

From Waste to Purpose: Indian Cities Are Rewriting the Plastic Story

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Over a decade ago, walking through an Indian market, a purchase often came with a plastic bag, commonly called polythene. These bags carried vegetables, clothes, food and countless other purchases.

Today, markets across the country are increasingly becoming plastic-free. Many shoppers carry a cloth bag from home. A shopkeeper offers a reusable alternative. Residents segregate dry and wet waste at home. Plastic collected from households travels to a recovery centre instead of a dumpsite. Some of it may eventually return as a new product. India began changing its plastic story with stricter rules and better waste management systems. The **Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM)**, launched on **2 October 2014**, has strengthened systems for collection, segregation and recovery. Identified single-use plastic items have been prohibited since **1 July 2022**.

But this change has not happened overnight, nor has it come from rules alone. It has grown through small habits, supported by awareness, local action and community participation. Across cities and communities, they show how small changes can reshape the plastic journey. Together, they cover the arc of plastic: reduce, reuse, return, recover and recreate.

Reduce: Making Market Part of The Solution

A market is where one small habit repeats hundreds of times each morning. In Trichy, the city corporation launched a campaign in 2022 to tackle persistent single-use plastic use in markets.

Three farmers' markets — **Tennur, K.K. Nagar and Woraiyur** — covering **220 vendors**, were selected for intensive engagement. Trichy City Corporation engaged the vendors, explaining the environmental harm caused by single-use plastic and encouraging them to adopt sustainable alternatives. The **“ThunippaiThiruvizhai” (Cloth-Bag festival)** initiative further encouraged shoppers to use reusable cloth bags. The results were measurable. Tennur market avoided **2,200 kg of single-use plastic in one year**, while K.K. Nagar avoided 620 kg in four months and Woraiyur 300 kg in six months.



Reuse: Thaila ATM: Making the Reusable Choice Easier

A cloth bag is a simple alternative to a plastic bag, but making it part of everyday shopping requires easy access. In **Vita town, Maharashtra**, the Nagar Parishad (Municipal Council) has installed **five “Thaila ATMs”** at crowded locations to offer shoppers reusable cotton bags.



The machines work like vending machines. Shoppers insert a coin or note and receive a cloth bag. Built on **Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM)** technology, the machines remotely monitor bag availability and alert the council when stocks fall below a set level. The initiative is creating livelihood opportunities too. Women from local **Self-Help Groups stitch the bags** supplied through the machines. Around **6,000 bags have been sold**, with the weekly market recording nearly **200 bags in a day**.

For Vita resident **Mumtaz Raju Sayyed**, the change is practical: “With the Thaila ATM, I can now get a cloth bag, which makes carrying my shopping easy.”



Mumtaz Raju Sayyed

The Thaila ATM is part of wider efforts in Maharashtra to reduce plastic use. Cities are combining **enforcement with awareness** through market inspections, penalties, street plays and public campaigns. In Indapur, authorities seized **25 kg of plastic bags and imposed a ₹90,000 fine**. At the same time, communities are promoting practical alternatives. In **Wardha**, a **Self-Help Group distributed 17,000 paper bags**, while cloth and jute bags are being encouraged for repeated use. Together, these efforts are helping make plastic-free choices more accessible in everyday life.

Return: Milk Pouches Earn A Return

What if an empty milk pouch could bring something back to the household? In the **Andaman and Nicobar Islands**, a buy-back initiative is encouraging residents to return used plastic milk pouches instead of discarding them.

Collection points were established where consumers could exchange used pouches for rewards, including fresh milk and discounts. Awareness campaigns encouraged residents to participate and highlighted the importance of recycling and responsible disposal. The project was done in collaboration with Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation Limited (ANIIDCO) and Sri Vijaya Puram Municipal Council (SVPMC).

The initiative gives plastic waste a value while creating an incentive for people to return it through a structured system. By November 2024, 17,600 milk pouches were collected, rewarding residents with 352 liters of milk. The model shows how a simple incentive can turn responsible waste disposal into a community habit.



Recover: Where Plastic Waste Finds a Second Life

Bengaluru is being made greener through plastic-waste recycling. According to the **Karnataka State Plastic Association**, plastic consumption in the city is around **16 kg per person each month**. Against this backdrop, United Nations Development Programme's Project **Prithvi** is helping give discarded plastic a second life.



Under the programme, a **Material Recovery Facility** called **Swachhata Kendra** was established in 2019 for Safai Saathis. The centre sorts plastic waste and processes it through **shredding and baling**, making the processed material **suitable for recyclers**. The facility also provided employment to **76 Safai Saathis** during the COVID-19 pandemic. Managed by social organisation **Hasiru Dala**, the centre connects waste recovery with livelihoods.

Processed plastic is used to make **roads, agricultural water pipes and furniture**. The initiative helps reduce the burden of plastic waste and contributes to the transformation of cities into cleaner spaces. What was once discarded therefore re-enters the economy as a useful material, bringing the idea of a **circular economy** closer to everyday waste management.

Recreate: Turning Multi-Layered Plastic into Durable Products



From chocolate wrappers and biscuit packets to chips and shampoo sachets, **Multilayered Plastics (MLPs)** are widely used in everyday packaging. These combine layers of materials such as plastic, paper and aluminium, making them difficult to separate and recycle. For years, most of this waste had nowhere to go but landfills. Patiala, however, found a way to give this difficult-to-recycle waste a new destination through a **Plastic Recycling Facility (PRF)**.

At a CSR-supported recycling facility in the city, low-value plastic waste is sorted, cleaned and shredded into flakes. Hot and cold pressing then binds these flakes into chipboard, an eco-friendly alternative to plywood. The material is strong enough for furniture, roofing and temporary shelters, while resisting water and termites. With a capacity of **10 tonnes a day**, the facility produces **75 to 100 chipboards**. The initiative gives difficult-to-recycle plastic a new purpose while supporting a **circular economy** and reducing landfill waste.

Road Ahead

Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) focuses on source segregation, door-to-door collection, scientific waste processing and material recovery. These stories show how change can begin locally and how markets can change habits. As the **Swachh Bharat Mission** completes twelve years on 2 October, these stories show how local action can change the plastic journey. The units differ — kilograms, bags, pouches and chipboards but the direction is the same: turning everyday choices into lasting change.

Reference

Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs

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