

Takeouts without plastics is impractical now say restaurants with ‘few or no’ eco-friendly options

In the last two years, restaurant take-outs have gone up exponentially. While both restaurants and delivery partners are happy about it, city authorities are concerned about the rising plastic waste – be it bags, plastic boxes or containers that are used to pack food. After banning single-use plastics, Mumbai city authorities are making a move to curb the use of plastic boxes and containers for food deliveries. In a meeting with restaurant bodies this month, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) suggested restaurants and hotels use steel containers instead.

This, the city says, is phase II of their initiative to fight plastics, after a nationwide ban on single-use plastics in July this year.

Mr. Pradeep Shetty, senior vice president, Hotel and Restaurant Association of Western India (HRAWI) said that looking for alternate solutions was not easy as they scramble to satisfy their already-demanding customers’ need for speed with services like 10-minute delivery.

“The plastics used in restaurants are not one-time use. If they ban plastic containers, do they have an eco-friendly plan in place? Will the Indian customer base be willing to pay more for an eco-friendly alternative? Our country does not have a Starbucks clientele as customers who can afford Starbucks can pay for eco-friendly packaging,” said Mr. Shetty.

That said, the food delivery ecosystem has been trying to transition to eco-friendly options but it’s still work in progress. Swiggy launched a packaging-assist programme in 2016 with the aim of partnering with restaurants across Mumbai, Pune and Bangalore, to provide eco-friendly packaging solutions.

Swiggy did not respond to queries sent seeking an update on its five year old initiative.

While the transition to eco-friendly options is on the rise, it is slow and will take time for them to become mainstream and popular.

The biggest challenge remains the prohibitive cost and limited availability of most eco-friendly options – be it reusable glass containers, bamboo or edible cutlery. While bagasse, made of sugarcane residue, is the only cheap option at ₹3,000 a tonne, or ₹3 a kilogram, the rest are much higher than plastic, which costs ₹15-18 per kilogram.