Pragmatic Steps towards Plastic Ban

Why in news?

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From January 1, 2019, the government of Tamil Nadu will implement a limited ban on certain plastic consumer goods.

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What is TN’s plan on plastics?

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- The ban is brought under the Environment Protection Act, 1987 and it would come into effect from January 1, 2019.
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- This to allow people to change over to using paper bags and other products made out of paper as substitutes to the plastic items facing ban.
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- The ban will be primarily on plastic carry bags, plastic plates, plastic cups, plastic flags, small plastic sachets used in packaging water, among others.
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- A few plastic materials used for packing milk, curd, oil and medicines have been exempted from the ban.
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- The ban would cover these plastic articles irrespective of the size of the micron.
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What is the evolution of essential carbon?

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- Before the 20th century, some of the carbon compounds available in nature were largely useful as food and to a smaller degree as fuel (being mostly wood and coal).
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- These carbon compounds can be called “essential carbon” or EC, the consumption of EC has also increased over the last century due to increasing human population.
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- In the 20th century, few of the carbon and carbon compounds acquired an additional dimension for humans.
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- They were considered to be essential for enhancing the ‘quality of life’.
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- This pursuit led to an increase in the per capita consumption of carbon compounds (as fuel for transportation and heating, special chemicals and plastics) and the higher presence of carbon dioxide in air, despite the cushion, or carbon sinks, provided by the oceans.
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- Carbon compounds used for enhancing the quality of life can be called “other carbon” or OC.
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What is the role of EC and OC in the environment?

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- The EC and OC, are closely associated with human and plant life. Living plants produce EC, continuously, by photosynthesis in which water and carbon dioxide are used up with the assistance of sunlight.
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- Qualitatively speaking, the speed of production of EC, luckily, is greater than its consumption.
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- The continued availability of EC is going to depend on the number of plant life around.
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- OC, on the other hand, is produced by the decay of dead plant and animal life to coal, natural gas and oil over millions of years.
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- OC is certainly not available at the present rate of consumption (in the last century major portion of available OC has already been consumed).
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What measures needs to be followed in this regard?

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- The tax on OC (GST or excise/VAT on plastics) should be increased many fold.
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- Among the consumer plastic products those containing carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen and oxygen (such as polyester, PET and nylon) can be taxed at the lowest, as they are likely to pose much less harm in view of their potential to biodegrade.
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- Then, polyethylene and isotactic polypropylene could be taxed at moderate level, as source segregation and incineration of these plastics under oxygen-rich conditions can be used to produce energy.
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- These constitute about 50 per cent of the plastics produced and consumed by volume.
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- Plastics containing halogens in their backbone must be taxed heavily as the damage caused by them is far more than that by hydrocarbon-based plastics.
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- Plastics can also be taxed based on ingredients that are used as additives and established to be harmful.
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- There are newer plastics (natural as well as synthetic) that are established to biodegrade.
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- Although they are relatively expensive compared to the synthetic plastics that do not biodegrade, promoting them would offer long-term benefits.
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- Given that people have gotten used to the advantages of plastics it may be more convenient to provide no-tax incentive for biodegradable polymers to begin with.
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Source: Business Line

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