

# Vendors find a loophole, hand out 'packaging bags'

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## **Mumbai:**

While the BMC has been taking initiatives to enforce the plastic ban, a new variety of plastic bag has entered the market.

TOI has found several shops and even vegetable vendors across the city handing out thick plastic bags without handles. And many even claim that such bags are allowed. However, they are only misusing a loophole in the law—an exemption for using plastics bags without handle for retail packaging. In fact this has also caused confusion among some BMC inspection teams enforcing the plastic ban as shopkeepers point out the exemption to them, a civic official said. Besides, reusable non-woven bags, which are been banned, are being provided by shops, saying that they are allowed.

Only branded stores and those in the malls have shunned plastic altogether.

Experts say that with no word on the recycling and buyback mechanism the entire ban fails to achieve its purpose. Several shopkeepers and consumers TOI spoke to said the absence of viable alternatives made the return of plastic bags inevitable. "It's virtually impossible to carry cloth bags to work so that one can shop on the way back home. How can one carry separate bags for eggs, milk, vegetables, meat or fish every single day? Non woven gets soiled," said Shyam Balani, a resident of Four Bungalows.

Certain small shops in Andheri West even charge Rs 5 for the bags with handles. A fruit vendor in Andheri municipal market said, "The BMC teams do come here often to seize our stocks. But we would lose business if we don't give out bags. It is easy for authorities to levy fines and instruct citizens to carry vessels and cloth bags everywhere they go, but this is impractical. Public needs cheap and practical alternatives."

In Thane, too, you no longer have to carry cloth bags when you have to vegetables. One vegetable vendor in Manpada now packs each vegetable in separate plastic bag. "The bags are back because of the convenience. While some customers did carry their own bags, most didn't. Now, civic officials have stopped coming for inspection. And if they come, they are willing to let us go for a bribe of Rs 100," said a vendor.

Asked about the violations, a government official said the crackdown has been going on and will continue with the same intensity. "Every municipal corporation is supposed to ensure that the ban is implemented. The state government has allotted powers to several agencies to fine violators," said a senior official.