

What If We Stopped Calling Packaging 'Waste'? India's Reuse Revolution

Buy. Use. Toss. We do it every day—whether it's a bottle of water, a bag of chips, or a box of detergent. This linear consumption model has defined our relationship with packaging for decades prioritizing convenience at the expense of environmental health. But as awareness grows and systems evolve, a shift is underway. In India (with over 1.4 billion people), the focus around packaging is moving from "What do we throw away?" to "What can we reuse?"

India's Packaging Waste Crisis

India generates a staggering 5.6 million metric tons of plastic waste annually. Packaging accounts for 56% of the country's plastic consumption, and 95% of this packaging is discarded after a short-use cycle with only a fraction making it back into production wasting valuable resources and piling pressure on ecosystems.

The narrative of waste in India is complex, deeply entwined with social and economic dynamics. While recycling has been the primary method of waste management, it is resource-intensive and has limitations. The absence of structured reuse, refill, and sanitization systems leaves packaging with no viable alternative but to enter the recycling stream or be discarded entirely. The challenge is clear: How do we move beyond recycling to a circular, reuse-centric model?

India's Untapped Strength

India has long operated successful reuse models—often without labelling them as such.

The Dabbawala System – Mumbai's tiffin carriers move over 200,000 lunchboxes daily with a near-perfect success rate, demonstrating an efficient, large-scale reuse model.

20-Liter Water Cans – Homes and businesses across the country rely on cleaned, refilled, and continuously reused water containers.

Despite India's strong culture of reuse, modern packaging remains stuck in a single-use mindset. Shifting to a reuse-driven system requires both behavioral change and the right infrastructure—and progress is underway.

The Role of Policy in Driving Reuse

India's Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) framework is no longer just a

guideline—it's a turning point. By 2025, brands must ensure that 10% of smaller rigid plastic packaging (0.9 - 4.9L) is reused, rising to 25% by 2028. For larger packaging, reuse targets are even more ambitious: 70% by 2025 and 85% by 2028.

This isn't just compliance—it's a fundamental shift in how packaging is designed, recovered, and recirculated. Packaging must be designed for reuse from the start—not as an afterthought.. The way brands communicate and position reuse—through packaging design, messaging, and advertising—will shape adoption.

Saahas Zero Waste would like to announce that our reuse journey has begun. We have initiated business models to implement reuse across industries like paints, lubricants, adhesives, homecare, and personal care.

Reuse models have the potential to recover resources from both FMCG and non-FMCG packaging, across B2B supply chains and direct-to-consumer formats. Whether it's industrial bulk packaging or everyday consumer goods, structured systems for packaging collection, sanitization, and reintegration into supply chains can enable packaging to flow back to brands and the market instead of being discarded.

One of our flagship initiatives is a reverse logistics pilot in collaboration with a product supplier designed to build a structured system for packaging recovery. Phase 1 focused on establishing a collection network to recover post-consumer packaging, starting with a single location and scaling to ten cities. The next phase brings in strategic partnerships with recyclers to support the integration of post-consumer recycled (PCR) material into new packaging while strengthening our reverse logistics supply chain. As the system evolves, the focus will shift toward reuse —working with a sanitization partner to redirect packaging from conventional recycling to refilling and reuse.

Each step lays the foundation for reuse to become a mainstream alternative.

What will it take for reuse to become the norm in India? Share your thoughts.