



## What is a Plastic Cow ?

In India, one of the most striking images is that of cows wandering on the roads. In cities, towns and villages numerous cows and bulls either sit or wander about peacefully, chewing the cud. It gives the impression of a society in harmony with animals. The holy cow, the Mother of India is revered by all and, in most states, is not allowed to be slaughtered.

India has an open garbage system, which means open garbage bins on the roads overflowing with stinking waste. Dogs, monkeys, pigs, rats and cows eat whatever they can find to survive. The numbers of stray dogs, rats and monkeys are equal to the amount of garbage on which they feed and multiply.

In cities and towns, large numbers of cows on the roads eat from garbage bins, foraging for fruit and vegetable leftovers, anything edible and smelling like food.

Since plastic bags have invaded our lives, almost all garbage and food waste is disposed in plastic bags. These bags spill out either on the road or from municipality dustbins. Because these plastic bags are usually tied in a knot at the mouth, cows are unable to reach the food leftovers inside and end up eating the plastic bags whole. Owing to cows' complex digestive systems, these bags never get expelled and, over time, accumulate inside the rumen, which is the first stomach of the cow. There, these bags get entangled and become hard like cement.

These cattle, owned or stray, often obstruct traffic and cause accidents. The municipality removes the animals from the road to be sent to godowns, *goshalas* (shelters designed for cows), or temples, or they are simply dumped at the garbage landfills on the outskirts of the city. From there they 'disappear' into trucks for transport to slaughter.

## What are these cows doing on the road anyway?

There are many small 'urban' dairy farms in cities and big towns. Dairy owners send their animals out on the road to forage for food as there is no green grass and little or no space to keep the animals at home. Still, the owner milks his cows. These cows share the roads with abandoned calves, young and old bulls and old and dry cows. They scavenge between the garbage bins, the vegetable markets and hotels and finally end up on the municipality garbage landfills outside the town.





In places where there are cattle markets, there are more 'owners'. These owners (brokers) buy the animals from farmers or cattle markets for very little money. These new owners mark the animals as their property and leave them on the road to fend for themselves. Whenever it suits them and the animal looks 'fat', they sell them for a lot of money to an unsuspecting real farmer or for slaughter. When the farmer feeds the cow natural food and grass, the animal, having eaten garbage all its life, dies from indigestion and the farmer and the cow are both victims of a cruel and immoral practice.

### **The holy cow reduced to a dying scavenger**

There have been many anti-plastic campaigns in India. At present, there is a ban on plastic bags up to 40 microns in many states. But no one has focused on the hazardous effects of plastic on the animals and their right to live a life free of plastic. It is the basic right of the cow to live and graze on natural food and to not have to eat garbage tied up in plastic bags. This is an acute form of cruelty. The noble cow has become a scavenger.

### **The rumenotomy and surgical removal of plastic up to 70 kg from one cow**

Karuna Society for Animals & Nature is based in Puttaparthi, in Andhra Pradesh (South India). In December 2010, Karuna Society received 36 stray cattle from Anantapur town, which is 70 km away, for permanent custody. Soon after their arrival, one of the cows died. The post-mortem conducted by our veterinary surgeon revealed that the animal's rumen was full of plastic. After examining all the animals, he advised us to start surgeries immediately to remove the plastic from their rumens to save their lives.

From the moment we received the 'plastic cow' from Anantapur town, we realised that there are hundreds of cattle on the roads feeding on garbage, including plastic. They are sentenced to a slow and cruel death if they do not receive help in time. Most people are not aware of this cruelty because, to them, these animals are walking about 'peacefully' on the road. Think about big cities like Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai and Bangalore, where tens of thousands of animals are walking around with their bellies full of plastic.

It has been a life-changing experience for all of us who witnessed the surgery and the removal of plastics and other waste items from the rumen. We were horrified by the suffering





these animals had to endure because they were let loose on the road and forced to forage for food in the open garbage bins.

### **The unobserved disaster - the plastic effect on wildlife**

Along India's rivers, there are thousands of temples, villages and towns, where untreated sewage and garbage flows in the water. Hundreds of kilometres away, garbage and plastic are deposited at places where wildlife feeds and drinks. Many animals die a painful and unobserved death. An elephant was found dead with 750 kg of plastic inside its stomach. Turtles, fish, birds, wild pig – no animal can escape!

For many years, Pradeep Nath, of Visakha Society for Protection and Care of Animals (VSPCA), Vishakhapatnam, has been involved in rescuing endangered turtles and other wildlife. According to him, many animals suffer from plastic ingestion or get entangled in plastic bags and suffocate to death.

### **The Plastic Cow Project**

Having realised that all cows on Indian roads were full of plastic, we at Karuna Society wrote a 'Plastic Cow' report to all our contacts, including the Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organization (FIAPO) network, to find ways to stop this cruelty. Philip Wollen of the Kindness Trust, Australia, responded immediately and told us to continue the rumenotomies, with the assurance that the Kindness Trust would fund 100 surgeries as a pilot project at the cattle hospital at Karuna Society.

The 'Plastic Cow Project' started with four people, who were concerned about the ban on plastics and violation of animal rights. It is a work in progress, with multiple strategies being devised to end this problem. The 'plastic cow' represents an icon for all animals exposed to the human garbage system.

Different Strategies

- Surgeries on plastic cows
- Public Interest Litigation
- Plastic cow campaign, including the documentary, this brochure and the website, [www.theplasticcow.org](http://www.theplasticcow.org)

### **Surgeries on Plastic Cows**

The rescue of individual plastic cows from the road does not solve the problem. These cows can never go back to the road after surgery. They need care and protection for life. At present the surgeries are performed at the Karuna Cattle Hospital, VSPCA in Vishakhapatnam, a few veterinary colleges and at IPAN in Ooty.



The general opinion about rumenotomies is that the procedure is not always successful. Many animals develop post-operative problems and die soon. Owners of plastic cows feel financially more secure if they sell the animal. There is a shortage of cattle hospitals where aseptic surgery can be performed and the veterinary surgeons' lack of experience further adds to the problem.

Karuna Society started with the same doubts but, after several surgeries and procedural improvements, the success rate is now high. Medical reports are available for checking on [www.theplasticcow.org](http://www.theplasticcow.org)

Performing rumenotomies is not the answer to the plastic cow problem. Only a total ban on plastics and removal of animals from the roads and garbage dumps will solve the problem. We are continuing with the surgeries, as they are life-saving procedures for these animals. As a pilot project funded by the Kindness Trust, Australia, it gives us more information about the problems, the surgeries and the rate of survival.

### Public Interest Litigation

The Plastic Cow activists filed a case in the Supreme Court of India, for animal rights and a complete ban on plastic bags.

Karuna Society for Animals & Nature, Puttaparthi, VSPCA Vishakapatnam and three individuals, Pradeep Nath, Clementien Pauws and Rukmini Sekhar, are the litigants in this case. Shyam Divan, a senior lawyer, presented the case and was supported by Pratap Venugopal.

The respondents in this case are the Central Government and all the States of India, through their Animal Husbandry departments, including the Animal Welfare Board of India.

While there may be a couple of other pending cases in the court, asking for a total ban on plastic bags as an environmentally hazardous pollutant, this team has specifically filed it as an animal rights litigation. This is clearly a case of the state violating its own laws, where the Constitution guarantees the right to life to all living beings and yet, the plastic bag issue is not being either monitored or implemented by the state. We have also asked for a better garbage disposal system, where there is no interface between animals and plastic. As the case unfolds over time, many more aspects can be brought to the attention of the Court and the public.

Reacting to the evidence presented to it, the Supreme Court admitted the plea on May 7, 2012, and announced that it was considering a total ban on plastic bags. This made huge national and international news.



## Excerpts from The Times of India

8 May, 2012, 05.10 AM IST, Dhananjay Mahapatra, TNN

NEW DELHI: **Excessive use of plastic bags and their unregulated disposal** has been choking lakes, ponds and urban sewage systems, said the Supreme Court on Monday while warning that it **posed a threat more serious than the atom bomb** for the next generation.

This observation from a bench of Justices G.S Singhvi and S J Mukhopadhaya came on a PIL filed by two Andhra Pradesh-based NGOs drawing the court's attention to 30-60 kg of plastic bags recovered from the stomachs of cows because of irresponsible disposal of plastic bags and a defunct municipal waste collection system.

The court issued notice to the Centre and State Governments on the PIL, seeking a ban on use of plastic bags in municipal areas which did not have a prompt garbage collection, segregation and disposal system. The NGOs said the absence of a prompt garbage collection and segregation and disposal system, allowed cows to rummage through garbage bins and eat foodstuffs disposed of in plastic bags which would get stuck in their first stomach.

But the bench wanted to address the larger questions arising from indiscriminate use of plastic bags, which not only posed a grave threat to nature and the environment but also to the human race itself. It suggested that the petitioner make the manufacturers and a television channel, which has been running a campaign against the use of plastic, parties to the PIL for a wider scrutiny of the important issue.

“All of us are watching how our lakes, ponds and urban sewerage systems are getting choked by plastic bags. We want to expand the scope of this petition. Unless we examine a total ban on plastic bags or put in place a system for manufacturers mandating them to collect back all plastic bags, the next generation will be threatened with something more serious than the atom bomb,” Justices Singhvi and Mukhopadhaya said.

Appearing for NGOs Karuna Society for Animal and Nature and Visakha Society for Protection and Care of Animals, senior advocate Shyam Divan said the problem was more acute in urban areas where people had a habit of disposing leftover food in plastic bags in municipal bins.

“Apart from the plastic completely choking the digestive system of the cow and causing excruciating pain to the animal, plastic residues enter the human food chain through dairy and animal products,” he added.



### The petitioners sought the following directions from the court:

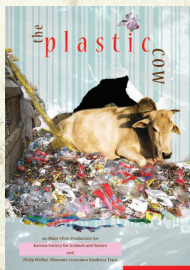
- Prohibit or phase out in a time-bound manner the open garbage disposal system and remove open garbage bins.
- Implement door-to-door garbage collection and prevent animals from entering into the garbage storage facilities.
- Municipalities must segregate all plastic waste from other waste.
- States must issue directions prohibiting use, sale and disposal of plastic bags in all municipal areas.
- Provide animal shelters and treat cows and other animals suffering from stomach pain due to the ingestion of plastic.

Read more on the website [www.theplasticcow.org](http://www.theplasticcow.org)

### The Plastic Cow Campaign

An outreach effort on a national scale is growing into an organic grassroots movement.

#### The Plastic Cow documentary



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9KBmgjqrU8>

The Plastic Cow documentary was made by Kunal Vohra of Altair Films. The film includes interviews with activists, toxicologists, government authorities, householders, students, journalists, etc.

Philip Wollen wrote the following synopsis of the documentary:

“The Plastic Cow uncovers the ghastly truth about the impact of plastic waste on the innocent India cow, which is now reduced to being a scavenger. The film focuses on the ubiquitous plastic bags, the exemplars of human negligence and waste which the discarded and hungry cows consume whole for the rotting scraps of food they contain. These plastic bags, which also often contain rusty nails, wires and syringes, clog their stomachs, leading cows to die slow, painful deaths.

“This unholy alliance of plastic, carelessness and negligence is not only torturing the Indian cow to death but it has also infected farming communities, rivers, forests and oceans, killing elephants, donkeys, fish, turtles and sea birds.”





“The film has been seen by thousands of people in India and all around the world on You Tube and other social networking platforms and at dozens of film screenings in various parts of the country.

### The outreach programme

This is envisaged as a focused campaign using The Plastic Cow documentary and intensive interactions at all levels of society – ministries, municipalities, dairy farms and co-operations, educational institutes, veterinary doctors, householders, children, animal welfare organisations, women’s groups, media, religious groups, restaurants and the plastic industry, etc.



We need to expand into an all-India network of ‘plastic cow campaigners’. We hope that a large number of people, from different parts of the country, will join the campaign and create ‘plastic cow chapters’ across India. We want all citizens of India to join this campaign to assert our sacred duty of respecting the rights of all animals to live and breathe, as is their birthright.

### What can you do as a campaigner?

To screen the film is a good starting point everywhere. People might come forward asking for advice and willing to volunteer to start local activities.

#### Personal

NEVER collect your vegetable peelings in a plastic bag.



When you go shopping, take your own bag along. Refuse plastic bags from the seller. Refuse bags that are below 40 microns, which are banned under law. Reuse the plastic bags you already have till they are worn out. Then, collect them in a separate bag and send them for recycling.



If you are really touched by the film and the suffering of the cow, reconsider your food habits. Nowadays, the milk and meat industry are closely connected and there is no more milk without slaughter. Even

by being a vegetarian, you contribute to the suffering you have just witnessed.

Inform yourself about the health benefits of living as a vegan. It is easy.



## Social

A group of volunteers, friends, students, housewives or pensioners can go around in their neighbourhood to observe the garbage disposal, the number of small dairies and the number of cattle on the road. Meet with the concerned people and discuss what improvements can be made.

Inform yourself as a group about the existing municipality laws and Government Orders regarding cattle maintenance, dairies and plastics/garbage disposal. Take the next step from there.

Try to find out where the illegal bags come from. In spite of the ban, why are they still being manufactured, distributed and used?

## Professional or in employment

If you are a government official in any of these areas, have the courage to voice your opinion and help the volunteers who try to change the situation. The same applies to journalists, doctors, veterinarians, health inspectors and shopkeepers. No effort is too small. Maybe the shopkeepers are a special group to canvass as they always want to satisfy the customers, who don't always take bags from home when they go shopping.

## Political

When you have enough data about your area, meet with MLAs and any concerned official and politician and build up a pressure group.

## Outside the Cities

90% of the milk is produced in rural areas and small towns. At present, there are 304 million dairy cows in India (livestock census Sept. 2012).

In 2007, there were 14 million farmers, 254 milk co-operations, 177 milk unions and 1,33,000 village-level societies. Now, in 2013, the numbers are much higher.

In the rural areas the 'Plastic Cow' campaign might need to have a totally different approach, through women's groups, creating awareness about plastics. Many dairy cows are taken out for grazing for a few hours but the growing amount of plastic and garbage are affecting them too.

Finally, we would like to propose one more effort.

## A research group; a think tank!

Lawyers, sociologists, philosophers, city planners, environmental scientists, nutritionists and anyone who is qualified in any field can support all other parts of the project by supplying relevant data.