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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Elastic Rules — Plastic Waste Management Amendments and EPR Flexibility

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CONTEXT

The Hindu editorial titled “**Elastic rules**” critiques India’s **2026 amendments to the Plastic Waste Management Rules**, which introduce compliance flexibilities including a **3-year carry-forward for missed recycling targets**, **tradable EPR certificates**, and **digital traceability via QR codes**. The editorial questions whether these “elastic” provisions dilute environmental accountability and whether infrastructure gaps in the informal recycling sector will undermine the circular economy goals.

THE EDITORIAL ARGUMENT

- ❶ **Flexibility risks becoming impunity** — allowing producers to carry forward missed recycling targets for 3 years effectively gives a 3-year grace period, during which plastic waste accumulates without processing
- ❷ **Tradable EPR certificates** — while market-based mechanisms can improve efficiency, they also allow large polluters to buy certificates from others rather than actually reducing plastic usage or improving recyclability
- ❸ **QR-code traceability is welcome but insufficient** — digital tracking helps monitor the chain from production to disposal, but only if enforcement agencies actually scan and verify at each node
- ❹ **Informal sector exclusion** — India’s plastic recycling is dominated by informal waste pickers (kabadiwallas, rag-pickers) who handle 60-80% of recyclable waste. The formal EPR framework does not adequately integrate them
- ❺ **Infrastructure deficit** — India has recycling capacity for only ~30% of the plastic waste generated; the remaining 70% ends up in landfills, waterways, or is openly burned



EXTENDED PRODUCER RESPONSIBILITY (EPR) IN INDIA

PARAMETER	DETAILS
Introduced	Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016 (amended 2022, 2026)
Principle	Producers/importers/brand owners are responsible for end-of-life management of plastic packaging
EPR portal	Centralised registration and compliance tracking
Categories	Category I (rigid plastic), Category II (flexible plastic/MLP), Category III (carry bags), Category IV (multi-layered packaging)
Targets	Annual recycling/reuse/end-of-life processing targets by weight

2026 Amendments — Key Changes

CHANGE	EDITORIAL'S CONCERN
3-year carry-forward for missed targets	Creates a de facto grace period; delays actual waste processing
Tradable EPR certificates	Market-based but allows buying compliance without reducing waste
QR-code traceability	Good for monitoring but only if enforced
Reduced penalties for first-time violations	May weaken deterrence
Brand-wise reporting (not just company-level)	Positive — increases granularity



INDIA'S PLASTIC WASTE CHALLENGE

INDICATOR	DATA
Plastic waste generated annually	~3.5 million tonnes (CPCB, 2023-24)
Per capita plastic consumption	~11 kg/year (vs 100+ kg in USA)
Recycling rate	~30% (formal sector)
Informal sector share of recycling	60-80%
Single-use plastics banned	July 1, 2022 (21 items)
Multi-layered packaging (MLP)	Most problematic — difficult to recycle

EPR CERTIFICATE TRADING — HOW IT WORKS

- 1 **Producer A** generates 1,000 tonnes of plastic packaging → must ensure 1,000 tonnes is recycled
- 2 If Producer A can only recycle 600 tonnes → buys **400 EPR certificates** from Producer B (who recycled more than their target)
- 3 Certificates are traded on the **EPR portal** at market-determined prices
- 4 **Net effect:** Total recycling target is met nationally, but individual producers can pay rather than perform

Editorial's Critique

The trading mechanism works **only if total national recycling capacity exceeds total production** — which is not the case in India. If capacity is deficient, certificates become a **licence to pollute**, as buying a certificate doesn't create additional recycling capacity.

THE INFORMAL SECTOR QUESTION

India's waste economy relies heavily on **2-4 million informal waste workers** who:

- Collect, sort, and sell recyclable waste to aggregators and recyclers
- Operate outside formal regulatory frameworks
- Are not registered on EPR portals



- Handle the most hazardous waste (medical, chemical-contaminated plastics) without safety equipment

The editorial argues that any EPR framework that does not **formalise and integrate these workers** will fail to achieve its recycling targets in practice, even if it looks good on the EPR portal.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 3 – Environment & Ecology

- Plastic waste management: rules, SUP ban, EPR
- Circular economy: concept and Indian application
- Informal sector in waste management
- Polluter pays principle vs regulatory flexibility

Mains Probable Questions:

- “Critically examine the role of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) in India’s plastic waste management. Are tradable EPR certificates an effective mechanism?” (250 words)
- “India’s waste management ecosystem is critically dependent on informal workers. How can the EPR framework integrate them without displacing their livelihoods?” (250 words)

FACTS CORNER

- India **banned 21 categories of single-use plastics** from **July 1, 2022** — including earbuds, straws, plates, cups, cutlery, and polystyrene items under 100 microns
- **Multi-layered packaging (MLP)** — used in chips packets, shampoo sachets, and instant food — is the **most difficult to recycle** because it combines plastic, aluminium, and paper layers that cannot be separated economically
- The **Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB)** is the national authority for plastic waste monitoring, while **State Pollution Control Boards (SPCBs)** enforce at the state level
- India’s **per capita plastic consumption** (11 kg/year) is one-tenth of the US — but growing at 10%+ annually, making India one of the fastest-growing plastic markets
- The **Global Plastics Treaty** (being negotiated under UNEA) would create the first internationally binding instrument on plastic pollution — India has been cautious, arguing for a focus on waste management rather than production caps

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