

Towards healthy environment

Dawn

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NEWSPAPER headlines are replete with stories of critical environmental degradation of water, air and other life support systems. The enormity of our environmental degradation has reached every part of Pakistan.

Our forest cover, a lifeline to a healthy environment, is a dismal four per cent according to official claims, although even this figure seems exaggerated. Our rivers and canals are full of toxic chemicals and wastes discharged wantonly by our industries and municipalities. And, as these public waters reach our agricultural fields, the toxicity of the wastes enters the food chain.

The MV Tasman Spirit disaster was a grim reminder of the neglect of our marine environment and mangroves and our unpreparedness for the contingency of an oil spill. Our population continues to increase exponentially, further burdening a depleting natural resource base. The vanishing wildlife habitats and pollution have challenged our important legacy of the nation's wildlife wealth. The indiscriminate fertilizer and pesticide use and their unregulated transportation and storage have also threatened our ecosystem.

The lack of the access to potable water to the majority of our population has proliferated water-borne diseases. Our urban metropolises are pitiable spectacles of air pollution, solid waste, squalor and poverty. Even noise is beginning to be a major source of urban pollution. The result has been that environmental degradation affects every household, community, town and village in Pakistan.

How did we get to this abominable result? The answer is not simple but its genesis can be traced to unplanned economic growth and insensitivity to environmental factors in national priorities. Thus, while nations have to industrialize to increase production and to provide economic activity for the benefit of its citizens, all this could be done with due regard to environmental factors.

Many societies have for long developed a mechanism of structuring their economic development on the foundational basis of an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). This way, the harmful effects of a proposed project are pre-determined at the very initial stage of the project life cycle and this advance information can be factored to eliminate or reduce the harmful effects of economic and industrial activity through deploying technological innovations in the fields of pollution abatement equipment and treatment works.

While the Pakistan

and to encourage environmental education in Pakistan, various efforts, though modest, have been made by the public and private educational institutions to start environmental education in higher, secondary and primary levels. But it is at the graduate and postgraduate levels in the universities that some initiatives are noteworthy.

The Pakistani alumni of the Asia-Pacific Centre of Environmental Law has catalyzed the development of environmental law in the country by starting post-graduate diploma classes in Punjab University Law College, Lahore, the Islamic International University, Islamabad, and the Peshawar University Law College, Peshawar. Further, the Dr. Parvez Hassan Environmental Law Centre was established in 2003 at Punjab University to provide qualitative graduate and post-graduate environmental legal education. Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore, has also pioneered with post-graduate studies in environmental sciences.

The second equally compelling reason for our increasing environmental desolation is the lack of awareness of the importance of environmental protection. It is crucial for the people of a country to be aware of the importance of a clean environment and, even if the national planners ordain a vision of sustainable development, this must be nurtured and facilitated for implementation through mass awareness.

The people must understand and support the importance of clean air, clean water and a healthy food chain. It is for this reason that it is imperative that environmental education is included in school and academic syllabi right from the beginning. Starting from nursery to primary, middle and high schools, environmental education must also receive focus during university, graduate, and post-graduate education.

In the quest for environmental protection I have been involved since 1977. At that time, it was a lonely effort as there were no allies. However, over a period of time, one involved the media through the Pakistan Forum of Environmental Journalists.

In this lonely journey, I also sought the support of civil society. Over a period of time, this constituency has also proved responsive and we today see a lot of NGOs and other civil groups prioritizing environmental protection and sharing with the government responsibility on environmental issues and assisting in the implementation of environmental programmes at the grassroots level.

The next ally that I sought was the judiciary. Both the executive and the legislature have been largely unresponsive to environmental protection

works.

While the Pakistan Environmental Protection Act of 1997 and the preceding Pakistan Environmental Protection Ordinance of 1983 provided for the requirement of filing an EIA before the establishment of projects in Pakistan, these provisions were never enforced because of lack of political will. Lacking also was the professional and technical ability to conduct and evaluate such assessments owing to the non-availability of formal education in the field of environment.

Setting environmental quality standards for industrial emissions and effluents can make a difference only if the Environmental Protection Agencies (EPAs) have the laboratories and equipment and technical administrators to regulate such standards. This can only be possible when there are proper educational opportunities for acquiring environment-specific skills in the sciences and other disciplines including management, law, economics and engineering. Capacity building, through education, is Pakistan's foremost challenge in the growing environmental crisis.

Since the early 1990s, in order to develop an environmental mindset

sponsive to environmental protection and I turned to the judiciary. We achieved this in the Shehla Zia vs. Wapda case when, in 1994, the Supreme Court of Pakistan, in a direct petition against the construction of a high voltage grid station that could cause harm to the health of the residents of Islamabad, held that environmental rights are a part of the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution. This judicial activism has been a great boon to our efforts and has spawned welcome environmental litigation all over the country.

While there may have been some successes with the media, civil society, and with the judiciary, where we have failed is in the matter of attracting the youth and the women of our country to support this great cause. The progress of other developing countries, in fact of developed countries also, shows that no cause or movement can be successful unless it has the full support of the youth and women. We must change our mindset to utilize our natural resources "in trust" for future generations and only with this new paradigm will we create the appropriate capacity to meet today the challenges of tomorrow.