**Environmental care**

Friday, Apr 28, 2023

Part - I

By Sohail Azmie

Those who have been to Karachi must have seen its sea and coastline. Kemari Jetty is a popular place for first-timers who want to have some fun at sea. There are plenty of boats and some old-fashioned ferries, which can take visitors and regular passengers from Kemari to Manora Island and back.

But apart from the excitement of taking a boat ride, people get to witness some heart-wrenching scenes at Kemari as soon as they arrive at the place. Kemari Jetty and the boats’ basin around it present a picture that is torturous for any individual having the slightest regard for cleanliness and environmental care. Various spots highlight a horrific reality of a society sans any idea of environment protection.

These scenes make us question who on earth would want to do something this unthinkable to a place which is supposed to be a gateway for recreation at sea. It may be difficult to accept but such unkempt places have become our ‘trademark’. Places like Kemari Jetty are mere symptoms of deep-rooted perennial problems, which need to be addressed to have our environment clean and the seas healthier.

History tells us that the Akkadian Empire of Mesopotamia was destroyed because its people did not care about their environment and abused the region’s natural resources. If we keep ignoring the environment and let the natural habitat decay, we might be in for repeating history.

As per the UN Human Development Index, Pakistan ranks 147 out of 188 countries. This position is considered ‘low’ on the development index. Pakistan’s mean years of schooling are 5.1, which suggests a sorry state of our education focus. The World Health Organization puts Pakistan at 122 out of 190 in its performance report. The report on the UN’s health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) shows Pakistan on the 149th position out of 188 countries, while sharing the score of 38 with Bangladesh and Mauritania – six places behind India and way behind Iran.

Pakistan’s 38.8 per cent population suffers from ‘multidimensional poverty’ – no access to quality education, lack of healthcare and poor living standards. While these are highly disappointing figures, people may be interested to know why these figures matter in our discussion on the environment. These issues play an important role in leading to situations like the one we encounter at Kemari Jetty. The deplorable condition of our seas and rivers is a direct consequence of lack of transparency, education and healthcare in our society.

According to Numbeo, the world’s largest user-contributed database, Karachi is the world’s eighth most polluted out of 277 cities surveyed. A 2013 report published by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) titled ‘The Environment and Climate Change Outlook of Pakistan’ also highlights disturbing realities in our country which remain ignored. The report considers Pakistan’s high population growth rate to be the first and foremost factor in environmental degradation.

Pakistan’s population grew from a mere 32.50 million in 1947 to 207.74 million in 2017. At this explosive rate (2.5 million per year), we will be touching 300 million by 2050. Not only is the increase in overall population alarming, but the associated trend is also quite worrisome. The report says, “the phenomenon of the rapidly growing population in Pakistan is also being accompanied by increasing concentration of population in the urban areas. The country’s urban population multiplied more than ten-fold during [the] 1950-2012 period, compared to this, the total population increased over five-fold.

“The trend of growing urbanization has also witnessed concentration of urban population in a few major cities. Karachi, the largest city of the country, has 20 per cent of the total urban population, followed by Lahore and Faisalabad with another 20 per cent. Rawalpindi, Multan, Hyderabad, Gujranwala and Peshawar together hold another 14 per cent, while the remaining 46 per cent of the urban population lives in about 400 relatively small towns and cities. The eight largest cities have been growing at the rate of over 3 per cent per year, and according to projected trends this growth rate will continue in the next decade”.

The report goes on to point out that “from the environmental standpoint, the phenomenal increase in the population of Pakistan, whether total or urban, without corresponding expansion in basic amenities of life and infrastructure has exposed a majority of people to conditions, which are far from satisfactory. This can deteriorate further in the absence of well-conceived and properly planned corrective actions in the years to come.”

Policymakers have failed to see this trend and there has been no mechanism, project or a way forward to ‘deal’ with this population explosion and its fallout on the major cities. New cities should have been established taking loads off urban cities suffering from endless municipal and management issues. It does not take much to understand that Karachi’s garbage issues have no solution unless authorities pay attention to the city’s overpopulation.

I recently visited the Neelum Valley, and I was disappointed to see how the beautiful Neelum River has now become a sewage and domestic waste dump for people living along its banks. The colour of the river has changed from blue to grey due to the constant dumping of sewage wastes in the river. Tourists and the locals have not even spared the majestic Barkati Lake situated at 12,130 feet above sea level at Ratti Galli, Dawarian. Plenty of plastic bags, used plates and loads of trash lay around the lake.

Muzaffarabad is unsafe for people who care about the environment. They will be utterly disappointed to see its current state. This does not end here. All along our rivers, both domestic and industrial waste is thrown, which ends up in the Arabian Sea.

Pakistan has progressively lost nearly 25 million of its agricultural land due to soil erosion – the contributors being salinity and waterlogging. According to the UN Food and Agricultural Organization report ‘Global Forest Resources Assessment 2015’, forest cover in Pakistan, which is 1.9 per cent of land (with an additional 2 per cent ‘other wooded land’), is extremely low as opposed to the required rate of 20-30 per cent of total land.

Pakistan’s forest depleted from 1990 to 2015 at an annual rate of 2.1 per cent. This means that in 1990 Pakistan’s forest covered 2.527 million hectares of land. By 2015, it was reduced to 1.472 million hectares (one hectare is equal to 0.01 square kilometre). This simply means that forest area in Pakistan disappeared at a staggering 43,000 hectares per year from 1990 to 2015, and no one did anything about it.

To be continued

The writer is a freelance contributor.