**Rising pollution**

Fleeting moments

By Iftekhar A Khan

As the temperature goes down and people feel relieved of the sultry and humid season, the creeping smog nullifies the comfort level that a change in weather was expected to bring.

Smog has begun to appear on the skies that were left clear and blue after the rainy season. Major cities face a serious problem of air and noise pollution. Both have a negative effect on the health of the citizens, school-going children and elderly alike.

The polluted air causes coughing, wheezing and lung complications. Asthma patients suffer the most. Stubble burning in villages after the harvest season is the main source of air pollution in rural areas. Although stubble burning is banned, not many care about it; and nor do the reps of the environment department bother to visit the fields to ensure that no such burning takes place. And in cities, it is the burning of trash and plastics that make the air dense with suit and smoke. For instance, burning of garbage along the Ring Road in the outskirts of Lahore produces clouds of suit and smog that continue to shroud the city.

According to one estimate, Lahore city produces about 9,000 tons of waste every day. Underage waste pickers comprising mostly Afghan children and women collect most of it manually before it is carted away to dumpsites. One wonders how effectively the Lahore Waste Management Company, which has a high-sounding name, handles garbage. In November 2018, it was announced that the Punjab government signed an agreement with a Chinese firm to produce 40 MW electricity by setting up an incineration plant on 52 hectares of land near Lahore. The plant was to go into operation within 22 months. Do such plants emit toxic pollutants?

The provincial environment department has warned that smog levels will rise in the coming days. A warning is not enough. The public should be informed what necessary measures the department intends to take to prevent the pollution. What adds to the smog are smoke-emitting vehicles, especially goods carrying overloaded long-body vehicles. Two-stroke engines in Chingchi rickshaws and motorcycles emit smoke and unburnt carbon particles that pollute the air.

There was a time when every vehicle had to obtain a fitness certificate periodically to be declared roadworthy. The driver of the vehicle had to demonstrate to the checking staff that all lights on his/her vehicle functioned, the wipers and the indicators operated and that the vehicle didn’t emit smoke. One wonders if any such checks are carried out nowadays, as we have done away with most of the civic practices of the past. These days not even traffic wardens check smoke-emitting vehicles.

Noise pollution is another nuisance that could be easily controlled if the government recognised its adverse effects on the citizens’ health. Human ears are designed to tolerate sound within a certain decibel (dB) level. Up to 60 dB is considered as the normal conversation level. Noise above 80 dB could trigger aggressive behaviour in humans, making them jittery, unfocussed and cantankerous.

The main cause of noise pollution are the pressure horns indiscriminately used by buses and truckers. A high-pressure horn touches 200 dB. When blown incessantly on the roads, it could permanently impair the hearing of those living or working nearby. The police could easily check pressure honking if they wanted to. However, the callousness by the motorway police can be observed only a hundred meters from its kiosk on the Multan road near the NHA office. Buses park illegally, wait for passengers by blowing their pressure horns but no motorway police official seems to care. Maybe the motorway police have developed an ear for musical pressure honking.

It’s time for the environment department to treat noise pollution as harmful for human health as are air and water pollution. Uncontrolled noise pollution could turn us into a noisy nation that’s hard of hearing, insensitive, angry and intolerant. When one hears loud, one speaks loudly. Smog is short-lived but noise pollution remains a permanent curse in our lives.

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