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**A mindset for pollution**

It’s the same time and the same smog but a different year. A lot many reasons have been pointed out for the scary smog that visits Lahore but hardly any steps are taken to solve this problem.

More than anything else, it is about a mindset that doesn’t still take the obvious threat seriously. Understandably, we are not teaching every school-going child how bad can be a bad environment for our survival.

The only fact that we can take solace in is that smog affects not just this part of the world but others too. And that only confounds the problem, smog being only one of the many manifestations.

If we are burning more coal; if there’s no check on the industrial smoke; if there’s no ban on beyond limit smoke-emitting vehicles; if more than seven thousand brick kilns are still operating in Punjab, according to one estimate, can we expect a smog-free environment? There is more talk and less action on this, it seems. Thus, the recurrence of smog every year.

Punjab is perhaps the worst-hit. The Lahore High Court expressed its dissatisfaction recently over the measures taken by the Punjab government to tackle smog, saying the chief secretary of the province had not taken the issue seriously. Hearing petitions about environmental challenges, the court directed an additional advocate general to convey the court’s concern to the chief secretary. Environmental experts are rightly perturbed over the alarming Air Quality Index (AQI) of the city. And it’s only the beginning of the smog days.

The recurring smog is a true reflection of our dangerous tendency to put environmental issues at the backburner. Take the case of banning shopping bags, for instance. Despite some lukewarm efforts by the government to ban single-use plastic bags in Islamabad, Lahore and elsewhere in the country, people have been uncooperative in stopping the use of shopping bags.

While a few people showed appreciation of the government’s step of banning polythene bags, we have seen others arguing with shopkeepers, insisting their goods be delivered in something that takes hundreds of years to decompose, 500 years or more to be exact. A more alarming fact is that, according to experts, polythene bags don’t degrade completely; they photo-degrade, becoming micro-plastics that absorb chemicals and continue to pollute the environment.

A simply remedy is replacing polythene bags with bags made of a piece of cloth. They can be re-used easily without affecting our climate. This is where the role of our collective social awareness comes in. I have seen shopkeepers in the neighbourhood finally giving in to the people’s inability to carry fabric bags or pots, in case they want to buy yogurt, for instance. Making a fabric bag shouldn’t be a difficult undertaking.

While the government should show consistency in its approach to ban plastic bags and take the required actions, there should be an unending awareness campaign in every media forum and through local mosques about the damage we are causing ourselves and our generations to come.

Our anathema to a clean environment can be gauged from the fact that we still burn waste with impunity despite a ban on it in Punjab. Unattended hazardous e-waste is another story to look at. Does it require a mammoth government machinery to ensure that no waste is burnt and a proper waste management system is in place?

That the environment is not even low on the government’s priority list prominently shows itself in its slow implementation of the much-needed electric vehicles policy. The government has claimed it is going to introduce local and commercial e-vehicles but all these claims remain on paper. Meanwhile, India has done a lot of work on introducing e-vehicles. According to a news report, only in Delhi over 3,000 e-vehicles have been registered. Being serious about e-vehicles policy can prevent a lot of damage to our environment; and the sooner we understand this, the better.

Amid this show of laxity over issues that directly affect our health and our future, one can imagine how serious we must be about treating our industrial waste. Do we have updated and ready data about how much industrial waste is produced and treated? Can we be satisfied about the capacity of plants treating industrial waste?

Untreated or inadequately treated industrial waste is poisoning our water and our air. The lack of proper treatment of waste produced from dying clothes and making leather, etc is pointed out from time to time. Stories about the leather tanneries in Kasur, for instance, and waste from other industrial hubs, such as in Faisalabad and Karachi, appear in the media every now and then. This is not neglect but utter failure in protecting our drinking water and crops from becoming poisonous.

Add to this shameful response to the environment our taking joy in cutting trees in the name of so-called development. It is unfortunate, and equally surprising, that we are unable to look around and be inspired by countries that take their environment very seriously.

Without getting into a debate about who’s more responsible in destroying our environment – Europe, the US, China, Russia, the developing countries – it would be sane and timely to also correct our ways, not just as individual countries but as individual human beings too.