

Let's Not Waste Waste

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CALL me naïve, but I am a strong believer that the fate of our country lies in the hands of each one of us. The citizen need not be highly educated; however, the highly educated and well-to-do definitely have more responsibility towards the country. The latter need a change in mind-set and should start thinking of "not what the country can give her/him but what he/she can give to the country."

I also think that this mind-set cannot come naturally -- it has to be taught, ingrained and repeatedly pushed down every citizen's throat until "country comes first" becomes a part of our nature. And this process has to start right from kindergarten. We should also be taught to think positively, to learn not to think of what problems we have but to think of finding solutions to those.

And those of us who are fortunate enough to have an education should in turn influence those not so fortunate to build a positive image of their surroundings and play their part in making their own area clean. Being naïve, I also believe that a clean Bangladesh will automatically produce a prosperous Bangladesh. Banning polythene bags is not enough; people need to be made aware of the consequences of substances resistant to biodegradation, and also of the positive aspects of biodegradable material and their recycling capacity. I wonder if anyone has noticed that the farther away from Dhaka one goes the less one observes litter on the roadside, and heaped garbage near water-bodies? In other words, village folks create less non-biodegradable waste and are more adept at re-cycling. As most of us are aware, urban garbage is a huge problem in Dhaka city. The garbage dumps at Syedabad are not only hazardous, the residents living around that area must also be in an olfactory hell. Most residential areas, including Dhanmondi, Gulshan and Baridhara, have their share of stench-emanating dumps -- which frequently totally overpowers our sense of smell.

Most of the waste we produce is not only biodegradable, it can also be used to produce energy. Just think, if we could have a system of collecting the biodegradable kitchen waste separately and this was supplied to a biogas generating plant, we would all be winners! In Japan and the Philippines, households have to collect and dispose of their waste in 3 categories; (a) biodegradable stuff like paper, vegetable waste or other biological material, (b) glass and (c) metallic waste. There is re-cycling of the glass and metallic products, while the biodegradable stuff is collected for further treatment to generate fertilizer or biogas. In collaboration with the municipal bodies, we the citizens in every residential community need to start a similar system as soon as possible.

I felt so proud the day I read in the papers that a biogas generating plant had been set up with German help and an agreement signed with Kawran Bazaar for collection and provision of the daily raw vegetable waste to the biogas plant in Narayanganj. We have heard of various business bodies talking about funds to generate power, but biogas is a suitable alternative and more plants similar to the one set up by the Germans can be easily established. I was heartened when I saw a program on Channel 1, where the excretory products of chicken in a poultry farm were being used to generate biogas, which in turn was used to drive a generator. The power generated was enough to run the poultry farm.

All it required was the innovative skill of an engineer, who converted local generators in such a way that these could directly operate by using biogas. More programs such as these should be broadcast, awareness created, and arrangements made to produce such systems on a wider scale. I often wonder what it would take for the factory management to stop spewing waste into our water-bodies, polluting our beautiful rivers, and turning our surroundings into toxic dumps. The Daily Star published a series of photos of the appalling condition of some of the rivers and water bodies in the city's outskirts, where unsuspecting children were even seen bathing.

I am reminded of the famous quote of Martin Niemoller's: "In Germany, they came first for the communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a communist. And then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. And then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. And then . . . they came for me . . . and by that time there was no one left to speak up."

We in Dhaka are so busy making a living and making ends meet that we shut our eyes to this blatant and deliberate pollution, thinking that it will never affect us. It is, however, actually affecting us because one day a fish growing in one of the lesser polluted areas may end up on our dinner table!

The situation is truly dangerous and alarm bells should be ringing, because this toxic waste is now getting into the ground water system -- our beloved Dhaka city is truly on fire! The government, environmentalists, microbiologists, biotechnologists and factory management, a multidisciplinary team, should put their heads together and quickly put up economically viable schemes for pollutant degradation, and save themselves and their city from a certain slow and painful death. Schemes for water conservation are also the need of the day. Small local projects can be thought of, as well as bigger projects in village communities, for rainwater-harvesting. Creation of proper awareness is a key factor here, where each and every citizen can do his part.

The government should also declare water conservation a high priority task and develop strategic plans for implementation. Just the other day I was reading about how unscrupulous digging up of soil for selling was destroying native homesteads in villages. If this practice could be done strategically, where water would naturally collect during the monsoon in areas where the soil was removed, a win-win situation would be produced.

Children in every household should also be taught not to waste water by turning on taps at full speed and leaving them on for long periods. Tap leaks should be dealt with urgently, and systems which use water sparingly for flushing waste should not only be developed but also installed in all households. Another day when my heart was filled with pride was when the Cox's Bazaar cleaning campaign started, and adults and children alike picked up litter from the beaches in order to popularise opinion for voting for Cox's Bazaar as one of the 7 wonders of the world. Let us do this in every city and every community. I believe we can turn Bangladesh into a wonderful country.

I started out with creation of waste by urbanites. Has any of you ever gone to visit our national symbol and pride, the Shaheed Minar, on February22? I cringed with shame at the litter strewn in every corner in the whole area.

Let us create awareness about how not to litter our streets, and to throw waste in designated areas. Let us not burden our country with waste, but learn in a nation-wide campaign to put it to good use. I urge all our dramatists, literary giants and eminent personalities to create awareness about cleanliness, biodegradation and recycling with utmost urgency. Journalists and eminent personalities should also put pressure on the government to tackle all kinds of pollution problems on a priority basis.

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