

It's Now or Never



Recently, a few reports have been published in a couple of well-known magazines in Bangladesh with the titles like 'Plastic causes waterlogging in mega cities including Dhaka', 'BD globe's 4th worst in cutting pollution', 'Sylhet, Sunamganj floods worst in 122 years'! We can sum it up in one word: ALARMING!!! Somehow, all the news were related to pollution. Actually, there are many different sorts of pollution in Bangladesh, but estimates claim that plastic pollution is the worst. According to a World Bank report, Bangladesh ranked in the top 10 in the world for the use of plastic and polythene. Between 2005 and 2022, its use almost tripled. Regarding the amount of plastic and polythene pollution entering the sea through rivers, Bangladesh is currently ranked 6th in the world. Bangladesh annually contributes roughly 2 lakh tonnes of plastic to the Bay of Bengal. This represents 547.9 tonnes daily!! Each year, South Asian countries produce 334 million metric tonnes of solid trash. Approximately 70% to 80% of this debris finally enters the ocean, of which 12% is made entirely of plastic.

We know that polythene hinders the soil's ability to absorb water through layer shadowing and frequently clogs areas against water retention and absorption capacity. As a result, our central river systems experience drainage problems. However, a study of 2021 found that the sale of fruits during the rainy season in Dhaka increased polyethylene consumption. Additionally, large amounts of plastic are dumped on the ground throughout the year by almost 2.3 crore people only in Dhaka city, which is flowing into canals, rivers and underground drainage systems along with rainwater. Since there is little rainfall in Dhaka, the drainage system can be overloaded if there is a huge flow of water. If you look closely, even the water reservoirs, canals and lakes of the luxurious areas such as the residential areas of Gulshan, Banani and Bashundhara are in poor condition too. Most of these wetlands have turned into garbage and breeding ground for mosquitoes, which ultimately help to spread

dengue in Dhaka. However, we need approaches combining managers and users to keep those areas healthy and clean, supporting a better drainage facility in Dhaka.

Now let's come to the most important point. 2022 is the year of the worst floods to hit the districts of Sylhet and Sunamganj in the last 122 years. Every year, 8000 travellers only visit Moulvibazar. According to an estimation by Sylhet chamber of commerce, the tourism sector earns almost 2.5 to 3 crore Tk daily. The haor-based Sunamganj now has at least 20 luxury boats for safe and enjoyable travel. There are hundreds of other small boats and large boats. The boat can carry 150 to 200 tourists during the day. Many tourists now spend the night in Haor as they have luxury boats. Sylhet's traditional wetlands, which act as sponges absorbing surface runoff are now under severe threat due to this immense tourist pressure along with extreme pollution, especially plastic and plastic-made substances that fill up the water with pollutants. If we couldn't take action properly, the present over-flooded scenario in Sylhet will be a regular phenomenon for Bangladesh.

If we look at the world's most active river systems, the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna, they carry a lot of silt and pollutants from the higher catchments. The Meghna and Jamuna Rivers in Bangladesh got excess rain from the Indian states of Assam and Meghalaya this year. But as the wetlands were ill-equipped to handle the water's removal, Bangladesh was seriously affected by the flood. In addition, unchecked plastic pollution is the most frequent threat that could be dealt properly with realistic policy and management strategies. The water carrying capacity of the rivers in Bangladesh has already been reduced and ruined by the siltation of riverbeds brought on by deforestation, solid waste dumping, and excessive stone mining in the upstream rivers or areas of the northern region like Tetulia and Panachagarh.

Daily almost 85,000 visitors are accommodated on the 120-kilometre-long sandy beach of Cox's Bazar. Unverified estimates claim that Cox's Bazar, a popular tourist destination, receives more than 30,000 people annually on its 155 kilometres of natural coastline. Pollution already poses a severe threat to St. Martin's Island and Sundarban, two hubs of natural biodiversity. Ships of various types and sizes transport almost 80% of Bangladesh's trade by volume. Approximately 67,924 fishing boats are operating in the country's interior and coast which are continuously adding pollutants to the aquatic ecosystem. So, pollution is everywhere from land to the sea and it has to be controlled now or it will never be. We are already late in taking action properly.

According to the global Environmental Performance Index (EPI) 2022 study, Bangladesh stands 4th in terms of environmental pollution. In addition, out of the top 05 worst performers, 04 are from South Asia, and 3 are littoral regions around the Bay of Bengal. Dhaka consistently ranks 1st, 2nd, or 3rd among the most polluted cities in the world according to the real-time air quality index. According to the National Youth Survey on Environmental Pollution and Protection 2022, this year's medical expenses for illnesses caused by environmental pollution totaled tk. 34.38 billion.

I said in one of my writings that nature seemed to be rejuvenating due to COVID 19 lockdown. Within 10 days of the complete lockdown in Bangladesh, the indiscriminate jumping of dolphins near the coast in Cox's Bazar has been seen. That has not been seen in the past three

decades. I always refer to this as an indicator of the favorable condition of nature that could be revived and turned back through proper management action. There is still a ray of hope that humans can replenish nature, but we should start now.

As per the current trends, the amount of mismanaged waste (including plastic) in South Asia is expected to double to 661 million tonnes by 2050, which will affect the region's marine ecosystems, livelihoods, human health and sustainability adversely. So, combined regional action should be taken right now. Integration, cooperation and engagement program within South Asia should be planned in a need-based way instead of considering it as a national crisis only. Rather than pointing fingers at natural phenomena, preparing for potentially avoidable problems should be a top priority. Nevertheless, harmonization in policy and problems should be practiced.

Author: Afifat Khanam Ritika, Research Officer, Bangladesh Institute of Maritime Research and Organization (BIMRAD).

The article was published in [the daily sun](#) newspaper on July 05, 2022