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AIR POLLUTION

What can we do to reclaim 6.8 years of our lives?

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In a world that constantly deals with complex challenges, a revelation has raised alarm about something that needs our immediate attention. The Air Quality Life Index study, conducted by the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago (EPIC), has uncovered that the people of Bangladesh are losing 6.8 years of their life expectancy due to the toxic blend of air pollution and other environmental factors. This grim statistic should now force us to confront the dire consequences of inaction and recalibrate our priorities for the sake of present and future generations.

In Bangladesh, air pollution looms as a silent yet pervasive threat. In 2019, the Health Effects Institute (HEI) found 173,500 instances of excessive mortality attributable to the adverse effects of subpar air quality. What's more concerning is that over half of these undue fatalities can be attributed to indoor air pollution. Polluted air, contaminated water, and a lack of proper sanitation facilities have collectively become a toxic concoction, gradually eroding the very essence of life itself. The loss of 6.8 years is more than a mere statistic; it signifies countless missed opportunities, unfulfilled potential, and the absence of cherished moments spent with loved ones. Who knows, those lives could have driven the nation forward.

Air pollution affects all kinds of spaces, from bustling cities to serene rural areas. Despite being often disregarded as a minor

concern, it significantly reduces efficiency, raises healthcare costs, and imposes a burden on social systems. Those residing in crowded urban centres inhale a dangerous mix of particles, metals, chemicals, fibres, asbestos, and toxic gases. A type of airborne particle, bioaerosol, can even transport microbes over vast distances. Breathing in all these substances leads to illnesses, as the lungs become battlegrounds and the heart, brain and other organs start giving up. Such environmental damage also exacerbates poverty, as low-income groups are exposed to greater air pollution due to subpar indoor living conditions, improper energy usage, and a specific lifestyle.

The causes behind this air pollution epidemic are manifold. Low-grade fuel, brick kilns, unfit vehicles, construction and demolition materials, and power plants are generally the main sources for pollution. Our reliance on wood, coal, and cow dung is not helping improve the situation, and the spread of pollution across borders significantly adds to the woes. As the population continues to grow and urbanisation accelerates, the problem will keep on compounding, unless swift and comprehensive measures are adopted. Such measures require a diverse approach that transcends geographic boundaries and prioritises the shared responsibility of governments, industries, and individuals.

A robust system for monitoring air quality needs to be established nationwide. Accurate data is

essential to understand the extent of the issue, pinpoint areas with high pollution levels, and track improvements over time. It's surprising that we still lack information about the reasons behind air pollution spikes in remote regions. Identifying the sources of emissions and pollution hotspots is now critically important. To achieve this, the government could propose a comprehensive nationwide study using advanced experimental and modelling techniques.

Concurrently, it's crucial to enforce stricter emission standards for vehicles and industries. This effort should be coupled with investments in cleaner technologies and renewable energy sources. Industries should adopt eco-friendly practices that prioritise sustainability and reduce carbon emissions. By fostering collaboration between governments and the private sector, innovative solutions can emerge that balance economic growth and environmental conservation. The old approach of conducting business cannot persist; the time has come to shift towards a new mindset that embraces environmentally conscious practices.

Moreover, campaigns to raise public awareness have a crucial role in safeguarding lives, especially those of children. When individuals are well-informed, they can initiate change at the grassroots by making informed decisions daily, contributing to a healthier environment. Schools, media outlets, and community groups have an essential role to play in spreading information about the impacts of air pollution and the steps individuals can take to minimise harm. This education should be targeted at schools, communities, and workplaces. Adopting the appropriate lifestyle can significantly save lives, especially in the low-income

group, which should be educated about proper indoor ventilation, cooking methods, and energy sources. It's crucial for the general public to grasp the severe consequences of being indifferent toward air pollution.

The "Air Pollution (Control) Rules 2022" is a welcome addition in this fight. However, the available legislations should be properly enforced to curb illegal sources of pollution, such as the open burning of waste, a major contributor to air pollution. Aside from that, waste management systems should be modernised to encourage proper disposal and recycling. The current methods used to handle solid waste are facing significant challenges, and waste sites have negative impacts on urban heat waves, air quality, and the spread of diseases carried by vectors. Besides, green spaces and tree planting initiatives should be promoted to naturally cleanse the air and provide a break from the concrete jungles. Lastly, international collaboration is also crucial. Air pollution knows no borders, and efforts to combat it should not be confined within national boundaries. Sharing best practices, technological innovations, and expertise can accelerate progress in reducing pollution levels regionally and globally.

The revelation of a 6.8 year life loss in Bangladesh should serve as a wake-up call; it should remind us that we are custodians of a fragile planet, who are responsible for the well-being of billions of people. The study's findings should evolve into a catalyst for change. Time is of the essence, and the government, private sector, civil society, and individuals must unite to tackle this challenge head-on. By doing so, we not only reclaim years of life but also ensure a healthier, more sustainable future for generations to come.

Lifespan of the Leviathan

KNOT SO TRUE



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One can't go unnoticed in this day and age. One can't live in shadows, or be unheard; the edges of visibility have expanded and have collapsed the surreptitious and the stealth. Every whisper is a bleat; every breath is pronounced. Life is like being in a live theatre, exposed to the onlookers, either to be booed or loved for the duration of whatever our lives, lies and loves are worth. There's a rampant cancel culture, lest one publicly shares preferences that don't go down well. Opinions must hinge on the balance principle. Yet, while all over the world society is more critical than ever before, governance goes unnoticed and state-building continues to be a failed exercise.

The voices siding with the unusual and extraordinary don't have the bandwidth of crossing the neighbourhood or one's own social media page. Op eds are carefully penned, lest they risk the wrath of the Leviathan. The contemporary discourse being hosted in electronic media bends towards an extreme bias, with competing pitches bordering on onscreen violence and impropriety accompanied by democratic intolerance being all out to shame all lessons learnt from History.

Opinion is no more a natural claim; it is tailored by a structured refrain, constructed through a careful exercise of blatant advertisements of self-proclaimed pace of growth, fuelled by fanatics from despot corners, throttled by a concocted, fabricated notion of progress.

Freedom, for the most part, walks through the narrowest corridors while Fear lurks in every block. Only the blind walk unchained, since they have neither witnessed the unbridled blood-drenched trail of falsehood, nor realised that the stench comes from home. Nightingales have had their vocal cords removed in the dark expectation of having their throats slit. Sight has retreated to liminal spaces with the only hope of backrooms chasing the light away.

The megaphones all over the world are travesties of any decent world order. Either it's the bandwagon of despots writing the playbook of autocracy or it's the launch of a new episodic wave of human rights abuses. Somewhere, some master players are conspiring to make sure that they rule forever, in whichever lands they rule. Somewhere, somehow the conjurers of evil have made sure that they have full control over media, wealth, and a constant narrative of growth. Economies fail, politics plunge to ever newer lows and moral infrastructure is at a loss. Corruption is quickly brushed under the carpet; criticism is met with flack; the media is tasked to mask all bigotry.

It seems this entire civilisation of ours has sunk to the depths of an inescapable inferno of war-mongers who report to hyper-nationalism, align with the soft powers that push countries to unimaginable debt traps, claim regional camaraderie, continue seeking external endorsement and, at the end, pull through one way or the other.

Where is History in all this? History cannot be our destiny, but we could certainly learn from it, if we wanted to.

We could remember how the "Great Elector" of Prussia, Frederick William I, whose rule began in 1640, and who, after having ruled Brandenburg-Prussia for more than 48 years, believed that the strengthening of the state and the expansion of its power

could only come from "one brain." As a result, Prussia went on to collect more taxes, raised revenue, went to war, controlled society more and yet lost out on nation-building just because society was nowhere to be seen.

On the contrary, the Swiss resisted the Habsburgs by uniting all the cantons, and by allowing the peasants to become autonomous. The Swiss started with watches, then moved on to the machine tools industry, pharma, chocolates, and cheese. By "going Swiss," the Swiss ended up having the highest per capita income than any other European state.

In both of the above cases, it was war that propelled statehood. But in one, society was ignored and in the other, the Swiss society and the state together built one of the most vibrant democracies in Europe.

We could also remind ourselves of the Chile that said "no" to Pinochet in 1990 and transitioned to democracy; we could remember Lech Walesa who, after defeating Jaruzelski, led the country to democracy, led the Polish parliament with 28 different political parties, and finally inked a compromise, so that the government, the trade union, and and the management could talk together and build the nation. That talk itself created a safe transit to democracy.

But what does one do with history?

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What happens to the collective national memory of lands which have lived through wars, hunger, flood, poverty, and still managed to turn around in democracy? Apparently nations that have memories of democracy can never suffer from dementia. Apparently there are civil societies that awaken when they are pushed too far beyond. But times have changed...

Who would want to move for democracy and risk losing it all?

Remember there was one Litvinenko, an operative in Russia's Federal Security Bureau, who shared his horrors of secret services with Putin, who listened to him attentively, and the next day opened a file on him? Litvinenko, having no option, fled from his own country for fear of his life in 2000 and then was poisoned six years later by two ex-KGB agents in London while having a cup of tea with them, which resulted in his death three weeks later of polonium-210-induced radiation syndrome.

Truth be known: the Czech president and the playwright, Vaclav Havel's "The Power of the Powerless" has fallen prey to erasure while Machavelli's prediction of the despaired common people giving their support to "one man, so as to be defended by his authority" stands erect in total audacity.

Therefore, untouched despots live and thrive in the association of braggarts, undeterred, and confident of survival and absolute power.