

Prioritising profits over the environment is costing us dearly

The Daily Star speaks with Dr Ainun Nishat, professor emeritus and advisor at C3ER, BRAC University, about the future of climate resilience and environmental policy in Bangladesh.



Ainun Nishat

The Daily Star (TDS): How would you assess the current state of Bangladesh's environment, and what are the most pressing challenges?

Ainun Nishat (AN): We do not follow rules or obey regulations. Factories are set up indiscriminately, dumping liquid waste into nearby canals. Even wealthier residential areas contribute to pollution, with toilets directly connected to rivers, lakes, or canals. For instance, sanitary waste from Gulshan ends up in nearby lakes. Bangladesh lacks a proper sewer system. In Dhaka, Wasa treats only 5-10% of liquid waste at the Pagla sewage treatment plant, while the Dasherbandi Sewage Treatment Plant (STP) remains unconnected. The situation is absurd—like constructing a ten-storey building without installing an elevator or staircase. How would people use it? Similarly, pollution—whether soil or water—remains uncontrolled.

Yet, all the necessary laws are in place. Article 18A of the Constitution commits the country to protecting the environment, ecosystems, biodiversity, and wetlands. On paper, we have national commitments and legal frameworks for sustainable management. In practice, however, we do not uphold them. Wetlands are depleted, forests are cut down, and civic responsibility is lacking—both among businesses and communities in their daily activities and operations.

To illustrate this point, let me share an experience. During my visit to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, last year, our guide took us to various places, including a traditional local market that had existed for around 3,000 years and remained largely unchanged. It was a circular market, divided into seven sections. Despite having a fish section, there was no dirty water anywhere. The poultry section had properly processed

The reckless dumping of waste—from tanning factories to city sewage—has left much of the Buriganga River biologically dead.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN



- » Factories that produce liquid waste—such as the dyeing industry, pharmaceutical plants, and cosmetic industries—should all have effluent treatment plants (ETPs).
- » On paper, we have national commitments and legal frameworks for sustainable management. In practice, however, we do not uphold them.
- » If we install water quality sensors in these factories and connect them to a central system via satellite, we can see the pollution levels in real time. This way, pollution monitoring will be more effective.
- » We keep collecting reports—ministries prepare reports every year—but no one analyses them. The data collected is not used effectively to learn from those reports. There needs to be proper analysis and appropriate corrective actions.
- » Wherever pollution is detected, the local community should be informed and encouraged to put pressure on the polluters. Similarly, monitoring officials must also be held responsible if they fail to enforce regulations.

chickens, neatly stored in refrigerators. Vegetables were displayed in an orderly manner. The market was even a tourist attraction, demonstrating how a well-maintained market should function.

Now, compare that to Bangladesh. If you visit a wet market here, you risk ruining your shoes—or even your trousers. Our behaviour is reckless and unhygienic. People litter, spit, and urinate anywhere. There is little awareness of the need to protect public property, water bodies, or the environment. Even breathing in our cities has become hazardous.

The poorest communities suffer the most from our environmental negligence. Many live in slums next to drains or canals. If these waterways were properly maintained, their homes wouldn't flood every rainy season. But since canals are

encroached upon and clogged, water cannot drain, leaving their homes submerged. While lower-income groups also contribute to pollution, they do so out of necessity rather than choice. If our country were better managed and free from pollution across all sectors, their circumstances would improve as well.

TDS: Do you think our problem is a lack of awareness, or do we simply not care?

AN: It is not about awareness; rather, we are knowingly irresponsible. We understand what is wrong. However, the focus on maximising profits, often disregarding the long-term consequences for the environment, puts us at a disadvantage.

Monitoring is crucial. If you look at the garment factories now, many of them are becoming responsible. However,

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