

# Citizen's Agenda for Environmental Protection

In his first appearance before the media after being elected as chief minister, Ashok Chavan emphasized the need for improving the quality of life in urban areas. One key factor towards a qualitative enhancement of urban life would be to uplift the environmental profile of the cities. Garbage disposal, air pollution, tree cover, open spaces - these issues have not been given the gravity they deserve, with the result that they pose a serious threat to the health and environment of the urban habitat.

To be serious about environment, the new government must accomplish a 'pollution-free' Maharashtra by 2014 as a mission. Towards this end, it must pursue a development process which is environmentally sustainable, based on a strategy that not only preserves and maintains natural resources but also provides equitable access to those who are denied this such as those living near the coast. It should be recognized that unless environment protection is at the core/centre stage of all policy formulation, any 'development' may actually cause deterioration of the quality of life.

With over 45 per cent urbanization in Maharashtra, environment-related habitat problems such as epidemics caused by poor waste disposal practices are at their peak. There are two reasons for this state of affairs -- poor implementation of the law and insufficient infrastructure for environmental protection. Notwithstanding the existence of notified rules regarding management of different types of waste -- hazardous, municipal, bio-medical, plastic, sewage, etc., the implementation of these rules is extremely poor. Moreover, there is a dearth of a visible and credible policy approach and action plans to deal with the problem of waste management. The collection and treatment facilities too are inadequate.

The government has its role cut out in providing the necessary support to the local authorities to pursue a policy of zero tolerance in the arena of waste and effluent disposal. The management of municipal solid wastes (MSW) in cities requires application of suitable technology as per local needs. However, in the absence of specific guidance in this matter, decisions of the local bodies are ad



**Dr. Dilip B. Boralkar,**  
M. Sc., Ph.D. (Mumbai)  
Former Member Secretary of  
Maharashtra Pollution Control Board

hoc or vendor-driven. Not a single city or town in the state has adequate compliance of environmental regulations pertaining to the management of MSW.

Bio-medical waste is another area of concern. Hospital waste consists of body parts, fluids, needles and sharps, cotton waste, etc. requiring segregation at source as infectious and non-infectious, and specific norms for safe transportation, treatment and disposal. Yet, many hospitals, especially public ones, do not have waste management facilities. Recently, the Bombay high court had come down heavily on the state government for non-compliance of orders and had slapped a fine of Rs 5000 on the department secretaries concerned.

Neglect of waste disposal ends up corroding the organic cycle and affecting human beings. For instance, discharge of partially treated and/or untreated sewage into rivers and other water bodies is a fundamental cause of water pollution which, in turn, is responsible for most water-borne diseases.

Most of the water bodies in the state are polluted. This fact was recently brought to the notice of the state Cabinet. The main cause of this pollution is discharge of untreated or partially treated sewage. The collection, transport and treatment of sewage is not as per the standards laid down by the Pollution Control Board. Various disease-causing organisms such as coli form bacteria was found present in drinking water

sources. A holistic approach, also factoring in water conservation, recycling of treated waste water and rain-water harvesting plans as integral part of construction projects, is required.

Apart from the obvious do's on waste disposal, we need to proactively further the cause of environmental management. Two aspects of vital importance in this regard are increasing forest and tree cover, and improving energy efficiency. We need to rehabilitate large tracts of wastelands by greening them. Energy shortage must make us conserve energy and use it well. The new government must set up time-bound targets for both these programmes. As the first step, let us survey and identify the public and private lands that are suitable for afforestation. People's participation, especially those living on fringes of forests is necessary for the successful implementation of any project. Remedial steps should be taken to revive the ecology of lands contaminated by waste disposal and of areas where the groundwater is contaminated or polluted. Supportive research and guiding participation of academic universities should be encouraged. Coastal Zone Management must get high priority. The existing approach is ad hoc. So, it is very important to prepare area-specific management plans based on the social and economic needs of the area and integrate them with coastal zone management.

All government departments must be required to harmonize their policies and legislation with the goals of environment protection and sustainable development. They must be mandated to list the progress in this regard in their annual reports including the expenditure incurred. The State Pollution Control Board, tasked with implementing various environmental acts, should get greater attention. The Board's performance must be reviewed annually. Its advice must be incorporated in state policies on subjects like development, industrialization, transport, etc. For this to work, the Board must have designees possessing the required expertise. The chairman, member-secretary and members of the Board must be technically qualified and experienced in pollution control, survey, assessment and monitoring.