

# SHASHI THAROOR WRITES ON DELHI POLLUTION: WE MUST NOT LAPSE INTO INACTION THE SILENT KILLER OF POOR AIR QUALITY RESURFACES

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

Amid the gloom of the daily assault on our society by the [coronavirus](#) and the lockdown against it, one silver lining along our collective clouds has been impossible to miss — the bright blue skies and cleaner air.

The national capital region — which, on average, sees most of the days in a year in the poor to severe category on the national Air Quality Index — has witnessed something akin to a miracle. With the lockdown in effect, and construction, industrial and vehicular activity down to a crawl, the capital has been experiencing record levels of clean air.

Barring a single day on April 5, when a few overzealous supporters of the prime minister chose to take the latter's call to light lamps in support of our critical service providers to the next level — by bursting firecrackers — the AQI levels in the city have dropped to scarcely believable levels. It has been refreshing to see the AQI below 30 on most days.

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Even prior to the lockdown, during the single-day "[janata curfew](#)" on March 21, the gains Delhiites received were immense: Reportedly, the Central Board of Pollution Control pointed out that it registered whopping reductions in PM 10 levels (-44 per cent), PM2.5 (-34 per cent) and Nitrogen Oxide (-51 per cent). The following week, with the lockdown, saw a 71 per cent plunge in all these indicators.

It's not just Delhi that is breathing easier. A recent (and surprisingly fact-based) gem that was doing the rounds on WhatsApp revealed that thanks to clear skies, you could now, for the first time, view the foothills of the Himalayas in neighbouring Himachal from Jalandhar in Punjab.

The clean air that has replaced the smog in some of our most polluted regions is not just a glimpse of an experience that most Indians have almost forgotten existed. There is a more serious reason why this is worth paying attention to.

Initial research by Harvard's T H Chan School of Public Health has suggested that there could be a correlation between air pollution and the lethality of [COVID-19](#). Through their findings, based on data from nearly 3,000 counties in the US, the researchers have pointed out that a marginal increase in long-term exposure to PM2.5 could contribute to a higher fatality rate among those affected with coronavirus. The study showed that counties that registered on average as little as one microgram per cubic metre of PM2.5 more than their counterparts had a COVID fatality rate that was 15 per cent higher.

**Explained: [Air pollution's insidious link to the coronavirus pandemic](#)**

A similar study in Italy by scientists from Denmark's Aarhus University pointed out that regions in the northern part of that country, which faced high levels of air pollution, also registered the highest number of coronavirus-related deaths (12 per cent versus 4.5 per cent in the southern part). This trajectory mirrors a 2003 study by the University of California which found that the

impact of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in China was more fatal in parts of the country that suffered from poor air quality.

This should be a matter of concern for all of us who live in regions where the air quality has perennially remained poor. Severe exposure to foul air inevitably means that most of us have gradually developed weaker respiratory systems and other conditions that would make us even more vulnerable to a virus like COVID-19.

India's situation is horrific in this regard. A study conducted by the Kolkata-based Chittaranjan National [Cancer](#) Institute (CNCI) found that the key indicators of respiratory health and lung function of school children in Delhi between four and 17 years of age were markedly worse than their counterparts elsewhere. Indeed, the figures were twice to four times as bad for children in Delhi than in other places, and were not reversible.

I remain confident that as a country we will collectively pull through our current crisis. Eventually, the lockdown too will be lifted, and we will have to kickstart the economy. We cannot realistically expect to continue to hold back our economic activity the way we are doing right now. Livelihoods matter almost as much as lives.

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But we should seize the opportunity to try and find a way to drive the economy forward without once again driving our air pollution levels through the roof. Renewable energy is part of the answer, and there are other steps the government must take. As a concerned MP who has convened multiple high-level and cross-sectoral stakeholder gatherings to find solutions to our crisis of poor air, and as an Indian politician representing lakhs of people, I've been concerned at how little traction my efforts received. There is no doubt that neither public health, generally, nor air pollution, specifically, has yet won or lost an election for any Indian politician.

That must change. We must not lapse into inaction when the lockdown is lifted and the silent killer of poor air quality resurfaces. In a country as diverse and stratified as ours, the crises that we are required to address daily are many: Often, some will have to take priority over others. But ultimately we must recognise that toxic air affects us all, no matter which part of the country we come from, what political and ideological affiliations we may have, or what socio-economic class we find ourselves in.

The COVID crisis has prompted many of us to vow to fight for greater emphasis on public health in our country, which currently devotes only a woeful 1.28 per cent of GDP to keeping Indians healthy. Not only does this not undermine our need to grow the economy, it is essential to strengthen our economy instead. Because the engine of growth is the Indian workforce, and an unhealthy and vulnerable workforce will not generate the growth we need. Let's defeat COVID, and let's also make cleaner air an indispensable part of our defence against the next deadly contagion.

***This article first appeared in the print edition of April 16, 2020, under the name 'Blue skies and cleaner air'. The writer is a member of Parliament for Thiruvananthapuram***

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