

# DELHI CHOKING, BUT DO NOT BLAME STUBBLE BURNING ALONE

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'We need to take more comprehensive, long-term measures throughout the year and not just in the days and weeks when it begins to make news'. The picture is of Delhi's air | Photo Credit: AP

Every year around Deepavali, and like clockwork, Delhi's air quality makes it to the headlines. But there is a problem. You would have noticed that the noise on TV channels and even newspapers over the issue dies down after one 'strong wind speed day' and blows the debate away. Next winter we are back to expressing outrage again. As firefighters we are doing well, but as planners doing very little. While nature will not change, emissions can be reduced.

Increasingly polluted air is a hazard and a health crisis in the making. In fact, it is already one. India now reports 2.5 million air pollution-related deaths annually. Pollution not only makes our throats and eyes burn but is much more insidious. Some pollutants are so small that they are able to enter the bloodstream with ease, impacting almost every organ in the body and leading to the onset of health issues such as stroke, heart diseases, respiratory diseases and cancer, to name just a few serious health problems. It is not just about good air. It is about life.

While a lot has been written and said about Delhi's air quality, the question that still has to be answered is this: why is nothing changing after all these years?

A principal reason is that year after year, we are doing the same things to try and address the problem without actually trying to evaluate why those measures are not effective. The Government formed the Commission for Air Quality Management, which, unfortunately, did not offer anything new. This body essentially issued the same orders the Ministry and the Environment Pollution (Prevention and Control) Authority used to, with just a slight change in the language used. Every year schools are closed, people are advised to stay indoors, or carpool and work from home, bans on firecrackers are reinforced, construction stopped, trucks and cars not allowed to enter the city, and industries running on fuel shut. These measures, and several others, are akin to dressing a bullet wound with bandaid. Stopping people from going about their regular work is plain bad governance.

As the haze descends over Delhi, the blamegame begins — with stubble burning in the

neighbouring States being identified as the main culprit. However, the reality is that Delhi's air is bad even when stubble is not being burnt. The burning of biomass in and around Delhi, if audited properly, would be the same as stubble burning in other States. Unfortunately none of the bodies, be it the municipal body or the government's Public Works Department, is willing to take responsibility for this or address and find a solution to the problem. This is not to say that stubble burning is not a problem. Some solutions have been tried out over the years, but with little success. What is required is a fundamental shift in agricultural patterns, which needs someone to make a bold political call. Unless farmers are adequately compensated, the problem is unlikely to go away. The 'Happy Seeder'-based solution has sadly not been a happy experience. We need to acknowledge that the problem is not just Delhi-centric. For some strange reason we all talk about the airshed approach but do not spend the rest of the year trying to solve the problem. Delhi chokes on its own dust and industrial activities. Who is ensuring compliance with the rules relating to the handling of construction and demolition waste? Delhi started with much enthusiasm about roadside greening and cover. But is anyone monitoring this? Everyone seems to be looking at the data of PNG in industry, but is anyone looking at the unauthorised industries, which are a large emitter? Vehicles are another source of pollution in the city and we need to introspect why, despite an expanding fleet of public transport, citizens who primarily use two-wheelers have not moved to using the public transport system — buses and the metro. I feel the reasons for this include last-mile connectivity, the problem of crowding in buses and metros, and the inability to reach and navigate narrow lanes that two-wheelers can. The state of maintenance of buses could be another reason as well.

We have to be creative and look beyond the measures that have already been tried and proved they are at best a short-term solution to a recurring, long-term problem. Even then a core issue that needs to be addressed is the governance system. There needs to be a single entity that takes responsibility for air quality management. We cannot operate in silos where one system of governance is responsible for thinking, a second issues orders and a third is responsible for implementation. Without an efficient system that works in a coordinated way, we will find ourselves to be in the same position years later.

The reality also is that Delhi is not the sole offender. There are many other cities in India where safe levels of air quality are breached regularly. Air quality is a problem on most days but becomes an issue around Deepavali and when stubble is being burnt. We need to take more comprehensive, long-term measures throughout the year and not just in the days and weeks when it begins to make news.

C.K. Mishra is a former Secretary, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change and founder, Partnerships for Impact

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