

Delhi's debilitating smog is shocking but not surprising

If it weren't for the fact that pollution levels are the worst ever every year, Delhi could have been living in a science fictional time loop for the past few years. The smog gets so bad at this time of the year that Delhiites choke. The government scrambles for immediate stopgap solutions. A few are implemented. Once winter is over, it's back to business as usual. Rinse, repeat.

Delhi continues to bear the ignominy of being one of the most polluted cities in the world with alarming indifference. It isn't as though the solutions to the issue of pollution are shrouded in the smog that currently envelops the city, rendering them invisible. Obvious solutions such as reducing the number of polluting vehicles, imposing strict guidelines for polluting industries, and building better public transport infrastructure have been talked about for many years. Yet, authorities only think of strategies such as the odd-even plan (whose benefits are debatable) for cars when the pollution levels reach these dangerous levels.

Residents of the city must also share the blame. Before Diwali this year, the Supreme Court tried to reduce firecrackers from adding to the problem, but many people defied the spirit of its judgement by bursting polluting crackers well into the wee hours of the morning. The number of cars that are added to the road every day, the number of diesel powered generators that the city uses, and the impunity with which pollution control measures are flouted – all add to the smog that the capital's residents are now breathing.

Crop burning from neighbouring states also adds to the pollution in Delhi. No practical solutions that don't involve criminalising the farmers who grow our food have been found for that either. Identifying and helping farmers implement more efficient ways of mulching and composting, and using crop residue for the production of biogas have been suggested as alternative means of dealing with crop residue that farmers currently burn. But the implementation of such methods will require a serious engagement with farmers, who are already under immense financial pressure.

The problem of air quality is also a problem of unplanned and extensive urbanisation.

There isn't a miracle cure for this problem. Air pollution in Delhi has been caused by several decades of continuing irresponsible behaviour. Whatever the solution, and however much it costs, it is sure to be offset by the cost of man hours lost due to delays in flights, trains and vehicular traffic due to smog and the staggering health costs involved. Quite simply, it makes economic sense to invest in cleaner technologies and practices. This will require political will, commitment, and a concerted effort by all stakeholders including residents, non-governmental organisations and governmental agencies.

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