

Own the crisis

Delhi, where 25 million people reside, has struggled to breathe this month. A thick layer of smog, initially deemed “severe” and then an “emergency”, enveloped the national capital region. The average concentrations of hazardous particulate matter were nearly seven times the safe standards last Thursday.

Breathing has certainly become injurious to health in Delhi. Yet, those of us who live here and have vocalised our breathlessness, struggle to acknowledge that we too have somehow contributed to what the social media has termed an “apocalypse”. Instead, an accusatory finger is repeatedly pointed in a direction away from us — off late towards the fields of Punjab and Haryana.

Every year, starting late-September and through October, farmers from the northern states set their paddy fields on fire after harvesting. This is a low-cost straw disposal practice that reduces the turnaround to the next wheat crop. The alternative, purchasing machinery to manage stubble, is an impossible cost to take on without state support.

This smoke gets carried all the way to Delhi and, in fact, across the entire northern-Gangetic plain.

The farmers argue that their “once-a-year” practice only adds to particulate matter already in place due to the capital’s “polluting factories, diesel vehicles, thermal power plants and dust generated from construction sites.” They are vehement that it is not just them who contribute to the pollution and they cannot be blamed for the year-long consequences of the city’s consumption patterns.

The problem is far more complex than to reduce it into a simple binary of pro-environment and anti-environment measures — to say that farmers in Punjab and Haryana aren’t “caring” about the capital is to discount all that Delhi should have, but has not, done.

Numbers show that air quality isn’t superior in other Indian cities. In fact, Delhi did not feature among the top 10 most polluted cities in the world in the 2016 WHO analysis. Instead, Gwalior and Allahabad took the dubious distinction of being the second and third most polluted cities in the world, with Patna and Raipur among the top 10.

What does Delhi in is that its landlocked geography contributes to trapping pollutants. Several source apportionment studies have repeatedly underscored the contributing factors for the bad air with clear numerical proportions. Last week, Chief Minister [Arvind Kejriwal](#) inaugurated 20 additional monitoring stations making Delhi the most-watched city in India for the air it breathes.

In spite of the availability of increasingly reliable and granular numbers throughout the year, and access to studies by premier national institutes pinpointing exactly what the issues are, the problem of “air pollution” is manifest only when it confronts us, when eyes burn and we are left breathless.

Recently, Environment Minister Harsh Vardhan who was representing India at the climate change conference in Bonn said the central government “shall do everything possible to bring about improvement in the air quality” in Delhi and NCR. He also said the current high levels of smog in some areas was the result of “meteorological conditions” and “hoped” the situation will improve in the near future.

At a press conference held a month ago in Delhi, the minister — who is also a doctor — argued that there is no clear empirical evidence to link air pollution with severe health problems. The

Centre has repeatedly said that it has requested state governments in NCR to take effective steps to mitigate the levels of air pollution and bring them to acceptable levels. The National Green Tribunal has also repeatedly urged states to sit together and look at the problem, collectively. The Delhi government has oscillated between blaming others — state and central governments — and urging for “cooperation” for the “greater good”.

Yet, like Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement*, “politics has become a matter of personal moral reckoning rather than an area of collective action”. Terms such as “greater good” and political “cooperation” have become empty words and rhetoric serving only to further political agendas. This is especially surprising, in the case of a party like the [Aam Aadmi Party \(AAP\)](#), which not only had air pollution as a part of its election manifesto but also rose to power by stressing on the need for collective, concerted action as an effective means for solving these problems.

In the context of climate change, Ghosh reflects that over the time we live in as one where the “dominant culture in which the idea of the collective has been exiled from politics, economics and literature alike” and adds, “Quite possibly then, this era, which so congratulates itself on its self-awareness, will come to be known as the time of the Great Derangement.”

To extend the argument, the facts are there — Delhi’s air was “hazardous” for days. In other words, the people of India’s capital are breathing in poison. The situation, though unfortunate, is neither surprising nor was it unavoidable. This can no longer be an individual issue — where the city and its people point outwards, towards the farm fires of Punjab. The air belongs to us all, and if we don’t realise that we must be deranged.

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