

# AIR POLLUTION HAS REACHED DANGEROUS LEVELS NOT ONLY IN CITIES BUT IN OUR VILLAGES AS WELL

Relevant for: Environment & Disaster Management | Topic: Environmental Pollution - Air, Water, Soil & E-waste

Millions of households cook on stoves that fill the room with thick smoke from firewood and dung. | Photo Credit: [Getty Images](#)

It is that time of the year when there is much breast-beating about the poisonous air in our capital. The hazardous quality of air in the national capital region (NCR) is indeed a cause for serious concern. On Diwali, a combination of farm residue burning in Punjab and Haryana, vehicular and industrial emissions, and bursting of firecrackers led to the air quality index in Delhi and its satellite cities exceeding 999 in many areas. The World Health Organisation considers air quality to be healthy only till a reading of 50.

It has now become a norm for the judiciary to take proactive steps in matters of environment and public health and safety. The Supreme Court tried its best by imposing a ban on firecrackers to restrain runaway pollution but a suicidal citizenry flouted it quite openly, dashing hopes of a cleaner Diwali.

This seasonal worry about air pollution in winter actually ends up hiding the darker reality of its all-pervasive nature throughout the year. Central Pollution Control Board data shows that air quality is bad not just in Delhi but in more than a hundred cities across the country, including our coastal metros. Also, in the brouhaha over cities and towns, we conveniently ignore the fact that people in our villages also suffer severely from the ill effects of air pollution.

A big source of air pollution in India is in people's homes, particularly in villages and slum tenements. There have been 3.8 million deaths worldwide from indoor air pollution in 2016 alone, WHO says. India shares a large burden of the deaths.

Millions of women in both rural and urban areas cook on stoves or fires that fill the room with thick smoke from firewood and dung. This poses an enormous risk to health to women and children, who spend the most time near the domestic hearth. Over 60% of all premature deaths from household air pollution in 2012 were among women and children.

In poorly ventilated dwellings, indoor smoke can be 100 times higher than healthy levels for fine particles that are deposited deep into our lungs. This is a problem that can be easily solved by building efficient chimneys. In the past 50 years, innovators have come up with several models of smokeless cook stoves. But we have miserably failed to ensure their widespread use.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has thrown his weight behind the Swachh Bharat campaign in a bid to make the country free from open defecation, and it has made a huge difference in many parts of the country. Perhaps it is time for him to start a similar campaign to clean up the foul air in the homes in the countryside and urban slums.

## Serious hazard

Unlike in rural homes, cleaning the poison from the ambient air in cities, unfortunately, does not have such a simple solution. India tops the list of countries with the largest number of cities where air quality poses a serious hazard for citizens. In a study done by WHO, air pollution has gone from bad to worse between 2007 and 2017.

If we are to consider breathing clean air as a fundamental right, the business as usual approach of belching noxious fumes from diverse sources cannot be allowed to continue. The alarming state of affairs calls for radical solutions, and the piecemeal action by authorities in NCR — which, in any case, is rarely implemented effectively — is simply not enough.

We should learn from China how to tackle air pollution on a war footing. Some 10 years ago, Beijing was blanketed in thick smog in the winters, but the situation has improved dramatically. In 2017, Beijing recorded 226 days with good air quality compared to 176 in 2013.

Of the many steps it took, one was to severely restrict the registration of private vehicles.

In contrast, India's cities have seen an explosion of cars and the government has responded by building more roads. This approach needs to change. China has come down heavily on polluting industries, shuttering those which violated norms. Similar action is possible in India as well.

Urging administrative action is easy, but we must realise that any effort to clear the air requires civic consciousness, first and foremost. The wanton disregard of the ban on bursting firecrackers across the country despite knowing its poisonous outcome doesn't speak well of us. Unless we as a society take collective responsibility to clean up our act, breathing fresh air in India will remain a distant dream.

*The writer is Managing Editor of IndiaClimateDialogue.net. Follow him on Twitter @scurve*

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