

END THE BLAME GAME: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON DELHI'S POLLUTION CRISIS

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

A familiar sequence of events unfolds in the National Capital Region before the advent of winter. The monsoon retreats, dries the air and the wind drops. The pollution from construction, industry, road transport, hitherto being masked through the year, becomes more visible. However, the period also coincides with a unique practice in northern India where farmers in Punjab, Haryana and eastern Uttar Pradesh, in a bid to hurriedly clear their fields of rice straw to make space for wheat, set fire to the chaff. This long-standing practice is now facing criticism because of its emerging link to Delhi's noxious air quality. The stubble smoke carries over into Delhi through long-range wind transport. Finally, the third element during the season is Deepavali and the bursting of crackers. The season is also marked by more social gatherings such as weddings or related celebrations that again see a demand for crackers. While there is an official ban on crackers, except so-called 'green crackers' that are not widely available, the additional smoke from all of these add to the bad air, spiking air quality meters into the 'very poor' and 'severe' categories. This provokes a public outcry and concerns from the Supreme Court of India and a harried response from the Government that pushes for restrictions on free movement and construction. Invariably, the weather improves and all is forgiven.

The recurrent tragedy of addressing the problem of air pollution in Delhi is that it invariably descends into a blame game. The Centre blames the Delhi government, because it belongs to a different political dispensation, which in turn quite conveniently blames farmers in Punjab. What is never addressed head-on is that the air pollution crisis is not a problem that can be solved overnight. The lockdown last year provided compelling evidence that taking vehicles off the road and a cessation in industrial and construction activity led to clearer skies. Source apportionment studies by various institutions have shown that the contribution of stubble burning varies significantly, from as low as 4% on some days in October-November to as much as 40%. But the running of power plants and construction are also necessary activities that cannot be shut at a moment's notice. The move to ban the entry of trucks too is not any more effective than waiting for the wind to blow over, and has consequences for the economy. The way forward is to view winter air pollution as a natural disaster and target root causes. Road dust is the dominant source of particulate matter and the most significant impediment to clean air, and unfortunately the least amenable to an easy fix. The emphasis must be on concerted and consistent efforts, and not annual blame games.

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