

The right to breathe

Air quality readings in Delhi are extremely poor, once again, at this time of the year. And with the government gearing up for a graded response, all debate over the Supreme Court ban on firecrackers in the Delhi-NCR region can be put to rest. In November 2016, Delhi witnessed a public health emergency with the air pollution hitting perilous levels and smog covering the city. Given that the situation repeats itself year after year, it was expected that the judgment would be welcomed by citizens from all walks of life.

However, despite the international media hailing the judgment, it was puzzling to note the response from certain quarters at home. Some of us are worried about the commercial interests of traders and the firecrackers that will probably lie unsold. In the process, we choose to feign ignorance to the menace of air pollution and care little about the deadly chemicals that harm us. We do not mind a trade-off between public health and profit. And, to add fuel to fire, our opinion leaders and intellectuals provoke strong reactions among the masses with tweets. Yes, the apex court's ban on firecrackers may hurt the interests of the traders in the short run. But then, clean air is a basic human right. It is too naïve to assume that "nothing can happen to me". Air is a great equaliser. It treats everyone the same - the rich and poor alike.

It is absurd on the part of a few to give the SC order a communal twist and claim that Hindus are being targeted. Fireworks are said to have originated in China. The use of firecrackers spread to other cultures down the centuries to add thrill and glamour to celebrations. Stuffed with potassium nitrate (75 per cent), carbon (15 per cent) and sulphur (10 per cent), firecrackers have nothing to do with Hindu faith and are only a thoughtless excess. Diwali firecrackers produce extremely high levels of PM 2.5 (fine particulate matter with a diameter of 2.5 microns or less) over a short period of time, especially in the breathing zone (within a three-foot radius of the lit firework). PM 2.5 enters the blood stream through the lungs and cannot be filtered out. They act as silent killers causing cancer, respiratory and cardiovascular diseases.

Diwali is a festival of lights, not of raging fire and noxious fumes. Spiritually, it signifies the victory of light over darkness, good over evil, knowledge over ignorance, and hope over despair. Waking up to the chilling impact of lethal air pollution and protecting the city from poisonous fumes to make life safer is more in sync with the spirit of Diwali. The concept and projection of Diwali in our country is often misconstrued. Generations have grown up reading textbooks with images of children playing with firecrackers, thus correlating firecrackers with Diwali celebrations. School books need to be edited and the youngsters need to learn to de-link Diwali from firecrackers. Their course materials must teach them about the outcome of bursting firecrackers.

Air pollution is an inescapable horror for the residents of Delhi with children being most vulnerable. The haze that permeates the city after sundown is a lethal blend of toxic fumes that blacken our lungs like that of the smokers and cling to the tissue like slime. By now, a lot of damage has already been done. Delhi is silently suffering from a severe paediatric respiratory crisis with children suffering from irreversible lung damage. Half of Delhi's schoolchildren will never recover full lung capacity, surveys reveal. Its deathly air has led to generations with choked lungs, weak hearts and a failing immune system. Recently, a team of Delhi's topmost doctors appeared on a TV channel to recount the horrors of pollution in Delhi. One specialist stated that he has seen the change in colour of lungs of people over the last 25 years, turning from pink to blackish, even for non-smokers, due to the toxins being deposited constantly in the lungs.

Among the megacities, Delhi is among those with the poorest air quality, according to a World Health Organisation report. The New York Times' South Asia correspondent, Gardiner Harris, bid farewell to Delhi after completing his assignment in 2015 with an article that lashed out at the city's

breath of death - its poisonous air. His decision to leave India because of Delhi's air pollution raised global concern about the hazardous ambience of the National Capital Region. To contend with the poor air quality, embassies and international businesses in Delhi considered reducing staff tenures, advised staff to reconsider bringing their children to Delhi and provided high-end air purifiers.

As an aspiring global super power, India needs to showcase its capital by meeting international standards on pollution control, and adhering to the quality of living index etc. While trying to project itself as the world's manufacturing hub and seeking foreign investment, the country needs to walk the talk and attain global standards. Delhi needs to be safe and inviting for the global community. It cannot afford to be wrapped up in smoke and haze, blurring the cityscape and fogging its future. Hence, the residents of Delhi from all walks of life should have welcomed the SC order. The government and NGOs should have come forward to create awareness among the people about the order. We need more organisations like the Indian Nature Society, educating the masses against the ill effects of air pollution. Cleaning the air does not feature in the election manifestoes of political parties and it is time they got together on this critical issue.

Delhi has managed to clean up its air before. At the turn of the century, polluting industries were made to leave the city. Coal-burning power plants were shut down. A historic Supreme Court judgment in 1998 - compelling all public transport vehicles to run on CNG - had reduced levels of Respirable Suspended Particulate Matter (RSPM) significantly. From a high of 409 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ in 1995, it came down to 191 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ in 2000 and fell further to 161 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ in 2007. But a decade later, the air quality has slipped and we have lost the gains of the first generation action.

It is only the day after Diwali, when we wake up to a smoky dawn with our eyes burning, our breath choked, our kids coughing and the sick gasping for breath, do we realise the devastating impact of fireworks on the environment. But then, the harm is done. For days the smog does not leave the city due to slow wind speed. So the complete ban of the apex court on the sale of firecrackers is a necessary first step to initiate the much-needed attitudinal changes among people.

No campaign for a clean Delhi can be a success without community participation. If we were sensible enough, it would not have been needful for the apex court to step in to give us the last minute resuscitation. The right to breathe clean air is fundamental. Considering the health hazards caused by the cracker fumes, fireworks ought to be boycotted all across the land for all time to come.

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