

Delhi's air most polluted of any capital city for fourth year in a row

Martina Inessa
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Air pollution in Delhi, India's capital and with upwards of 30 million people its largest urban agglomeration, continues to worsen. Each year it causes and aggravates debilitating, often fatal, conditions and illnesses among tens of thousands of people.

Despite a brief respite from last July to September, Delhi's air was found to be the foulest and most toxin-laced of any national capital in 2022 for the fourth year running.

A measuring of Delhi's air quality around 11 AM on February 7 of this year showed that Delhi's Particulate Matter (PM) 2.5 concentration was 171 micro grams per cubic meter, and the air quality index (AQI) was 223. Both figures are over five times above World Health Organization (WHO) recommended safe levels.

PM 2.5 is used by scientists as the primary indicator of air pollution. It is a measure of the atmospheric concentration of particulate matter smaller than 2.5 microns or micrometres. AQI is composed of the particulate levels of eight pollutants of up to 10 microns, including sulphur dioxide, carbon monoxide, methane and lead.

Small solid airborne particles of less than 2.5 microns can travel deep into the respiratory system, causing severe respiratory and cardio-vascular problems. Exposure to Delhi's poor quality air for even a short period of time can trigger heart attacks in people with cardiac problems, and wheezing, fatigue and other complications even among healthy people.

PM 2.5 air pollution has caused an estimated 25,000 deaths in Delhi since the beginning of 2021.

Poor air quality reportedly killed 6.67 million people around the world in 2019. 1.67 million people were killed in India alone, a grim figure surpassed only by China where 1.85 million people died due to air pollution, according to the "State of Global Air 2020" report released in October 2020.

Despite the fact that on November 7, 2022, nearly all of Delhi's monitoring stations recorded air quality indexes of between 300 and 400, falling into the 'very poor' category at which "prolonged exposure" "may cause respiratory

illnesses," the authorities lifted all pollution controls. According to a recent report released by the University of Chicago in June 2022, individuals residing in Delhi could lose up to 10 years of life expectancy due to foul air.

The World Air Quality Report released by Swiss organization IQAir in March 2022 found that 35 of the 50 cities in the world with the worst air quality are in India. No Indian city met the WHO's safety air quality standards. Coal-fired power plants, factories and vehicles are among the major sources of India's air pollution.

The problem worsens during winter, when northern cities, including the capital Delhi, are typically blanketed in choking smog. Indian authorities largely blame this health menace on the burning of crop stubble by poor farmers. This is a gross and wilful exaggeration. According to a study from March 2016 by Urban Emissions Info, all bio-mass combustion, including farmers' activities, accounted for 20-35 percent of PM 2.5, while vehicular exhaust fumes, industrial emissions and construction activities accounted for 65 percent.

There are methods to decompose paddy stubble without burning it, such as bio-decomposers or converting paddy stubble into fertilizers. Alternatively, it could be used for bio-mass energy generation and sustainable building construction. Rather than providing the necessary financing to implement such initiatives, the central and state governments spend their time blaming each other for the problem.

Industrial and thermal power plants are a major contributor to air pollution in Delhi. Though coal usage in Delhi has been banned, only the large, regulated industries have shifted to natural gas. A recent study by the Delhi-based environmental research and advocacy think tank Centre for Science and Environment, entitled "Assessment of Industrial Air Pollution in Delhi National Capital Region (NCR)," showed that coal is still the most widely used fuel in the NCR. Around 1.4 million tons of coal are used by industry in the NCR annually.

Faridabad, an industrial suburb of Delhi and part of the

NCR, and neighbouring Ballabgarh reportedly house a total of 950 air polluting industrial units. If these industries were to develop or be provided with natural gas infrastructure, the use of coal could be stopped completely and air pollution, including green-house gas carbon emissions, significantly reduced. The same would be true if diesel generators, which are also a significant contributor to air pollution, were replaced by natural gas generators. However, since the provision of natural gas would require large-scale infrastructure investments, profit-oriented industries are resisting the conversion.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "Make in India" and Production Linked Incentive schemes are expected to catalyse a manufacturing boom across sectors from auto to consumer appliances. In the rush to attract investment, Indian authorities totally neglect the potential damage to the environment and human lives from profit-driven, unplanned and almost entirely unregulated industrialization.

India's far-right Bharatiya Janata Party government, like its Congress Party-led predecessor, pays lip service to the need to combat climate change and has even set aside funds to develop "green industries." But the BJP and Indian ruling class are determined for both economic and geostrategic reasons to reduce India's dependence on imported oil and natural gas, through a massive push to develop its abundant coal reserves—said to be the fourth largest in the world.

The profit-oriented acceleration of coal mining and other polluting activities have been taking place with the blessing of the government, enabling billionaire tycoons such as Gautam Adani and Mukesh Ambani to profit handsomely.

South Asia is home to the most polluted countries in the world. In addition to India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan consistently rank among the five or ten countries with the foulest air, water and land worldwide.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, *The Lancet Regional Health Southeast Asia* found air pollution to be the second most important risk factor for disease in India after malnutrition. More than 116,000 infants in India died within a month of birth in 2019 due to air pollution—outdoor and indoor—according to the "State of Global Air 2020" report.

The report found that India had the highest burden of infant deaths due to air pollution, followed by Nigeria (67,900), Pakistan (56,500), Ethiopia (22,900), and the Democratic Republic of Congo (1,200).

According to a WHO assessment from 2018, 1.8 billion children worldwide—93 percent of all children under the age of 15—breathe air that is so filthy that it poses a major risk to their health and development every day. Air pollution-related acute lower respiratory infections claimed the lives of 600,000 children globally in 2016.

In 2019, Bangladesh recorded the second-highest average

PM 2.5 concentration in the world. A more recent study carried out between January and July 2021 found the average PM 2.5 was nearly 17 times the WHO limit and over four times Bangladesh's permissible PM 2.5 benchmark of 65 micrograms per cubic metres of air.

The air pollution generated by South Asia's industries and cities spreads across the entire subcontinent, with blankets of smog simultaneously impacting Delhi, the Indian states of Punjab and Haryana, and Pakistan's Punjab province. Similarly, toxin-laden air hovers between Bangladesh and India's West Bengal and Jharkhand. Air pollution can therefore only be dealt with on an international basis, but the rivalries between South Asia's capitalist states makes any effective cooperation impossible.

Rather than allocating much-needed resources to implement air pollution abatement measures to save millions of lives, the ruling elites in India and the other South Asian states have dismantled even the most minimal environmental safeguards in order to compete as the cheapest location for industrial investment.

In India and South Asia as a whole, air pollution takes a much more severe toll on the health of the poorest and most vulnerable layers of the population. Wealthier people can more easily access technologies like air purifiers and can remain indoors on days with poor air quality. The impact of air pollution is therefore exacerbated by glaring levels of social inequality.

In the same way that global warming, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the fight against the mounting attacks on democratic rights and the imperialist-instigated war in Ukraine are class issues, so too is environmental destruction. It is impossible to overcome the disastrous effects of air pollution, including greenhouse gasses, without the working class taking political power, putting an end to the profit system and reorganizing socioeconomic life on the basis of scientific planning and democratic control. Only socialist production that is not limited to a single nation-state, but coordinated across the entire planet, can solve the problem of the destruction of environments suitable for human habitation by profit-driven capitalism.



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