

Choking point: India and its (in)visible killer

Once upon a time air pollution was viewed as a problem exclusive to cities of developing countries. Those industrialized cities, groaning under the weight of unchecked population increase and archaic infrastructure. This is no longer the case and hardly a week goes by without a new report highlighting the untimely breach of pollutant levels and all the associated health implications in cities we call home - London, Los Angeles And Washington D.C. And somehow it still doesn't register highly on our lists of things to worry about, as we live much of our lives protected from this invisible threat by air conditioning units and weekend breaks to the country. In India, where nearly 1.2 million people die from air pollution annually the threat is all too real, especially for those least able to defend themselves.

The problem of air pollution in India is as complex and diverse as the country itself. A country on course to surpass China as the world's most populous country, the dichotomy between the have and the have-nots could not be starker and these societal undercurrents have been brought to bare in the form of air pollution - for India it is not simply a case of launching a tranche of new initiatives and strong arming big business into cleaning up their act. This is a problem that runs right to the core of society, pollution can arise from prosperity and poverty.

Poverty driven pollution - Of the 1.6 billion people with no access to electricity worldwide approximately a quarter live in India and a further 300 million people live with "very, very limited access to electricity". Energy poverty is a huge issue as is the education around it. Most Indian households still rely on inefficient sources of energy such as agricultural waste and firewood as well as waste plastics in the cities. This is exacerbated in the autumn and winter months when crop waste is burnt on large scales to avoid more expensive mechanical tilling. And it is the poor and destitute of these cities that carry the burden of pollution. It is impossible not to witness the daily scramble for living space on Delhi's pavements and underpasses, the masses of people huddling round plumes of acrid smelling smoke to stay warm. It is these people, poorly nourished and with no chance of medical care that have no respite from pollutants.

Capitalism, congestion and carbon - The unrelenting expansion of this country has put its cities infrastructures under great strain. According to a study by IIT, Madras traffic congestion costs Delhi \$10 billion a year in lost productivity, air pollution and road accidents. Many initiatives to ease congestion have been proffered with a government appointed panel suggesting disincentising the use of private vehicles through higher congestion taxes and investment in flyovers and dedicated bus lanes that could alleviate up to 50% of congestion but these face entrenched barriers of ineffective government bureaucracy. Walking through the streets of Delhi you would be mistaken for thinking refusal disposal was not something offered by municipal government but huge landfill sites on city limits smolder day and night, burning anything flammable to cope with population it was not designed for. The mushrooming of the urban middle class is also to blame. It is now estimated that the Indian middle class exceeds 300 million, or the entire population of the USA. This social strata has contributed more than any other to the increase in private vehicle use on city roads as well as more gated community compounds which force local traffic on to main roads by restricting free movement.

Conclusion -The 2017 State of Global Air report, from the Health Effects Institute in Boston shows that air pollution related deaths in India between 1990 and 2015 have risen by almost 150%. This is in stark contrast to other well-known air polluters like China and USA where rates have stabilised. The per capita death rate highlights this best – in China 5.9 people in every

100,000 die of an ozone related illness, in India the figure is 14.7. Whilst China follows an aggressive policy of cutting coal powered energy production and removing high polluting vehicles from its roads through successful government funded subsidies at both a national and local level India is taking longer to react with an “emergency plan” only able to force a ban on fireworks during the Hindu festival of Diwali.

Whilst air pollution may cause a lot of gloom, it isn't all doom for India. Delhi is the world's 11th most polluted city; 2 years ago it was top of the list. Progress is being made and people are not waiting around for the government to act. The issue has received increase media coverage internationally and NGOs are on the ground acting to alleviate the problem. One such NGO is the London based charity Catch Your Breath India. James Kitt, Director said, “having experienced first hand the effects of air pollution in India as a visitor I found a great sense of injustice that it is the poor and vulnerable who are paying the price for a problem that they have no control over. We have committed to helping children be free from preventable anthropogenic disease as they are our future”. Catch Your Breath India has partnered with international respiratory mask manufacturers, Indian heavy industry and other NGOs. “We hope the provision of masks will stem the children's exposure to pollution during every day tasks like walking to school. We want to go in and educate children on the harmful affects of pollution and instill civil responsibility that their actions have a direct impact on the environment in which they live and partner with pan-Asian NGOs to raise awareness of the plight of people who have no voice.”