CONVERSATIONS 2: Air Pollution

To Tackle Air Pollution, One Needs to be Grounded

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Ecological issues are rarely headlines in the national media. So when Delhi's horrific air pollution issue took up prime time this winter, I found it ironically welcome. Perhaps, just perhaps, if many powerful people in India's capital are affected, this could be an environmental problem that will see some focused attention? Or perhaps not. Much of the discussion in official circles remains centred around quick fixes, as it has been for many years. Compressed natural gas (CNG) and other clean fuels, phasing out old vehicles, Euro standards for automobiles, odd-and-even-number-plated traffic, stronger standards for power stations—all these are worth doing, but they will not yield anything more than temporary relief, if even that.

Ecological crises require getting to root structural reasons: who is taking decisions for whose benefit, what models of well-being or 'development' are being adopted, and so on. For many decades, India's politicians, bureaucrats, and corporations have pushed a form of development whose single-minded reliance on economic growth has overshadowed all considerations of justice. This is accompanied (or underwritten) by an unregulated hunger for profits and material gains and the pursuit of political power through ugly electoral competitiveness. And so a country averaging the second highest rate of growth in the world for the past 25 years has amongst the worst records regarding hunger and deprivation, nutrition, inequality, gender discrimination, casteism, and ecological damage. Air pollution is just one of the outcomes of development that claims uncounted victims as 'collateral damage'.

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So what would be truly meaningful solutions to this? We could get to this by considering each of the immediate causes of the 'airpocalypse' (an apt term coined by Greenpeace India) (Dahiya *et al.* 2017).

One, replace coal with renewable sources of power, which are eminently comparable in cost if one were to include all the ecological and social costs of coal. Even more important is widespread dialogue on and restraints on energy consumption itself, for even renewable sources would be destructive with ever-increasing power demand.

Then there is the explosion of autovehicles. In the post-globalization era (early 1990s), governments have offered all kinds of sops to boost the automobile industry. Cities that were pedestrian and bicycle-friendly have been converted into a nightmarish maze of roads, flyovers, and parking lots. Trying to solve this by mandating cleaner fuels is shortsighted, as Delhi's CNG experiment has shown. Highest priority has to be given to public transportation, cycling, and walking, now becoming common in some European cities. Pune is currently designing an ambitious plan for cycling, a game-changer if implemented. Additionally, urban design that minimizes the work–home commute can save hours of productive time and reduce fuel use and pollution.

Construction dust is another major source of pollution that requires rethinking architecture, with greater attention to mud, bamboo, and other alternatives to cement–concrete and to dust control mechanisms. But more fundamental is controlling the real estate and construction industry, a political minefield. Another basic issue is large-scale rural–urban migration, requiring massive new infrastructure. Several villages have reversed this trend by vitalizing the local economy and tackling social injustice. Policies that support such changes—including by redirecting investments currently skewed towards cities and providing good facilities for basic needs including health, learning, and communications—could help buck the migration trend.

There is then the issue of crop residue burning, especially relevant for northern India. Ecological damage, increasing economic cost of farming, and poor returns in the market, all related to the green revolution model, have made it harder for farmers to stay afloat. Instead of traditional techniques of fallow agriculture, farmers simply burn the residue and immediately put the land back into cropping. A shift is needed to organic, biologically diverse farming; better market remuneration for crops; village-based agro-processing; and direct sale to consumers through producer companies. Plenty of examples in India show the feasibility of these approaches.

Three final points are important. None of the above will happen if decision-making continues to be concentrated in the government (and its corporate buddies). Recalling the roots of democracy (=power of the people), we have to demand that we have a voice in the decisions that affect our neighbourhoods and the city we live in. If nascent moves towards participatory budgeting and *sabha* planning in Pune, Bengaluru, Delhi are taken to their logical end, we *may be* able to get decisions of the above kind, depending also on how much we are willing to take responsibility and participate meaningfully. Radical democracy is also needed for villages to be empowered to say 'no' to urban exploitation of their resources.

Secondly, while air pollution affects everyone, it affects the poor (and especially women and children) more. They often live and work in more polluted areas, are more vulnerable to the ill effects of pollution, and are less able to afford treatment. Workers in industries, construction, traffic management, and similar jobs are most susceptible. So, the poor need priority actions, which also means that they need to be central to decision-making. How about giving the millions of workers who cycle to work a say in how roads should be designed?

Third, we need transformations in our worldviews. Many of us 'educated' types tend to think that life revolves around material possessions, money, and instant fame. We ignore the most basic things in life: air, water, the satisfaction of a quiet moment, the happiness of being with nature and loved ones. There is a collective insanity in a species that pollutes the two things without which none of us can live: clean air and water. Treating this madness requires changing what we 'teach' our children, looking deeply within ourselves to find the care and love and ethics we are each capable of. Cleaner fuels simply do not make the cut.

REFERENCES

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