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DELHI

## High Density Population Adds To The Woes Of Pollution In Delhi Slums During Winter

From the pollution capital of the world, a tale of intertwined yet divergent lives of slum dwellers in Delhi



Unseen menace | Photographs by Tribhuvan Tiwari  
Haze over Anand Vihar; (inset) Ramesh Chand of Sanjay Colony with his chest x-ray



Trisha Mukherjee

20 December 2021

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It is a grey November afternoon. Sudha Kumari is sitting on her haunches needling drawstrings into pants, perched right outside her one-room home at the end of a steep flight of stairs, in Delhi's Sanjay Colony.

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Inside, her husband sleeps on the only cot in the room lit with a solitary bulb. Her two children sit crouched on the floor. Beside her is her mother-in-law. The blue wall is lined with shelves full of steel utensils on one side and clothes on the other.

“The sky gets dusty and dull as soon as winters arrive. There’s so much dhuan (smoke) in the air. There is haze and no sunlight,” she says.

At the mention of pollution, she looks back at her husband quizzically and turns back to say, “*Yahan nahi hota itna* (that doesn’t happen much here),” ironically, while breathing in air classified “unhealthy”.

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Sanjay Colony is located in the Okhla industrial estate that houses several factory units including of ready-made garment exporters, as well as other industries like pharmaceutical manufacturing, plastic and packaging.

The waste from these factories find their way into residential clusters like Sanjay Colony, as is evident from the drains overflowing with garbage. Being a hub of cloth manufacturing, everything, from sorting of leftover fabric to creating new garments, happens in these dingy lanes, where throughout the year, the air is rife with dust particles. In winters, pollution aggravates the air quality in the congested colony.

“Here, pollution comes from industries in the form of effluents in the canal that runs next to the colony. Over time, residents have become used to it. People are not even aware of what they are breathing in,” says Muzamil Yaqoob, who is one of the researchers working on a project at Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology, Delhi to understand the disproportionate impact of pollution on different social groups.

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**Smog Creeps Into The Houses Of Sudha, Nirmala, Ramesh Chand And Many Other Residents Of Slums Across Delhi, Without Them Realising Its Long-Term Effect On Their Lives.**



“An objective of our Social-AQI project was to strike a conversation with people about the kind of pollution they are living in, because air pollution is disproportionately dispersed,” he adds.

A few maze-like lanes—barely wide for a single person to traverse at a time—away from Sudha’s home, is Ramesh Chand’s two-storey residence-cum-workshop. He works out of the ground floor, and lives with his wife on the first. The ground floor is stuffed with huge sacks of tiny bits of fabric. On one of them sits Chand and his wife.

Chand was diagnosed with asthma a few years back, around the time pollution in Delhi first started breaching the calibration limits of monitoring instruments. During the winter of 2018, he started coughing and it refused to subside, prompting his son to seek medical help.

“I have chest pain and difficulty in breathing. I start coughing no sooner than it gets cold and pollution rises. It’s been two years since my treatment began at VIMHANS Hospital, through my son’s ESI card.

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“I’ve been taking medicines, and have been advised to wear a mask when I step out, but the polluted air is everywhere, and our work also involves spending a lot of time around dust. I’ve tried to reduce that,” he says.

Muzamil points out that according to their data, collected using hyper-local sensors, the air quality in Sanjay Colony was abysmal around Diwali, when AQI had reached 450.





*The great divide Harinder Singh and family sitting around an air purifier in their Defence Colony home (top); Nirmala Devi in her Anand Vihar home*

In Anand Vihar, one of the most polluted areas in the capital, Nirmala Devi wakes up to the view of a drab grey wall encasing a factory premise. She lives in a makeshift *jhuggi* next to the main road.

The air is hazy enough to impair visibility to a few hundred metres. She emerges from her home, masking her face with the end of her sari to stifle a cough. The distinctive smell of the industrial area is impossible to miss, but Nirmala doesn't seem to bother.



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Only a few weeks back, she says, she had gone to a nearby clinic after she faced difficulty in breathing. She spent Rs 200 getting an “ultrasound” and buying 15-days worth of medicine.

“I run out of breath so frequently that I can't even scold my children (she has three boys). There are days when I wake up in the middle of the night, gasping for air,” she says. But much like Sudha, she couldn't place the role of pollution in her life.

In the first week of December, Anand Vihar recorded a “poor” AQI of 194. According to a study by Centre of Science and Environment, the



area has consistently been among the most polluted in the city, owing to its proximity to several sources—including industrial emissions, traffic and waste burning. Its proximity to the Ghazipur landfill also impacts the air quality.

**“High Density Areas Will Be More Polluted. CO2 Emissions Will Be Higher, More Traffic Will Result In Dispersal Of More Dust Particles,” Says Ashish Jain.**

“The decomposition of waste in the landfill results in emission of toxic gases like carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, methane and hydrogen sulphide, and because there is heavy traffic in the area, a lot of settled dust particles come into the breathing zone,” explains Ashish Jain, director of Indian Pollution Control Association, an NGO that works towards a sustainable environment.

The smog creeps into the houses of Sudha, Nirmala, Ramesh Chand and many other residents of slums across Delhi, without them realising the quality of air they are breathing, and the long-term effect it is having on their lives.

While the coughing, chest pain, burning of eyes and itching of throats does cause discomfort—AQI, PM (particulate matter) and air purifiers are not terms they are familiar with, unlike businessman Harinder Singh, who lives in posh Defence Colony.

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When it rained last week, his first thought, Singh says, was that the AQI would fall. “For many years, the first thing I do after waking up is to take in the sunlight. But now, days are dull and grey, and it puts me off,” he says, sitting in his spacious living room that boasts of a gorgeous green view of his garden.

The tastefully done space houses paintings by artists Arpana Caur and Purushottam Singh and gifts by writer Khushwant Singh and film director Imtiaz Ali.

Calling himself a “Delhi man”, Singh, the founder of clothing brand “1469”, admits he is more optimistic than many of his friends, who have left the city over the last few years due to the worsening air quality, and holds out hope for rainy and sunny days. But he still takes his family out of Delhi every now and then, to “get a dose of fresh



air”. “We keep going to Chandigarh, stay there for a week to recharge our lungs,” he says.

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While Singh says he does not have much faith in electronic devices like air purifiers to mitigate pollution, he bought one worth Rs 28,000 a few years back, after his wife put her foot down. “I don’t know how effective they are, but back then, like any parent, I was very worried about my children. My youngest suffers from asthma and wheezes a lot, so we put one in her room,” says Kirandeep Kaur. The couple have two more kids.

Just the mention of pollution leaves Avneet Marwah, the CEO of Super Plastronics Private Limited, exasperated. The entrepreneur, who lives in south Delhi’s Greater Kailash, says he is so anxious and paranoid about pollution that he has six air purifiers at home, one in his car and several others in his workplace in Noida.

“Pollution used to be unimportant as a conversation topic half a decade ago, but now it has reached the next level. The repercussions will be felt 7-8 years later, especially by the children. The youth will be affected the most.

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“Air purifiers are always running when my children are around. Our car windows are always rolled up, and we hardly take the kids out,” says an anxious Marwah, who has two boys, one aged four years, the other five months.



In fact, he considered moving out of Delhi four years back due to the worsening quality of air. “I was staying in Bangalore for 10-15 days every month to stay away from the pollution. I might still consider moving out. I know at least a dozen people who have. I’ve started having health problems myself. I have sinus, which aggravated after November 5 this year,” he says.

While Sudha, Ramesh and Nirmala, Harinder and Avneet might be living in the same city with similar levels of polluted air, their stories bring to light the question, “Is pollution really the social leveller we make it out to be?”

Ravi Agarwal, founder-director of the environmental non-profit Toxics Link, doesn’t think so. For him, pollution, like the Covid-19

pandemic, is a “marker of social hierarchy”.

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“We need to be conscious that while we all face pollution, there are people who can buy air purifiers, while others can't. We don't realise it's the poor that get most affected. If you are in a car, you can roll up the windows and switch on the AC. But most of these poor people either walk or bicycle to work,” he says.

Agarwal emphasises the need to look at air pollution from the perspective of the most impacted. “Besides science, we also have to take into account the impact of pollution and its contributors. In case of climate change, we tell developed countries, “you are producing, why should we pay?” The logic applies to air pollution too: “I'm not producing it, but I'm suffering more than you”. That lens is very important,” Agarwal says.

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The distinction in the way pollution affects different social groups is also evident in the housing structure. Pollution levels in Sudha and Nirmala's densely populated neighbourhoods will be a lot higher than Avneet and Harinder's spacious localities, points out Jain.

“Any area that is densely populated and has more human activity will be more polluted. The CO<sub>2</sub> emissions will be higher, and more movement will result in dispersal of more dust particles, which will emerge as pollutants and come into the breathing zone,” he says.

(This appeared in the print edition as "Upstairs-Downstairs in the Smoking Zone")



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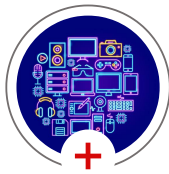
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