

Sequel to a murder story

It is dangerous to breathe in most Indian cities, and even though the government accepts this, precious little is being done about it



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Rajinder Gupta, Delhi's transport minister, addresses the public meeting organised by the CSE at the WWF auditorium at New Delhi, on November 1, 1997

"DELHI roads should display a statutory warning: Breathing here is injurious to health." This is how Delhi's transport minister Rajinder Gupta described the city's air quality at the public meeting organised by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) in New Delhi on November 1. The meeting marked the first anniversary of the release of the book *Slow Murder: The deadly story of vehicular pollution in India*, a CSE publication. CSE has come out with another set of shocking figures — it is estimated that there has been an increase of 28 per cent in premature deaths due to air pollution over the last three-four years. Another shocking observation was that precious little is being done to deal with the problem.

Participating in a panel discussion titled *Slow Murder and Since*, Anil Agarwal, director, CSE, presented the grim statistics: 51,779 people are estimated to have died prematurely in 36 Indian cities due to air pollution in 1995, as against 40,351 in 1991-92 (*Down To Earth*, Vol 6, No 12). "We don't have our own method of monitoring pollution levels and the present situation is grim. The future is bleak and nobody knows what to do," he said.

Agarwal added that the ministry of environment and forests (MEF) taken no initiative to curb pollution. He described the ministries dealing with health, finance and surface transport as "clueless agencies", the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) as a "poor monitor" and the Delhi government as a "great believer in tailpiper". The Delhi government has taken some action, but it lacked scientific basis and consistency, he noted.

Chaired by V Ramalingaswami, CSE chairperson and former director general of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), the meeting examined vehicular pollution from various points of view by the expert panellists, which included M G K Menon, eminent scientist and former Union minister, R C Bhargava, former managing director of Maruti Udyog Ltd, S K Chhabra, chest specialist at the Patel Chest Institute, New Delhi, and D K Biswas, chairperson of CPCB. The speakers agreed with Agarwal that very little is being done to control air pollution and no scientific data is available on certain key pollutants such as ozone or very fine particulate matter that are less than 10 micron in diameter and are known as

PM10 and PM2.5.

Amidst this absence of data, official apathy coupled with the boom in the transport sector, the air pollution situation in 19 Indian cities has become critical, according to the CSE presentation. Kanpur tops in the pollution rankings. Dehradun and Jaipur also figure in the list. The CPCB data shows a dramatic

SLOW MURDER AND SINCE...

Action taken by the Union government

A notification was issued for emission standards for the year 2000. An evaluation

- Great improvement. But the entire process of planning and notification by the ministry of surface transport (MOST) lacked transparency.
- No study to show the new standards' impact on the air quality.
- Permitted emission of hydrocarbons (HC) from two-wheelers (2.4 gm/km) is higher than that suggested by the H B Mathur committee.
- Decisions on cold and warm start emissions and urban driving cycle for laboratory test of vehicle emissions not brought to public notice. Government accepted European urban driving cycles just by renaming it "modified Indian driving cycles". As driving patterns in India are quite different, it underestimates actual emissions by 30-40 per cent.
- Standards for the year 2000 have taken into account the durability of catalytic converters, but nobody knows who will certify this. Certificates obtained from abroad indicate only their working in high quality fuel.
- Little effort made to cut down diesel subsidies to discourage the use of dirty diesel.