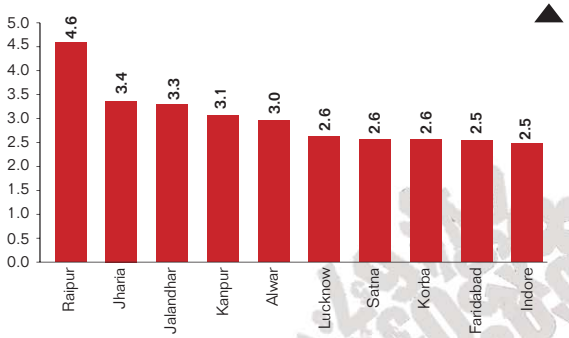
# The ambient air we breathe

***Every year, its quality is measured. Every year, data seems compromised. Every year, no action***

■ The Central Pollution Control Board executes a nation-wide programme to monitor ambient air quality. The National Air Quality Monitoring Programme is an ongoing process; its network consists of 326 air quality monitoring stations covering 116 cities/towns in 28 states and 4 Union Territories. It measures all pollutants (except carbon monoxide), but the data released is only of Respirable Suspended Particulate Matter (RSPM), a potent pollutant, measured in residential areas.

■ Number of times exceeding standard- that is 60 microgramme per cubic metre (µg/m$^3$) for top ten cities




■ If 2004 data is to be believed, not one of 52 cities (ranked as per RSPM levels) had 'low' levels of the pollutant (0-30 µg/m$^3$)!

RSPM levels of 65 per cent of all cities measured were 'critical' (> 90 µg/m$^3$); as much as 21 per cent of cities had 'high' pollution levels (60-90 µg/m$^3$)

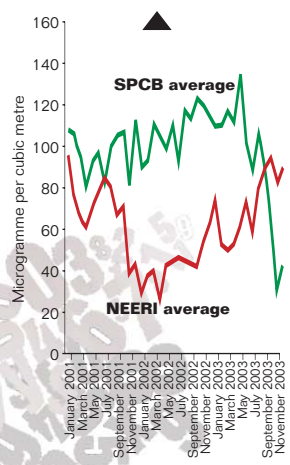
In the last two years, government has done nothing to tackle RSPM levels. Fifty per cent of top ten stations with highest RSPM levels in 2003 are found in the same category the next year

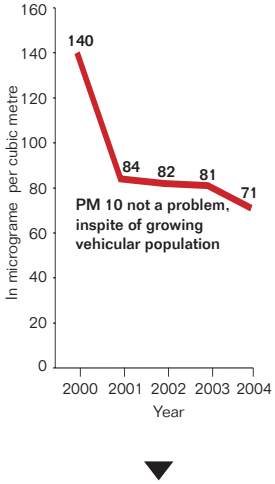
■ The emerging challenge: smaller towns in India. None of the key metro cities, plagued by enormous number of vehicles and pathetic public transport systems- recipe for higher air pollution levels, figure in the top 10 of the list of polluted habitations.

Government hasn't responded to the challenge. Consider Raipur: RSPM levels here grew from 191 µg/m$^3$ in 2002 through 240 µg/m$^3$ in 2003 to 275 µg/m$^3$ in 2004

■ The existing challenge: how accurate is the data? Consider: RSPM pollution in Chennai has reduced by more than 100 per cent in just one year! In 2004, RSPM levels were just 31 µg/m$^3$. In 2003? 75 µg/m$^3$

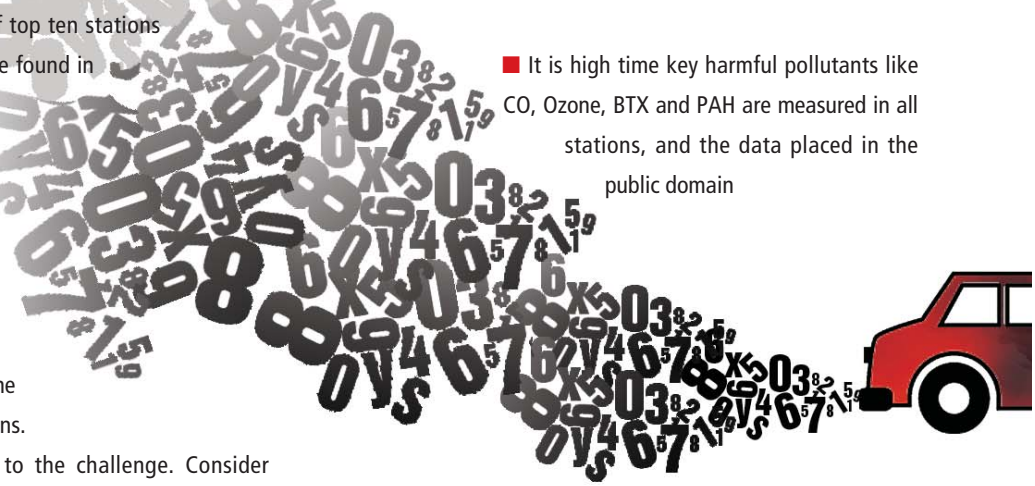
A World Bank study done last year says Chennai data exhibit almost divergent trends at times, if RSPM monitoring by the State Pollution Control Board (SPCB) and National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI) is compared




By doing almost nothing, Bangalore city has brought down its RSPM consistently in the last five years. Experts don't know how.

■ It is high time key harmful pollutants like CO, Ozone, BTX and PAH are measured in all stations, and the data placed in the public domain



*Source: Anon 2005,* Most Polluted Cities, *Press Information Bureau, Union Ministry of Environment and Forests, October 7, New Delhi*