

Bumbling along in the smog

[DH deccanherald.com/opinion/bumbling-along-in-the-smog-772961.html](https://deccanherald.com/opinion/bumbling-along-in-the-smog-772961.html)

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DH



DECCAN HERALD



Harini Nagendra,

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Harini Nagendra prides herself on barking up all trees, right and wrong
@HariniNagendra

Anti-pollution masks. Respirators, nebulizers, air purifiers and humidifiers. Anti-pollution shampoos, cleansers, soaps and lotions. Anti-pollution face creams, face washes, masks -- even an anti-pollution foundation, which helpfully comes in multiple skin tones. The market is certainly doing brisk business as our air pollution levels soar.

Of course, very little of this helps. A famous, much-touted NASA study of the 1990s claimed that houseplants could provide a “promising economical solution” to air pollution in offices and homes, creating a lot of business for home-style gardening stores. But the intensity of air pollution is now so high that unless you have plants parked on every square inch of your working or living surface, there’s not much they can do to keep our air clean.

We have lost faith in the ability of our governments – national, state or city – to deal with air pollution. Those with more cash to burn turn to fads like oxygen bars and spas, and even oxygen bottles – search online, and you can get a bottle full of air collected just for you from the Himalayas! If you want to pay even more, you can get air imported all the way from the ‘most exotic and untouched regions of Australia’ or Switzerland.

Those with less money seek out masks. Now in all colours, sizes and shapes, they range from tiny, almost invisible filters that fit into your nostrils for the fashion conscious, to large, ill-fitting masks distributed to traffic policemen who deal with the worst of the

smog. We are left scrambling, dealing with air pollution on our own -- relying on incomplete knowledge, seduced by advertising and desperate for relief. In doing so, we accept what is unacceptable.

Because it moves around, air is a public resource. If I choose to pollute the air, by bursting crackers every morning and evening over an entire week around Deepavali, I do not have to bear all the 'costs' of air pollution. Polluted air does not sit still in front of my home but moves around. Thus you, my neighbour – despite being an anti-pollution activist (you have not bought or burst a cracker in years, ever since your child came home from school with an anti-pollution poster), will be forced to share in my pollution load and lighten my burden. Since I am never faced with confronting the full costs of my action, I can repeat this every year, taking refuge in the fact that “bursting crackers on Deepavali is an Indian tradition”.

There is a positive change over time. Many apartments and housing societies have turned to group celebrations, pooling crackers and reducing their overall usage. Schools have played a major role in enabling children – when our children speak, we tend to listen! But is the rate of change even close to what we need? As a people, we are nowhere near reaching agreement that we need to tackle air pollution on a war footing – from banning or severely limiting crackers on Deepavali to improving our public transport systems so people can move away from cars.

As I write this, Delhi has declared a public emergency – the levels of air pollution have gone off the charts. In Bengaluru, cases of bronchitis are on the rise. Air pollution is now the third-largest cause of death in India, decreasing average life expectancy by 4.3 years, and killing 1.24 million people in 2017 alone. How much worse does this need to get before we accept it is a national public emergency?

Challenges of public goods like air pollution need to be solved by public action, that is, by the government. We cannot expect individuals and communities to deal with this on their own – all it does is to help the market make a killing (quite literally).

Pollution
environment

NEXT STORY



Bharat Bhushan,

- MAY 13 2022, 12:00 IST
- UPDATED: MAY 13 2022, 12:00 IST