

Air pollution is choking Delhi skies

BINDU SHAJAN PERAPPADAN

Children are the worst sufferers deprived of the possibility of breathing clean air

Alarm bells have started ringing and what environmentalists here have been crying hoarse for long has now been endorsed by World Health Organisation (WHO) – Delhi has the most polluted air in the world.

Putting it simply, the city air is choking its residents and children whose lungs are still growing have no possibility of breathing clean air.

“Of course, the city is choking itself and the worst sufferers are children who with their developing lungs bear the brunt of the assault. The city has not been able to maintain good air quality prescribed by its own environment monitoring agency, the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), leave alone meet the WHO standards, which are much more stringent,” said Dr. T.K. Joshi, head of Centre for Occupational and Environmental Health, Lok Nayak Hospital.

Dr. Joshi, who is also a member of a national task force constituted by the CPCB on maintaining air quality, said the situation has now turned alarming mainly due to the steady rise of particulate matter (PM) in air. They will be meeting this Friday to review the situation.

“As the WHO report has also noted the rise in the concentration of the PM 10 and PM 2.5 matter is most detrimental to human health. PM 2.5 is known to penetrate deepest into the lung tissues and cause major health hazard. The main culprit is the rampant and growing use of diesel – gensets, diesel vehicles – and poor quality fuel,” he said.

Stating that till about two years ago, WHO’s International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) had listed fumes rising out of diesel exhausts as the probable cause of carcinogens, Dr. Joshi noted: “This has now been upgraded to definite carcinogens. So, that should sum up for the city just how dangerous the rise in air pollution level is.”

Cautioning about the present danger, Centre of Science and Environment (CSE) executive director, research and advocacy, Anumita Roychowdhury said: “Delhi has lost the gains of its CNG programme. Its air is increasingly becoming more polluted and un-breathable, bringing back the pre-CNG days when diesel-driven buses and autos had made it one of the most polluted cities on earth.”

She added that diesel vehicles are known to emit higher smoke, particles and NO_x – generic term for mono-nitrogen oxides NO (nitric oxide) and NO₂ (nitrogen dioxide) – than their petrol counterparts.

According to WHO and other international regulatory and scientific agencies, diesel particulates are carcinogens. “Even the so-called ‘clean’ diesel runs with 350 parts per million of sulphur, allows higher limits for NO_x and particulate emissions compared to petrol cars,” she said.

The CSE in its studies on air quality in Delhi has noted that in 2001, when the CNG programme was on, the annual average level of respirable suspended particulate matter in residential areas stood at

149 microgram per cubic metre. After registering a drop in 2005, the level has shot up to 209 microgram per cubic metre in 2008. The concentration is, thus, around three times higher than the safe levels.

Eight hourly maximum current level of carbon monoxide is touching 6,000 microgram per cubic metre – way above the safe level of 2,000 microgram per cubic metre – though the annual levels have registered a drop, noted the CSE.