

Environmental Pollution

For normal and healthy living a conducive environment is required by all the living beings, including humans, livestock, plants, micro-organisms and the wildlife. The favourable unpolluted environment has a specific composition. When this composition gets changed by addition of harmful substances, the environment is called polluted environment and the substances polluting it are called pollutants. Environmental pollution can, therefore, be defined as any undesirable change in the physical, chemical or biological characteristics of any component of the environment (air, water, soil), which can cause harmful effects on various forms of life or property. Environmental pollution could be of various types:

1. ■ AIR POLLUTION

It is an atmospheric condition in which certain substances (including the normal constituents in excess) are present in concentrations which can cause undesirable effects on man and his environment. These substances include gases, particulate matter, radioactive substances etc.

- ① Gaseous pollutants include oxides of sulphur (mostly SO_2 , SO_3) oxides of nitrogen (mostly NO and NO_2 or NO_x), carbon monoxide (CO), volatile organic compounds (mostly hydrocarbons) etc.
- ② Particulate pollutants include smoke, dust, soot, fumes, aerosols, liquid droplets, pollen grains etc.
- ③ Radioactive pollutants include radon-222, iodine-131, strontium-90, plutonium-239 etc.

→ Sources of Air Pollution

The sources of air pollution are natural and man-made (anthropogenic).

① Natural Sources: The natural sources of air pollution are volcanic eruptions, forest fires, sea salt sprays, biological decay, photochemical oxidation of terpenes, marshes, extra terrestrial bodies, pollen grains of flowers, spores etc. Radioactive minerals present in the earth crust are the sources of radioactivity in the atmosphere.

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② **Man-made:** Man made sources include thermal power plants, industrial units, vehicular emissions, fossil fuel burning, agricultural activities etc. Thermal power plants have become the major sources for generating electricity in India as the nuclear power plants couldn't be installed as planned. The main pollutants emitted are fly ash and SO_2 . Metallurgical plants also consume coal and produce similar pollutants. Fertilizer plants, smelters, textile mills, tanneries, refineries, chemical industries, paper and pulp mills are other sources of air pollution.

Automobile exhaust is another major source of air pollution. Automobiles release gases such as carbon monoxide (about 77%), oxides of nitrogen (about 8%) and hydrocarbons (about 14%). Heavy duty diesel vehicles spew more NO_x and suspended particulate matter (SPM) than petrol vehicles which produce more carbon monoxide and hydrocarbons.

Indoor Air Pollution

The most important indoor air pollutant is radon gas. Radon gas and its radioactive daughters are responsible for a large number of lung cancer deaths each year. Radon can be emitted from building materials like bricks, concrete, tiles etc. which are derived from soil containing radium. Radon is also present in groundwater and natural gas and is emitted indoors while using them.

Many houses in the under-developed and developing countries including India use fuels like coal, dung-cakes, wood and kerosene in their kitchens. Complete combustion of fuel produces carbon dioxide which may not be toxic. However, incomplete combustion produces the toxic gas carbon monoxide. Coal contains varying amounts of sulphur which on burning produces sulphur dioxide. Fossil fuel burning produces black soot. These pollutants i.e. CO , SO_2 , soot and many others like formaldehyde, benzo- (a) pyrene (BAP) are toxic and harmful for health. BAP is also found in cigarette smoke and is considered to cause cancer. A house wife using wood as fuel for cooking inhales BAP equivalent to 20 packets of cigarette a day.

➔ **Effects of air pollution:** Air pollution has adverse effects on living organisms and materials.

🔥 **Effects on Human Health:** Human respiratory system has a number of mechanisms for protection from air pollution. Bigger particles ($> 10 \mu\text{m}$) can be trapped by the hairs and sticky mucus in the lining of the nose. Smaller particles can reach tracheobronchial system and there get trapped in mucus. They are sent back to throat by beating of hair like cilia from where they can be removed by spitting or

swallowing. Years of exposure to air pollutants (including cigarette smoke) adversely affect these natural defenses and can result in lung cancer, asthma, chronic bronchitis and emphysema (damage to air sacs leading to loss of lung elasticity and acute shortness of breath). Suspended particulates can cause damage to lung tissues and diseases like asthma, bronchitis and cancer especially when they bring with them cancer causing or toxic pollutants attached on their surface. Sulphur dioxide (SO_2) causes constriction of respiratory passage and can cause bronchitis like conditions. In the presence of suspended particulates, SO_2 can form acid sulphate particles, which can go deep into the lungs and affect them severely.

Oxides of nitrogen especially NO_2 can irritate the lungs and cause conditions like chronic bronchitis and emphysema. Carbon monoxide (CO) reaches lungs and combines with haemoglobin of blood to form carboxyhaemoglobin. CO has affinity for haemoglobin 210 times more than oxygen. Haemoglobin is, therefore, unable to transport oxygen to various parts of the body. This causes suffocation. Long exposure to CO may cause dizziness, unconsciousness and even death.

Many other air pollutants like benzene (from unleaded petrol), formaldehyde and particulates like polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) toxic metals and dioxins (from burning of polythene) can cause mutations, reproductive problems or even cancer.

2. Effects on Plants: Air pollutants affect plants by entering through stomata (leaf pores through which gases diffuse), destroy chlorophyll and affect photosynthesis. Pollutants also erode waxy coating of the leaves called cuticle. Cuticle prevents excessive water loss and damage from diseases, pests, drought and frost. Damage to leaf structure causes necrosis (dead areas of leaf), chlorosis (loss or reduction of chlorophyll causing yellowing of leaf) or epinasty (downward curling of leaf), and abscission (dropping of leaves). Particulates deposited on leaves can form encrustations and plug the stomata. The damage can result in death of the plant.

3. Effects on aquatic life: Air pollutants mixing up with rain can cause high acidity (lower pH) in fresh water lakes. This affects aquatic life especially fish. Some of the freshwater lakes have experienced total fish death.

4. Effects on materials: Because of their corrosiveness, particulates can cause damage to exposed surfaces. Presence of SO_2 and moisture can accelerate corrosion of metallic surfaces. SO_2 can affect fabric, leather, paint, paper, marble and limestone. Ozone in the atmosphere can cause cracking of rubber. Oxides of nitrogen can also cause fading of cotton and rayon fibres.

→ Control of Air Pollution

Air pollution can be minimized by the following methods:

- Siting of industries after proper Environmental Impact Assessment studies.
- Using low sulphur coal in industries
- Removing sulphur from coal (by washing or with the help of bacteria)
- Removing NO_x during the combustion process.

- Removing particulate from stack exhaust gases by employing electrostatic precipitators, bag-house filters, cyclone separators, scrubbers etc.
- Vehicular pollution can be checked by regular tune-up of engines ; replacement of more polluting old vehicles; installing catalytic converters ; by engine modification to have fuel efficient (lean) mixtures to reduce CO and hydrocarbon emissions; and slow and cooler burning of fuels to reduce NO_x emission (Honda Technology).
- Using mass transport system, bicycles etc.
- Shifting to less polluting fuels (hydrogen gas).
- Using non-conventional sources of energy.
- Using biological filters and bio-scrubbers.
- Planting more trees.

2. ■ NOISE POLLUTION

We hear various types of sounds everyday. Sound is mechanical energy from a vibrating source. A type of sound may be pleasant to someone and at the same time unpleasant to others. The unpleasant and unwanted sound is called noise.

Sound can propagate through a medium like air, liquid or solid. Sound wave is a pressure perturbation in the medium through which sound travels. Sound pressure alternately causes compression and rarefaction. The number of compressions and rarefactions of the molecules of the medium (for example air) in a unit time is described as frequency. It is expressed in Hertz (Hz) and is equal to the number of cycles per second.

There is a wide range of sound pressures, which encounter human ear. Increase in sound pressure does not invoke linear response of human ear. A meaningful logarithmic scale has been devised. The noise measurements are expressed as Sound Pressure Level (SPL) which is logarithmic ratio of the sound pressure to a reference pressure. It is expressed as a dimensionless unit, decibel (dB). The international reference pressure of 2×10^{-5} Pa is the average threshold of hearing for a healthy ear. Decibel scale is a measure of loudness. Noise can affect human ear because of its loudness and frequency (pitch).

The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) committee has recommended permissible noise levels for different locations as given in Table 5.1.

Sources of Noise Pollution: The main sources of noise are various modes of transportation (like air, road, rail-transportation), industrial operations, construction activities and celebrations (social/religious functions, elections etc) electric home appliances.

High levels of noise have been recorded in some of the cities of the world. In Nanjing (China) noise level of 105 dB has been recorded, while in some other cities of the world these levels are: Rome 90 dB, New York 88 dB, Calcutta 85 dB, Mumbai 82 dB, Delhi 80 dB, Kathmandu 75 dB.

Effects of Noise: Noise causes the following effects.

(i) **Interferes with man's communication:** In a noisy area communication is severely affected.

(ii) **Hearing damage:** Noise can cause temporary or permanent hearing loss. It depends on intensity and duration of sound level. Auditory sensitivity is reduced with noise level of over 90 dB in the midhigh frequency for more than a few minutes.

(iii) **Physiological and Psychological changes:** Continuous exposure to noise affects the functioning of various systems of the body. It may result in hypertension, insomnia (sleeplessness), gastro-intestinal and digestive disorders, peptic ulcers, blood pressure changes, behavioural changes, emotional changes etc.

Control of Noise Pollution

1. Reduction in sources of noise: Sources of noise pollution like heavy vehicles and old vehicles may not be allowed to ply in the populated areas.

2. Noise making machines should be kept in containers with sound absorbing media. The noise path will be interrupted and will not reach the workers.

3. Proper oiling will reduce the noise from the machinery.

4. Use of sound absorbing silencers: Silencers can reduce noise by absorbing sound. For this purpose various types of fibrous material could be used.

5. Planting more trees having broad leaves.

6. Through Law: Legislation can ensure that sound production is minimized at various social functions. Unnecessary horn blowing should be restricted especially in vehicle-congested areas.

3 ■ WATER POLLUTION

Water pollution can be defined as alteration in physical, chemical or biological characteristics of water making it unsuitable for designated use in its natural state.

Sources of water pollution: Water is an essential commodity for survival. We need water for drinking, cooking, bathing, washing, irrigation, and for industrial operations. Most of water for such uses comes from rivers, lakes or groundwater sources. Water has the property to dissolve many substances in it, therefore, it can easily get polluted. Pollution of water can be caused by point sources or non-point sources. Point sources are specific sites near water which directly discharge effluents into them. Major point sources of water pollution are industries, power plants, underground coal mines, offshore oil wells etc. The discharge from non-point sources is not at any particular site, rather, these sources are scattered, which individually or collectively pollute water. Surface run-off from agricultural fields, overflowing small drains, rain water sweeping roads and fields, atmospheric deposition etc. are the non-point sources of water pollution.

Ground water pollution: Ground water forms about 6.2% of the total water available on planet earth and is about 30 times more than surface water (streams, lakes and estuaries). Ground water seems to be less prone to pollution as the soil mantle through which water passes helps to retain various contaminants due to its cation exchange capacity. However, there are a number of potential sources of ground water pollution. Septic tanks, industry (textile, chemical, tanneries), deep well

injection, mining etc. are mainly responsible for ground water pollution, which is irreversible. Ground water pollution with arsenic, fluoride and nitrate are posing serious health hazards.

Surface water pollution: The major sources of surface water pollution are:

1. **Sewage:** Pouring the drains and sewers in fresh water bodies causes water pollution. The problem is severe in cities.
2. **Industrial effluents:** Industrial wastes containing toxic chemicals, acids, alkalis, metallic salts, phenols, cyanides, ammonia, radioactive substances, etc. are sources of water pollution. They also cause thermal (heat) pollution of water.
3. **Synthetic detergents:** Synthetic detergents used in washing and cleaning produce foam and pollute water.
4. **Agrochemicals:** Agrochemicals like fertilizers (containing nitrates and phosphates) and pesticides (insecticides, fungicides, herbicides etc.) washed by rain-water and surface run-off pollute water.
5. **Oil:** Oil spillage into sea-water during drilling and shipment pollute it.
6. **Waste heat:** Waste heat from industrial discharges increases the temperature of water bodies and affects distribution and survival of sensitive species.

Effects of Water Pollution

Following are some important effects of various types of water pollutants:

① **Oxygen demanding wastes:** Organic matter which reaches water bodies is decomposed by micro-organisms present in water. For this degradation oxygen dissolved in water is consumed. Dissolved oxygen (DO) is the amount of oxygen dissolved in a given quantity of water at a particular temperature and atmospheric pressure. Amount of dissolved oxygen depends on aeration, photosynthetic activity in water, respiration of animals and plants and ambient temperature.

The saturation value of DO varies from 8-15 mg/L. For active fish species (trout and Salmon) 5-8 mg/L of DO is required whereas less desirable species like carp can survive at 3.0 mg/L of DO.

Lower DO may be harmful to animals especially fish population. Oxygen depletion (deoxygenation) helps in release of phosphates from bottom sediments and causes eutrophication.

② Nitrogen and Phosphorus Compounds (Nutrients): Addition of compounds containing nitrogen and phosphorus helps in the growth of algae and other plants which when die and decay consume oxygen of water. Under anaerobic conditions foul smelling gases are produced. Excess growth or decomposition of plant material will change the concentration of CO_2 which will further change pH of water. Changes in pH, oxygen and temperature will change many physico-chemical characteristics of water.

③ Pathogens: Many wastewaters especially sewage contain many pathogenic (disease causing) and non-pathogenic micro-organisms and many viruses. Water borne diseases like cholera, dysentery, typhoid, jaundice etc. are spread by water contaminated with sewage.

④ Toxic Compounds: Pollutants such as heavy metals, pesticides, cyanides and many other organic and inorganic compounds are harmful to aquatic organisms.

Toxic substances polluting the water ultimately affect human health. Some heavy metals like lead, mercury and cadmium cause various types of diseases. Mercury dumped into water is transformed into water soluble methyl mercury by bacterial action. Methyl mercury accumulates in fish. In 1953, people in Japan suffered from numbness of body parts, vision and hearing problems and abnormal mental behaviour. This disease called Minamata disease occurred due to consumption of methyl mercury contaminated fish caught from Minamata bay in Japan. The disease claimed 50 lives and permanently paralysed over 700 persons. Pollution by another heavy metal cadmium had caused the disease called Itai-itai in the people of Japan. The disease was caused by cadmium contaminated rice. The rice fields were irrigated with effluents of zinc smelters and drainage water from mines. In this disease bones, liver, kidney, lungs, pancreas and thyroid are affected.

unable to feel

Arsenic pollution of ground water in Bangladesh and West Bengal is causing various types of abnormalities.

Nitrate when present in excess in drinking water causes **blue baby syndrome** or **methaemoglobinemia**. The disease develops when a part of haemoglobin is converted into non-functional oxidized form.

Nitrate in stomach partly gets changed into nitrites which can produce cancer-causing products in the stomach.

Excess of fluoride in drinking water causes defects in teeth and bones called fluorosis.

Pesticides in drinking water ultimately reach humans and are known to cause various health problems. DDT, aldrin, dieldrin etc. have therefore, been banned. Recently, in Andhra Pradesh, people suffered from various abnormalities due to consumption of endosulphan contaminated cashew nuts.

Control of Water Pollution

It is easy to reduce water pollution from point sources by legislation. However, due to absence of defined strategies it becomes difficult to prevent water pollution from non-point sources. The following points may help in reducing water pollution from non-point sources.

(i) Judicious use of agrochemicals like pesticides and fertilizers which will reduce their surface run-off and leaching. Avoid use of these on sloped lands.

(ii) Use of nitrogen fixing plants to supplement the use of fertilizers.

(iii) Adopting integrated pest management to reduce reliance on pesticides.

(iv) Prevent run-off of manure. Divert such run-off to basin for settlement. The nutrient rich water can be used as fertilizer in the fields.

(v) Separate drainage of sewage and rain water should be provided to prevent overflow of sewage with rainwater.

(vi) Planting trees would reduce pollution by sediments and will also prevent soil erosion.

...treatment of

■ SOIL POLLUTION

Soil is the upper layer of the earth crust which is formed by weathering of rocks. Organic matter in the soil makes it suitable for living organisms. Dumping of various types of materials especially domestic and industrial wastes causes soil pollution. Domestic wastes include garbage, rubbish material like glass, plastics, metallic cans, paper, fibres, cloth rags, containers, paints, varnishes etc. Leachates from dumping sites and sewage tanks are harmful and toxic, which pollute the soil.

Industrial wastes are the effluents discharged from chemical industries, paper and pulp mills, tanneries, textile mills, steel industries, distilleries, refineries, pesticides and fertilizer industries, pharmaceutical industries, food processing industries, cement industries, thermal and nuclear power plants, mining industries etc. Thermal power plants generate a large quantity of 'Fly ash'. Huge quantities of these wastes are dumped on soils, thus contaminating them.

Pesticides are used to kill pests that damage crops. These pesticides ultimately reach the soil and persist there for a long time. Pesticides which are persistent in nature are chlorinated hydrocarbon insecticides

Effects of Soil Pollution

Sewage and industrial effluents which pollute the soil ultimately affect human health. Various types of chemicals like acids, alkalis, pesticides, insecticides, weedicides, fungicides, heavy metals etc. in the industrial discharges affect soil fertility by causing changes in physical, chemical and biological properties.

Some of the persistent toxic chemicals inhibit the non-target organisms, soil flora and fauna and reduce soil productivity. These chemicals accumulate in food chain and ultimately affect human health. Indiscriminate use of pesticides specially is a matter of concern.

Sewage sludge has many types of pathogenic bacteria, viruses and intestinal worms which may cause various types of diseases. Decomposing organic matter in soil also produces toxic vapours.

Radioactive fallout on vegetation is the source of radio-isotopes which enter the food chain in the grazing animals. Some of these radio isotopes replace essential elements in the body and cause abnormalities e.g. strontium-90 instead of calcium gets deposited in the bones and tissues. The bones become brittle and prone to fracture.

Radioisotopes which attach with the clay become a source of radiations in the environment.

Nitrogen and phosphorus from the fertilizers in soil reach nearby water bodies with agricultural run-off and cause eutrophication. Chemicals or their degradation products from soil may percolate and contaminate ground-water resources.

Control of Soil Pollution

~~(i)~~ Effluents should be properly treated before discharging them on the soil.

~~(ii)~~ Solid wastes should be properly collected and disposed off by appropriate method.

~~(iii)~~ From the wastes, recovery of useful products should be done.

~~(iv)~~ Biodegradable organic waste should be used for generation of biogas.

~~(v)~~ Cattle dung should be used for methane generation. Night-soil (human faeces) can also be used in the biogas plant to produce inflammable methane gas.

~~(vi)~~ Microbial degradation of biodegradable substances is also one of the scientific approaches for reducing soil pollution.