

India Savors a Rare Upside to Coronavirus: Clean Air

Delhi residents are stunned by how blue the sky really is as a strict lockdown cuts back drastically on air pollution.

By Jeffrey Gettleman Photographs by Rebecca Conway

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NEW DELHI — There are countless downsides to the world's getting walloped by the coronavirus and being put under severe lockdown.

But here in one of the most polluted cities on earth, where many people routinely wear face masks to filter out the filth, something rare and wonderful has emerged: a pure blue sky.

Because there are so few cars on the road, few factories belching out black smoke and almost no active construction sites to create clouds of choking dust, pollution levels in New Delhi, India's megalopolis capital, have dropped to remarkably low levels.

At night there are stars. During the day the air is so clean that, for once, you can't taste it, free of the usual smoky metallic tang. One cruelty of the coronavirus is to be under a tight lockdown right now, with parks bolted shut, ordered to stay indoors unless vitally necessary, only to look out your windows and see this.

And the lockdown has spelled economic misery for the millions of people who have been prevented from working.

But old-timers say Delhi's air hasn't been this clear for decades.

"I look at the sky quite often and enjoy its blueness from my balcony," said Sudhir Kumar Bose, 80, a retired English professor.

"I don't know how long this will last," he added. "But right now I feel much better."

It's not just Delhi, but Chennai, Ahmedabad, Bengaluru and Ghaziabad. All across India, cities can suddenly breathe. Los Angeles, New York, Beijing, Seoul and Milan — they have experienced less pollution, too, hit hard by the virus and restrictions on people's movement.



Trees at Lodi Garden in Delhi.

But those places aren't nearly as polluted as India. Nowhere is. Last year, once again, India topped the charts of the worst polluted as home to 14 of the 20 cities with the most hazardous air.

Delhi is among them, but last week it recorded a pollution reading of 38 on the Air Quality Index, about as good as anywhere in the world and stunning to Delhiites who have become steeled to a reading of 150 AQI — on a good day.

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Sometimes, especially in the winter, as cold air condenses car exhaust and factory smoke and wind speeds drop, Delhi's AQI (which measures different airborne pollutants) can shoot up to 500 or more. That gives many people chronic coughs and more serious lung disease.

But now sick people are savoring the reprieve.

"My old patients say they can't believe it," said Dr. Arvind Kumar, a Delhi chest surgeon who has been studying the consequences of living in a place with bad air. "They are feeling lighter, they are using their inhalers less frequently, most of them are feeling better."

Of course, everyone knows this is a sign of the frozen economy. The clear skies are a consequence of a tight lockdown — the world's biggest and one of the most severe — that has shuttered factories, grounded flights, evicted taxis, rickshaws and crowded buses from the roads and brought movement to a screeching halt. Many Indians are obeying the orders to stay indoors in a lockdown that has become a national house arrest for a nation of 1.3 billion people.

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Environmentalists are using these strange times to make a point. One of the most outspoken, Jai Dhar Gupta, an Ivy League-educated environmental activist and entrepreneur, has been fighting for years against the widely held belief that India is somehow doomed to suffer bad air because of its geography and climate.



A checkpoint near Jama Masjid in Old Delhi.

“Clearly,” he said, “this is not something that can’t be reversed. We’ve just reversed it.”

Towns more than a hundred miles from the Himalayas can now see snow peaks. Some people joked that they could see Canada from Punjab State. Others said the air was so clear they would soon be able to see God.

The sky over Delhi is usually smudge gray, day or night. The gauze never lifts. The sun sets mildly behind it.

Across much of China, too, air pollutants plunged after a lockdown to stifle the epidemic closed factories, cut road traffic and drastically reduced air travel.

China’s restrictions from January helped cut small, health-threatening pollutants called PM 2.5 — for being less than 2.5 micrometers in diameter, the smallest and most dangerous particles that are monitored — by as much as 30 percent below normal levels, according to the Copernicus Atmosphere Monitoring Service. Levels of nitrogen dioxide, a pollutant caused by motor vehicles and industry, also fell between 10 and 20 percent.

"This is the first time I have seen such a dramatic drop-off over such a wide area for a specific event," said Fei Liu, an air quality researcher at the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center, according to a report from NASA.

But in China the near-pristine skies are already passing. There have been more bad days recently, as factories have restarted and more vehicles have returned to the roads.

In India, the lockdown is still in full effect, and it is unclear when it will be lifted. Narendra Modi, India's prime minister, imposed the strictures at the end of March, saying they would be for 21 days. But many people fear he was just lowballing to keep the public from becoming too dispirited.



Produce vendors in Delhi last month were hard up for business.

With some of the world's poorest, most densely packed slums, India has a huge risk of a coronavirus crisis. Health officials are racing to contain the highly contagious disease, which could rip through areas where millions live face to face. With India's reported cases doubling around every four days and now topping 4,000, many people are bracing for a long lockdown.

At least there will be some dispensations.

There's almost no honking, no shouting, no jostling. Roads and public spaces are wide open and empty, perfect to see — and hear — birds. Delhiites are now spotting rare birds like gray hornbills and red-throated flycatchers.

The other evening, after sunset, another rare delight showed itself: Venus, shining crisp and bright and steady with nothing to obscure it. The pure black sky was bursting with stars, wrapping around us, endless but somehow consoling.

Hari Kumar and Shalini Venugopal contributed reporting from New Delhi, and Amber Wang from Beijing.

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