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CONVERSATIONS 2: Air Pollution

Editorial Note

Vikram Dayal *

We have three different perspectives on air pollution.

First, Ashish Kothari sees air pollution in Delhi as a symptom of the wrong model of development. Because this is one environmental problem that affects the rich and powerful, it may get focused attention. But quick fixes like clean fuels will not solve the problem. We need to change the energy system, so that it is based on renewables, and even restrain energy consumption itself. The urban transport system has to be overhauled so that public transport, cycling, and walking are given priority. Housing, too, should move to such materials as mud and bamboo. And agriculture can be based on organic, biologically diverse farming. All these radical changes require radical democracy with meaningful participation, and that each of us change our worldviews.

Second, Rohit Negi notes that members of India's civil society such as Kothari want the Indian state to take environmental concerns more seriously. Negi examines one aspect of Delhi's air pollution: when it moves across the portfolios of different administrative units, how do they collaborate? Government departments and political leaders engage differently with the phenomenon and with even trying to collaborate. Negi discusses the views of political leaders—the initial appeal by the chief minister of Delhi; the response by the chief minister of Punjab, which was that his state lacked resources; and the suggestion of the minister of environment and forests at the centre—the smog in Delhi was not an emergency.

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Third, Priya Shyamsundar picks up one aspect of Delhi's air pollution that Kothari and Negi identify—rice straw burning in the Indo-Gangetic plains. Shyamsundar cites a study by IIT Kanpur (2016) that estimates that a third of the concentration of small dust particles in Delhi in winter months is due to biomass burning. In contrast to Kothari—who appears to suggest that you need a wholly different kind of agriculture, and lists a menu of far-reaching changes—Shyamsundar focuses on agricultural machines that can solve the straw burning challenge. The Happy Seeder, for example, has diverse benefits: it reduces air pollution and water use and increases soil organic matter. Negi draws attention to the Punjab chief minister saying that the central government has to lead such efforts; Shyamsundar closes her piece by suggesting that the central government's announcement of a subsidy package to help farmers who stop burning straw—along with other measures—could reduce pollution and lead to longer-term food security.