

'My children are suffering but what can I do?' Delhi's polluted air, by the people who live there

A family living in the middle of an eight-lane motorway, an autorickshaw driver struggling to breathe, a young woman who can't wait to leave ... the foul air of India's capital affects all sections of society



For three years Mohammad Yunus, his wife Babli, five children and a handful of relatives have made their home on a patch of concrete in the middle of an eight-lane motorway, near a stretch of road named after Mahatma Gandhi. As lorries, buses and motorcycles roar past on either side of the family's cramped bit of south Delhi pavement, and a modern, concrete flyover carries several more lanes of traffic overhead, their evening routine unfolds.

A young woman in a pink dress squats to kindle a fire from wooden sticks and plastic bottles, then breaks a lump of dough into pieces to bake into chapatti bread. A three-month-old baby and a toddler sleep on a dirty mat just a few feet from the curb. The incessant blaring of horns makes conversation difficult, but does not rouse the children.

Delhi's horrendous air pollution – the worst in the world, according to the World Health Organisation – is far from the only worry facing the Yunus family. But the poisonous fumes are doing them serious harm, and the children are particularly vulnerable to its health-wrecking effects.

Babli Yunus has a thick, phlegmy, hacking cough that she says never goes away. Her son Toufiq, who looks about nine (no one at this encampment knows their precise ages), has had a fever for several days. “I keep thinking that my health is so bad, and my children are also suffering, lying around here. But what can I do?” Babli asks as one daughter, aged about three, leans back in her lap, playing with a dirty yellow comb. “This child has a cough and cold. So does this one.”

Babli doesn't know whether the family's latest round of illnesses was caused by the diesel and petrol exhaust that gives the air an acrid smell and a heavy feel, or by a soaking rain that left their clothes and blankets wet. “It all goes into our systems,” she says. “We end up eating a lot of dust.”

“Dust, dirt, everything,” her husband echoes. “This is a main road. It never closes.”

It is hard to imagine an existence more wretched than that of the Yunus family, huddled together on this dirty rectangle of concrete about 10 x 4 metres, surrounded by traffic on three sides and pressed on the fourth against a tall metal fence. Mohammad brings home what money he can, working on construction sites and selling vegetables in the market. His children, who do not attend school, earn a few coins collecting discarded plastic bottles from around a nearby bus stop.

Mohammad says a total of 18–20 people live in the space. Their belongings hang from the fence's spikes: a plastic bucket, bundles wrapped in patterned cloth, a few blankets, a shirt. Pedestrians stream past just inches away, dodging traffic and carrying goods on their heads or under their arms. A few months ago, a girl of around eight living on the same stretch of road was struck by a car and killed, nearby families say.

Delhi's foul air impacts all sections of its society. A 2010 study of more than 11,000 schoolchildren found 43% had poorly developing lungs, compared with 25% of a rural control group. The Delhi pupils were three times more likely to have severe impairment, and such deficits are believed to last for life.

But the city's destitute – poorly nourished, often suffering from chronic illnesses, and unable to afford medical care – are the most severely affected. “These people don't get any respite from the pollution, even at night, so yes

I think it does [cause more death and illness among the poor]”, says Dr Neeraj Jain, a respiratory consultant at Sir Ganga Ram Hospital. “It’s just their economic status that makes them more vulnerable.”

A growing body of research also shows that those living within a few hundred metres of major thoroughfares suffer greater health problems. Everywhere in Delhi, the air is thick with toxins, and levels of the tiniest pollution particles – linked to ailments from heart attacks and stroke to cancer, respiratory infections and even dementia – reach 17 times the recommended limits in some parts of the city. Even in the springtime, when the air is far better than in the filthy, choking winters, the haze is visible night and day, shimmering in the headlights of cars and blurring buildings and bridges behind a gauzy grey curtain.

Mohammad and his relatives came to Delhi from their village near Lucknow because the high cost of land made it impossible for them to earn a living by farming. The family originally camped a few kilometres away but police forced them out so they settled beneath the flyover, unable to find anywhere better to live.

“It was God’s will that we came here,” says Yunus, a slim man in a worn grey shirt and trousers, his face freshly shaven but for a neat moustache. “Where should we go? You tell us.”



The autorickshaw driver

In Delhi, millions live much of their lives on the street. It is not just the homeless: vendors of everything from car parts and furniture to drinks and snacks spend their workdays beside busy roads. Rickshaw drivers wait at busy corners for fares, then pedal through heavy traffic, inhaling pollution deeply.

Sitting for hours in New Delhi's gridlocked traffic, perched behind the handlebars of his open-air autorickshaw, Nand Lal Kumar coughs and coughs, struggling for air. His head pounds, "my chest gets heavy, stomach gets tight" and "I feel suffocated, anxious."

"I have difficulty breathing at the end of the day, my face is black with soot," says Kumar, waiting for his next fare on a noisy corner in south Delhi, beside a road jammed with honking cars, trucks and buses. "But there's absolutely no other alternative. There are no other jobs."

Kumar, 38, left his village more than 20 years ago to seek opportunity in the capital, but he still struggles to scratch out a living. After fuel, maintenance and loan payments, he nets 300 or 400 rupees, about three or four pounds, each day.

"I can't even pay my rent on time. I haven't been able to pay my children's school fees for a year or two. I pay half the fee, they go for a while, then they have to stop," he says. "Nobody thinks about autorickshaw drivers in this country. Passengers are only concerned that we might overcharge them. Nobody cares about us or our families."

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The doorless, green-and-yellow three-wheelers that clog Delhi's streets were converted to compressed natural gas years ago, so they create little pollution. Their drivers, though, inhale the health-wrecking air on the roads all day. Scientists who measured levels of tiny, dangerous airborne particles in autorickshaws' backseats said they were the among the worst ever found in a regular form of transport, up to eight times higher than Delhi's already disastrous baseline pollution. Kumar, in battered sandals and a worn, blue-grey uniform, knows he suffers the effects.

He sees a respiratory expert every few months, to little avail. “‘Take medicines and you’ll be fine,’ that’s what the doctor says. It gets OK and then it gets bad again,” he says. “My cough doesn’t stop for a month at a time.

“I do worry about my future health, but there’s nothing I can do,” he says sadly. “My job is a hazard for me.”

The young family

As well as the 7.5 million vehicles on Delhi’s roads (with nearly 1,400 more added every day), smouldering garbage fires are everywhere in the city, and poor families burn wood and dung to cook and stay warm. Just beyond the city limits, thousands of primitive brick-making factories send plumes of black smoke into the air, while coal-burning power plants lack even the most basic filtration systems.

Dirty diesel generators power mobile-phone towers and provide back-up electricity for malls, hospitals and apartment blocks. Smoke from the fires that farmers in neighbouring states set to get rid of crop stubble after harvest settles over the city. Construction projects such as the expansion of the Delhi Metro – a long-term hope for reducing pollution – only add to the clouds of dust.

After Manjali Khosla and her family moved to Delhi from Dubai three years ago, she spent the first six months fighting pneumonia. She tried every brand of face mask she could find, to filter out the pollution she blames for her illness and keep others from catching it.

Born in India and raised in Hong Kong and North America, Manjali wanted her children to experience life in their parents’ home country and spend time with extended family. She and her husband did not understand until they arrived just how big a role Delhi’s filthy air would play in their lives.



The children, a 10-year-old and twins aged eight, sometimes wear masks at school. Someone in the family is always coughing and Manjali's father-in-law suffers from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, a severe lung problem. She has a PhD in chemistry so she understands the science. Air pollution is India's fifth-biggest killer, causing 620,000 premature deaths a year, and it terrifies her.

Manjali has bought filters for the family's house and plants that are said to purify the air. She finds indoor activities to discourage the kids from playing outside on the foulest days, and plans holidays abroad as often as possible – but still frets about what their years in Delhi may do to her children's health. "I've even dreamed polyps coming out of their lungs, something very drastic," she says.

Returning to Delhi after trips away, the kids come off the plane holding their noses. Symptoms are always bad during the first days back: "You feel like there's like an ulcer or something inside you, something's burning, and it takes about a week for the feeling to go away," she says. "The sinuses hurt, your head hurts, your eyes water."

But while many of the foreign families Manjali knows are contemplating leaving, she is determined to stay in Delhi for a few more years yet.

“My kids say, ‘Why are we here, why don’t we just leave?’ But I say, ‘If we leave, it doesn’t solve the problem – your grandparents are still here, your cousins are still here. Let’s stay and try to fix it. And in the meantime, wear masks.’”

The paediatrician

Dr Sanjeev Bagai has one word to describe what it feels like to see the wheezing children who stream through his surgery door every day:

“Helpless.”

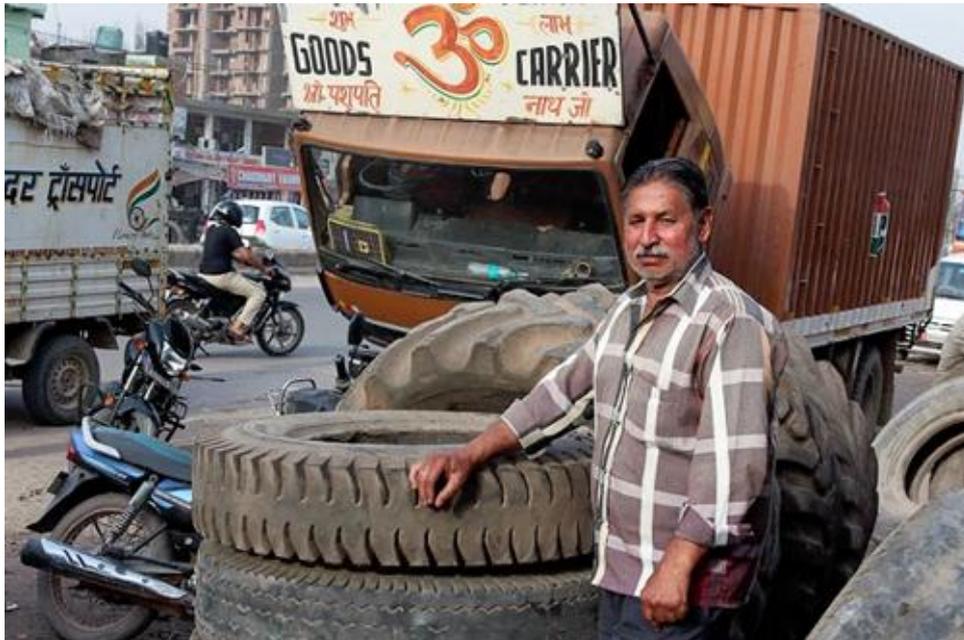
He can treat them with steroids and inhalers, and antibiotics for those with bronchitis – but he cannot clean the air that makes them sick.

In his practice, asthma cases are up by 40-45% in the last five years, poor lung function is common, and lowered oxygen levels caused by breathing difficulties can lead to long-term problems with vision, growth and brain development, says the paediatrician.

“This morning, I’ve seen five patients; three had wheezing.” All of them were under six. Bagai, a burly man with cufflinks and a carefully waxed handlebar moustache, explains that asthma, once seen only in children over three or four, is now common in babies and toddlers. He once diagnosed it in a newborn, less than three weeks old. “Rapid breathing, breathlessness, spasmodic cough,” he says. “It can be life-threatening.”

According to Bagai, asthma carries a stigma in India, and young patients often become depressed and withdrawn. “They feel scared to play, they miss a lot of school days,” he says. “Very often kids say, ‘I’m taking all the medicine, but why am I getting this again and again? Why me?’”

The lorry driver



In the hottest part of a baking day, eight truckers are stretched out on a concrete platform in their company's bare, windowless office, waiting for 10pm, the earliest they are allowed to drive their hulking diesel vehicles through Delhi.

A dozen lorries are parked outside, their cabs decorated with scraps of sparkly tinsel. "It's a tough life, but this is what I do," says Surinder Singh, sitting on a blue wooden table, a Hindi newspaper in one hand. "If I had some other job, I could spend time with my children, relax, go to the market."

It is mid-afternoon and Singh, with a round face and boyish sweetness in his eyes, has not been home since last night; grey stubble covers his cheeks and chin. He plans to stop there for a nap, dinner and a bath before heading out with a load of iron pipes. "There is no rest in this job."

An estimated 80,000 trucks crowd Delhi's roads every night, spewing a toxic stew of pollutants. So Singh and other drivers have become a focus of the city's growing pollution concerns.

Now, their livelihoods are in jeopardy. In April, judges barred all diesel vehicles more than 10 years old from entering the capital. Truck drivers

threatened to strike and the court postponed its order, but the threat remains.

“My truck will be as good as scrap [under the rule],” Singh says. He estimates the decision slashed two-thirds off the value of the lorry that became his in 2013, after nine years of repayments. “How will I feed my children? How will I educate them if I lose my business, my job?”

He feels the effects of dirty air himself – shortness of breath, itchy eyes, a cough. But he doesn’t think truckers deserve all the blame. “Look at the garbage fire right here,” he adds, pointing toward a thick cloud of acrid smoke across the street. “And what about the 20 and 25-year-old cars that drive on the roads of Delhi?”

The wantaway Delhiite

Pavika Bakshi has swallowed live fish and drunk the waters of a healing stream in search of something to stop her wheezing. Aside from medication, the only thing that helps, she says, is yoga.

It won’t be enough to keep her in New Delhi, though. Bakshi’s parents are searching for a husband for her, and she has told them to look beyond the city.

“It could be outside India, it could be in India around the coastline,” she says, perched on a chair in a quiet room at the yoga school where she practices. “Anywhere I feel better.

“It’s not a happy situation to be in, because this is my city and I absolutely love it – but I wish it was minus this huge baggage. I keep asking my mother all the time, ‘Why are we a part of this place? Why are we here? Can we not leave?’”

Bakshi, 32, says she feels well whenever she goes abroad, so is certain it is Delhi’s air that makes her chest grow tight and her breathing raspy. “You come back glowing, because you are healthier,” she says. But soon after returning, “there is no energy and you are lifeless and you are dull”.

Her friends talk all the time about leaving, says Bakshi, who has long, dark hair and a sparkling stud in her nose. “We’ve all been in good jobs, we are

making good money here, but what am I supposed to do with that money?” she says. “It can’t buy me clean air.”

Dirty air, and the death and illness it causes, have become front-page news in India. Government ministers and the courts are taking heed, announcing a bevy of measures – from fines for burning garbage to coal-fired power plant upgrades. But many doubt the rules will be enforced.

“At one level, I’m confident that something will happen now, because the public outrage over this rising pollution is at such a pitch that a government cannot ignore it altogether,” says Arindam Sen Gupta, executive editor of the Times of India. “But how effective this plan will be is a matter of speculation.

“I don’t think there’s a cohesive vision – we work in fits and starts. When the problem becomes acute, we wake up to it and then emergency measures are taken. It’s usually pressure from below which works in India, from the people.”