**India’s Air the World’s Unhealthiest, Study Says**

By

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India has the worst air pollution in the entire world, beating China, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh, according to a study released during this year’s World Economic Forum in Davos.

Of 132 countries whose environments were surveyed, [India ranks dead last](http://epi.yale.edu/dataexplorer/indicatorprofiles?ind=eh.air) in the ‘Air (effects on human health)’ ranking. The annual study, the Environmental Performance Index, is [conducted and written by](http://epi.yale.edu/about) environmental research centers at Yale and Columbia universities with assistance from dozens of outside scientists. The study uses satellite data to measure air pollution concentrations.

India’s high levels of fine particulate matter (a subject [we’ve been looking](http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/01/2011/11/21/new-delhi-now-more-polluted-than-beijing/) at on India Ink, albeit just in Delhi) are one of the major factors contributing to the country’s abysmal air quality. Levels of so-called PM 2.5, for the 2.5 micron size of the particulates, are nearly five times the threshold where they become unsafe for human beings.

Particulate matter is one of the leading causes of acute lower respiratory infections and cancer. The World Health Organization found that Acute Respiratory Infections were one of the most common causes of deaths in children under 5 in India, and contributed to [13% of in-patient deaths](http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section313/Section1519_10854.htm) in paediatric wards in India.

1. What kind of health problems can result from India’s air pollution?

When it comes to overall environment, India ranked among the world’s “Worst Performers,” at No. 125 out of the 132 nations, beating only Kuwait, Yemen, South Africa, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Iraq. Neighboring Pakistan, in contrast, ranked 120th and Bangladesh was listed as No. 115 on overall environment.

It is not just India’s big cities which are grappling with air pollution, said Anumita Roychowdhury, executive director of India’s Centre for Science and Environment, a non-profit organization which was not involved in the study. Air pollution also is worsening in smaller cities, she said.

The main culprit, Ms. Roychowdhury said, is the growing number of vehicles in India. While the country still has far fewer vehicles per capita than developed nations, India’s cars are more polluting, Ms. Roychowdhury said. Other air pollution experts also cite [India’s reliance coal](http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/20/surprising-sources-of-delhis-air-pollution/) and polluting industries like brick-making that are located close to densely-populated areas.

1. What are some of the causes of India’s poor air quality?

Emission standards are nearly “10 years behind European standards,” Ms. Roychowdhury said, and these standards are not legally enforceable, unlike in countries like the United States which has the [Clean Air Act](http://epa.gov/air/caa/caa_history.html). India has an [Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981](http://envfor.nic.in/legis/air/air1.html) which is supposed to be enforced by the [Central Pollution Control Board](http://cpcb.nic.in/Introduction.php). This act lacks teeth, Ms. Roychowdhury said. “We need to take big steps or the problem will overwhelm us,” she said.

D. Saha, a scientist in the “Air Lab” at India’s Central Pollution Control Board said the study’s findings were not a matter of huge concern.

“We should not compare our country with others,” Dr. Saha said. “India has a different terrain.” He cited seasonal rainfall, deserts and dusty conditions as being responsible for the particulate matter. “Can we put water sprinklers across the country?,” he asked.

Particulate matter comes from boilers, thermal power plants and cars, as well, he said, but India would not have development if these activities were curbed, he said. “The diseases mentioned in the report are caused by many factors not just particulate matter, we are raising undue alarm,” Mr. Saha said.

His advice? “It is a non-issue, we have other pressing problems like poverty, focus on them.”

1. Do you believe that air quality should be a higher priority in India? Why or why not?
2. What are some actions that the Indian government can take in order to reduce air pollution?