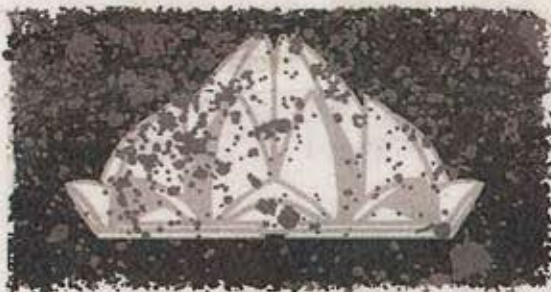


Children gasping for fresh air at pollution hotspot Anand Vihar



LET DELHI BREATHE

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New Delhi: "On Diwali, families get together and celebrate at home, but we have avoided our house in Anand Vihar for over a decade now because my son is asthmatic," says Puja Trikha, who now lives in Surya Vihar. For her, the dilemma is between being with the family at a special time and risking her son's health. She would probably describe the pollution level at Anand Vihar as "killing", but for lack of such a category, the Central Pollution Control Board defines the air quality there as "severe".

Most residents of this colony on the Delhi-UP border share Trikha's anxieties. Mothers there even stop their children from going out to play to avoid exposure to the dangerous air. All in vain perhaps - medical clinics in the locality report that children frequently complain of trouble in breathing and suffer prolonged cough and irritation of the throat.

It's not simply those who spend a lot of time outdoors who are affected. "We get month-old babies suffering from blockage of the nose due to pollutants," says Dr VK Jain, a paediatrician at Pushpanjali Medical Centre in Anand Vihar. "They are unable to breathe normally. All we can do is to open up the upper airway by administering saline drops."

Data collated by the Central Pollution Control Board shows Anand Vihar has the worst air quality in the capital, 30-40 per cent higher than the levels recorded in other localities such as Dwarka and Punjabi Bagh. The World He-

alth Organisation and other global bodies monitoring the air quality in Delhi go a step further and define the area as among the most polluted in Asia.

But Anand Vihar wasn't a pollution hotspot it is today

until the late 1990s. Till then it was known mostly for the inter-state bus terminal located there and for the national highway connecting the capital to UP and Uttarakhand. Then, over a decade ago, a property boom overtook its small-town character and turned it into a neighbourhood - along with Kausambi, Indrapuram and Vaishali - of upscale residential apartments occupied by car owners.

"Already a transit point for inter-state vehicles such as goods trucks and diesel buses, the influx of residents with cars added to traffic volume and vehicular pollution," points out Prashant Mandal, who lives in the area. Besides these cars, nearly 1,000 CNG buses and 300 die-

TOI tracked the pollution levels in the area on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, and found Anand Vihar's AQI was as high as 455, 473 and 495, respectively, during the peak hours against a safe level of 50

sel buses drive in and out of the terminal daily. Add to that the hundreds of trucks carrying animals and processed meat to and from adjoining Ghazipur, which has Asia's largest livestock market and slaughter house, and you can imagine why Anand Vihar's is the most alarming name in the pollution story.

TOI tracked the pollution

levels in the area on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, and found Anand Vihar's Air Quality Index (AQI), a parameter measuring the chief pollutants, was as high as 455, 473 and 495, respectively, during the peak hours against a safe level of 50. At this 'severe' level, even healthy people can be affected, while those with existing respiratory ailments face serious threats. PM10, or respirable particulate matter with a size equal to or less than 10 micron, is the lead pollutant in the area. Prolonged exposure to PM10 in high concentrations can cause coughing, wheezing, asthma attacks and bronchitis. The level of the even more dangerous PM2.5 (tinier and more easily inhaled particulate matter) too was four or five times the safe standard of 60 micrograms per cubic metre.

"Air conditioning has become a necessity to counter dust and pollution rather than for cooling," says housewife Suman Sharma. Despite precautions like these, families are experiencing the adverse effects of poor air. When TOI talked to students of the municipal school in Vivek Vihar, almost all of them claimed to be suffering from respiratory problems or chest congestion.

"Hum jab saans lete hain toh lagta hai kuch phans raha hai (When we breathe, it seems something is stuck inside)," says nine-year-old Mohammad Tauqir.

Many families with elderly members ailing from respiratory illnesses have installed oxygen cylinders at home for emergency purposes because they can't keep running to the hospital for every frequent breathing crisis that arises.

In fact, chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, who himself suffers from a chronic respiratory condition, must be knowing how the air quality has deteriorated. "He used to live in Kausambi, less than 2 km from Anand Vihar," recalls Shiv Kumar, a colony resident.

However, the problem needs the attention of not just a single man, but of an entire system, whose combined effort must be to make Anand Vihar's air breathable again.

DELHI'S MOST POLLUTED

Air Quality Index at Anand Vihar

8.30 PM | 495, category: severe, main pollutant: PM 10

PM 2.5 concentration

7AM | 455 µg/m3

1PM | 328 µg/m3

4.30PM | 215 µg/m3

7PM | 547 µg/m3

(24-hour standard is 60 µg/m3)

HEALTH IMPACT

➤ Every third child in the area suffers from prolonged cough, sore throat and difficulty in breathing. Newborns and infants are worst affected

➤ Teenagers and working adults, who cannot avoid going outdoors, suffer from constant cough, irritation and runny nose

➤ Staying indoors all the time causes depression among the elderly. In many cases, respiratory ailments require hospitalisation

KEY CONTRIBUTORS

About a thousand buses operate from Anand Vihar terminus. The inter-state ones run on diesel

Hundreds of trucks enter Delhi though the border with UP nearby

Smoke from burning garbage and other gases released during decomposition at Ghazipur landfill

Jams on road dividing Delhi and UP, and NH24

Industrial areas in Sahibabad, which has a number of paper and dye factories, and Patparganj



Construction of a Delhi Metro line and residential/commercial spaces in Kausambi, Indrapuram and Vaishali across the border adds to particulate matter in air

Housing societies in UP use diesel-powered generators for many hours every day as power backup

