

# Delhi's poor bear the brunt of deadly smog

9 November 2017, by Nick Perry



Some streets in the Indian capital have recorded pollution levels 40 times the World Health Organization recommended safe level since Monday, with calm weather and the annual post-harvest burning of crop stubble in Punjab fuelling the crisis

Rickshaw driver Sanjay can only afford a handkerchief to shield his face from the smog-filled streets of Delhi, even as many residents rush to buy protective masks to combat the toxic menace.

Better off inhabitants of the world's most polluted capital are swarming sellers of face [masks](#)—costing more than the 300 rupees (\$5) that Sanjay earns in a day—and high-tech [air purifiers](#) that could easily cost his annual wage.

Delhi authorities Wednesday ordered all 6,000 schools to shut until Sunday after choking smog descended on northern India, while people with breathing difficulties have been told to stay indoors.

On top of expensive European air purifiers, inhabitants are turning to nose filters, indoor plants and even yoga to mitigate the crisis.

But doctors say that none of it will be enough to prevent deaths in the metropolis of 20 million

people battling a pollution crisis for the second year.

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Sanjay, who like many Indians goes by one name, spends his days waiting for passengers, breathing in the poisonous mist so thick that often he cannot see the other side of the road.

"I don't have a mask. The masks are too expensive. I have a hankie," he told AFP, bringing out a cotton square.

He knows however that putting the rag over his nose and mouth does next to nothing against the onslaught of fine particles—so small they bury deep in the lungs—that sear his eyes and throat.



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"My eyes are fire," he said, pulling back an eyelid to expose an irritated, bloodshot iris.

Labourer MK Sharma also cannot afford a smog mask. He thought the scarf wrapped around his face—a method favoured by motorcyclists and street workers—made things "a little better", but he wasn't sure.

"It is better than nothing," Sharma said hopefully.

Rupesh Kumar paid \$4 for a cheap, poorly-fitted fabric mask. It was all he could afford. "I want to save myself from Delhi," he told AFP.

### **Yoga cure for smog poison**

Nearby, affluent Delhiites jostled in a long queue to a small shop selling neoprene masks, fitted with a carbon mesh designed to filter out the noxious particles.

Panic rose from the crowd as the vendor lowered the shutters, announcing most sizes had sold out.

"Oh my goodness, you're finished? This is a catastrophe," said Sue, an expatriate woman who declined to give her second name, her young daughter by her side.

Those lucky enough to secure a mask ripped open the packaging and put it on their children on the pavement.

One elderly Indian woman looked distressed upon learning a mask cost 2,500 rupees, roughly \$40. "This is really too much. I cannot deal with this," she said, shaking her head.



The metropolis of 20 million people battling a pollution crisis for the second year

At a nearby shop, office worker Apurva, covering her mouth with her sleeve, purchased two air purifiers to complement the one already at home.

"Every room needs one because it is that crazy," she told AFP, referring to the high-end machines that cost anything between \$150 and \$1,000.

Many joggers and dog walkers in Delhi's Lodhi Gardens park appeared unfazed, joining the overwhelming majority of residents battling on without masks.

Children played cricket, couples canoodled and men read newspapers in smog so thick that the park's ancient Islamic monuments were barely visible in the gloom.

One snowy-haired retiree taking a daily walk told AFP he did not worry about the danger for his health because he did not have asthma.

"I can walk without a mask. I am not troubled by this weather," said lifetime Delhi resident Rammi Bakshi, reflecting a common belief that the winter smog is seasonal.

At India Gate, a towering monument barely visible behind a screen of haze, Pushkal Rai scoffed at suggestions the smog would halt his cricket match.

"We're spiritual guys, we love yoga, meditation, and this will remove (the pollution) from our body," he told AFP, adding sugar cane also helped clean the lungs of contaminants.

"We are Indians, we never worry about such kind of things here."

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