

Don't blow hot and cold on clearing the air

India must learn from China's pollution and emission control norms to improve and regulate its air quality levels

Padma Wangmo

Air pollution in India has reached dangerous levels. This is outlined by the fact that a vast majority of our population, around 660 million, inhabit areas in which the Indian National Ambient Air Quality Standards (fine particulate pollution) are breached.

If we are able to reduce pollution in these areas, the life expectancy may increase by 3.2 years on an average.

Thermal power plants (TPPs) are a major source of power generation in India. Coal-based TPPs contribute 85% of the total installed capacity.

They are a significant source of suspended particulate matter (PM), sulphur oxides (SOx), nitrous oxides (NOx) and mercury, which adversely impact health and the environment.

There is a need for relevant regulatory authorities at the Centre and state levels to revise the existing emission standards, introduce new standards for certain pollutants and ensure compliance still persists. The coal-based power sector accounts for approximately 60% of particulate matter (PM), 45-50% of SO₂, 30% of NOx and more than 80% of mercury

emissions.

The proposed draft for new emission standards is positive and relevant, but continues to be inadequate.

The new norms rectify the lack of emission standards for SOx and NOx. The PM norms for existing TPPs require further curbs. India's coal-based TPPs are significantly below global efficiency standards and struggle to appropriately dispose of the fly ash they generate. For implementing best practices, one can look towards China and its norms applicable to thermal power stations.

Since China launched its emission standards in 2012, and subsequent additions in Air Pollution Prevention and Control Action Plan, with time-bound objectives for 5-10 years, significant changes have been incorporated. Efforts were made to ensure retrofitting, for which the government offers incentives.

Here, the government is still unclear in regard to ways to reconcile economic development with the protection of India's forests and rivers, corresponding it to improving the air quality.

Conflicts between local and national governments, and between agencies, have

also hampered efforts.

No significant policies have been put in place, except the announcement of the National Air Monitoring Index.

The need of the hour continues to be a strong political stand, which must be adopted to make changes at both the micro and macro levels. It could start with uniform green regulations along with a comprehensive plan to manage dust and stringent green norms for vehicles.

For dust, violators like the agencies that keep roads dug up for prolonged durations and builders who don't regulate construction dust should be heavily penalised. Mechanised, instead of manual, cleaning of roads can also reduce local air pollution.

Localities/colonies should have their own specific air pollution norms. The central government must begin to rank the 10 best and worst cities for their air quality on a monthly basis; set targets of PM 2.5 in the three key regions and PM 10 in other areas, as has been in the case of China.

*Padma Wangmo is with Al Gore's The Climate Reality Project
The views expressed are personal*