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CONVERSATIONS 2: Air Pollution

Regionalizing Air: On the Possibilities of Transborder Collaborations

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The transboundary nature of air pollution is well recognized today. Already by the end of the nineteenth century in England, the spatiality of air toxicity was beginning to be seen as generalized rather than precisely located (Whitehead 2011). This is increasingly true of North India's air pollution discourse. To be sure, the tendency to view pollution as 'Delhi's problem' remains popular. This city focussed imaginary is constructed, for instance, via Delhi's positioning as the world's most polluted city, its repeated comparisons with Beijing, and by exceptional actions such as vehicle rationing and converting the public transport fleet to run on compressed natural gas.

In particular, atmospheric scientists who use remote sensing are quick to argue that smog episodes take a regional form, and have deployed concepts like the 'airshed'. During the November 2017 smog, it was suggested that dust storms blowing in from the faraway Middle East were a contributing factor. Fires with origin in Indonesia and industrial effluents from China's Pearl River Delta are similarly blamed for pollution in, respectively, Singapore and Hong Kong. It is against this backdrop that the following questions become relevant: under what conditions do administrative units—whether nation-states or provincial governments—collaborate towards effective pollution abatement actions? And what would it take for parties in the National Capital Region (NCR), where four different states and the central government interact, to meaningfully cooperate?

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In their analysis of the Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution (CLRTAP), which brings together 51 countries of Europe and North America to monitor and ameliorate air pollution, Lidskog and Sundqvist (2012) elaborate on what they consider the preconditions for such collaboration. These are, first, the establishment of working channels of communication (or 'roads') between different administrative units; second, doing the political work of finding mutually agreeable achievable goals that are progressively scaled; and third, bringing science and policy together to define a clear plan of action implementable across the region. The authors do not, however, problematize a straightforward relationship of contemporary states to science—even though countries like the US have moved in a decidedly post-truth direction—in fact, they assume it. These developments have heightened suspicion of not only the sciences that study ecological concerns but also of transnational environmental collaborations, such as the emergent climate change regimes. This is a knee-jerk reaction that turns on what it considers its simultaneous defence of narrowly defined national interests and individual freedom (Wainwright and Mann 2012).

Closer home, and as Ashish Kothari notes in this issue, the Indian civil society has long complained about the state's lack of seriousness in its response to environmental concerns. To this one may add the considerable unevenness between departments and provinces in terms of an engagement with scientific debates (CSE nd). In November 2017, as smog enveloped the NCR, some of these issues came to light. Aerial images suggested that smoke released by the burning of farm residue in the agricultural belts of the Indo-Gangetic plains was largely responsible (see Priya Shyamsundar's intervention in this issue). The regional nature of the issue was clearly visible even though the media was largely fixated on Delhi. Keen to expand the geography, the chief minister (CM) of Delhi called the CMs of Punjab and Haryana for an emergency meeting. This invited immediate scepticism from the Punjab CM, who argued that his government did not have the resources to incentivize an alternative means of residue disposal and, moreover, it was a *national* issue, and the central government should be therefore leading the efforts, rather than Delhi.

The present government's environmental stance in turn is not consistent. The prime minister has asserted seriousness at global events even as his government has been accused of pro-corporate bias. The current minister of environment, forests and climate change has repeatedly attracted criticism given his frequent downplaying of air toxicity. In November 2017, for instance, he suggested that the smog did not constitute an emergency since it was not as bad as the Bhopal gas disaster.

In this scenario, establishing effective monitoring and proactive regional collaboration, though challenging, remains urgent. While supplementing technical capacities is important, political representatives' role is more critical. They must bring together diverse publics for continuous knowledge sharing and discussions, and lead efforts to develop a shared understanding of the problem and of suitable interventions. Drawing lessons from experiences like the CLRTAP is a good place to begin.

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