At a Glance
WASTE AND AIR POLLUTION

Air pollution in India is caused by unsustainable solid waste management practices (open burning, landfill fires, and incineration), industrial point and area sources, vehicles, domestic fuel burning, and roads.

THE CRISIS

- New Delhi, the world’s most polluted city, broke all records of air pollution in 2017.
- Patna, Mumbai and Pune regularly report dangerously high levels of air pollutants.
- Patna and Delhi both have an annual PM 2.5 concentration that is 11–12 times over WHO limits.
- Air quality at landfills is usually in the ‘severe’ category. The three landfills in Delhi have already crossed permissible height limits, while the one in Deonar, Mumbai, is eight stories tall, and has caught fire several times.
Global pollution-related deaths: 9 million
Global air pollution-related deaths: 6.5 million (72% of total pollution-related deaths)
Waste burnt globally per year: 1.1 billion MT
Percentage of global particulate matter from trash fires: 29%
Annual air pollution-related deaths in India: 1.2 million
Percentage of direct particulate matter due to open burning in Indian cities: 5–11%
Percentage of GDP lost due to air pollution: 3%
Trash burnt daily in Delhi: 190–246 MT
Air quality index in Delhi (Nov 2017): 1,010
Air quality equivalent in cigarettes/day: 50
Annual PM 2.5 in Delhi and Patna: 120 ug/m³
Daily waste generated in Delhi: 10,000 MT
Daily waste transported to Delhi landfills: 8,000 MT
Percentage of total air pollution from biomass and open burning in Delhi: 20–30%
Percentage of of solid waste burnt on streets: 2%
Percentage of solid waste burnt in landfills: 10%
Percentage Delhi residents who know improper waste management causes air pollution: 94%
National Green Tribunal fine for open burning: Rs 25,000

Waste burning releases carbon monoxide (CO), particulate matter (PM), carcinogenic hydrocarbons (HC) and nitrous oxides (NOx), all of which are hazardous to health.

Air pollution disproportionately affects the vulnerable and the poorest of the poor, such as waste pickers, who live and work near landfills.

As national inventories of air pollution do not take emissions from open fire burning into account, they are unincorporated into policy decisions.

The impacts of waste burning are ignored by people and completely hidden by failed government regulation.

In 2016, the National Green Tribunal banned open burning of waste, including at landfills, and imposed a fine for violations.

Cleaning up the toxic air of Indian cities requires strict control on burning of solid waste.
Reducing at source, reusing, recycling and composting locally is more effective than landfiling and incinerating.

Inefficient waste management through landfills and biomass burning creates methane, a climate damaging, highly combustible gas that ignites fires that spew particulate matter.

Waste pickers are the true environmentalists of this country, working to reduce, recycle and reuse our waste, to the detriment of their own and their families’ health and well being.

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