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Treading with caution: Bikers navigating a road amid poor visibility in Delhi on Sunday morning. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

Delhi chokes on toxic smog; air quality panel flags 'recurring negligence', high dust levels

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Commission for Air Quality Management in NCR and Adjoining Areas (CAQM) on Sunday pulled up the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) over "evident gaps" and "recurring negligence" in the upkeep of roads in the city.

It said flying squads inspected 136 road stretches maintained by the DDA. Out of them, 15 showed high levels of visible dust, 38 recorded moderate dust levels, 61 had low dust intensity, and 22 were found to have no visible dust.

The squads also found accumulation of municipal solid waste (MSW) on 55

stretches, construction and demolition waste on 53 stretches, and open burning of MSW or biomass on six stretches.

Dust pollution is one of the major sources of air pollution in Delhi.

The CAQM stated that these "observations clearly indicate evident gaps and recurring negligence in the upkeep of the stretches concerned".

It added that the DDA needs to enhance its "operational efficiency" and take prompt corrective measures through "consistent and timely dust mitigation interventions".

"The agency also needs to deliver improved compliance across all road

stretches for MSW/biomass burning," it stated.

AQI hits 461

Meanwhile, air quality in the national capital on Sunday deteriorated with a 24-hour average air quality index (AQI) of 461 at 4 p.m., the highest value recorded this season, according to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB).

It worsened further from the 431 ('severe') recorded a day earlier and is likely to improve slightly to the 'very poor' category on Monday, the CPCB's daily official bulletin stated.

AQI in the range of 51-100 is termed 'satisfactory', 101-200 is deemed 'moderate', 201-300

'poor', 301-400 'very poor', 401-450 'severe', and 451-500 'severe plus', according to the CAQM.

Air quality in several other cities of north India, including Bahadurgarh in Haryana, and Ghaziabad and Noida in Uttar Pradesh, were in the 'severe plus' category. Baghpat and Greater Noida in Uttar Pradesh recorded air quality in the 'severe' category.

"Air quality is likely to be in the 'very poor' category from Monday to Wednesday and the subsequent six days," the Centre's Air Quality Early Warning System for Delhi stated.

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Courts must protect, not regulate free speech

Freedom of speech is vital for any democracy. The suspect for any attack on the right to free speech is usually the executive or the legislature. However, the proceedings of the Supreme Court of India, in *Runwar Allahbada vs Union of India* and other cases have raised the worry that the potential risks of endangering speech could emerge from the Court itself. On November 27, 2025, the Court said that self-styled bodies are insufficient for regulation of online content and suggested the creation of neutral, autonomous bodies. It also suggested that the Government publish the draft regulatory guidelines and invite comments.

Existing laws and regulation

In India, the existing laws already regulate various aspects of speech. Section 67 of the Information Technology Act and Sections 294, 295 and 296 of the Bharatya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) penalise obscenity. On online regulation in particular, Sections 66 of the Information Technology Act prohibits computer-related offences such as hacking and 66B of the Act prohibits publishing personal images of others. Section 66F of the same Act penalises cyber terrorism. The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules were also promulgated in 2021 though they are criticised for their overreaching interference and penal provisions.

Under these rules, there is already an oversight mechanism by the Centre. These rules also impose prior restraint. To illustrate, as per clause 11(c) under the appendix of the Rules, a publisher should take "due caution and discretion" while dealing with "activities, beliefs, practices or views of any racial or religious group". Despite the existence of these and other provisions, any attempt at further regulating the right to freedom of speech and expression must be subject to critical analysis, especially when it comes from the Court.

The first concern is about the nature of the case under consideration. The Bench was dealing with a plea challenging the First Information Reports at the instance of persons who are accused of improper or obscene content. The question of online content regulation was not originally the subject matter of such a case.

However, in the earlier proceedings on March 3, 2025, the Court said that it would "extend the scope" of the case to examine the question of what regulatory measures are required to prevent broadcasting which are "offensive to well-known moral standards of our society". This expansion is problematic at the outset. Identifying the



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problems of content and regulation is something that falls in the legislative domain. In *Common Cause vs Union of India* (2008), the Court cautioned itself: "Apart from the doctrine of separation of powers, courts must realize that there are many problems before the country which courts cannot solve, however much they may like to." When the Court takes on this task, it is limited by inherent institutional barriers, including that of technical expertise in the field of online media regulation. The Court's obstinacy for regulations in the field also would be vitiated by the same limitations.

The second is about the thin line between regulation and unlawful restraint. A five-judge Bench of the Court in *Saharu India Real Estate Corp. Ltd & Ors vs Securities & Exch. Board Of India & Anr.* (2012) had considered in detail the question whether regulation of media content is desirable. Being conscious of the dangers of blanket prohibition, the Court held that pre-censorship of the media must be avoided at all costs. In the context of court reporting, it was held that the postponement orders directed at the media must be done only as a last resort and must satisfy a high threshold of reasonableness.

An outline in the Constitution

Also, the grounds based on which the right to free speech can be restricted are laid down by the Constitution in Article 19(2). This consists of interests of sovereignty, security of the state, public order, defamation and others expressly enumerated. The Court itself, speaking through a five-judge Bench in *Koushal Kishor* (2022) held that additional restrictions beyond what is expressly laid down in Article 19(2) could not be imposed. It was categorically held: "The grounds lined up in Article 19(2) for restricting the right to free speech are exhaustive. Under the guise of invoking other fundamental rights or under the guise of two fundamental rights staking a competing claim against each other, additional restrictions not found in Article 19(2) cannot be imposed on the exercise of the right conferred by Article 19(1) upon any individual."

It is interesting to note that on previous occasions, the Court has effectively restrained itself from venturing into blanket prohibitory measures. In *Adarsh Co-operative Housing Society Ltd. vs Union of India and Others* (2018), when a suggestion was made by a counsel urging the court to direct the film-makers to add a disclaimer before the movie, the Court repelled it.

It said that it is for the Censor Board and not for the Court to decide it, and even the Censor

Board could decide it only after hearing the producer or the director of the movie.

Validity of the laws are to be determined by the Court as the constitutional umpire. During the Constituent Assembly debates, Pandit Thakur Dass Bhargava said that "the Supreme Court should ultimately be the arbiter and should have the final say" in situations of challenging the restrictions on freedom, by saying whether "the restrictions put are reasonable" (Constituent Assembly Debates, December 1, 1948). This is the scheme of Article 19 of the Constitution as well. Therefore, constitutional propriety demands that the Court abstains not only from the process of law making but also from the deliberation on the requirement for a law touching the citizen's freedom.

The case abroad

The Court's persuasive demand for further stringent laws in a tricky area could instigate prior censorship or statutory gag. Almost all the major democracies across the world focus on removal of offensive content and penalisation in case of breaching the order for removal of content. The Digital Services Act, 2022 promulgated by the European Union prescribes content removal protocols. The Network Enforcement Act, 2017 in Germany ensures prompt action on harmful content, without adversely impacting free speech. The Online Safety Act, 2023 of the United Kingdom focuses on removal of harmful content and imposing a fine in case of breach. The Online Safety Act, 2021 in Australia imposes a fine on non-compliance with regulation. Unlike these practices in democracies, countries such as China and Russia are invoking draconian laws to restrict online content. Surveillance and pre-censorship also dominate the online content regulation in these jurisdictions. Sadly, even some of the democracies which transform into autocracies also follow suit. David Landau and Rosalind Dixon, in a research paper, demonstrated that "would-be authoritarians at times seek to capture courts and deploy them in abusive ways as part of a broader project of democratic erosion..." (Abusive Judicial Review: Courts Against Democracy, 53 UC Davis Law Review 1313 (2020)).

When the Court repeatedly asks for stringent laws to regulate Internet content and when the Centre readily agrees, it is a serious concern in terms of a citizen's freedom. Author Salman Rushdie, when censored, has put it succinctly – "Free Speech is the whole thing, the whole ball game. Free speech is life itself."

An anomaly

The Centre must make burnt-area estimates of stubble public

In a statement to Parliament, the Environment Ministry said that Punjab and Haryana had collectively reduced "fire incidences" by 90% in 2025 compared to 2022. This is in reference to the burning of farm stubble, a traditional shortcut to quickly shed fields of paddy remnants and prepare them for a second crop – in this case, wheat – but that has in the last decade and a half been linked to spikes in air pollution in October-November in Delhi and surrounding cities.

As part of steps to address this, the Centre and the State governments have been employing a carrot-and-stick approach – fining farmers but, simultaneously, also providing subsidised farm equipment, combined harvesters and tractors as well as incentivising them to collect stubble and sell them to thermal plants for co-firing. There is little direct evidence to show that these measures have reduced the contribution of stubble burning to Delhi's post-monsoon air quality. That would require using mass-spectrograph measures to analyse the chemical make-up of pollutants over time and trace the weightage of stubble burning. That analysis is unavailable and so the government has been using proxies such as counting whether the number of active fires visible by satellites have been declining to evaluate this metric. Since 2020 there has been a decline in fires in Punjab and Haryana, prompting the government to take credit. It turns out that this was a pyrrhic victory. When images from a different satellite were used to compute another parameter called "burnt area" – the actual land area that had been burned – the reduction was a more gradual 30%: from about 31,500 square kilometres in 2022 to 19,700 sq.km in 2025 (as of November 25, this year), an independent research outfit has found. Using data from another set of satellites called Meteosat, unambiguous evidence emerged that farm fires had shifted towards the evening. Unlike the other satellites, which orbit the poles, this one is 'geostationary', meaning it continuously looks at the same spot. The Centre has been using fire count-reduction based on polar-satellite data, which passes through India between 10 a.m. and 1.30 p.m. Since 2022, reports had been emerging that farmers had shifted their burning towards evening precisely to avoid detection by these satellites. The Supreme Court of India, when apprised of this in 2024, had expressly told Environment Ministry bodies to ascertain 'burnt area' to gauge stubble burning trends. Moreover, given that satellites have different resolution powers, there is no knowing what the true count of fires is at present. The Centre, however, has still not made year-wise burnt-area estimates public. Being disingenuous with data will only accelerate the erosion of public confidence in the government's claim on tackling air pollution. The Centre must immediately move to address this.

The right moment to boost India-Ethiopia ties

Ethiopia, with a population of around 109 million (2024) and as one of Africa's fastest-growing economies, is of growing strategic and economic interest to major partners, including India. Its substantial manufacturing base, large domestic market, and geographic position in the Horn of Africa make it one of the continent's pivotal states.

Despite internal challenges, Ethiopia continues to be viewed as a regional anchor of stability with an effective military, and a central role in the evolving politics of a subregion marked by conflict. It is also the headquarters of the African Union and a potential renewable-energy powerhouse, especially in hydropower, positioning it to become an important regional energy exporter.

Although landlocked, Ethiopia has traditionally relied on Djibouti for access to the Red Sea. Recent efforts to diversify access through Somaliland and Eritrea underline its desire to secure strategic autonomy in trade and logistics. Politically, the country is emerging from the traumas of civil conflict and is attempting to build a new national consensus. This regeneration provides an important window for enhancing India-Ethiopia engagement across multiple domains.

Deep ties with India

India's relationship with Ethiopia has deep and long-standing roots. For more than a century, Indian teachers and university professors have formed the backbone of Ethiopia's education system, shaping generations of students and earning enormous respect. Although the number of Indian teachers has declined, Ethiopia's interest in educational collaboration remains high. Ethiopia was the pilot country for the Pan-African e-Network project in 2007 and has maintained long-term cooperation with IIT Delhi for tele-education, demonstrating strong receptivity to modern educational technologies.

Today, Ethiopia sends one of the highest numbers of African students to India, often through government-funded programmes. Remarkably, it has the largest number of PhD students from Africa studying in India. Ethiopia also successfully used graduates from the Pan-African e-Network's Master's programmes to help staff newly opened universities and academic departments.

Expanding this education partnership –



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With Ethiopia attempting to build a new national consensus, its engagement with India can be developed across multiple

university linkages and new scholarship frameworks – remains one of the most promising avenues for bilateral cooperation.

Investment and defence cooperation

Indian investment in Ethiopia is another pillar of the partnership. Indian businesses first ventured into Ethiopia in the 1950s, but the real surge came after India extended major lines of credit beginning in 2006. These catalysed a wave of private investment that surpassed \$4 billion. Ethiopian leaders continue to acknowledge the positive developmental impact of Indian investors, particularly at a time when International Monetary Fund (IMF) conditionality requires the country to mobilise new capital. While earlier investments focused heavily on agriculture, many investors withdrew due to taxation and operational issues.

Today, the most promising opportunities lie in mining – especially gold, critical minerals, and rare earth elements – which is an area where Ethiopia has vast but underexplored potential. The Indian Embassy's recent comprehensive mining survey identifies key opportunities while noting regulatory, infrastructural, and logistics constraints that must be addressed. If India can work with Ethiopia to commission and operate selected mines, this could help secure supplies for India's fast-growing renewable energy, battery, and semiconductor sectors. Mining cooperation could become a core element of a strategic economic partnership.

Defence cooperation is another promising frontier. Ethiopia was one of the first foreign countries to receive Indian military assistance, beginning with the establishment of the Harar Military Academy in 1956. Since 2009, Indian defence teams have supported the training of Ethiopian forces. After years of demanding internal deployments and operations in Somalia, the Ethiopian military requires fresh training and modern equipment to replace aging Soviet-era systems. India, with its competitively priced and battle-tested platforms, is well placed to become a key supplier.

A new MoU on defence cooperation and the first meeting of the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee held this year provide an institutional framework for expanding training, capacity building, and defence exports. Ethiopia, which has responsibly repaid earlier Indian lines of credit under the Indian Development and

programme, could be considered for new defence-related lines of credit within IMF guidelines.

Potential for a new phase

As both countries enter new phases of development, and with Ethiopia now a member of BRICS, the moment is ripe to redefine the partnership. Ethiopian officials repeatedly express strong interest in attracting Indian investment, especially in pharmaceuticals, agro-processing, light manufacturing and mining. India could help by updating bilateral agreements such as the Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA) and the Bilateral Investment Treaty to support private-sector engagement. Ethiopia, in turn, needs to address long-standing investor concerns related to foreign exchange availability, taxation, approvals, and consistency of regulations. The 2,500-strong and influential Indian diaspora, represented through the India Business Forum, continues to highlight foreign exchange accessibility as a key bottleneck.

At the multilateral level, expanding cooperation through BRICS, G-20 platforms, and South-South frameworks strengthens political convergence. Demonstrating success stories of Indian investment within Ethiopia and across Africa could help build wider regional partnerships. Under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), Ethiopian-based Indian companies can now access East African and continental markets more easily, making Ethiopia an attractive hub for Indian enterprises. In a rapidly changing global economy – marked by tightening regulations in the United States and European Union and uncertainty around arrangements such as African Growth and Opportunity Act – India's duty-free tariff preference scheme for Ethiopian exports remains important. Ethiopia can leverage this preferential access by welcoming more Indian investors, including in export-oriented manufacturing with buy-back arrangements.

Overall, the prospects for India-Ethiopia relations are bright. With renewed political will, targeted reforms, and strategic alignment, the partnership can evolve into one of the most dynamic and mutually beneficial relationships between India and Africa in the coming decade.

The meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali at Johannesburg during the G-20 summit has



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A people-led climate intelligence movement

Globally, monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) systems have become central to climate transparency. Under the Paris Agreement, countries must track emissions, adaptation progress, and climate finance to show movement towards their Nationally Determined Contributions. COP30 reinforced this through the Global Implementation Tracker, the Belem Mission to 1.5°C, and voluntary indicators for the Global Goal on Adaptation.

India aligns with this direction, emphasising that stronger domestic MRV is essential both for transparency and for unlocking climate finance, while also underscoring that developing countries need substantial financial and technical support to build such systems. Also, climate finance must not only increase in scale but also shift power downwards to frontline communities like the Indigenous Peoples, and local communities. These communities who observe climate change daily and bear its greatest impacts must lead monitoring efforts, govern funds, and access resources that support local adaptation and environmental stewardship.

Yet, MRV systems still rely heavily on remote sensing, administrative datasets, and external expertise, leaving little room for community-generated insights. It is in this context that Tamil Nadu's community-based environmental MRV (CbMRV) initiative becomes relevant. It makes community-generated environmental intelligence a formal part of climate governance.

The CbMRV model

Across Tamil Nadu, climate change is reshaping daily life: in Erode, farmers describe the rains collapsing into short, intense bursts, and increasing heat waves; along the Cuddalore coast, salinity is moving inland and shifting tides are affecting fish catch; and in the Nilgiris, tribal foragers report



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thinning forest moisture and erratic flowering cycles. These signals emerge first at the smallest ecological scales, yet policymaking relies on coarse datasets as climate intelligence has rarely been produced locally.

CbMRV was created to change exactly that. It enables villages to generate systematic, science-ready environmental data. It weaves traditional ecological knowledge with field-based monitoring of rainfall, temperature, soil and health, biodiversity, fish catch, cropping patterns, livelihoods, and even carbon stocks and emissions. This evidence is integrated into a digital dashboard that informs decision-making across village, district and State levels. CbMRV thus reframes governance as a partnership between communities and institutions, rather than a top-down exercise.

The initiative began in 2023 under the UK PACT programme, which enabled Tamil Nadu to pilot a community-based MRV system that could support just transition goals. In collaboration with Keystone Foundation and other scientific partners, three ecologically distinct landscapes were selected: Aracode in the Nilgiris (mountain forests), Vellore in Erode (agriculture and wetlands), and Kallai in Cuddalore (mangroves and coastal fisheries).

In these locations, communities contributed generational knowledge that shaped the indicators, monitoring protocols and digital tools that now underpin CbMRV. Carbon feasibility studies were conducted in parallel to assess how reliable village-scale data could support future community-centred carbon projects. In less than three years, each pilot village has developed into a functional environmental knowledge hub, with trained monitors, field instruments and digital systems capable of generating real-time data.

Community climate stewards

A defining achievement of the

initiative is the emergence of 35 key community stakeholders (KCS) – farmers, fishers, women, youth, elders, and tribal knowledge-holders – who now serve as first-line community climate stewards. They collect and interpret environmental data, and can identify trends, work with local institutions, and help translate information into daily decisions in the near future.

CbMRV is also reshaping how data flows through governance systems. At the panchayat level, it can complement Gram Panchayat Development Plans and programmes such as the Climate Resilient Village, strengthening vulnerability assessments, crop diversification decisions, and natural resource management. At the block and district levels, village-scale evidence can support watershed development, agricultural advisories, and disaster preparedness. At the State level, CbMRV can enhance the evidence base for the Tamil Nadu Climate Tracker, the State Action Plan on Climate Change, the Green Tamil Nadu Mission, coastal adaptation programmes and climate investment pathways under the Tamil Nadu Green Climate Company.

A key aim is long-term institutionalisation and the creation of a permanent green workforce. Training modules, applications, field protocols and dashboards developed under CbMRV are being proposed for integration into community colleges, Industrial Training Institutes, forestry and agricultural institutions, Panchayat Raj training centres, and State skill development programmes. With sustained support, community monitors can maintain long-term environmental baselines and eventually replicate the system across other geographies.

When the tools of science are shared rather than concentrated, and when governance grows from the ground up, climate action becomes both more democratic and more resilient.

Nubian ibexes climbing a hill in Israel's southern Negev desert near Faran

