

Air quality improves in over 90 cities

Lockdown has reduced vehicular traffic across the country, leading to a drop in PM2.5, NO_x levels

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

With a nationwide lockdown in place, over 90 cities, including Delhi, recorded minimal air pollution in the last few days.

Welcoming the reduction in pollution, environmentalists urged the government to treat it as a "wake-up call" and stop its "obsession" with "development" at the cost of the environment.

India is currently under the biggest lockdown with around 130 crore people asked to stay home in view of the COVID-19 outbreak.

The government has urged people to avoid unnecessary travel, significantly reducing the traffic movement across the country.

According to the Centre-run System of Air Quality and Weather Forecasting and Research (SAFAR), the measures against COVID-19 have led to a drop in PM2.5



Breathing well: NO_x pollution levels have dropped by 38% in Mumbai. •PTI

(fine particulate pollutant) by 30% in Delhi and by 15% in Ahmedabad and Pune, respectively.

The level of Nitrogen Oxide (NO_x) pollution, which can increase the risk of respiratory conditions, has also reduced. NO_x pollution is mainly caused due to a high motor vehicle traffic. In Pune, NO_x pollution has reduced by 43%, in Mumbai,

by 38% and in Ahmedabad, by 50%.

Gufran Beig, a scientist at SAFAR, said generally in March, pollution is in the "moderate" category (Air Quality Index range: 100-200) while currently, it is in the "satisfactory" (AQI 50-100) or "good" (AQI 0-50) category. "It is the lockdown impact. Local factors like shutting down of industries

and construction and traffic have contributed in improving the air quality. Rain is also helping, but the curbs on local emissions are playing a significant role," he said. Under the "good" category, pollution is considered to be at the lowest and the air is believed to be the healthiest to breathe.

COVID-19

According to the data of the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), the air quality in the national capital is presently in the "good" category. In Kanpur, which has high pollution levels, it is in the "satisfactory" category. Moreover, 92 other cities with CPCB monitoring centres have recorded minimal air pollution, with the air quality in the range of "good" to "satisfactory".

As many as 39 cities have recorded "good" air quality and 51 cities have recorded "satisfactory" air quality in the last few days, the CPCB data showed.

An AQI between 0-50 is considered good, 51-100 satisfactory, 101-200 moderate, 201-300 poor, 301-400 very poor and 401-500 severe.

Environmentalists believe that the reduced pollution levels should act as a wake-up call for the government.

Jyoti Pande Lavakare, co-founder, Care for Air NGO, said the low AQI and the blue skies proved beyond doubt that a lot of the polluted air was "anthropomorphic, that is, man-made". "Slowing down the economy to such a degree is not the ideal way to bring down air pollution, but it proves that it can be done. We can achieve the same outcome by doing this mindfully, using technology and low-emission alternatives," she said.

Arjun Dev: a legendary historian passes away

He co-wrote some of the extremely popular NCERT books

ADITYA MUKHERJEE
MRIDULA MUKHERJEE

Professor Arjun Dev, the legendary educationist and historian, a kind, gentle and generous but extremely brave man, passed away today morning at a hospital near his home in Noida. Born on November 12, 1938 in Leiah, West Punjab (now in Pakistan), he did his schooling in Ambala and then studied at Kirori Mal College, Delhi University. He is survived by his wife Indira Arjun Dev with whom he shared every aspect of his professional life.

Prof. Arjun spent the better part of his academic life working as a historian at the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). In partnership with Indira he wrote a number of extremely popular textbooks for the NCERT on Modern and Contemporary India and the World. One of their books, which was discontinued by the NCERT under the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regime in 2002 was republished by Orient Blackswan as *History of the World: From the Late 19th to the Early 20th Century* and has remained a very widely read text.

For children

During his tenure at the NCERT, Prof. Arjun had collaborated in the effort to get some of the tallest professional historians India had produced since Independence, like Romila Thapar, R.S. Sharma, Satish Chandra and Bipan Chandra, to write textbooks for schoolgoing children. This was as an effort conceived since the late 1960s to create modern, scientific textbooks, which



Arjun Dev

1938 - 2020

would replace the ones that had continued from colonial times with their colonial and communal bias. These texts became a great success and became a template for textbook writing globally.

Within the NCERT, the Bharatiya Janata Party, beginning with the Vajpayee government in 1999-2004, made massive efforts to replace the textbooks written by the country's most renowned scholars with texts by unknown scholars toeing the Hindutva line. Prof. Arjun spearheaded the determined struggle against these efforts but, alas, could not stop them in the end. The *New York Times* of October 18, 2002, quoted Prof. Arjun Dev's criticism of this "assault on history" which would promote a "version of the past [which] is crucial to their political...ideology of Hindu supremacy. They will go to any lengths to achieve this, even put forth a fake invented past."

After retiring from the NCERT, Prof. Arjun took up another major enterprise, the Towards Freedom Project of the Indian Council of Historical Research. It was a project conceived as a re-

joinder to the British government-inspired *Transfer of Power Volumes* which documented the history of the last ten years of colonial rule in India in a manner that did scant justice to our great national liberation struggle. Started under the General Editorship of Prof. Sarvepalli Gopal, the first two volumes came out in 1997 and were published by the Oxford University Press. With the coming to power of the Vajpayee government, two volumes in the press were withdrawn and the project stalled. The project could be restarted only in 2005, and Prof. Arjun was the indefatigable coordinator of the project with Sabyasachi Bhattacharya as the General Editor.

Heart and soul

Prof. Arjun put his heart and soul into the project, and a large number of volumes were published, covering the period right up to 1947. Unfortunately, the second volume covering the year 1941, edited by Prof. Arjun Dev himself and the third volume, covering the year 1947, edited by Prof. Sucheta Mahajan, have yet not seen the light of day, even though they were sent to press several years ago. Prof. Arjun told an online publication, on August 27, 2017, "After the publication of the first two volumes, the BJP had realised that the documents related to the role of the Sangh Parivar will not do it any good. Many of these documents expose its nationalist pretensions and show the communal role played by the Sangh during the nationalist movement."

(The authors retired as Professors of History at JNU)

How COVID-19 testing kit was born in India

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
MUMBAI

Virologist Minal Dakhve Bhosale led from the front to create India's first coronavirus testing kit even when she was in the last stage of her pregnancy.

Ms. Bhosale's efforts paid off with her team delivering the testing kit in a record time of six weeks.

Ms. Bhosale gave birth to a baby girl just a day before submitting the kit to the authorities for evaluation.

"It was like giving birth to two babies," Ms. Bhosale told PTI over the phone.

"There were complications in the pregnancy while work on the test kit was on. The baby was delivered through caesarean," she said.

Ms. Bhosale said she felt that it was the right time to serve the people to help them in combating the coronavirus threat.

"I had been working for five years in this field and if I don't work in emergency situations when my services are needed the most, then what is the use?" she said.

Though Ms. Bhosale was not able to visit the office due to the pregnancy, she was guiding a team of 10 persons working on the project at Mylab Discovery in Pune.

Company's co-founder Shrikant Patole said just like drug discovery, test kits too go through a lot of quality checks to improve the precision.

He credited Ms. Bhosale for the success of the project.

Elephant gifted to U.S. in 1961 euthanised

71-year-old Ambika served as an 'Ambassador for her species' in Washington zoo

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
WASHINGTON

Ambika, a 72-year-old elephant which was gifted to the U.S. in 1961 on behalf of children of India, was "humanely euthanised" by veterinarians at a national zoo in Washington, officials said on Saturday.

Estimated to be the third oldest Asian elephant in the North American population, Ambika was euthanised at the Smithsonian National Zoo.

"Ambika truly was a giant among our conservation community," said Steven Monfort, John and Adrienne Mars Director, Smithsonian's National Zoo.



Gentle giant: A file photo of Ambika strolling in the Smithsonian zoo in Washington. •NATIONAL ZOO, SI. EDU

In a statement, the zoo said Ambika was humanely euthanised on Friday, following a recent and irreversible decline in her health.

Born in India around 1948, Ambika was captured

in the Coorg forest when she was about 8 years old. She worked as a logging elephant until 1961, when she was given to the zoo as a gift from the children of India, the zoo said in a statement.

"Elephant keepers have fondly reflected on Ambika's sense of humour, particularly during mealtimes, when the persnickety eater would arrange her grains to her liking before eating," it said.

'Contribution to biology'

"For the past five decades, Ambika served as both an ambassador and a pioneer for her species. It is not an exaggeration to say that much of what scientists know about Asian elephant biology, behaviour, reproduction and ecology is thanks to Ambika's participation in our conservation research studies, Monfort said.

Salman to help 25,000 workers in film industry

Daily wage earners to be beneficiaries

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
MUMBAI

Actor Salman Khan has pledged to financially support 25,000 daily wage workers from the film industry in the wake of the national lockdown, according to Federation of Western Indian Cine Employees (FWICE).

The daily wage workers across different avenues are badly hit by the 21-day lockdown.

According to FWICE president B N Tiwari, Salman via his Being Human Foundation reached out to their organisation. "Salman's Being Human Foundation has come forward to help daily wage workers. They called



Salman Khan

us three days ago. We have about 5 lakh workers, out of which 25,000 are in dire need of financial help. Being Human Foundation said they will take care of these workers on their own. They have asked for account details of these 25,000 workers," Mr. Tiwari said.

Composer Penderecki dies at 86

ASSOCIATED PRESS
WARSAW

Krzysztof Penderecki, an award-winning conductor and one of the world's most popular contemporary classical music composers, whose works have featured in Hollywood films like *The Shining* and *Shutter Island*, died on Sunday. He was 86.

In a statement, the Ludwig van Beethoven Association said Mr. Penderecki had a "long and serious illness."

Mr. Penderecki was best known for his monumental compositions for orchestra and choir, like *St. Luke Passion* and *Seven Gates of Jerusalem*, though his range was much wider.

Himalayan Ibex a distinct species

They are divergent from Siberian Ibex, reveals a genetic study

SHIV SAHAY SINGH
KOLKATA

A recent study by scientists of the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) has proved that Himalayan Ibex, distributed in the trans-Himalayan ranges of Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh, is a distinct species from the Siberian Ibex.

The paper, 'Genetic evidence for allopatric speciation of the Siberian Ibex (*Capra sibirica*) in India,' has recently been published in *Endangered Species Research*, an international peer-reviewed journal.

Siberian Ibex is a species of wild goat and is distributed in diverse habitats, ranging from cold deserts, rocky outcrops, steep terrain, high-land flats and mountain ridges to low mountains and foothills.

From Mongolia, its distribution extends towards Altai, Hangai, Gobi-Altai, the Huruks mountain ranges as well as Sayan Mountains



Himalayan Ibex in Lahul and Spiti, Himachal Pradesh.

near Russia and scattered populations in the small mountains of Trans-Altai Gobi.

In Asia, Ibex is distributed in the Montane habitats, ranging in elevations from 500 m to 6,700 m in countries like India, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Southern Siberia and China. In India, the Ibex is distributed mainly in the trans-Himalayan ranges of the Union Territories of Ladakh and Jammu and Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh

up to the river Sutlej.

To unravel the complexity in species recognition of Indian Ibex, the researchers, under a project funded through the National Mission on Himalayan Studies implemented by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, undertook field surveys and collected faecal samples from Lahul and Spiti, Himachal Pradesh.

The genetic analysis conducted with the inclusion of the sequences available from all across the distribution

ranges in Central Asia, Tajikistan, Altai Mountains, Mongolia and Russia provided first evidence to claim that Himalayan Ibex is genetically different from all other ranges of Siberian Ibex. The samples collected from India clustered with the sequences from Tajikistan in a phylogenetic analysis, which were adequately different from the other two clades: KZ clade of Tajikistan (which broadly represents one of the clusters in the phylogeny) and AMR clade of Altai Mountains, Mongolia and Russia.

"The results of the genetic analysis surprisingly revealed that I-T clade (referred to as Siberian Ibex) was estimated to have diverged from Alpine Ibex during the Pleistocene epoch (2.4 million years ago) than the Siberian Ibex during the Miocene-Pliocene boundary (6.6 million years ago)," Mukesh Thakur, the lead author of the paper, said.

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