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# Improvement in air quality wears down with relaxation in lockdown

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The lockdown and frequent rain saw Bengalureans breathe easy for the first time in recent years as the air quality improved significantly. However, post several relaxations, pollutants have started making their presence felt again.

In a comparison of the air quality from March to June, the Air Quality Index (AQI) went from 100 before the lockdown (March 1 to 21) to 61 during the lockdown (March 21 to May 3). Post May 3, it has gradually risen to 71, according to Ambee, an eco-intelligence startup based in the city.

Akshay Joshi, CEO of Ambee, told *The Hindu* that the two major factors behind the city experiencing cleaner air during the period were the absence of vehicular pollution and construction activities — real estate and public infrastructure.

“We have not seen such low AQI. In fact, in some areas like Malleswaram, Jnanabharathi (Mysuru Road near BU campus), Vijayanagar, the PM<sub>2.5</sub> was at its lowest ever. Peenya, Hosur Road and Silk Board, where the average AQI has been close to dangerous levels, went to safe levels amidst the lockdown,” he said.

Sulphur oxide (SO<sub>x</sub>) and Nitrogen Oxide (NO<sub>x</sub>) were the lowest during the lockdown due to very little traffic.

“Frequent rains have reduced the PM (particulate matter) count as well. We saw a spike in PM in some areas due to garbage burning, resuming of construction and road repair works. Post complete lockdown, we see an increase in SO<sub>x</sub>, NO<sub>x</sub>, CO and PM as traffic has begun the flow,” Mr. Joshi explained.

### **Most and least polluted areas**

The 10 most polluted areas from May 3 till May 14 included Jayanagar, Peenya Industrial Area, Herohalli, Banashankari third stage and Kathriguppe. From May 14, they were replaced by Madanayakanahalli, Dasanapura, J.P. Nagar third phase, Jayanagar, Magadi Road, Bannerghatta Road, Shantinagar, Konanakunte and Chickpet.

The Karnataka State Pollution Control Board’s AQI for January and February showed Jayanagar fifth block, Central Silk Board and City Railway Station between 101 and 200, categorised as ‘moderate’ – may cause breathing discomfort to people with lung disease such as asthma and discomfort to people with heart disease, children and older adults.

T.V. Ramachandra from the Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science said things were almost back to usual already. “There was a drastic reduction in air pollution as there

were one-tenth of vehicles and no building activity. But there are already traffic jams as before, that means we are back to business. Planning is an important component and decentralised growth will help change things," he said.

Dr. Sharachandra Lele, Distinguished Fellow in Environmental Policy & Governance, ATREE added, "How do we regain the clean air that we glimpsed so briefly during lockdown? We can do a few things as individuals: reduce commuting, keep working from home, skip shopping trips to malls (since lockdown showed us that those trips are superfluous), and reduce our purchases from online portals (again: something we were able to do without largely). But really the ball is in the government's court. It needs to restart metro work immediately, establish exclusive bus lanes, and bicycle lanes. The restarting of BMTC buses was a disaster as the government did not pay attention to the needs of passengers in setting the fares. This shows the need for much greater mandatory participation of people in decision-making about public transport."

But with the monsoon having arrived, the rains could help keep a check on micro particles rising out of dust, bringing temporary relief during the season.

KSPCB officials were unavailable for comments.

*This is the first of a two part series ahead of World Environment Day on June 5.*