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GASP! The Pollution Board says Bengaluru's air is getting better

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Highlights

Is there Something fishy in the air and water out here?

Experts slam KPSCB's tweaking of calculation method, by which it has arrived at a conclusion that Particulate Matter in the air has dipped

Take a deep breath, because what you're about to read can shock you. The Karnataka State Pollution Control Board (KSPCB) has made some startling revelations that pollution in Bengaluru has declined in the last five years. According to the Board, there has been a decrease in PM 10 (Particulate Matter 10 comprises pollutants which are 10 micrometres or less in diameter) and PM 2.5 (Particulate Matter or PM 2.5 includes pollutants smaller than 2.5 microns) over the last four to five years.

But the Karnataka Transport Department says the number of vehicles registered in Bengaluru rose by 23 lakhs in 4.5 years. K Satheesh, professor at the Centre for Atmospheric and Oceanic Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru said in an interview to the Times of India in October this year, that air quality in Bengaluru averages about 100 micrograms per metre for PM 2.5 while the World Health Organisation's permissible air pollution density levels is 60 micrograms per metre for PM 2.5.

The KSPCB's report says that PM 10 which has an annual average standard of 60, was 89 in 2018-19 and PM 2.5 which has a standard value of 40 was 42.5 for the year 2018-19. Experts slam these numbers and say that the method of calculation is faulty. They say that air pollution density should not be measured as an annual average but as a daily calculation.

According to the KSPCB report, the annual average values of PM 10 in Bengaluru have been tabulated from the year 2014-15 to 2018-19. According to the report, in the year 2014-15, the annual average was 125.6 microgram/qubic metre and following year the numbers started dipping. In the year 2015-16 it was 117.6, in the year 2016-17 it was 98.9, in the year 2017-18 it was 87.1 and in the year 2018-19 it went slightly up to 89.9 microgram/qubic metre.

In the same manner, the board has also said that there is a decline over the last four years in the annual average values of PM 2.5 in the city. The report said that in 2015-16, the annual average was 59.4, in 2016-17 it was 47.3, in the year 2017-18 it was 43.1 and in the year 2018-19 it was 42.4 microgram/qubic metre.

Besides the increase in the number of vehicles registered every year in Bengaluru, the city has another problem. According to a study by Clean Air Platform, Bengaluru has a robust construction industry which results in the air being polluted with medium and fine sand. Samples collected from 11 localities in South and West Bengaluru revealed that medium and fine sand was found in 50 percent to 90 percent of the samples. According to another study by urbanemissions.info, vehicular pollution (28%) is the major contributor to air toxicity in Bengaluru while road dust (23%) is the second highest factor.

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There are six 12 Air Monitoring vehicles in Bengaluru

Experts says that in summer, Bengaluru's air toxicity beats that of New Delhi and respiratory diseases are on the rise. In such a scenario KSPCB's report is confusing.

KSPCB reasons

The Board says it has taken up several measures like working with the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahangara Palike (BBMP) and the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB) in disposing waste materials efficiently that had all added up to cleaner air. It also added that it has been working with the Forest department to take up afforestation activities.

Basavaraj Patil, member secretary from KSPCB said, "We have our own monitoring systems in local urban bodies which are monitoring the air quality. If we look at the data as on last month, we have around 83 lakh vehicles in Bengaluru and it is growing exponentially. Despite this we have been able to record decreasing PM levels because of how we are disposing wastes and working with the BBMP and BWSSB. . We are also working with the Forest department and BBMP's forest wing to do tree plantation drives across the city and State which is helping to bring down PM in the air," added Patil.

He also said that there are over 12 Air Monitoring vehicles (Parisara Vahini) and six of them are in Bengaluru and other vehicles spread across the State. "We are also working with the Regional Transport Office to bring in awareness about reducing air toxicity. We have installed display boards in many places and we are creating awareness on controlling pollution. Even the Sewage Treatment Plant (STP) operators are being trained with the help of Environmental Management Policy & Research Institute (EMPRI)," he added.

Air Quality Index should be calculated every 24 hours. Calculating an annual average is not the way this is done.

– Professor Mahesh, Consultant at EMPRI

Experts dismiss report

However, the experts slammed the entire concept of calculation of air toxicity on an annual average value system which they believe misleads the public.

Speaking to Bangalore Mirror, Professor TV Ramachandra from the Centre for Ecological Sciences, IISc said, "Air quality check is done every day. If it's done annually, there are a lot of factors that will dilute the figures and mislead the public. We have done a study of 10 cities in the country which clearly shows that there is no way that the pollution levels are decreasing in the city. When it comes to Bengaluru how can you say that cases of respiratory diseases and cancer are on the decline? The vehicles are increasing rapidly as is the construction activity."

"We have seen that over 60 per cent of the emission is due to two-wheelers. Four-wheelers and trucks are increasing day by day. These annual averages are released just to mislead people," he added.

Experts from EMPRI also said that this data cannot be considered valid. Professor Mahesh, Consultant at EMPRI said, "When it rains the PM decreases. The quality of air should be reported every 24 hours and then you can see that air toxicity is steady. Calculating an annual average is not the way this is done because factors like the monsoon can alter the annual average."