



How to Die in Clean Air ?

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I knew Bharat long before he decided to care about Delhi's air. He wasn't interested in saving the environment, he was only interested in making sure the bad air reached everyone else before it reached him. Like most people in this city, he wanted clean air in his own house and a moral lecture for the rest of the world.

Bharat's concern for the air usually began after he had finished polluting it for the day. Every morning, he stepped out with his car, even if he had to travel the distance that a reasonably healthy man could walk while chewing peanuts. When I asked him why he wouldn't walk, he said, "It's not safe to breathe outside." He said this while starting the engine and releasing enough smoke to make the air even less safe. His logic was simple, the city should improve its air quality before he considers improving his habits.

Bharat liked to think of himself as a reasonable man. "I'm not against walking," he once told me, "but the city should first give us clean air. Walking in this pollution is unhealthy." He said this while standing next to the delivery guy who had just cycled five kilometres to bring him his organic vegetables. The delivery boy didn't have the privilege to negotiate with the air. Bharat did. Or at least he believed so. He felt the city owed him good air, even though he was personally contributing nothing more than complaints.

Bharat became most active about air quality during Diwali. Weeks before the festival, he would post long messages about cracker bans, children's lungs, government failure, and "collective responsibility." He spoke like a man whose conscience had finally woken up. But on Diwali night, the only thing awake was his enthusiasm for noise. He burst crackers with the devotion of a man performing a national duty. When I asked about the contradiction, he said, "These are harmless. The real problem is other people's crackers," for him, pollution was a democratic issue everyone had equal rights to cause it, but his share somehow didn't count.

Bharat's favorite subject, however, was his air purifiers. He had eleven of them, one in every room, even the storeroom had cleaner air than most Delhi. He spoke about them the way rich people speak about security guards- as silent workers protecting his life from the rest of the population. "These machines are the future," he told me once, pointing at a purifier as if it were a national achievement. He believed that owning more purifiers made him more

responsible. I didn't tell him that it only made him more privileged. In Bharat's mind, clean air was not a right, it was a subscription plan he had purchased.

Bharat had developed a habit of talking about "my air" and "their air," as if oxygen came with property papers. He would say things like, "At least the air inside my home is pure," with the tone of a man who had survived a disaster while others were simply unlucky. He never understood that clean indoor air and dirty outdoor air cannot stay separate for long. But Bharat believed in borders-between his purity and everyone else's pollution. His idea of responsibility was simple that the world should change its behaviour so that he didn't have to change his own. Bharat enjoyed giving advice about air more than following any of it. "People should stop using cars unnecessarily," he would say, moments before taking out his own. "The government must control emissions," he added, while his generator hummed loudly during a short power cut. Bharat spoke about pollution like a man reviewing someone else's mistakes. In his mind, the air was suffering because of careless strangers never because of him. His conscience worked like his purifier: it filtered out his own smoke and kept only other people's guilt.

Whenever pollution levels spiked, Bharat behaved like a victim of someone else's crime. He blamed farmers for burning stubble, tourists for increasing traffic, factories for releasing smoke, and the weather for refusing to cooperate. He blamed everyone except the man who lived in his own house. The truth was simple, Bharat trusted the idea that responsibility should always travel outward. For him, pollution was never a matter of personal conduct, but it was a convenient list of people he could accuse.

Bharat took great pride in the fact that the air inside his home was "better than Switzerland." He said this while pointing at a digital meter that glowed like a trophy. His living room smelled of filters, disinfectants, and a strange confidence that came from breathing air other people couldn't afford. He kept the doors and windows shut, as if fresh air were a criminal trying to break in. Bharat had created a private air kingdom, sealed carefully from the city he contributed pollution to. He didn't realise that no house is big enough to hide from the air outside.

The trouble began on a winter evening when the pollution was so thick that even the street dogs looked tired of barking. Bharat was unusually restless. His purifier in the bedroom had started making a faint clicking sound. Most people would have ignored it, but Bharat treated his purifiers the way some people treat elders in the family any sound from them demanded immediate respect to shut them down. "The air outside is extremely toxic today," he said, as if the city needed his confirmation. He shut the door tighter and increased the purifier's speed, proud that he was the only one fighting the air with machinery.

Late night, the clicking sound had grown louder. Bharat sat in front of the purifier like a man attending a sick relative. He pressed buttons, shook the machine gently, and even tapped the sides to "encourage" it. "This one is my best model," he told me, as if I were questioning his parenting. "It cleans the air in minutes." He said this without

noticing that he had sealed every window, every vent, and every gap, turning his bedroom into a glass jar, for Bharat, air was not something to improve but something to trap. The purifier was his god, and the room was its temple. The clicking finally stopped, but not in the way Bharat hoped. A faint burning smell replaced it. He sniffed the air sharply, the way a man checks for danger in his own kitchen. At first, he tried to blame the smell on “outside pollution,” as if the city had somehow sneaked through the walls, but the smoke rose from the purifier itself-thin at first, then steady, like the machine had decided it was tired of cleaning everyone else’s mistakes. Bharat stared at it with betrayal. A lifetime of blaming others had not prepared him for the moment when the problem stood right in front of him, plugged into his own wall.

Bharat panicked and ran to the door, only to remember he had sealed it himself “to keep the dirty air out.” The windows were locked with tape, the vents covered with cardboard, and even the tiny gap under the door was blocked with a rolled towel. The smoke inside the purifier thickened and slipped into the room like an uninvited guest. Bharat coughed, then tried to switch the machine off, but panic makes even simple buttons look complicated. For the first time, the air he trusted had no place left to escape to, and neither did he.

The smoke spread faster than Bharat’s understanding of the situation. He tried shouting for help, but the room swallowed his voice the same way it had swallowed its fresh air. His purifier kept coughing out smoke like a tired machine giving its last performance. Bharat stood there, surrounded by the very thing he had spent years avoiding. He had always believed the outside air would kill him; it never occurred to him that the danger could come from the air he trusted most.

By the time the door was forced open, Bharat was lying on the floor, surrounded by smoke from the purifier meant to protect him. The neighbours stood quietly, unsure whether to feel sad or surprised. Delhi has many ways of harming people, but this one felt unusually private. Bharat had spent years fighting the city’s air while refusing to fight his own habits. In the end, he didn’t die because the air was dirty. He died because he tried to own the clean part of it.