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Front Page

Page 1 anchor

Can't see red over Brown Cloud now

*First, Delhi dismissed it as West pressure, now accepts the evidence***SONU JAIN**

NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 14 Faced with evidence that the haze of pollutants over the Indian Ocean could adversely affect monsoons, agriculture and even public health, New Delhi has decided to join the international Atmospheric Brown Cloud (ABC) project.

This is significant given that when preliminary findings were announced in London in 2002, India dismissed the data as an attempt by the West to link the cloud with pollution generated in India, a pressure tactic to force New Delhi to accept commitments under the Kyoto protocol.

Since then, the data has been analysed by top experts in this field and the results are alarming, said V Ramanathan, professor of climate and atmospheric science at the Scripps Institute of Oceanography, who is heading the study.

Not only is the brown cloud reducing the amount of sunlight over the Indian landmass by 10%—a phenomenon called global dimming—the extent of this is twice that elsewhere.

This cloud, first labelled Asian Brown Cloud — a thick layer of soot, sulphur and nitrates—was re-christened Atmospheric Brown Cloud after similar patterns were seen near other continents.

Ramanathan said the decrease in volume of monsoon rain over the Indian subcontinent from the 50s is because of this brown cloud.

“This is an area of concern with a billion people depending on the monsoon,” said Ramanathan addressing a conference here today.

That's not all. The cloud is pushing the rain system towards the ocean, away from the landmass. One pointer: dimming is worst over the Indo-Gangetic plain. Joining the ABC project couldn't have come at a more appropriate time. “The new evidence has shed light on something that was a grey area. We can't afford to stay out of it,” said R K Pachauri, DG of TERI, one of the two Indian scientists working on the project.

The warning signs

Evidence to show why haze is bad news:

- Reduces sunlight over Indian landmass by 10%, twice as worse as elsewhere
- Pushes down monsoon volume
- Deflects rains away from land, to ocean
- Less sunlight means less Vitamin D
- Adversely affects marine life

Now on board the project, a range of Indian institutions will join the research, a steering committee to over-see the project will have a representative from the government.

“This is not a national problem — hence all Asian countries are on it and will be sharing data,” said Ramanathan. According to him, there are many unanswered questions. “Forget about monsoon, less sunlight also means less vitamin D for the body. Right now, we have no idea of its impact on humans,” he said.

The other area of concern — agriculture is already being addressed. The impact of less sunlight on photosynthesis is being studied for the rice crop in the Gangetic plain.

Also, under the scanner: the cloud’s impact on marine life and its link with global warming.

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