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Students move Delhi High Court to reschedule sports calendar away from peak pollution months

The petitioners argue that children are especially vulnerable to severe air quality. During strenuous exercise, their air intake is significantly higher than at rest, which results in a much larger and deeper dose of pollutants like PM2.5 penetrating the lungs.

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— PRIYANSH VERMA

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The petitioners argue that athletes and children are especially vulnerable to severe air quality.

As many as 11 school children, who are residents of Delhi, have filed a writ petition in the Delhi High Court, seeking a stay on "state-scheduled" sporting events during November to January, as these months witness "severe" and "hazardous" air quality.

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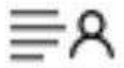
The petitioners are of the view that the annual sports calendar (including all zonal, inter-zonal, state and national tournaments, trials, and coaching camps) for all outdoor sports in the National Capital Territory of Delhi, should be scheduled during safer and less susceptible months with “verifiably better” ambient air quality; and have sought directions from the Delhi HC on the same.

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The petition, seen by Moneycontrol, says that the repeated scheduling of such outdoor sports events, by the state government in the months of November to January of each school calendar is “arbitrary, unreasonable, and negligent”.

“This (in)action of the Respondents violate the Petitioners Fundamental Right to Life, Health and Education under Articles 21 & 21A of the Constitution of India. It is a matter of fact and record that each year, Delhi undergoes a massive public health crisis in the period between November to January where the air pollution levels in Delhi are highly toxic,” the petition said.

“In fact, even as on date of filing of the instant Petition, the AQI in Delhi is consistently in the 'Severe' category; the statutory GRAP-III emergency plan has been put in force; and there remains every likelihood of the same further being upgraded to a GRAP-IV level emergency,” it added.



The petitioners argue that athletes and children are especially vulnerable to severe air quality. "During strenuous exercise, their air intake is significantly higher than at rest, and they often breathe through the mouth, bypassing the nasal filtration system. This results in a much larger and deeper dose of pollutants like PM2.5 penetrating the lungs."

Dr. Arvind Kumar, Founder Trustee of the Lung Care Foundation, says in the petition that "long-term cohort studies have repeatedly shown that exposure to high PM2.5 in childhood leads to permanent reduction in lung growth and capacity, which persists into adulthood and predisposes to chronic respiratory disease. Given these established vulnerabilities, children must be treated as a priority risk group in any decision involving outdoor exposure."

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"To be clear: scheduling of official competitive sporting events at these times creates conditions that are highly harmful to children, particularly those below the age of 18. This places young athletes and their hapless parents in a difficult state of choosing between their health and their athletic careers, as they are being exposed to a known, severe health hazard in an officially sanctioned event," says Dr Kumar.



Further, the petitioner say that the Delhi government is acutely aware that the environmental factors during November to January are not suitable, and are in fact, extremely hazardous to children. “The same is inter alia demonstrable from the fact that in November 2023, Respondent No. 1 (Delhi government) was compelled to suspend all sports, issuing an order that explicitly admitted a threat to the health and security of students/children. However, the Respondents thereafter shockingly revoked the suspension and; in a grossly negligent manner carried on with scheduling sporting events in this exact same period year after year.”

“The repeated scheduling of sporting events at this time of the year is a flagrant violation of the Petitioners’ Fundamental Rights under Article 21 of the Constitution of India. It is submitted that sports and physical literacy is a very fundamental and important part of a child’s upbringing, and play a vital part in ensuring a good life for them. Similarly, it is trite that right to clean air, environment and health are also a vital part of a child’s fundamental right to life,” says the petition.

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