



Chennai

Three-day art exhibition at Nungambakkam throws light on city's deepening air pollution

Pugai Padam Collective, a coalition of youth groups and art activists, puts up an art exhibition where the art was created by pollution itself

By Praeen S A

Chennai's environment became the unseen artist for a little over a month, layering smog plates with soot and smoke, creating abstract patterns. The resulting art about pollution, created by pollution itself, was exhibited at Nungambakkam last week by Pugai Padam Collective, a coalition of youth groups and art activists.

A study was conducted by a group of volunteers between December 24, 2022, and February 2, 2023, across 14 locations in the city, including seven sites in North Chennai and others in South Chennai, covering some of the city's most polluted neighborhoods. As part of the study, the team placed smog plates — an innovative pollution-capturing artistic medium created by Los Angeles-based artist Kim Abeles — in residential areas and school premises. A smog plate is a glass plate coated with castor oil and left exposed to the air for 30 to 35 days. Over time, the plates absorb particulate matter, making the air pollution in the vicinity visible.

These smog plates were displayed alongside visual photographs from the respective areas, capturing the daily lives of residents as well as the sources and elements contributing to pollution.



Photo:P Jawahar

A smog plate placed in Kuruvimedu in North Chennai was covered with extreme ash particles, turning the glass colour brown, due to its proximity to the NTECL Vallur Thermal Power Plant's ash pond, raising questions about residents' living conditions. Similarly, at Kargil Nagar in Manali, photographs depicting oil floating on stagnant water note the daily impact of pollution from the nearby CPCL petrochemical company.

In Velachery, smog plates placed on the second floor of a private flat were found to be covered with dust particles. Residents allegedly blamed the severe pollution levels on emissions from the Perungudi dump yard and a nearby plastic recycling unit. Meanwhile, in Keezhkatalai, the smog plate was coated with fine dust, indicating high vehicular movement in the area, and also due to its proximity to a stone quarry.

In contrast, smog plates installed within the Theosophical Society campus in Besant Nagar accumulated mostly sand dust and dried leaves. This was attributed to the presence of sandy open grounds, dense tree cover, and ground vegetation inside the campus, which is away from the main road.

As part of the exhibition, children's uniforms and medical records of families from Ennore, documenting respiratory ailments and wheezing issues, were also displayed as evidence of lived reality.



Photo:P Jawahar

Environmental activist Nityanand Jayaraman said that pollution numbers alone do not capture the suffering of the public, who experience air pollution in various forms across the city. He noted that exhibitions showcasing lived experiences are crucial in helping people understand the real pain and everyday struggles of those affected.

This exhibition, which set out to do the same, stressed the need for the government to study these lived realities, rather than focusing solely on air quality index numbers and PM2.5 levels.

Around 300 visitors attended the exhibition, most of them from schools, colleges, women's groups, and others.