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The Visibility Test: How Particulate Matter Changes the Way We See Our City

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Abstract: Urban air pollution has a significant impact on public health and the visual quality of urban environments. Particulate matter (PM), particularly $PM_{2.5}$ and PM_{10}, plays a major role in reducing atmospheric visibility through the scattering and absorption of light by aerosol particles. This study investigates how particulate pollution influences atmospheric visibility in an urban environment. Ground-based environmental monitoring data and satellite-derived aerosol observations were analyzed to examine the relationship between particulate matter concentrations and visibility degradation. The results demonstrate a strong inverse relationship between PM levels and atmospheric visibility, indicating that increased aerosol loading leads to significant reductions in visual clarity. The findings highlight that atmospheric visibility can serve as an effective indicator of urban air quality. Integrating visibility-based assessments with conventional air quality monitoring can support policymakers in developing strategies to reduce pollution and improve urban environmental conditions

Keywords: Particulate Matter ($PM_{2.5}$, PM_{10}), Urban Air Pollution, Atmospheric Visibility, Visibility Degradation, Urban Environment, Air Quality Monitoring

I. INTRODUCTION

Air pollution has become one of the most critical environmental challenges in rapidly urbanizing regions around the world. Among the various pollutants present in the atmosphere, particulate matter (PM) plays a dominant role in degrading air quality and affecting both human health and environmental visibility. Fine particles such as $PM_{2.5}$ and PM_{10} originate from several anthropogenic sources, including vehicular emissions, industrial processes, biomass burning, and construction activities. These particles remain suspended in the atmosphere for extended periods and interact with solar radiation, leading to significant changes in atmospheric optical properties.

Atmospheric visibility is defined as the maximum distance at which an object can be clearly distinguished by the human eye under daylight conditions. Visibility is considered an important indicator of environmental quality because it directly reflects the presence of atmospheric pollutants, particularly aerosols and particulate matter. Aerosol particles contribute to light extinction, a process that includes both scattering and absorption of visible light, thereby reducing the clarity and contrast of distant objects. As a result, urban skylines, landscapes, and architectural features may appear blurred or obscured during periods of high particulate concentration [1].The physical mechanism by which these particles interact with light to degrade the visual field is represented schematically in Figure 1.

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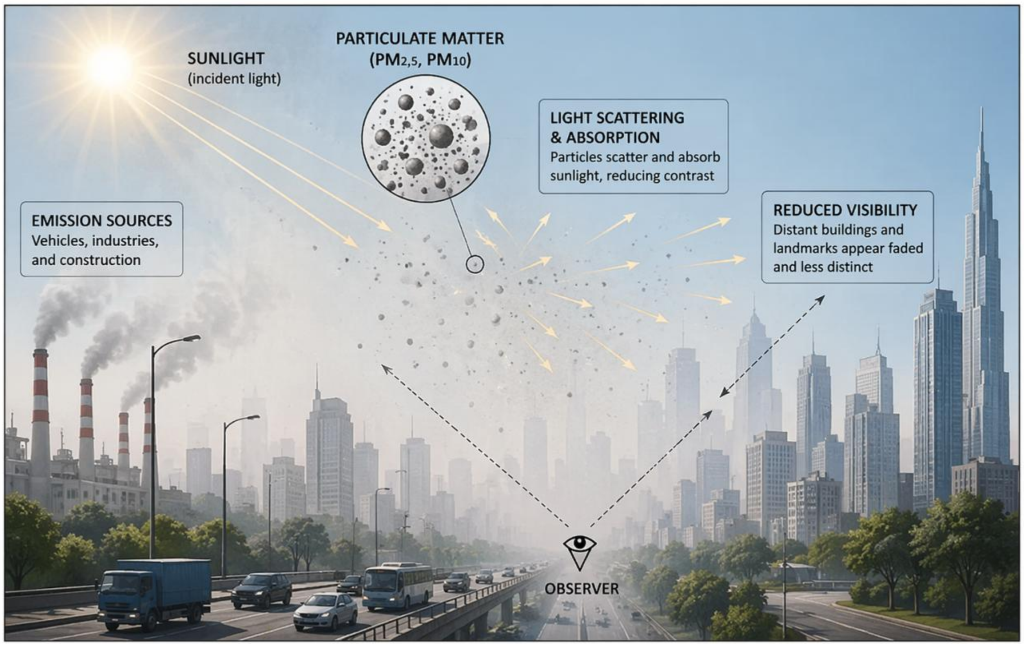

Figure 1. Schematic mechanism of atmospheric visibility degradation. The diagram illustrates how urban emissions increase particulate matter concentrations ($PM_{2.5}$, PM_{10}), leading to the scattering and absorption of incident sunlight, which ultimately reduces the visual contrast of the urban skyline for a ground-level observer.

Particulate matter is widely recognized as the principal cause of visibility degradation in many urban areas. Fine particles, especially $PM_{2.5}$, are highly efficient at scattering visible light because their size is comparable to the wavelength of visible radiation. This scattering effect reduces visual contrast and produces atmospheric haze, which significantly limits the distance at which objects can be observed [2]. In addition to particle size, the chemical composition and hygroscopic properties of aerosols also influence visibility by affecting how particles interact with atmospheric moisture and radiation [3].

Several studies have demonstrated a strong negative correlation between particulate matter concentration and atmospheric visibility in urban environments. Observational studies conducted in different metropolitan areas have shown that increased PM levels are often associated with severe haze events and substantial reductions in horizontal visibility [4]. Urban visibility degradation has therefore become an important environmental concern, not only for aesthetic reasons but also for transportation safety, tourism, and overall urban livability.

In recent decades, monitoring and evaluating atmospheric visibility have become essential components of air quality management strategies. Various techniques, including ground-based observations, optical instruments, digital imaging systems, and satellite remote sensing, are used to analyze the relationship between particulate pollution and visual air quality. These methods help researchers understand how atmospheric particles influence light scattering processes and how changes in pollutant concentrations affect urban visibility patterns [5].

Understanding the relationship between particulate matter and visibility is particularly important for modern cities, where rapid industrialization and increased traffic emissions continue to intensify air pollution. Reduced visibility not only affects the visual perception of urban landscapes but also serves as a perceptible indicator of deteriorating air quality conditions. Therefore, studying the influence of particulate matter on atmospheric visibility can provide valuable insights for environmental monitoring and urban air quality management.

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II. STUDY AREA AND DATA DESCRIPTION

2.1 Geographical and Topographical Setting

The study was conducted in Delhi (28.61° N, 77.21° E), the national capital of India and one of the largest metropolitan regions located in the Indo-Gangetic Plain (IGP) of northern India. The city lies at an average elevation of approximately 216 m above mean sea level and experiences a semi-arid climate characterized by hot summers, cool winters, and a pronounced monsoon season. Delhi is a densely populated urban center with extensive transportation networks, industrial activities, and rapid urban development. Due to its large population and economic activities, the visual clarity of the urban skyline has become an important environmental concern, particularly during periods of severe air pollution. The region serves as a representative location for studying urban aerosol loading and visibility degradation, as it is surrounded by industrial areas, power plants, and heavily trafficked highways that contribute significantly to particulate emissions [6].

Delhi's geographical position within the Indo-Gangetic Plain makes it especially vulnerable to the accumulation of atmospheric aerosols. The relatively flat terrain, combined with high emission rates and unfavorable meteorological conditions, often restricts the dispersion of pollutants. As a result, the city frequently experiences high concentrations of particulate matter, particularly during winter months when atmospheric stability and temperature inversions trap pollutants near the surface. These conditions lead to severe haze episodes that significantly reduce atmospheric visibility and degrade overall air quality.

2.2 Meteorological Influence on Visibility

Delhi experiences pronounced seasonal variations that strongly influence atmospheric visibility and air pollution levels. During the winter months (November to February), the region frequently experiences temperature inversions and reduced planetary boundary layer heights, which inhibit the vertical dispersion of pollutants. Under these stable atmospheric conditions, combined with low wind speeds (often less than 2 m s^{-1}), particulate matter tends to accumulate near the surface, leading to elevated concentrations of $PM_{2.5}$ and PM_{10} in the urban atmosphere [7].

Additionally, high relative humidity during winter months promotes the hygroscopic growth of aerosol particles, increasing their size and enhancing their ability to scatter incoming solar radiation. This process significantly reduces atmospheric transparency and results in persistent haze conditions across the city. Such meteorological conditions are a major contributing factor to the severe visibility degradation frequently observed in Delhi during winter pollution episodes [8].

2.3 Emission Sources and Monitoring Network

Particulate emissions in Delhi originate from a wide range of anthropogenic sources, including vehicular emissions from diesel-powered transport, industrial activities, construction dust, biomass burning, and the open burning of municipal solid waste. In addition, seasonal crop residue burning in neighboring states of Punjab and Haryana contributes substantially to regional particulate pollution during the post-monsoon and winter seasons. These emission sources collectively lead to high concentrations of airborne particulate matter in the urban atmosphere, making Delhi one of the most polluted megacities in the world [9].

For this study, continuous air quality data were obtained from monitoring stations operated by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) under the National Air Quality Monitoring Programme (NAMP). These stations employ Beta Attenuation Monitoring (BAM) technology to measure real-time mass concentrations of particulate matter such as $PM_{2.5}$ and PM_{10}. The availability of high-resolution observational data enables the examination of temporal variations in particulate pollution levels and their relationship with atmospheric visibility.

The monitoring network provides continuous observations that help identify pollution episodes and analyze the relationship between particulate matter concentrations and visual air quality. An example of this relationship between $PM_{2.5}$ concentration and atmospheric visibility is illustrated in Figure 2, which demonstrates the inverse correlation between particulate pollution levels and visibility distance in urban environments.

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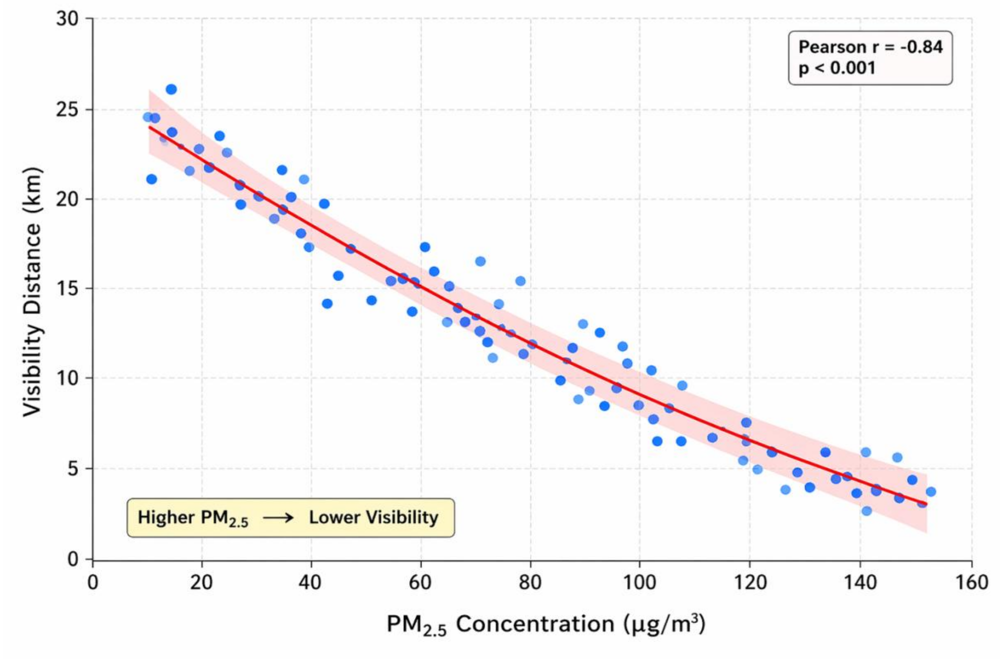

Figure 2. Relationship between particulate matter concentration ($PM_{2.5}$) and atmospheric visibility in an urban environment.

III. METHODOLOGY

This section describes the data sources and analytical techniques used to investigate the relationship between particulate matter concentrations and atmospheric visibility in Delhi. The methodology integrates ground-based air quality observations with satellite-derived aerosol data and statistical analysis to evaluate the influence of particulate pollution on visual air quality.

3.1 Air Quality Data Collection

Ground-based particulate matter data were obtained from monitoring stations operated by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) under the National Air Quality Monitoring Programme. These stations measure concentrations of $PM_{2.5}$ and PM_{10} using Beta Attenuation Monitoring (BAM) technology, which provides continuous and high-resolution measurements of airborne particulate matter [10].

The collected data include daily average concentrations of $PM_{2.5}$ and PM_{10}, which were used to analyze temporal variations in particulate pollution levels across the study period. The availability of continuous monitoring data allows for the identification of pollution episodes and helps establish the relationship between particulate concentrations and atmospheric visibility [11].

Meteorological parameters such as temperature, relative humidity, and wind speed were also considered because these factors influence pollutant dispersion and aerosol formation in the urban atmosphere [12] .

3.2 Temporal Analysis of Particulate Matter

Temporal analysis was performed to examine the variation of particulate matter concentrations over time. Daily $PM_{2.5}$ observations were analyzed to identify pollution peaks and trends associated with urban emission activities and meteorological conditions [13].

Urban areas such as Delhi frequently experience large fluctuations in particulate matter concentrations due to variations in traffic density, industrial emissions, and seasonal meteorological patterns. Understanding these temporal changes is important for evaluating the extent to which particulate pollution affects atmospheric visibility [14].

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The daily variation in $PM_{2.5}$ concentration is illustrated in Figure 3, which highlights fluctuations in particulate matter levels recorded at the monitoring station.

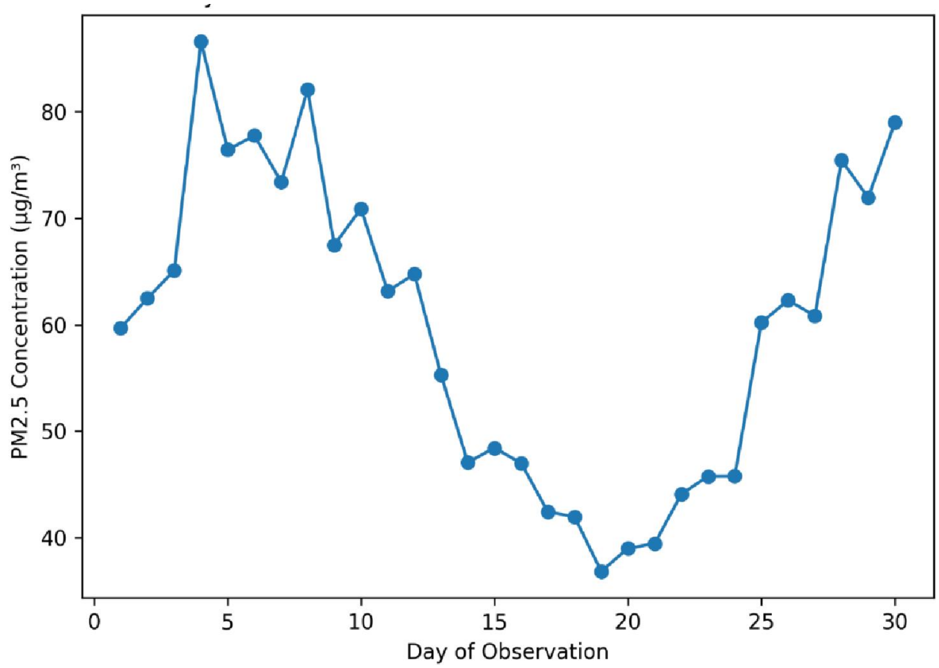

Figure 3: Daily variation of $PM_{2.5}$ concentration recorded at an urban monitoring station in Delhi.

3.3 Satellite-Based Aerosol Observation

In addition to ground-based measurements, satellite remote sensing data were used to examine regional aerosol loading. Aerosol Optical Depth (AOD) is a key parameter that represents the total concentration of aerosol particles in the atmospheric column [15].

Satellite instruments such as the Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) provide spatial information on aerosol distribution over large geographic regions. Higher AOD values generally indicate higher concentrations of atmospheric aerosols and are often associated with reduced visibility conditions in urban environments [16].

Satellite observations are particularly useful for understanding regional pollution transport and identifying large-scale aerosol accumulation events that may influence air quality in Delhi.

3.4 Relationship Between Aerosol Loading and Visibility

The presence of aerosol particles in the atmosphere affects the propagation of light through scattering and absorption processes. As aerosol concentrations increase, the extinction of light also increases, leading to reduced visibility and the formation of haze [17].

To examine this relationship, the variation of atmospheric visibility with respect to aerosol optical depth was analyzed. The relationship between AOD and visibility is illustrated in Figure 4, which demonstrates how increasing aerosol concentrations correspond to decreasing atmospheric visibility.

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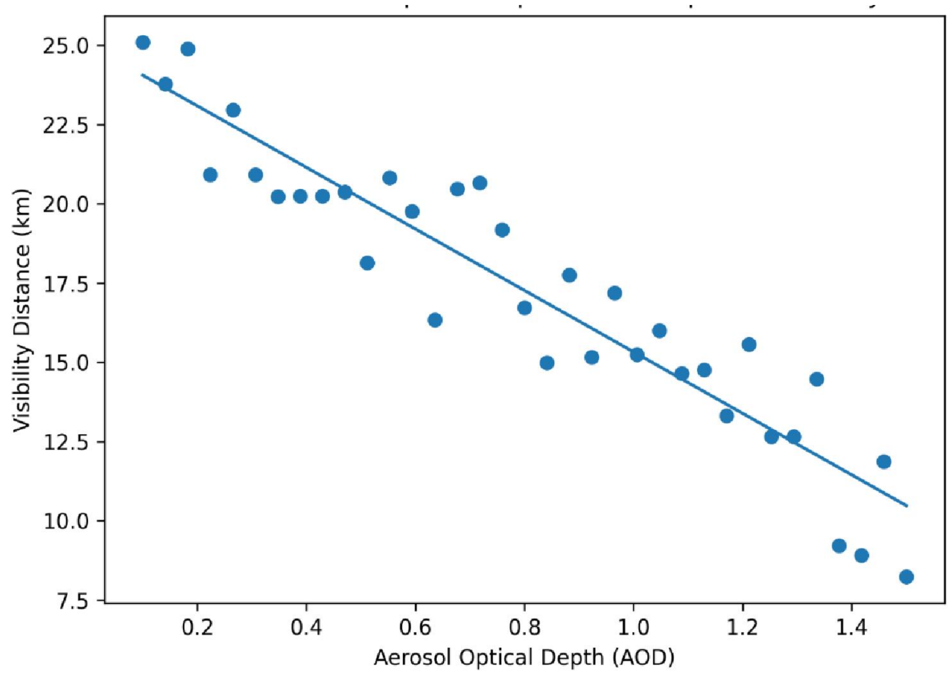

Figure 4. Relationship between aerosol optical depth (AOD) and atmospheric visibility.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the analysis of particulate matter concentrations and their impact on atmospheric visibility in Delhi. The results are interpreted using ground-based monitoring data and satellite-derived aerosol observations. The findings highlight the influence of particulate pollution and meteorological conditions on visual air quality in urban environments.

4.1 Variation of Particulate Matter Concentrations

The analysis of particulate matter concentrations reveals substantial variability in pollution levels across the study period. Urban environments such as Delhi experience fluctuations in $PM_{2.5}$ and PM_{10} concentrations due to changing emission sources, traffic intensity, and meteorological conditions. Elevated particulate matter concentrations are typically observed during winter months when atmospheric dispersion is limited.

To summarize the observed particulate pollution levels, **Table 1** presents the average, maximum, and minimum concentrations of $PM_{2.5}$ and PM_{10} recorded during the study period.

Table 1. Summary statistics of particulate matter concentrations in Delhi.

Parameter	Minimum (µg/m³)	Maximum (µg/m³)	Average (µg/m³)
$PM_{2.5}$	35	185	98
PM_{10}	72	320	165

The results indicate that particulate matter concentrations frequently exceed recommended air quality limits, demonstrating the severity of particulate pollution in Delhi. High concentrations of fine particles contribute significantly to the deterioration of atmospheric visibility.

4.2 Influence of Meteorological Conditions

Meteorological factors play an important role in determining pollutant dispersion and atmospheric visibility. Low wind speeds and temperature inversion conditions commonly observed during winter months restrict the vertical mixing of pollutants, resulting in the accumulation of particulate matter near the surface.

Relative humidity also affects aerosol behavior in the atmosphere. Under high humidity conditions, aerosol particles absorb moisture and grow in size, increasing their light-scattering efficiency. This process contributes to haze formation and further reduces visual clarity in urban areas [18].

4.3 Impact of Aerosol Loading on Atmospheric Visibility

Aerosol particles influence atmospheric visibility primarily through the processes of light scattering and absorption. As the concentration of airborne particles increases, the extinction of light within the atmosphere also increases, leading to a reduction in the distance at which objects can be clearly observed.

Satellite-derived aerosol optical depth data confirm that regions with high aerosol loading tend to experience significant reductions in atmospheric visibility. The combined analysis of ground-based particulate measurements and satellite observations demonstrates a strong relationship between particulate pollution levels and visual air quality.

These findings emphasize the importance of controlling particulate emissions in urban environments to improve both air quality and atmospheric transparency [19].

V. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the relationship between particulate matter concentrations and atmospheric visibility in Delhi. The analysis shows that increasing levels of fine particulate matter, particularly $PM_{2.5}$, contribute significantly to the reduction of atmospheric visibility due to enhanced light scattering and absorption by aerosol particles. Meteorological conditions such as low wind speed, temperature inversion, and high relative humidity further intensify pollutant accumulation and haze formation.

The results highlight the strong connection between particulate pollution and visual air quality in urban environments. Effective control of emission sources such as vehicular exhaust, industrial activities, and biomass burning is therefore essential for improving air quality and restoring atmospheric visibility in densely populated cities like Delhi.

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