AEROSOLS: SOURCES, CLASSIFICATION, AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

[1].Smt. R. Manjula, [2]. Sri.M.Ramesh Kumar,
Lecturer in Physics, Lecturer in Physics,
GDC (W), Visakhapatnam, GDC S.Kota,

ABSTRACT

Aerosols span a spectrum of sources, sizes, and compositions that determine their lifetimes, optical properties, and impacts. This review consolidates classical frameworks used to categorize aerosols (by source, size, composition, and optics) and links these to environmental outcomes—visibility reduction, acid deposition, and climate forcing. We synthesize foundational theory with Indian field results to provide a compact reference for researchers and policy practitioners.

Keywords: Aerosols; sources; Angström exponent; classification; visibility; India.

1. INTRODUCTION

Physical characterization begins with size distributions and optical behavior (Whitby, 1978; McCartney, 1976). The Angström exponent, derived from spectral optical depth, diagnoses columnar particle size (Ångström, 1961; 1964). Remote sensors and handheld photometers extend monitoring (Ichoku et al., 2002; Morys et al., 2001).

2. SOURCES

Aerosols originate from both natural and anthropogenic activities, with relative contributions varying spatially and seasonally. **Natural sources** include mineral dust uplifted by winds from deserts such as the Thar, sea salt particles generated from breaking waves, volcanic emissions releasing ash and sulfur dioxide into the stratosphere, and biogenic emissions such as pollen, spores, and secondary organic aerosols from vegetation. These natural inputs form the baseline atmospheric burden and often travel long distances, influencing regions far from their origin.

In contrast, **anthropogenic sources** are more persistent and concentrated near human settlements. Fossil fuel combustion in power plants and vehicles emits sulfates, nitrates, and black carbon. Industrial operations such as smelting, construction, and cement production further add coarse and fine particles. Agricultural practices, particularly the open burning of crop residues and fertilizer application, contribute black carbon and ammonium nitrate aerosols. Biomass burning, including domestic cooking and heating with firewood and dung, remains a major source in rural India.

In the Indian context, the Indo-Gangetic Plain is a global hotspot where dense population, vehicular traffic, and seasonal crop burning combine to generate hazardous levels of aerosols. Coastal megacities like Mumbai and Chennai show unique signatures of mixed maritime and industrial aerosols. Himalayan regions are affected by long-range transport of dust and carbonaceous aerosols, accelerating snow and glacier melt. Overall, natural aerosols dominate the background load, but anthropogenic aerosols control short-term variability and are chiefly responsible for health and climate risks in densely populated areas.

3. CLASSIFICATION

By source (natural vs. anthropogenic); by composition (sulfates, nitrates, BC, organics, sea salt, dust) (Novakov & Penner, 1993); by size (PM2.5 vs. PM10) (Hinds, 1999); by mixing state (internal vs. external) (Covert & Heintzenberg, 1984); and by optics (scattering vs. absorbing) (Horvath, 1993).

4. ATMOSPHERIC PROCESSING AND ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

Once aerosols are emitted into the atmosphere, they rarely remain in their original form. Instead, they undergo **dynamic processing** through a variety of physical and chemical pathways that continuously reshape their size distribution, composition, and radiative properties. This "aging" process occurs over timescales ranging from hours to weeks and plays a decisive role in determining their environmental impacts.

4.1 Coagulation, Condensation, and Chemical Aging

Immediately after emission, fine particles can collide and merge through **coagulation**, while gases such as sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, and volatile organics can condense onto existing particles, forming new layers of sulfates, nitrates, and secondary organic aerosols. Heterogeneous and multiphase reactions on particle surfaces further alter acidity, hygroscopicity, and reactivity (Ravishankara, 1997). Such transformations enhance the ability of aerosols to act as **cloud condensation nuclei (CCN)** and **ice nuclei (IN)**.

4.2 Radiative Effects: Scattering and Absorption

The optical properties of aged aerosols govern their direct impact on the Earth's radiation balance. Sulfates, nitrates, and sea salt predominantly **scatter solar radiation**, producing a cooling effect, whereas black carbon strongly **absorbs radiation**, warming the atmosphere while dimming the surface (Charlson et al., 1992; Hansen et al., 1997). This competition between scattering and absorption determines not only local heating rates but also visibility degradation, especially in urban and industrial regions.

4.3 Cloud Interactions and the Twomey Effect

Aerosols also exert profound **indirect effects** on clouds. The Twomey effect (1974) demonstrated that a higher concentration of CCN leads to more numerous but smaller cloud droplets, increasing cloud albedo and reducing precipitation efficiency. Rosenfeld (2000) showed that polluted clouds often suppress rainfall, potentially shifting regional hydrological cycles. This has direct relevance in monsoon-dominated regions such as South Asia, where changes in cloud microphysics influence onset, intensity, and spatial distribution of rainfall.

4.4 Regional Evidence from India

Field campaigns across the Indian subcontinent provide concrete evidence of these processes. Moorthy et al. (2001) documented elevated aerosol optical depths during the **Indian Ocean Experiment (INDOEX)**, with strong seasonal variability between monsoon and dry months. Parameswaran et al. (1998) and Niranjan et al. (2004) observed gradients in spectral optical depth and Angström exponent, reflecting shifts from coarse dust-dominated regimes to fine pollution-dominated regimes. Such variations highlight the dual influence of **long-range transported dust** and **local anthropogenic emissions**.

4.5 Broader Environmental Implications

The combined outcome of these processes is visible in reduced horizontal visibility ("haze"), enhanced atmospheric stability, and disruption of natural hydrological cycles. Moreover, aerosol deposition on sensitive surfaces, such as Himalayan snow and glacier ice, accelerates melting by lowering surface albedo. These effects amplify concerns about regional water security and agricultural productivity, making atmospheric processing not merely a scientific curiosity but a pressing environmental issue.

Table 1. Practical aerosol classification and implications.

Criterion	Types	Examples	Key Implications
Source	Natural	Dust, sea salt, volcanic	Background visibility, nutrient transport
Source	Anthropogenic	Combustion, industry, biomass	Smog, health risk, warming
Size	PM2.5 / PM10	Combustion vs. crustal dust	Deep lung deposition vs. upper airway
Composition	Sulfates / Nitrates / BC / OC	Coal, traffic, biomass	Cooling vs. warming balance
Optics	Scattering / Absorbing	Sulfates vs. BC	Radiative forcing sign

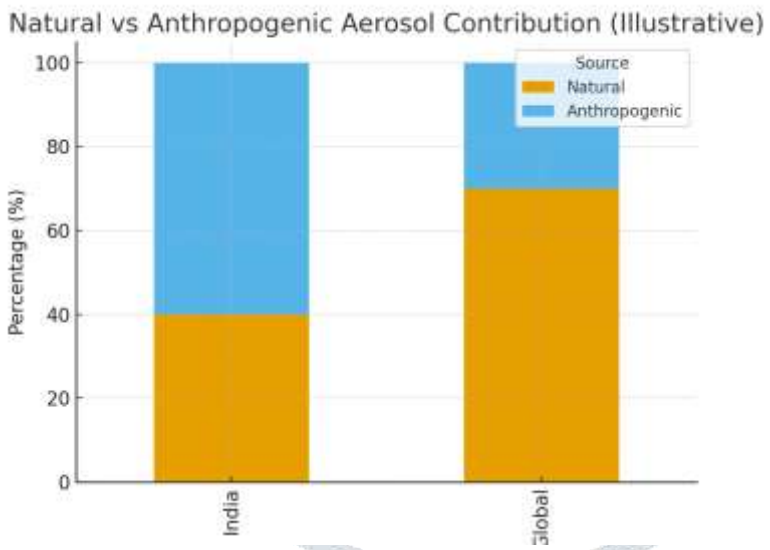

Figure 1. From sources to environmental impacts via atmospheric processing.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Source Contributions and Dominant Aerosol Types

Studies combining satellite retrievals (MODIS, MISR, CALIPSO) and ground-based networks (IMD, IITM, ARFINET) confirm that **anthropogenic sources dominate fine-mode aerosols** across South Asia, while **natural sources drive coarse-mode variability**. Mineral dust from the Thar Desert accounts for strong pre-monsoon loading, with transport reaching the Indo-Gangetic Plain and beyond. Sea salt dominates coastal regions but often mixes with industrial and vehicular emissions. Biomass burning, including seasonal crop residue burning in Punjab and Haryana, is a major episodic source of black carbon and organic carbon.

5.2 Classification Insights from Indian Studies

Field measurements indicate that Indian aerosols are a complex mixture of sulfates, nitrates, black carbon, organic matter, mineral dust, and sea salt. In winter, carbonaceous aerosols contribute up to 40–50% of PM2.5 mass in northern cities, while sulfates and nitrates dominate in summer. Urban–rural contrasts are evident: megacities like Delhi and Mumbai show high concentrations of secondary inorganic aerosols, while rural regions report stronger biomass-burning signatures. These classifications align with source apportionment studies using chemical mass balance and receptor modeling techniques.

5.3 Environmental Impacts: Visibility, Radiation, and Agriculture

High aerosol loading significantly reduces horizontal visibility, particularly in winter haze episodes over northern India. Measurements from ARFINET indicate mean aerosol optical depths (AOD) above 0.6 in polluted regions, compared to global background values of ~0.1–0.2. This translates into strong radiative effects, with **surface dimming** of up to 15–20 W/m² during peak episodes. Agriculture is also impacted: reduced solar radiation lowers crop photosynthesis, while ozone precursors formed in polluted air masses damage wheat and rice yields. Recent ICARB campaigns showed aerosol-related yield losses in the Indo-Gangetic Plain could reach 10–15%.

5.4 Seasonal and Regional Variability

The Indo-Gangetic Plain emerges as the most critical aerosol hotspot, with sustained high concentrations due to population density and industrial activity. Pre-monsoon periods are characterized by dust intrusions, while winter sees persistent fine-mode pollution from biomass and fossil fuel burning. Coastal regions show mixed contributions of sea salt and urban-industrial aerosols. Himalayan regions are increasingly vulnerable to **aerosol deposition**, particularly black carbon, which accelerates glacier retreat. This seasonal and spatial heterogeneity underscores the importance of localized mitigation strategies.

5.5 Integrated Discussion

The results confirm that aerosols in India represent a **multi-source, multi-effect system**. Natural aerosols define baseline variability, while anthropogenic emissions are the major drivers of health and environmental hazards. Their classification into sulfates, nitrates, carbonaceous aerosols, dust, and sea salt is not merely academic but essential for designing control measures. For example, reducing biomass burning would directly lower black carbon and organic carbon concentrations, while stricter vehicular emission standards would reduce nitrate and sulfate burdens. The discussion highlights that integrated management of aerosol sources would provide simultaneous benefits in **air quality improvement, crop protection, and climate mitigation**.

6. CONCLUSION

A structured classification connects sources to impacts. This lens helps target controls—limiting BC and secondary inorganics delivers health and climate wins.

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