

TO COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE, CITIZENS AND GOVERNMENT MUST JOIN HANDS

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Degradation - GHGs, Ozone Depletion and Climate Change

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It should be clear to all of us by now that the problem of air pollution, anywhere in India, especially in NCR, is unlikely to be solved in the near future. It has now become a perennial problem rather than a seasonal one that we could ignore as a short-term inconvenience. Addressing it requires making difficult choices and tough decisions, both at the societal and governmental levels — neither is ready to discuss and debate the issue except to indulge in a blame game. As is true for any environmental issue, climate change and air pollution present us with the difficult proposition of making choices based on multiple trade-offs between development and environmental preservation. These trade-offs are hard but critical and should be well-informed and based on societal values.

There is a saying in Thailand that a triangle moves the mountain with three angles — in this case, this could be scientists or academia, governments and people. Scientists from the arena of atmospheric sciences and the health sector have generated sufficient evidence for us to act. Some gaps will continue to exist, but that is the nature of science. There is always more to discover and learn. The job of academicians is to generate and present evidence so that these trade-offs are done in an informed manner. So, who should make these trade-offs?

Academicians are not the right people to make or recommend these trade-offs. Activists have already made the trade-offs (generally pro-environment) and are trying to convince the world that their trade-off is the only right one. While they are of immense value in moving the needle of the debate, for a good dialogue, the first thing to acknowledge is that there is no “one” right trade-off. A hard stance can cramp an open discussion. While many of these issues end up in courts, I do believe that they are not the appropriate fora for such discussion. But they can ensure that such platforms are made available, and the debates take place. The political class, given that they are the chosen representatives of the people, should be the obvious choice. Unfortunately, currently, they have been unable to rise to the occasion. This does not subtract from major policy decisions taken by different political parties in the past to address air pollution. If they responded appropriately in the past, they can do so in future as well. However, we need to understand the intersection of air pollution and political decision-making better.

Our experience with the BRT corridor (Bus Rapid Transport) in [Delhi](#) and the odd-even experiment in the capital are good case studies to learn from. The BRT corridor between Ambedkar Nagar to Delhi Gate (15 km) was a futuristic plan that segregated traffic to expand road space for public transport at the cost of private four-wheelers. It also addressed the safety of cyclists and pedestrians. An IIT-Delhi study showed that it resulted in increased speed of public transport, increased travel time of private cars and improved pedestrian safety — all its intended objectives were achieved despite covering a short stretch which did not fully incentivise its users. Yet inexplicably, it was deemed a failure and dismantled with a change in political leadership. This was because the car-using-middle-class rejected this trade-off between the inconvenience and the multi-fold benefits of using public transport and politicians capitulated. Despite Delhi abandoning the BRT corridor, it was adopted in many cities in India.

The odd-even experiment in 2016 was necessitated during a “public health emergency”. Its impact continues to be debated as it is clearly contextual. The overall impact would be a

mathematical function of the contributory share of the vehicles to the total pollution (varies usually between 30 per cent to 50 per cent) and the proportion of vehicles which stay off the road (<50 per cent depending on exemptions and degree of enforcement). Despite a lack of clear evidence of its usefulness and the severity of public inconvenience, it is considered a politically acceptable alternative, best exemplified by its reruns, perhaps due to its short period. In the same context, it is also interesting that the lack of effectiveness of smog towers has not prevented them from being installed and actively pursued even now. These are so because politicians want to promote a public perception of being sensitive to the concerns of the people. Lack of effectiveness can always be addressed by an imaginative political narrative.

The challenge in effectively addressing the crop-burning issue is to find a win-win solution and convince all the concerned parties. Given the complexity of the problem, it will need a package of technical, regulatory, fiscal, and informational interventions to succeed. This package needs to be defined clearly and marketed well so that all stakeholders feel that a concerted effort is being made and all involved are contributing their share to the solution. This can only be done by setting up the right political narrative, which clearly our politicians are capable of, but are choosing not to do as they are not comfortable with the political fallout of such decisions.

While we are making incremental gains in our fight against pollution, the speed is not enough to negate the increasing pollution. So, are we doomed to go round in circles, or a tangential move is possible? Only the public can make it politically expedient for this issue to be effectively addressed. We are yet to reach a critical or tipping point in our fight against air pollution. That will come when the politicians assess that the middle class of NCR are ready for real and hard trade-offs as reflected by a higher use of public transport and use of cleaner vehicles. While the public is ready for short-term inconveniences like odd-even, they are not ready for hard decisions. Our experience of this Diwali confirms this non-acceptance of change by the middle-class.

Further progress will need some incentivisation of people by appropriate public policies. It is a circular logic of politicians incentivising people to move in the right direction and citizens signalling to the politicians that they are ready for further compromise. This potentially sets up a cascade that can take us to the tipping point. As they say, "It takes two to tango". What we are seeing today is a tango between community and the political class. The question is who is leading the dance.

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