

Choking on air

Three weeks ago, with a ban against firecrackers and a graded response action plan (GRAP) in place, Delhi's authorities seemed better equipped than in the past two years to combat the unhealthy haze that engulfs the city after Diwali. Pollution levels did surge after the festivities but the fact that they were lower compared to the past two years gave hope that the city's authorities were in control in their battle against bad air. These hopes have been belied. The post-Diwali smog never receded and on Tuesday, the city registered "severe" on the Air Quality Index (AQI). "Everyone may experience serious health effects", notes the AQI website.

The Environment Pollution and Prevention Control Authority (EPCA), which enforced GRAP two days before Diwali, has asked the Delhi government to put more emergency measures in place. The SC-mandated body has suggested that parking fees be quadrupled. It also asked Delhi Metro to lower fares during non-peak hours for at least 10 days and introduce more coaches. There are problems with this course of action. The GRAP envisages progressively tougher action as pollution levels rise, without waiting for an emergency to impose strict measures.

The EPCA did not have to wait for pollution levels to plummet to levels described by the Indian Medical Association as "a public health emergency" before making its post-Diwali GRAP recommendation. But the SC-mandated body did not see matters turning grave even after the haze persisted. An even more serious problem pertains to the passive attitude of the Delhi government. In the past two years, it has waited for pollution to assume emergency proportions before reacting, and then done nothing more than respond to courts or court-mandated bodies like the EPCA.

The Delhi government implemented the odd-even policy last year only after the Delhi High Court asked it to submit a time-bound plan. Despite the problems it created for people, there was enough support for the policy which demanded the Delhi government conduct a comprehensive analysis of its successes and failures. But it has, reportedly, developed cold feet over the odd-even policy. The EPCA, though, wants to enforce the odd-even policy if the city's pollution levels aggravate. The SC-mandated body's other proposals will require at least 16 authorities to work together. The EPCA and the Delhi government have not devised a coordination mechanism between these bodies. It remains to be seen if the city's latest pollution crisis spurs them into action.

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