

Crisis is in the air

The first thing that the Central and Delhi governments should own up to regarding the air pollution crisis is that everyone was forewarned and cannot pretend to be taken unawares. This “winter of our discontent” is the season when, as temperatures dip, pollutants hover around the surface of the city and do not waft upwards. Things will only get more acute towards January. To make matters worse, smoke from burning farm waste descends on the capital from surrounding states at this time, which is a far more intractable problem.

Three years ago, the writing on the wall was the revelation by the World Health Organisation (WHO) that Delhi was the most polluted city in the world, and 13 out of the 20 worst impacted were in north India. The tell-tale parameter is the smallest measurable particulate matter — PM of less than 2.5 microns — which was an annual average of 153 micrograms per cubic metre that year, well above the WHO limit of 35. Beijing, which was previously the black sheep of the world’s urban air contamination, recorded 53 micrograms.

Last year, Delhi lost this dubious distinction to Zabol in Iran and fell to 11th place on the world map. However, north India continued to fare among the worst on the globe, with Gwalior second, Allahabad third, Patna sixth and Raipur seventh. While Delhi continues to get all the attention on this score, one should pay heed to children and senior citizens in these other beleaguered cities. These residents can’t afford air purifiers like many of the capital’s well-to-do and diplomats, not to mention the bizarre measure of installing huge vacuum cleaners on its roads.

Has any decision-maker in the capital understood the full consequences of declaring its air a “national emergency”? Visitors — whether on business or diplomats — will think three times before visiting Delhi this winter. One has only to recall that it was estimated that when President Obama visited for the Republic Day parade in 2015 he may have lost six hours of his life by spending three days in the capital. The US Embassy imported 1,800 air purifiers for his entourage. Children can’t attend school or play outside, and this has made Delhi the air pollution pariah of the world.

This could put paid to the prime minister’s “Make in India” campaign. Indeed, if a good economist could calculate the financial losses on days missed at work, avoiding the outdoors at certain times of the day and the bills for respiratory diseases, it would reveal a huge bill borne mostly by individuals, and prompt the authorities to take all measures possible to curb this public health menace.

Certain causes, like the burning of farm residue require a carrot and stick approach to encourage farmers to recycle crop waste rather than burn it. But other causes like the pollutants from thermal power stations in and around the capital and the dust from construction can be more easily tackled by stiff penalties.

The sources which can be tackled head-on are the pollutants from vehicles. Delhi’s AAP government has done well to experiment with an odd-and-even number plate scheme, which ought to be extended through the winter. Last March, the capital had 8.8 million vehicles, followed by Bengaluru with 6.1 million. Chennai, Kolkata and Mumbai have far fewer — 4.8 million, 3.9 and only 2.7 respectively. The reasons are not far to seek: Mumbai has an excellent public transport system, with its lifeline — the two local railways — carrying 3.7 million passengers a day, despite atrocious travelling conditions, which manifested in the foot overbridge accident this September. The once-renowned BEST bus service, now being bled to death by the city’s municipal corporation, still carries 2.9 million passengers (a sharp fall from 4.4 million seven years previously).

It is a no-brainer that the pollution caused by private vehicles, whether they are four- or two-wheelers, can be curbed by restricting their numbers, as Beijing and other Chinese cities have done successfully even as public transport is greatly increased. Shanghai, for instance, has emulated Singapore's example of setting a limit on the number of cars permitted on its roads; Singapore allows market forces to decide the price of such a licence, which can exceed the cost of a car sometimes. Parking fees ought to be drastically increased, and payable even at night time. And, following London's example, the proceeds should be ploughed back into bettering the bus service.

With India going on a transport infrastructure spree, including in cities, there ought to be a clear discouragement of private motorised transport in favour of public transport. Mumbai's reckless city fathers are doing precisely the reverse by building an Rs 15,000-crore coast road only for cars. If Mumbai has been spared the ignominy of Delhi when it comes to air pollution, one reason is that the sea breezes waft pollutants away. Once this road is built, all that will change since the prevailing winds are in a south-west direction. Indeed, a rule of thumb for any transport infrastructure scheme, whether in cities or outside them, should be that they can be permitted only if half the users constitute the public.

All cities are making the mistake of prescribing metros as the solution for local transport. Although far superior to adding roads, these are expensive. In Delhi, and to a smaller extent in Mumbai, any raising of fares sparks off a controversy. In Delhi, the 200-km-plus Metro network doesn't seem to have reduced the number of cars appreciably, only two-wheelers. Mumbai is going in for a slew of such projects at a high cost, even parallel to the existing express highways, which is inexplicable. The fact that its standalone 11-km Metro sees 3.5 lakh users a day, while Delhi has only 28 lakh or around nine times as many, demonstrates that the Metro won't prove the ideal mode of mass public transport.

That distinction should go to buses, which can run both long distances in cities, as well as provide last-mile connectivity to and from metros and local railway stations. And, dare one even state it, reserved bus lanes are the most cost-efficient and egalitarian means of city transport, which penalise the polluters — cars and two-wheelers — and carry commuters comfortably and cleanly. What's more, it's virtually a no-cost solution.

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