

# TO MITIGATE AIR POLLUTION, LOOK BEYOND TOKENISM

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The pollution problem in NCR is partly because of the nature of its topography

Beginning Monday, the odd-even scheme for automobiles plying in Delhi will kick in. Coincidentally, the weekend preceding it saw a steep deterioration in the air quality index or AQI in the city; forcing Environmental Pollution (Prevention and Control) Authority (EPCA) to declare a public health emergency on Friday as a desperate measure to contain the silent killer.

Unless the weather turns, especially if the rains turn up on Thursday as forecast and the cross winds regain momentum, the much touted odd-even scheme is unlikely to guarantee the desired mitigation to bring down AQI below the prevailing hazardous levels.

The odd-even scheme, first introduced three years ago, is an out-of-the-box idea with unproven claims on containing AQI levels. It is though a terrific concept (like the laser light display touted as a replacement for crackers this Diwali) to focus attention on air pollution, especially that caused by automobiles; but by exempting two-wheelers and not allowing privately-owned hybrids and CNG (compressed natural gas) vehicles, the Aam Aadmi Party-led Delhi government has inexplicably undermined its own campaign.

This is not to condemn the effort—anything at this stage is welcome. Instead, this is to nudge all stakeholders, not just the state and Union government, to realise the time for tokenism is over.

For three years now, the National Capital Region (NCR) has seen the pollution saga play out every winter; while some politicians can take solace in the marginal fall in AQI levels even though it stays in hazardous territory, the reality is that if something is not done urgently then NCR will soon become unlivable in the six months beginning October-November.

It is time to take the debate beyond the predictable binaries—looking for single causes like stubble burning—and viewed more holistically.

But any solution first needs to understand the problem. The NCR pollution problem is partly because of the nature of its topography. It is shaped like a saucer and hence is hugely dependent on a cross breeze—which serves it for most of the year, except in winter—to keep its AQI under control; exactly why the stubble burning that happens in the early part of the year does not harm Delhi as much. The obvious inference is that mitigation efforts have to be that much more to make up for this handicap.

Further, vehicular pollution, the gorilla in the room, has been growing very sharply. As previously pointed out in this [column](#) the emissions of particulate matter (PM) by automobiles have surged by 40% in eight years ended 2018; according to the Economic Survey put out by the Delhi government, there were 10.9 million vehicles in NCR at the end of 2018.

Clearly, there is a strong foundation to Delhi's pollution problem. What stubble burning and bursting of crackers does, in the absence of cross winds, is to send the pollution problem over the tipping point.

Just as the problem is complex, the solution too has to be nuanced and holistic; and not where

you try and kick the can down the lane by engaging in a high decibel blame game.

Experts have long been making a case for public transport. The assumption among policy planners is that the Metro Rail, an extremely capital-intensive option which nonetheless has been critical in addressing transport woes of NCR's working population, especially women, is the best solution. If dovetailed with a robust public bus network it will undoubtedly magnify the gains; unfortunately this is not the case.

Similarly, focus on building and maintaining good roads (which at the moment are mostly in neglect) and actually implementing laws to ensure only road-worthy vehicles ply, could go a long way in mitigation. Remember every time you brake to avoid a pothole and then accelerate your emissions are that much more.

Finally, the ultimate stakeholders, the residents of Delhi, have to force a public debate. With elections around the corner, this may well be a good time to get our elected politicians to commit to a timeline to contain pollution in the city. The only freebie that matters is clear air; and our politicians who always aver the cause of the poor should remember that like income inequality pollution is hardest on those at the bottom of the pyramid.

Time to walk the talk.

*Anil Padmanabhan is managing editor of Mint and writes every week on the intersection of politics and economics.*

*Comments are welcome at [anil.p@livemint.com](mailto:anil.p@livemint.com)*

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