

Green goals for the Delhi aam aadmi

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The misguided national subsidy on diesel — a subsidy intended to benefit the poor and is instead well-harvested by wealthy automobile owners — should be offset in Delhi by an equivalent tax." Picture shows traffic in South Extension in Delhi." photo credit: The Hindu [If strict regulations for capping automobile licenses are followed, Delhi's citizens can reap triple benefits: cleaner air, quicker and safer transportation, and more money in their pockets](#)

After earning global recognition for improved air quality only a decade ago, Delhi has now won the unenviable distinction of having the most polluted air among major cities of the world. No resident is immune to its effects; even Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal was treated for chronic respiratory illness.

Recent media reports on Delhi's foul air have elicited a flurry of advice, but structural problems cannot have individual solutions. They must be tackled institutionally, by rules that set new parameters for consumer and corporate behaviour. Consider one instance. Children, whose young bodies and brains are especially susceptible to harm from dirty air, play outside. You cannot put air purifiers outdoors. Imagine schoolchildren running in playgrounds wearing pollution masks. This is not the stuff of science fiction — it may become reality unless the government takes steps to clean the air.

The All India Institute of Medical Sciences reports a [four-fold increase in respiratory ailments](#) such as asthma, since 2007. Gains in air quality from 1998 to 2004, when court judgments ordered conversion of buses and three-wheelers to CNG, have been more than offset by rising emissions from other sources in the last decade, including cars and trucks, power plants, industry, brick kilns, diesel generators, construction, road dust, and open burning of wastes. Apart from their overall contribution, vehicular emissions are especially important by virtue of their role in the city's worst pollution exposure levels along its major roadways.

Seven measures

The power of Delhi's new Aam Aadmi Party government to tackle these is limited, but by no means non-existent. The government cannot on its own upgrade the nation's fuel standards to Bharat V and VI norms in line with global benchmarks, nor ensure timely completion of bypass roads in neighbouring States. However, there are seven measures that are within its reach, if it finds the political will to act.

First, the new government can move quickly to ensure accurate, real-time reporting of pollution levels in the city. The public has the right to know the facts about the air it breathes.

Second, emergency measures such as closing schools should be implemented whenever pollution levels cross a hazardous threshold. This will not only protect the most vulnerable — children — but also raise public awareness about the problem.

Third, particulate-quality pollution masks should be supplied free of charge to all traffic police, sanitation workers, rickshaw-pullers, auto-rickshaw drivers, construction workers and others who are disproportionately exposed to ambient air pollution on arterial roads, where pollution routinely soars off the charts.

Fourth, Delhi can set stringent emissions standards for trucks entering the city. Those that fail to comply can be required to transfer their loads to trucks that do. This will be inconvenient and costly, but less costly than more deterioration in public health. And it will prompt the trucking industry and manufacturers to get their own environmental houses in order.

Fifth, the misguided national subsidy on diesel — a subsidy intended to benefit the poor and is instead well-harvested by wealthy automobile owners — should be offset in Delhi by an equivalent tax. The Centre for Science and Environment cites World Bank data showing that particulate emissions from diesel engines are 6-10 times higher than for petrol engines.

Sixth, the government should begin a fundamental reorientation of transport infrastructure investment that moves away from private automobiles and towards pedestrians, bicycles and e-rickshaws as well as buses (including state-of-the-art bus rapid transit like the successful system in Bogota, the capital of Colombia) and light rail. In a big city, there is really no such thing as private transportation. There are private vehicles, but they can only move on public infrastructure. Public policy should serve people, not cars.

The revenue question

This will cost money. Where will it come from? This brings us to our final measure. Like the Singapore government, Delhi should cap the number of private automobile licenses. As in Singapore, these should be auctioned at the price set by demand, and be valid for a fixed time span (10 years in Singapore). In Singapore, the current auction price is about U.S. \$60,000.

Part of the revenue should be returned to all the residents of Delhi in equal payments to every woman, man and child — a transfer from the one per cent who will pay the auction price to the aam aadmi. The other part should be used to fund the green urban infrastructure that truly benefits a “world city.”

How much money would this cap and auction bring in? Today, roughly 2.9 million automobiles are registered in Delhi, although the actual number on the roads may be half that much, since the official data include vehicles no longer in circulation, or being used away from the city. If left unchecked, the number will grow rapidly, with projections for 2020 as high as 3.5-4.2 million. Such growth would prove disastrous not only for air quality, especially near arterial roads, but also for traffic congestion. Already cars in Delhi crawl at speeds of less than 4 kilometres per hour 24 per cent of the time they're on the road, and less than 15 km per hour for 40 per cent of the time.

If Delhi caps the number of license plates in 2020 at, say, the current circulating level of around 1.5 million, and auctions them off, these might fetch Rs. 12 lakh (U.S.\$20,000) apiece, about one-third of their current Singapore price. Total revenue would come to \$30 billion. Over a 10-year license life, this is \$3 billion or Rs. 18,000 crore per year. If the cap is ratcheted down over time to 5,00,000 cars, and this pushes the auction price to Rs. 36 lakh (the Singapore level), the amount of revenue would be the same.

If two-thirds of this revenue were returned to Delhi's residents, this would amount to Rs. 4,800 per person per year, or Rs. 24,000 per year for a family of five, for a projected 2020 population of 25 million — enough to win strong backing from the public. Payments could be made directly into electronic accounts keyed to the new Aadhaar IDs. If the other third, Rs. 6,000 crore per year, were devoted to infrastructure, this would increase the city's transportation budget by about 150 per cent, accelerating development of alternative transportation that must accompany less reliance on the automobile.

Delhi residents would reap a triple benefit: cleaner air, quicker and safer transportation, and, for all except license-plate buyers, more money in their pockets. The measures recommended above are eminently feasible, given AAP's handsome mandate. If the new government can achieve these goals, everyone in the capital will be healthier, and Mr. Kejriwal himself will be wheezing and coughing less at his next electoral joust. He might even get re-elected. The costs of failure will be high, not only for the Chief Minister and his party, but for the citizens of Delhi, too.

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