

AUTOMOBILE POLLUTION: WHAT IS OUR STAND?

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The study by Chittaranjan Cancer Institute and Environment Biology Laboratory, Department of Zoology of Kolkata University between November 1997 & May 1999, reveals that 43% of children in Kolkata are suffering from respiratory disorders compared to 44% among dual children.

In Bangalore, the incidence of asthma in children increased from 9% in 1979 to 29.5% in 1999 as against the corresponding increase in vehicles during the said period.

According to a World Bank study, using 1992 data, the annual health cost of India was upto 5,550 crores rupees due to ambient air pollution. Out of this Delhi alone stands for one fifth of it.

This was the Indian scenario of vehicular pollution more than a decade back but things have changed now. We have grown in population, not only humans but also vehicles. The years discussed in the above surveys was the premature era of motor vehicle in India but this decade is where the contribution of each family in the vehicular population is more than double the previous ones and so does its donation to the air pollution. But yes one thing remains unchanged and that is our attitude towards this serious issue and our efforts to stop the same. So this policy brief discusses the background, needs and problems in India with a short comparison with the countries abroad.

INTRODUCTION

Governments had always been negligent in this area and only after the Fourth Five Year Plan it occurred to them that our environment is a strong part of our resource and we do have an obligation towards it. It specified¹:

It is an obligation to each generation to maintain the productive capacity of land, air, water and wild life in a manner which leaves its successors some choice in creation of a healthy environment.

¹ Fourth Five Year Plan, 1969-74, Planning Commission, Government of India, Chapter 2, 'The Long Perspective'.

The second show of the careless behavior of the government is in passing the Air Act in 1981, which as per the act itself was passed in pursuance of the 1972 Stockholm Conference. What took them a decade is still a question for the researchers.

Thirdly the position is such that in this act the authority of both air and water pollution prevention was handed to the Water Board in spite of the inefficient working of the board in terms of the water regulations in the country to which the answer was the formation of better coordination and stabilization of the economy.

With the starting to be this much arbitrary, the present is dangerous. As per the September 2001 edition of a magazine published by the Central Pollution Control Board² the following results of air pollution including vehicular destruction were disclosed:

- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
1.5% deaths and 0.9% of NBD³.
- Lung cancer
0.4% deaths and 0.1% of NBD.
- Asthma
0.2% deaths and 0.5% of NBD.
- Tuberculosis
8% deaths and 5% NBD (largest in the world)
- Perinatal
6% deaths and 7.5% NBD (largest in the world)
- Cardiovascular diseases
17% deaths and 5% NBD.
- Blindness
No deaths but 1% NBD (largest in the world)

The above is the theatre of the diseases playing all over in India and sadly the government including the Act has done little for its prevention and control. To explain it better I will go by the words of Dr. Malcom S. Adiseshiah,

² Parivesh, September 2001

³ National Burden of Disease

My third question is who defines the areas, which are 'air polluted control areas'. And here, my question is that there is nothing in the Bill to deal with areas, which are already polluted. I see the Bill controlling future pollution but what about those areas, which are already polluted?

THE SUCCESSORS

In this case of vehicular pollution USA and England both precedes us for the pollution level and its prevention as well.

USA formed an agency called the Environment Protection Agency for the laying down of the guidelines on the standard amount of pollution production from new vehicles, subject to which the Clean Air Amendment Act of 1970 was passed restricting carbon monoxide emissions from vehicles. This act brought substantive reduction in the amount of carbon monoxide reduction in a small span of 7 years and with the efforts of the government the compellation on automakers for installation of 'catalytic convertors' on the exhaust system in order to convert gases to harmless carbon dioxide and water came as a revolution not only in America but also in the European market with a lethargic progress in India as well.

Our second successor is Great Britain, who through way of National Air Quality Strategy (NAQS) not only put the authorities in motion but also involved the local communities and citizens in the run.

As per the section 80 of their Environment Act of 1995, it is the responsibility of the Secretary of State to publish through NAQS the standards related to the quality of air, objectives behind the restrictions imposed and the measures to be taken by the local authorities for every locality and to make the general public aware of it. In addition to this the local authorities are required to give timely check and evaluation reports on which the higher authorities have to conduct detailed investigation with the preparation of reports informing the public about the air quality of the region and the contingency plans prepared to deal with the air quality emergency.

REQUIREMENTS

Looking down the scenario the need of looking up for a solution becomes prominent; a few of them are listed below:

1. Conversions of diesel vehicles to Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) as diesel vehicles have more cancer potency.

2. Ensuring the supply of only lead free petrol.
3. Laws for the installation of catalytic convertors.
4. Check and elimination of vehicles causing gross pollution.
5. Construction of more pedestrian areas, cycle lanes, bus only lanes, etc.
6. Ban on vehicles to enter an air sensitive area or on occasions of poor air quality.
7. Public awareness campaigns and housing meeting for the discussion on the topic of vehicular pollution.

RISTRCTIONS

The issue is gross and will require a large quantity of resource- labour as well as money; from the laying down of improved laws for the hour to its stringent application, from the construction of alternate commuting sites to its maintenance. But the resource on stake is even more precious- our environment nurturing the human resource of the country- the resource behind the success of all other resources, so the investment is worth investing.

HEROS OF THE COUNTRY

The Maharashtra government was the first one to site guidelines related to vehicular hazards laying down a milestone to the next passed Central Motor Vehicle Rules, 1989.

Where the state government laid down guidelines for the prevention of automobile hazards, it also introduced the training course for drivers for safe transportation and response.

The Kerala High Court also achieved a modest agenda by instructing the state government for the strict implementation of vehicular emission regulations framed under the Motor Vehicle Act by the issuance of smoke meter and gas analyzer at every major town. On the lines of the Kerala High Court, the Gwalior bench of the Madhya Pradesh High Court also issues regulatory norms.

On the verge of crisis they came up with preventive measures hence becoming the role model for other states.

CONCLUSION

All the above suggestions come under the ambit of the government's stand on this issue of vehicular pollution which is fatal for the population responsible for it. Unlike the other sources of pollution- power plants, industrial activities, construction work, etc this type is contributed by

each and every household of the country. As per a write up⁴ on vehicular pollution the population of Taiwan is just double the population of its vehicles. For India the vehicular fleet consists of 70 % of two and three wheelers and China triples the number of the Indian asset of vehicles. So it's the Asian population giving birth to one of the top polluted cities of the world.

Here comes our stand, the stand of the general public with automobile pollution. Firstly changing the mindset of viewing vehicles as a status symbol and taking it as a necessity for travelling distance. Secondly, realizing the potential and importance of the usage of public vehicle and respecting its value and the people travelling in it. Thirdly and most importantly visualizing it as our problem rather than the problem of the state or the sufferers because when we change the world around us change.

Nobody is going to clean the dirt of our house, so do it yourself.

The views expressed by the author are her own. The Centre does not bear any responsibility for the same.

⁴ 'Two and Three Wheelers Unmarking the Dragon', Down to Earth, 31 Jan 2002