

By Sidharth Mishra



Delhi entered the New Year reeling under severe air pollution. There are no farm fires in Punjab right now and still air pollution condition in Delhi, if not worse, it's definitely not better than what it was during the harvest time in November first week. The Delhi Government, having blamed one and all for the bad air of the national Capital, has now ordered a study to find out the reasons for the cloak of pollution hanging over the national Capital.

What do we need to study? Will it be possible for the present government led by Arvind Kejriwal to accept the honest findings of a sincere study? Unlikely; especially having come to power riding on populism propelled promises, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) can least take the chance of annoying its vote bank. Thus the souls in the national Capital can live and rest in polluted air for sometimes to come.

In order to provide for the promised subsidies to the power and water consumers, the Delhi Government has been scratching the bottom of the barrel to meet the financial needs. The has led to most unreasonable 'rationalisation' of budget expenditures including a 25 per cent cut in the funds meant for controlling air pollution in Delhi in its revised budget estimates for 2018-19. This has happened when pollution in Delhi is at dangerous level for the past one week.

One of the biggest factors adding to pollution plaguing the city has been the excessive burden of the private vehicles plying on the city roads. Government was needed to take tough measures on this count but city's Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia instead made a spectacle out of the dismantling of the dedicated bus corridors.

To discourage the sale of private vehicles, the Transport Department hiked the onetime parking charges to Rs 75000 sometime back. This, however, was upturned by the city government calling it exorbitant. Delhi's Transport Commissioner had issued an order notifying that the new parking charges would be applicable from January 1, 2019. But, soon after the notification, Delhi Transport Minister Kailash Gahlot tweeted: "Transport department has been

Kejriwal Govt Has to Come Clean on Cleaning Delhi's Air

Written by Administrator

Tuesday, 08 January 2019 02:42

directed to withdraw the order dated December 21, 2018 regarding increase in parking charges in South, East and North Delhi Municipal Corporations. Owners of commercial and non-commercial vehicles need not deposit the enhanced parking fee till the matter has been examined afresh." Justifying the withdrawal, Transport Minister, Kailash Gahlot had said that the pulling out was due to some 'irregularities' in it.

The 'irregularity' was that the order needed a political will to implement as it would have angered the cab operators, transporters and to some extent also car owners. The one-time parking charges of cars were raised from Rs 4,000 to up to Rs 75,000, depending on the price of the vehicle. On the other hand, the annual parking charges for commercial vehicles such as buses were raised from Rs 6,000 to up to Rs 75,000.

The government in the election year can ill afford such a tough measure even though it would have arrested the rapid decay in the quality of city's air.

The Delhi government especially the Chief Minister keeps floating the idea of bringing in odd-even car plying scheme as the solutions for deteriorating air quality of Delhi but as experience in past has shown that it is not a permanent solution. The solution lies in strengthening the public transport system, which in the last five years is strutting towards a collapse with no new buses being added to the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) fleet.

In fact no buses have been added into DTC fleet after 2010 Commonwealth Games. News have been doing rounds that 1000 new buses will be added into it but there is nothing on the ground. Similarly introducing electric buses were being talked about but there is no clear road map when will that happen. Third phase of Metro construction is delayed while there is no news about the phase four.

Introduction of CNG-run vehicles at the beginning of the century had 'cleaned the city's air', but statistics show that Delhi's pollution has increased five times over the past eight years. Moreover, thousands of trucks that make way into the city late at night are responsible for 65 per cent of the total particulate matter in Delhi's air. Most of them enter the city unregulated, despite the Supreme Court order to keep them out of the capital.

Two other related factors that cause air pollution are the fuel pumps and sale of adulterated

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fuel in Delhi. The fuel pumps don't have a Vapor Recovery System (VRS) that helps in limiting the release of pollutants into the air like in Western countries, while use of adulterated fuel increases emissions.

There are other factors too but vehicular pollution is the single most lethal contributor to city's bad air. As far as vehicular emissions are concerned, they contribute 63 per cent of the total air pollution in Delhi. Burning of petrol and diesel to run automotive vehicles releases greenhouse gasses. Delhi is flooded with more than seven millions cars and 1400 new ones are added to this tally every day.

Delhi's air cannot be cleaned by ad hoc measures. It has to be addressed by tough and persistent initiatives, which would need a government with a strong will to implement. It would also need various stake holders in state's politics to rise above petty considerations and come together to save the city for the posterity.

(First Published In News18.Com)