

## ENVIRONMENTAL ACCOUNTABILITY The Case of CNG

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On July 28, 1998, the Supreme Court passed a series of orders in the Mehta PIL on air pollution in Delhi, based on the expert recommendations of the Bhure Lal Committee (BLC). Amongst them, the Court gave directions for full conversions of the entire bus fleet to CNG by March 31, 2001. By that date, however, DTC had only 350 CNG buses, with 200 private converted buses, and about 10,000 CNG auto-rickshaws. So the Court ordered that all the diesel vehicles be withdrawn and chaos ensued for the next four days. Those four days provide us with a peculiar laboratory within which to examine the whole issue of pollution. If diesel vehicles are responsible for air pollution in Delhi, and if they were not on Delhi's roads for those few days, then there should have been some observable change in the air during that period. Was there?

The CPCB Chairman was reported as saying on April 3, that pollution levels were the same but, with the wisdom of hindsight, what does the data show? We are limited to the CPCB web-site's reported pollution levels at the ITO crossing. But if we assume that this represents the worst case scenario because of the thousands of buses that pass through, then the data should be significant. Of the several parameters that are displayed, we shall examine the NO<sub>2</sub> and SPM levels because these are supposed to be specific to diesel. On April 1 the values for these two were about 29% lower than the averages for the month (it was a Sunday), but on April 2 they matched the averages, while on April 3 and 4 they actually *Shot up* by 11-24%. In addition, the averages for March, April and May of this year were higher than or comparable to those for last year. In short, it cannot be said that the removal or restoration of the diesel buses had any significant impact on air quality.

Thus, even before one gets into the ongoing discussion on CNG being a cleaner fuel one has to examine whether in fact the diesel buses are the real culprits. The figures speak for themselves. Only 6.7% of the total vehicles in Delhi are diesel-driven, the rest all run on petrol. Buses are a mere 1.1% although they carry over 60% of all motorised passengers. So it is not surprising that even if one were to remove all these buses there would be hardly any dent in pollution levels. While these vehicles may be far more "polluting", their numbers do not add up to much for ambient pollution levels. In addition, for each bus removed (with 5 round trips), 200 private petrol-driven vehicles may be required to carry the same number of commuters. In other words, the removal of 28,000 buses would entail a doubling of the number of private vehicle trips. Thus, the debate on diesel versus CNG appears somewhat misplaced and camouflages the massive impact of petrol.

Is this all hindsight? Not surprisingly, the answer is no! For instance, just before the BLC came out with its recommendations, the papers of a World Bank Workshop on Vehicular Pollution Control were published. These papers not only analysed a range of options in fuels, lubricants, engines design and technological upgradations they also looked into traffic patterns, transport modes, enhancing public transport and most importantly, petrol engine emissions. Several of the authors also presented evidence before the BLC. Thus, the real question should be, “What were the cogent reasons that the BLC gave for rejecting the recommendations of all these experts?” Since the proceeding of the BLC have never know what reasons were (even for future decisions).

Does this lack of transparency have anything to do with the constitution of the BLC itself? The CSE Director is on record as saying, “the management process of conversion requires technical competence, not generalist bureaucrats”. Surely, this reasoning applies to the decision regarding conversion too. The BLC has as its members the Delhi Transport Secretary, an Environment Ministry official, a Petroleum Ministry official, the CSE Director, the CPCB Chairman, and later, the Maruti MD. How many of these gentlemen were ‘technically competent’ to decide on pollution is debatable. While much has been made of “lobbies” in industry, no one discusses the possibility of lobbies within the BLC itself. For instance, the CSE Director has written he has a “vested interest” because of his struggle with asthma and cancer – which he mysteriously related to “protecting the interests of the poor”! Logically then, other affected parties (such as the real poor, the commuters and the employees) should also have space on the BLC. And when these parties gather to express their views – as they will on June 24 at the Aga Khan Hall – will the BLC listen?

Finally, who should be held accountable for this whole sordid episode? It is not just a matter of ‘clean’ CNG and ‘dirty’ diesel. What about the issues of ‘lethal’ petrol convenient public transport? What about the costs involved and the commissioner's take? Who considers the price already paid (and still to be paid) by the office-goers, the workers, the auto drivers, the schoolchildren, the handicapped, and the self-employed? These questions are relevant not only for this particular “public interest” litigation, but also for the several others on the Yamuna and Ganga, industrial closures, garbage (read slum) removal, demolitions and service delivery. Does the onus lie at the door of the “public” politicians who make policy, or with the faceless bureaucrats who implement it? Is industry responsible for manufacturing polluting products of consumers for using them? Who eventually is accountable – the environmentalist who has a vested interest, the committee which makes the expert recommendations, or the court which appoints the committee? That is, or should be the substantive issue in a democratic and just society.

(999 words)