

Battling Pollution

India's first experiment with a road rationing system began on January 1, with the Delhi government ruling that private vehicles with odd and even registration numbers will be allowed to drive on roads on alternate days. The new system has many exemptions, and as of now will be effective for only a fortnight. Pollution levels in Delhi have reportedly come down in the first two days of the experiment, though the scheme's effectiveness and enforceability will only really be tested today - the start of a new week after the year-end holiday break ended on Sunday. Nevertheless, the Delhi government deserves to be complimented for having made a sincere effort in curbing vehicular pollution that, among other things, has made the country's capital one of the most polluted cities in the world.

The battle against vehicular pollution, however, cannot be won just by ordering a road rationing system. Equal emphasis is needed on expanding and upgrading public transportation networks in India's cities, and greater encouragement for battery-operated two-wheelers and four-wheelers that can significantly reduce vehicular emissions. Remember that over a third of Delhi's pollution is caused by emissions from two-wheelers. Just as more car-pooling and improved public transportation networks would help, creating incentives for more people to use e-scooters will make an equally big difference. The role of industry and the government - at both central and state levels - in expediting such a transformation is crucial. It would be unfortunate if the fortnight-long experiment with the road rationing system ended without having shifted governments' focus to creating greater capacity for better public transportation networks that people can use with comfort in preference to their private vehicles.

An area that brings to light the indifference of governments and industry to the need for sustainable reduction in vehicular pollution is the regulation that governs vehicular fuel standards across Indian cities. As a report in this newspaper has noted, the deadline for introducing the Bharat Stage V or BS-V norms for four-wheeler vehicles may have to be postponed by a year to 2020. The advantages of switching over to BS-V norms are huge, as their enforcement can reduce pollution from four-wheelers by 80-90 per cent in terms of PM_{2.5} or fine particulate matter. More importantly, BS-V norms can reduce the emission of mono-nitrogen oxides by 60-64 per cent. While the ministry for road, transport and highways is keen on introducing BS-V norms by 2019 and BS-VI norms by 2021, the ministry of petroleum and natural gas is of the view that there is not much of a difference between BS-V and BS-VI. Therefore, the oil refineries would prefer a direct switch-over from BS-IV to BS-VI norms by 2020. The cost of making the fuel compliant with BS-VI norms is estimated at a capital investment of over Rs 25,000 crore. Hence, the refineries would prefer to incur the cost to upgrade the fuel to meet BS-VI norms. Representatives of the automobile industry, however, are opposed to upgrading to vehicles that comply with BS-VI norms as that switch would be difficult to achieve. Given that India has as many as 13 of the 20 most polluted cities in the world, it is

unfortunate that the current debate is not about advancing the deadline for introducing BS-VI and exploring what steps need to be taken by the refiners and the automobile industry to meet those deadlines. Battling pollution needs greater coordination between governments and industry, and even greater commitment from all.

Business Standard 4-January-2016