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And now, some clean air business...

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The Covid-19 pandemic is a disaster of epic proportions that hit the world in 2020. There has been a silver lining, though: the air pollution levels, primarily due to the reduced vehicular, industrial and other human activities. The greatest disservice to the cause of clean air - one that affects every Indian, human and the entire creation - is to stop here. That will mean letting go of this windfall and an opportunity of a lifetime to think, reflect, plan and act. For once, can our polity and governance system anticipate an issue and win visionary accolades?

Everybody has now got used to this regular yearly pattern. Come October, the air starts getting murkier. Parali sets in, and the wind out. The topography, climate and manmade activities do the rest. In addition, Delhi is quite literally gasping for breath. Some people make noise. Dilli is declared a gas chamber or some equivalent of that. Courts come in, issue guidelines and deadlines. Governments scramble, and citizens ramble. There is some response to ameliorate “emergency”. Then back to square one once the weather becomes sporty, and the winds do their magic.

We forget several things in all of this: Kids bear the brunt. They are not safe while playing soccer. Alternatively, when in schools. Not even, while sleeping in their bedrooms. The elderly cannot even do their morning walks. The rest are too busy to realize what is up and so stark. There is enough nonchalance, it seems, to make “very poor” quality of air acceptable, and “poor” the norm.

Do we really deserve this? Particularly, when it isn’t really rocket science to clean the air.

We know that the particulate matter (PM) pollution - the one currently causing all the “lung burn” - is primarily caused by road and construction dust, vehicular and industrial emissions, and waste and biomass burning. We also know the solutions better cleaning of roads and construction procedures, better fuel and vehicles (e-vehicles), and better waste management and biomass management. This is not to suggest that the solutions are easy, but just to state that they are known, providing a crucial starting point. Implementing a plan that captures these solutions is challenging. It involves a multi-stakeholder and multi-dimensional engagement. It needs effective law making to provide a basis for action that passes the twin tests of justice for all players in the economy and legal propriety. It requires effective monitoring and governance of economic activities in the full circular economy, along with policies, rules and regulations that reward sustainable behavior and penalize the deviants. This seems daunting, but is achievable as shown by several cities around the world. Detailed reports from our study can be made available, but overall, we have the following recommendations.

The first recommendation is to get out of our fetish to import or develop some magic technology from abroad and wave the colloquial wand. Instead, the approach should be to study the comprehensive solution frameworks internationally, and adapt them to our needs. Indeed, there are many lessons to be learned from countries such as Japan, which has “been there and done that”, and in a democratic framework. In fact, an existing bilateral Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) already attempts to do some such learning. The cooperation should be strengthened with a regular and immersive exchange of best practices to understand and contextually adapt best

practices. It should involve stakeholders from the government, including at the implementation level, non-profit sector, academic institutions with relevant experts, and citizens who can be inspired and become brand ambassadors. The MoC, with its relevant provisions, can serve as a necessary and useful platform for the same. From such exchange will emerge learnings for an effective legislative, regulatory, governance (monitoring and implementation) and technological framework? The mantra, then, is to learn and adapt as opposed to import and forget.

Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the contemporary calls for and urgency rendered to global health and development partnerships can be a great opportunity to put in place a Clean Air Partnership with relevant countries. The MoC with Japan can be leveraged to initiate an Indo- Japan partnership and followed up with more stakeholders.

Second, it needs to be appreciated that pollution is best attacked at source. Once harmful particulate matter is out in the air, there are obvious limitations on its mitigation. Of course, technologies to purify the polluted air are required. However, investment and trust in such technology alone, without a proper cost-benefit analysis and a comprehensive solution to mitigate pollution at source, will lead to frustrations and unpleasant surprises.

Lastly, a continuous engagement with the issue. Not just to create and announce grandstanding policy measures, which undoubtedly are critical. Also, at the level of implementation. In its strategic, tactical, as well as day-to-day avatars.

Lest this be misconstrued, a clarification is in order. It is not that there has been no action. Delhi now has the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) and India the National Clean Air Plan (NCAP). The union government has publically announced targets of pollution reduction. All of this has indeed come from international and homegrown knowledge. The problem, however, is that a sustained view of the big-picture, an implementation plan to go with it, incessant and committed action with the urgency it deserves, is missing.

To conclude, the time to work on this is now. Right now, and with unequivocal urgency. Neither when the pandemic subsides, nor when October hits again, leaving us with no choice but to repeat the pattern of ramble and scramble. Experience shows that sincere and holistic efforts can yield perceptible results even within a year plus sustained benefits within 3-4 years. Enough, even to work in a democracy such as ours. In addition, win elections while being at it. What we do now will define whether the urgency and noise displayed by all stakeholders, from the citizens and governments to the courts, every winter, will remain just that. Actually, translate into some meaningful and doable change. Both on the ground and quite literally, in the air.

