

Delhi's air pollution is a classic case of environmental injustice

India's new tax on car sales is a step in the right direction, but can the country address the wealth and power imbalance driving the health disaster?

The news that India is introducing a new tax on car sales to help combat severe air pollution and congestion problems has unsurprisingly been decried by the country's car industry.

The chair of India's largest car manufacturer, Maruti Suzuki, says the tax "is going to hurt the industry, and will impact growth and affect job creation". Following the announcement, shares in Maruti Suzuki traded more than 5% lower.

But others have celebrated the move, recognising that business as usual cannot continue in a country home to the four most polluted cities in the world. "Once Indians owning cars was seen as a sign of economic success. Now this sort of thing is seen as Indians being responsible," a senior research fellow at Delhi-based thinktank the Brookings Institution told the Guardian.

The tax comes on the heels of the Delhi government's unprecedented step this winter of imposing an emergency "odd-even" license plate number rule to restrict private car use to alternate days.

Reports of extreme air pollution in Delhi and other Indian cities are nothing new. The World Health Organisation estimates that more than 600,000 people die each year as a result of outdoor air pollution in India. Much less discussed is the fact that not all residents are equally affected, nor equally responsible.

Delhi's low-income residents - who don't travel by car - bear the brunt of the city's toxic air. This is partly because of where they live. A 2011 study found levels of suspended particulates to be generally higher in the city's poorer neighbourhoods.

The poor also spend more time outdoors, where pollution is most intense. A study in the scientific journal *Atmospheric Environment* reports that men from low-income households spend on average about seven hours outdoors daily, compared to virtually zero for those at the top of the income scale.

What's more, affluent households can afford air conditioning, better nutrition and better healthcare, all of which insulate them, to some extent, from dirty air.

Some of the highest pollution exposures are inflicted on those who make their living on the streets, including traffic police and drivers of three-wheeled auto-rickshaws. These rickshaws have been converted to compressed natural gas, a cleaner fuel source, as a result of a 1998 supreme court ruling in a case brought by environmental advocates.

Many of Delhi's cars, by contrast, continue to burn particulate-heavy diesel. Researchers have measured concentrations of hazardous ultra-fine particles on the city's arterial roads that are eight times higher than those recorded on rooftop monitors just a kilometre away

The health impacts on residents are becoming more and more evident. Children's developing bodies are especially susceptible to long-term harm. A 2008 study for India's Central Pollution Control board reported that more than two-fifths of Delhi's schoolchildren have reduced lung function, damage that is likely to be irreversible.

The good news is that there is rising demand from India's citizens for cleaner air, coupled with greater willingness of Delhi's populist Aam Aadmi (roughly translated as common man) government, elected a year ago, to respond. Delhi needs ambitious, longer-term policies to tackle root causes of the problem. These must include not only steps to halt the exponential growth in car traffic and diesel trucks but also huge new investments in public transportation, tougher pollution controls on the smoke-belching power plants and brick kilns that ring the capital's perimeter, and measures to reduce the clouds of dust from construction debris and road traffic.

Beneath the headlines, Delhi's air pollution is not only a public health disaster; it is a classic case of environmental injustice. The city's affluent classes reap the lion's share of the benefits from the activities that poison the air, while less privileged residents bear most of the human health costs. This fateful disjuncture - and the inequalities of wealth and power that lie behind it - has posed the single biggest impediment to addressing the problem.

It remains to be seen whether the authorities in Delhi can muster the political will to go beyond stopgap emergency measures and launch the policies that are desperately needed to safeguard the public interest in a clean environment against the private interests of the polluting classes. Will India, often hailed as the world's largest democracy, be able to overcome the oligarchy that rules its air? The poor who bear the heaviest air pollution burdens wish they could hold their breath long enough to find out.

James K Boyce teaches economics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Aseem Shrivastava is a Delhi-based writer and co-author of *Churning the Earth: The Making of Global India*.

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