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ONGC organizes students' study visit at Cambay, Karaikal, Jorhat



In continuance with the study visits for students at its installation, work centers – as a part of the observance of Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav, celebrating 75 years of India's Independence – Oil and Natural Gas Corporation

(ONGC) limited organized fresh tours for students at Cambay, Karaikal and Jorhat. From 7-8 December 2021, 30 students of ONGC Gujarati Primary School were taken to Akhol Juni EPS, Lunej # 1 Drill Site of Cambay – the first successful oil well of ONGC and Lunej Musuem. In the past three months, a total of 250 students of various schools had completed their visit to the field of Akhol Juni i.e. EPS and Lunej Museum to know more about ONGC and its contribution in the Nation Building.

Slaying the demon diesel...

...and other (Green) Courtly tales of knight-errantry



RSRINIVASAN

ON THE OTHER HAND

Writ Petition No.13029 of 1985—a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed by MC Mehta and Others against the Union of India and Others in the Supreme Court of India—is a landmark case in the annals of green jurisprudence in India. It was that PIL which first forced the judiciary to step in and fill the gap in environmental pollution control action caused by executive inaction and indifference.

It was that case which also fundamentally changed the face of public transport in India. The SC order which forced the conversion of all public transport vehicles, including buses, taxis and autos plying in Delhi, to convert to Compressed Natural Gas (CNG)—then considered a much 'cleaner' fuel—caused a dramatic improvement in Delhi's air quality which lasted for nearly a decade.

It changed the way cities looked at urban planning and public transport, paved the way for the 'metro revolution' which swept India's mega cities transforming mass rapid transit along with the real estate sector and development of satellite towns, and led to many changes in standards, tax and fiscal policies which fundamentally altered the growth trajectory of India's booming automobile sector, among others.

It also led to some fundamental distortions in policy which are continuing to have major impact today, more than a quarter of a century

after these efforts were first set in motion by the MC Mehta PIL. Last week, for instance, the Delhi government finally ordered the de-registration of diesel-powered vehicles which are 10 years or older, with effect from January 1, 2022.

The order was the culmination of a lengthy court battle which had resulted in a 2015 order by the National Green Tribunal—India's apex 'Green' Court which decides on environment-related issues—to deregister all diesel vehicles older than 10 years. In 2016, after more appeals, this was amended to de-registration in a phased manner, starting with 15-year-old vehicles first.

The new fiat comes after the NGT rejected a last minute 'Hail Mary' appeal to modify the order to exclude the Covid period, which would have bought a minimum of two years' time, or even longer, given how new variants keep popping up. While dismissing the modification plea, the NGT observed that the government had "failed to prove" that allowing 10-year-old diesel vehicles to continue plying would not harm public health.

Which is all very well, but the ban perpetuates some fundamental policy distortions. The biggest, of course, is the continuing demonisation of diesel-powered internal combustion engines. While by and

large, petrol engines are cleaner than diesel engines, there are lots of ifs and buts. Modern diesels with high efficiency particulate filters are actually cleaner than many petrol engines. And two-wheeler petrol engines, on a cubic capacity basis, can be more polluting than cars, particularly for older vehicles. Of the more than one crore vehicles registered in Delhi, for instance, over 70 per cent are two-wheelers, which have not been considered in any of the pollution-control measures undertaken so far.



Policy smokescreen That needs to be dispelled

Diesel's prevalence in India's automobile sector is itself the result of another policy distortion—the earlier fuel subsidy regime, where diesel was considerably cheaper than petrol because it was used in agriculture to power pumps and tractors. That constitutes a minuscule portion of diesel consumption, but politicians worry about perceptions not factual minutiae. The result was a proliferation of diesel engines for even tiny vehicles like three-wheeler, and of course, cars.

Judicial distortion

While the subsidy distortion has been largely done away with, leading to a correction in manufacture and sales of diesel cars, the policy distortions introduced by judicial interventions continue. Another SC order, for instance, imposed a green tax on diesel engine cars with engine capacity of more than 2000 cc. There was never any logical explanation given for the 2000 cc cut-off, just as there was never an explanation given for the sub 4-metre length excise classification (admittedly not the NGT's fault this one!) which shaped India's auto market for three decades.

The point is, that such ad hoc interventions introduce as many

problems as they solve. The CNG-isation of Delhi's transport fleet led to substantial increase in NOX emission, while cutting back particulate emissions. But NOX is a greenhouse gas and just as harmful to health as fine particulates!

Then there is the 10-year cut-off. Vehicle age will determine the level of technology present in a vehicle but does not always guarantee better outcomes from an environment point of view. A well-maintained diesel vehicle which is a decade old can be far less polluting than an abused and ill-maintained one—whether diesel or petrol-engined—which may be just months old, same as how a well-kept diesel car can be much cleaner than a petrol or CNG car which is poorly maintained. There is zero evidence to suggest that a car with a 2100 cc diesel engine is more polluting than one with a 1600 cc one. And so on.

Even the instant order gives an escape clause to vehicle owners. By giving deregistered vehicles an NOC (No Objection Certificate) to be registered elsewhere. Neighbouring Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, which surround the national capital and form part of the same climate ecosystem, allow this. So how will simply changing the State

of registration help reduce pollution in Delhi? The real solution is simple. The Union Transport Ministry has been solving one end of the equation by imposing tighter emission standards for vehicle manufacturers and higher standards for fuel—India now operates on BSVI standards for fuel, among the most stringent in the world. There is also the push towards EVs, with some tax incentives on offer.

Together, this addresses the flow problem—reducing the number of more polluting vehicles entering the market. But the stock problem—of existing vehicles—can be only addressed by implementing the existing emission standards and ensuring that polluting vehicles are taken off the road. Older vehicles need to pass fitness tests and emission standards. If they meet both, why take them off the road, which is a waste of planetary resources?

That has to be done by State administrations, which have shown a singular lack of interest in doing this so far. Other than seeking rent, pollution tests and certifications are observed more in the breach. Fitness testing, now mandatory for commercial vehicles, is another bonanza for bribe takers, as any taxi or auto owner will tell you.

The existing 'green cess' on registration charges, meant to create a corpus for pollution control measures, continues to be a black hole as far as deployment is concerned. Even a relatively simpler control measure like imposing a 'green tax' on trucks entering NCT Delhi was dropped because the tax collection contractor said he couldn't implement it!

Make no mistake, as a Delhi resident, I am all for anything which helps me breathe a little easier. But India's urban pollution problem (not just Delhi—13 of the world's top 15 polluted cities are in India) needs a 360 degree approach and coordination between the Centre and States. Tilting at random windmills won't help.

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HALDIA FIRE: ₹5L EX GRATIA FOR VICTIMS, PANEL STARTS PROBE

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KOLKATA: Hundreds of contractual workers on Wednesday protested at the Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) refinery at Haldia in West Bengal's Purba Mednipur district, demanding compensation for the families of the three workers who died and 40 others who sustained injuries in a fire accident at the plant a day ago.

A three-member experts' committee has started a probe into the accident while a team of senior IOC officials from Delhi reached the refinery, officials from the oil corporation told reporters.

West Bengal irrigation minister Soumen Mahapatra, who hails from the district, visited the spot and held a meeting with IOC officials.

"IOC has agreed to give a compensation of Rs 5 lakh each to the three families. A similar amount will be given by the private firm that employed these workers," Mahapatra said.

"The preliminary cause of the accident seems to be a flash fire leading to burn injuries to 44 people and three persons unfortunately succumbed to the injuries. The fire was immediately extinguished and the situation is now under control," IOC said in a statement.

PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATIONS WITH FM

Industry groups seek rationalising of I-T slabs

They also suggested infra status for digital services, incentives to hydrogen storage & fuel cell development

OUR CORRESPONDENT

NEW DELHI: Rationalisation of income tax slabs, infrastructure status for digital services and incentives to hydrogen storage as well as fuel cell development were some of the suggestions made by various stakeholders at the pre-Budget consultation meeting convened by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman.

The customary pre-budget consultation meetings were held with the finance minister virtually between December 15 and December 22, as per the finance ministry statement.

More than 120 invitees representing seven stakeholder groups participated in eight meetings, scheduled during this period, it said.

The stakeholder groups include representatives and experts from agriculture and agro-processing industry; industry, infrastructure and climate change; financial sector and capital markets; services



Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman

It will be the fourth Budget of Modi 2.0 Government and Sitharaman. The Budget would come against the backdrop of gradual recovery taking place in the Indian economy hit by the Covid pandemic

and trade; social sector; trade union & labour organisation and economists, it said.

“The stakeholder groups made several suggestions on

various issues that included increased R&D spending, infrastructure status for digital services, incentives to hydrogen storage and fuel cell devel-

opment, rationalisation of income tax slabs, investments in online safety measures etc, among others,” he said.

Ministers of State for Finance Pankaj Chaudhary and Bhagwat Karad, Finance Secretary T V Somanathan; Economic Affairs Secretary Ajay Seth; Financial Services Secretary Debasish Panda; Corporate Affairs Secretary Rajesh Verma and Revenue Secretary Tarun Bajaj, were among others who attended these meetings.

It will be the fourth Budget of Modi 2.0 Government and Sitharaman. The Budget would come against the backdrop of gradual recovery taking place in the Indian economy hit by the Covid pandemic. The RBI in its latest bi-monthly monetary policy review pegged a GDP growth of 9.5 per cent in 2021-22. The government has projected a fiscal deficit of 6.8 per cent of the GDP). The Budget 2022-23 is likely to be presented on February 1.

The politics and economics of fuel prices

For a country like India, the dollar-rupee exchange matters a lot as we pay for imported crude in dollars. This pushes the price up significantly

Finally, the Centre slashed excise duty on petrol and diesel. It is claimed that the reduction has been initiated to help the 'aam aadmi'. This move will leave a hole of about ₹60,000-65,000 crore in the government's tax collection in the remaining months of this fiscal year.

For quite some time, the opposition parties were building up pressure on the government to reduce the tax on petrol/diesel. It is obvious that though the government was not willing to respond for various economic reasons, it was finally pushed to reduce the taxes due to the electoral reverses the ruling party suffered recently.

What are the options available to the Centre as well



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(The writer is a retired banker. The views expressed are personal.)

as State Governments to address the massive revenue gap? One way is to prune their expenditure. As the revenue expenditure cannot be reduced, obviously the capital expenditure will have to be cut. This will affect investments which, in turn, will affect growth and employment opportunities in the country.

Another option is to borrow from the market to offset the loss of revenue. This will push up interest rates in the market and also revenue expenditure of the government. This will also in turn affect investments and growth.

Yet another option will be to compensate the loss of revenue by taxing other items. This means that to help the



owners of vehicle, we are going to pass on the burden to other categories.

Before acceding to the expectation of the people, the Government should have tried to explain to the people that the present increase in petrol and diesel is on account of increase of imported crude prices and we

import eighty per cent of our crude requirement. The recent price increase is not on account of increase in

taxes. The Government has failed miserably to explain this. The opposition parties cited the taxes charged by the government as the reason for the increase in retail prices. This is false propaganda by the opposition, which the ruling dispensation has not countered effectively.

When we depend on import of crude for our use, the retail price cannot be controlled beyond a point.

Increase in petrol and diesel prices is not something new. The following analysis of increase during every seven years block will show how the present increase is not something unusual.

Between 1979 and 1986, the price of petrol increased by 110 per cent, 60 per cent in the 1993-2000 period, 70

per cent in the next seven years. During 2014 and 2021, the increase is 30 per cent with the price of petrol at ₹100 per litre.

Crude price is decided by various factors. There is continuous increase of demand at the international level but the supply is restricted by the producing countries by way of a cartel. This pushes up prices. For a country like India, the dollar-rupee exchange matters a lot as we pay for imported crude in dollars. One dollar was costing around ₹8.13 in 1979. Now it is around ₹75 plus. This itself pushed up the price by nearly ten times.

As it is, we do not have any long term policy for pricing petroleum products. Now the Government has

responded by reducing the taxes to provide some relief to the common man. If the international crude price further travels north, what is the option open to the government? Can they afford to go on reducing taxes on petrol and diesel? After all the government needs to tax such items that cannot evade taxes and taxing petrol and diesel is the best way. Alternatively, if the international price of crude drops will the government allow such reduction to be passed on to the consumer or will they increase the taxes? It is better to have a long-term policy on these.

Any Government must think of long-term economic prosperity of the country instead of focusing on short-term goals like winning elec-

tions. People should be groomed to sacrifice something in the present for better future.

Earlier the Finance Minister expressed her apprehension that if the central government reduces taxes on these products, the state governments may quietly raise their tax kitty and nullify her sacrifice. However, we now see that the state governments ruled by BJP have also slashed their VATs and there is pressure on other state governments to reduce their VATs.

When there is a need to develop green energy by promoting electric vehicles to address the target of zero emission by 2070, encouraging the consumption of petrol and diesel is a retrograde step by the Government.

डिप्टी सीएम ने पानीपत रिफाइनरी के आस-पास इलाके की एयर क्वालिटी जांचने के लिए आदेश

वैभव न्यूज ■ चंडीगढ़

हरियाणा के उपमुख्यमंत्री दुष्यंत चौटाला ने बताया कि पानीपत जिला में रिफाइनरी के आस-पास वायु गुणवत्ता के मामले में सुप्रीम कोर्ट व केंद्र सरकार पूरे एनसीआर क्षेत्र को निरंतर मॉनिटर कर रही है। पहले भी इस मामले में सर्वे हो चुका है, अगर क्षेत्र के विधायक कहेंगे तो राज्य सरकार की ओर से केंद्र सरकार को फिर से वायु गुणवत्ता के मामले में सर्वे करवाने बारे अनुरोध करेंगे।

डिप्टी सीएम ने यह जानकारी विधानसभा के शीतकालीन सत्र के दौरान सदन के एक सदस्य द्वारा पानीपत में आईओसीएल रिफाइनरी संयंत्र से होने वाले प्रदूषण से संबंधित पूछे गए प्रश्न के उत्तर में दी।

उपमुख्यमंत्री ने पानीपत शहर के पार्कों के रखरखाव बारे कहा कि अगर हरियाणा शहरी विकास प्राधिकरण के अंतर्गत आने वाले पार्क हैं तो वहां रेजीडेंस वेलफेयर सोसायटी हरियाणा शहरी विकास प्राधिकरण के साथ टाईअप करके मैनटेन कर सकती है। जहां उक्त प्राधिकरण के अंतर्गत पार्क नहीं आते हैं, वहां पर आईओसीएल रिफाइनरी संयंत्र के सीएसआर फंड के तहत कार्य करवाया जा सकता है, इस बारे में संबंधित विधायक व अन्य अधिकारियों से अगली जिला कष्ट निवारण समिति (जिसके चेयरमैन उपमुख्यमंत्री हैं) की बैठक में सहमति से निर्णय लिया जाएगा। इससे पूर्व, उपमुख्यमंत्री द्वारा सदन के सदस्य द्वारा पूछे गए प्रश्न का लिखित उत्तर सदन-पटल पर रखा जिसमें जानकारी दी गई।