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APATHY AND INACTION

(Left) The declining air quality in the MMR has not received enough attention; social activist Medha Patkar with Mahul residents at their protest against deaths due to pollution

Every Breath Mumbai Takes

The metropolis is gasping, yet a clean air action plan from the state pollution control board is a sorry cut and paste job that is clueless about the steps needed to make the air clean
By Debi Goenka

WHILE the world is aware of the air pollution issues faced by the National Capital Region (NCR), a similar crisis facing the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) has not received the attention it deserves. Even though Mumbai and most of the MMR is located along the Arabian Sea, or its creeks and estuaries, the air quality in the MMR is cause for worry and, surprising as it may seem, on a few days a year, it is even worse than Delhi's.

The reasons for this are many. The construction of high-rises has completely disrupted the air flows over Greater

Mumbai, besides affecting the green lung of the metropolis and significantly impacting the air quality in the city and its suburbs. Add to this the pollution caused by the coal-fired thermal power plants owned and operated by the Tata Power Company (TPC) in an area that has come to be known as Mumbai's "gas chamber"—the Chembur-Mahul belt. Shocking as it may seem, the TPC actually made an application in 2013 to the Maharashtra Pollution Control Board (MPCB) and the Ministry of Environment, Forests & Climate Change (MoEF) to convert one of their 500 MW units that were originally licensed to operate on gas or oil to coal, and this

was done under the label of modernisation! Not surprisingly, both the MPCB and the MoEF promptly cleared the proposal. These clearances were challenged in the NGT by the Conservation Action Trust (CAT) and others, including this writer.

These applications are still pending. After six years of litigation, we now find that the TPC is not going ahead with this project since it is not financially viable. This, of course, is a victory of sorts, but still begs the question—while coal-based power plants all over the world are being shut down (including in Delhi), how did the MPCB and the MoEF so blithely permit the conversion from gas/oil to coal?

To add insult to injury, the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI), which is one of India's most renowned scientific institutions, was commissioned by TPC to do an independent assessment on the impact of this project. Shockingly, the NEERI report concluded that there would be no material difference to the air quality or to the environment if TPC was allowed to operate

this 500 MW unit on coal instead of gas or oil.

This entire sequence of events gives us an understanding of how things can go horribly wrong if institutions that are meant to protect the people forget their responsibilities and bend over backwards to accommodate hazardous and highly polluting projects to come up in densely populated areas.

In addition to the 2,600 MW of power plants operating in Mumbai, there are also two refineries at Mahul. As its newly translocated residents have discovered, living in Mahul is a prelude to living in hell. These residents, who have been forced to occupy slum tenements a few metres away from the refineries, are suffering from a wide range of chronic illnesses, caused by the severe pollution. And after two years of battling with the insensitive authorities, the High Court directed the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) to relocate them to alternative sites, or to give them ₹15,000 per month as rent for staying in a safer environment. Instead of complying with the order, the MCGM has gone in appeal to the Supreme Court.

Due to its peculiar v-shaped topography, surrounded by the rising sea on three sides, road space in Mumbai is restricted. But the vehicular population of Mumbai continues to grow. The solution is actually quite simple—instead ▶



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of causing further environmental havoc by building sea links and coastal roads, the best option would be to follow the Singapore or London models, and restrict the number of private vehicles on the road.

Unfortunately, the best option is not the most lucrative option, since our system is geared to adopt the most expensive and time-consuming options, for reasons that we all understand. Since there is no restriction on the purchase and use of private vehicles, the number of vehicles on our roads keeps doubling every six to seven years, while motorable roads remain practically the same.

The problem has been further aggravated by the fact that almost all the arterial roads in Mumbai have been simultaneously dug up for building the Metro. While these projects are being touted as solutions to our traffic problems, there is no clarity on how much they will cost, and whether the public will be able to afford these services. And in the bargain, the real lifeline of Mumbai, which are our suburban train networks, are starved of funds. It has been estimated that for less than 10 percent of the cost of the Metro, it would be possible to double the capacity of these train systems. This would not involve any more land acquisition or displacement.

The slowdown in the economy seems

The road space in Mumbai is restricted but the number of vehicles is on the rise, leading to pollution. The problem is aggravated by Metro construction, which has led to all arterial roads being dug up.

to have had little impact on the builders in Mumbai. Construction continues unabated, and thanks to all the Metro and other projects, Ready Mix Concrete (RMC) plants are mushrooming all over the city. This creates a huge amount of SPM within the city. And since all these materials have to be transported by road, one can well imagine the chaos that Mumbai is being subjected to.

As part of the National Clean Air Campaign, the MPCB was required to prepare a Clean Air Action Plan (CAAP) for Mumbai, and get it approved by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB). Three draft plans were prepared by MPCB. While the first two drafts were rejected, the third one was approved by the CPCB. Unfortunately, neither the CPCB nor the MPCB thought it necessary to consult those who mattered—the Mumbaikars.

At a series of workshops organised by civil society groups in Mumbai (including CAT), the CAAP was found to be full of holes. The introduction is a combina-

tion of copy and paste from documents written by other organisations—without any attribution. The actual action plan document is even worse—there is no clarity about the steps to be taken; nor is there any clarity about who will be responsible for the implementation of these actions.

Here are some of the recommendations arising out of the civil society workshops:

1. The Mumbai plan lacks coherence, appears to have drawn from different reports without reference or attribution and there is a disconnect between the narrative and the actions suggested.
2. It fails to clarify what the reduction targets actually are, and by when these will be achieved.
3. Comprehensive sector-wise plans need to be prepared.
4. Comprehensive Environmental Pollution Index (CEPI) was computed several years ago for all highly polluted areas within the country. Greater Mumbai was classified as critically polluted as per CEPI. This exercise needs to be carried out every year for Greater Mumbai.
5. Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) needs to be prepared for Greater Mumbai and linked to the air quality levels as has been done for NCR.
6. There is an urgent need to set up a real-time air quality monitoring network within Mumbai city. Data should be made available online and the GRAP should automatically be enforced depending on the air quality.
7. Wardwise/zonal air quality maps with date from continuous air quality monitoring instruments need to be prepared periodically, and the trends analysed.

It is to be hoped that these and other specific recommendations are included in the CAAP. The alternative would be to go back to the courts. ■

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