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SUSHIL KUMAR / HT FILE PHOTO

# Only decongestion will help clean Delhi's dirty air



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**NEW DELHI:** The National Green Tribunal's (NGT) orders to improve Delhi's air quality may not have much of an impact unless the central and state governments work on an immediate plan to decongest the Capital. Experts estimate that if all orders of the tribunal are implemented in totality, air pollution will come down by only 10%.

Since November last year, the tribunal had issued a series of directions that may not be enough to make Delhi's air clean and safe for breathing. The reason is the tribunal asked authorities to do what was possible within the ambit of law. It cannot issue directions to decongest Delhi — a major cause for rising air pollution.

"Delhi needs much more drastic initiatives. The NGT orders are a piecemeal approach," said a scientist with the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), who conducted some studies on the NGT directions. "Unless there is a plan to decongest Delhi's roads, improving Delhi's air quality will be difficult," the scientist said.

A plan to decongest Delhi was discussed in the 1990s when the Supreme Court issued directions to clear the Capital's air of its soot. It included a plan to shift outside Delhi many of the central government offices -- including ministries -- that didn't play an effective role in daily business.

The proposal then talked about developing composite ministerial complexes having offices and homes for all its employees to reduce mobility. It talked about moving out wholesale markets such as the fruit and vegetable in Azadpur,

grain market in Lawrence Road and old Delhi markets.

More than 15 years later, the proposal had not moved beyond papers fearing protest by traders and government employees.

Its impact on Delhi's road is visible. A recently published study by the Central Road Research Institute showed that peak traffic during morning hours is seen on roads leading to central and southern parts of Delhi and vice-versa in the evening time.

A CRRI scientist said that on average, a person in Delhi travels 28.5 kms a day to report to work and to go back," said a CRRI scientist. This takes about one and a half hours every day.

As a result, the average road speed of a vehicle on Delhi has come down to 16 kilometres per hour, lower than other cities like Hyderabad, Chennai, Bangalore, Varanasi and Bhubaneswar.

If vehicle registration in Delhi continues at the current rate, the average speed on roads will be less than 10 kms an hour. Delhi's air pollution started rising since 2005-06.

A Planning Commission paper for the 12th five year blamed inefficient urban planning and poor implementation of regulations along with inadequate urban infrastructure as reasons for congestion in Indian cities. For Delhi, the paper said, there was parking space just for about 20% of the registered vehicles. This results in illegal parking on roads and a corrupt urban governance model. The CPCB's source appropriation study says human induced pollution -- vehicles, dust from rampant unregulated construction and beaming roadside eateries -- is the biggest reason for increasing air pollution in Delhi. The incremental NGT order will have negligible impact as a CPCB study on the tribunal's order for Lajpat Nagar shows it has not resulted in significant improvement in ambient air quality in the busy commercial centre.