

Will We Finally Breathe Fresh Air?

Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy

By Dr Pratima Singh.

Air pollution is one of the biggest threats staring India squarely in the face. A slew of measures to effectively tackle this menace were expected from Budget 2021–22. The budget, however, turned out to be a mixed bag, with more misses than hits as far as India's fight against air pollution is concerned.

Let us first get the positives out of the way:

1. Support for source segregation of waste and bioremediation of legacy waste and construction and demolition waste.
2. Support for Swachh Bharat and Clean Air programmes
3. Launch of a comprehensive National Hydrogen Energy Mission — progress towards net zero pathways
4. 100% electrification of broad gauge routes to be completed by 2030
5. Boost to the RE sector

Now let's take a look at the missed opportunities.

Insufficient Allocation

To tackle air pollution, Budget 2021–22 provisions INR 2217 crore for 42 urban centres with a million-plus population. Though a welcome announcement, it doesn't address the air pollution concerns in other 80 non-attainment cities, especially tier 2 and 3 cities. Under an earlier programme, INR 2200 crore has already been disbursed to 40 cities with a million-plus population, and without adequate performance indicators in place, fund allocation to only 42 cities is neither sufficient nor sustainable.

Vehicle Scrappage Policy

Though largely a step in the right direction — the policy will reduce emissions and encourage eco-friendly transportation — the lack of scrapping infrastructure and automated fitness check centres would make policy implementation challenging. The budget amply supports green transportation; however, the assessment rules for personal vehicles (20 years) and commercial vehicles (15 years) need to be tightly enforced.

Monitoring and Measurement in Tier 2 and 3 Cities

Only 5% of cities and towns are monitored for PM_{2.5} level, and less than 1% have air quality monitoring stations — factors responsible for a huge data gap. In this regard, Budget 2021–22 missed the trick by not prioritising monitoring infrastructure, especially in tier 2 and 3 cities.

Public Transport Infrastructure

One of the biggest reasons transportation is a major polluting source is the non-existent or dysfunctional public transportation systems in cities. Budget 2021–22 aims to promote public transportation through metro rail and city bus services. However, INR 18,000 crore and 20,000 buses are hugely insufficient numbers considering the massive requirement of buses in various cities

of India. Moreover, no mention of electric vehicles or other cleaner modes was made in the budget speech.

Innovation and Support for Reducing Agricultural Residue Burning

To tackle the issue of stubble burning, especially in the northern plains of India, Budget 2021–22 could have provided support for in-situ options such as happy seeder machines. Moreover, subsidies on biogas plants would have encouraged the adoption of cleaner energy, in line with the National Biofuel Policy, 2018.

Air Pollution from Industries

While the last budget mentioned the need to shut down polluting industries, Budget 2021–22 provides no support to push this. Installing emission reduction technologies and retiring old thermal power plants — by providing budgetary allocation for employee compensation and rehabilitation — would have helped India in transitioning from a coal-based to a gas-based economy. Furthermore, MSMEs could have been provided subsidies through budgetary allocation for upgradation of technology and adoption of energy-efficient technologies.

Supporting Capacity Building

Budget 2021–22 doesn't provide dedicated budgetary support to build capacity for state pollution control boards (SPCBs), which are in dire need of infrastructure upgradation (laboratories and computerisation). Properly functioning SPCBs are key to ensuring NCAP compliance by cities.

The author heads the Centre for Air Pollution Studies (CAPS) at the Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy (CSTEP), a research-based think tank.