It Isn't Even Odd to Work from Home

We are literally inhaling poison in Delhi. I do not normally have a sinus or coughing problem, and I am highly exercise-dependent for my mental and physical well-being. But every year during the three winter months, I do not dare to venture out for taking a walk or jogging, even though I live in an area that is reasonably green. During the dismal winter months of Delhi, I keep myself hermetically sealed within the four walls of my house, refusing to step out except for an emergency and barking at anyone who dares to open any window. But this year, none of this is helping me. I have blocked noses, sore throat, sleepless nights and what naturally follows as a consequence, a depressed and sterile mind. Same with my wife, and you can well imagine what happens when two depressed souls are locked within a house that increasingly resembles a gaol in a city that the Delhi High Court had aptly described as a "gas chamber".

So it was cheerful news that at last the AAP government had focussed its attention away from the Lt. Governor towards the Aam Admi of Delhi for a change. Alarmed by the rising air pollution that has assumed unseemly proportions with no one having any clue about how to combat it, the Delhi Government has announced its intention to allowing the plying of private vehicles bearing odd and even registration numbers to alternate days only in the national capital from 1st January 2016. A motorist will now be able to drive his vehicle only for 15 days in a month. Several other measures were announced along with this, like shutting down the Badarpur Thermal power station, moving the National Green Tribunal to close the Dadri power plant in Uttar Pradesh, carrying out a massive plantation drive along all arterial roads across the city to curb the spread of dust and vacuum-cleaning of roads by the PWD from April, besides allowing trucks into the city only after 11 pm. If only even half these intentions could be translated into actions rather than being exercises in tokenism, the city indeed would be a different place to live in, instead of the lethal toxic cocktail that it is at present.

The odd/even number scheme is nothing new. Cities like Beijing and Singapore have already tried it. The question is whether it is practicable in Delhi, where the public transport is clearly unequipped to carry the additional load. Thankfully, It would not restrict the Chief Minister's movements who has two cars numbered 0001 and 0002, or the rich people who can afford to buy a second vehicle – usually a used one - to beat the scheme and thereby contributing to increasing, rather than reducing vehicular pollution. As always, it will be the Aam Admi the Government wants to help who will be hurt the most. It is still unclear how the scheme will be implemented, what would be penalty on violators and how it will be enforced, or how the government would regulate the vehicles coming from outside. Considering all these, the scheme seems not to have been thought through. It looks more like a knee-jerk reaction; for a scheme like this to succeed, all stakeholders including the public had to be taken on board beforehand, which obviously was not the case.

A scheme like this can at best be a quick fix rather than a permanent solution, as experiences of different cities across the world prove. Beijing used it for the first time during the 2008 Olympic Games. It did curb its notorious smog level by 20 percent, the concentration of PM 2.5 (fine,

respirable particles) by 31% and asthma-related doctor visits by 50%. Now the ban is enforced for only a day every week, and it restricts not one but two last digits – one odd and one even – say 3 and 4 - so that to beat the scheme, one has to have a third vehicle carrying a different number. In 1989, Mexico City started its *Hoy No Circula* (today you can't drive) programme based on the even-odd formula to fight smog, which only resulted in giving a boost to the automobile sector, sharply increasing the vehicle sales. Bogota's *Pico y Placa* (Peak and [License] Plate) programme reduced private vehicle use by up to 40% on weekdays, but the effect on the city's pollution was only marginal. For a scheme like this to succeed, we also need an effective system of public transportation which is just not in place in most of our cities.

Other cities have tried other methods linked to pricing which are more effective, but may not be palatable in a country with a baggage of socialistic pattern of society and a history of the dole culture practiced and promoted as national welfare. Transport Demand Management methods linked to pricing like parking restrictions and congestion pricing have accrued long term benefits which are more helpful than short term emergency measures like an even-odd formula. London introduced congestion pricing in 2003 by imposing a fine of £ 5 for vehicles entering Central London areas - in the first three years, it reduced vehicle traffic by 16 percent and journey times by 14 percent, with significant reduction in the levels of toxic gases and particulate matter. The fee was hiked to £ 10 five years later followed by restrictions on the entry of buses and trucks in Greater London areas which led to a reduction in the level of PM 2.5 by 20%. Singapore follows a similar Electronic Road Pricing system based on high pricing using technology like GPS.

Delhi had 84.75 lakh registered vehicles as on 31st March 2015, out of which 57.26 lakh were two wheelers. Every year, 6 lakh new vehicles are registered in Delhi, that is, more than 1600 vehicles per day. There is also an unknown number of vehicles registered in neighbouring states of Haryana or UP plying in Delhi. It is estimated that on any given day, there are about 40 lakh four wheelers plying on Delhi roads - more than the total numbers of vehicles in Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai put together. For all its good intentions, the AAP Govt's move may add to this number by forcing commuters to buy additional vehicles. This cannot be a lasting solution to the city's woes. Let is therefore think of a more viable alternative.

Telecommuting is a term coined by Jack Nilles in 1973 which is increasingly being used in the developed world, and is not unknown in some private sector organizations in our country too. It means remote work or telework, i.e. technology-assisted work - an arrangement that allows employees not to commute to a central place for work; they are 'work-at-home' employees. In addition, there are 'nomad workers' who use mobile telecommunications technology to work from cyber cafes or other locations. Government and companies are increasingly using these concepts to attract and retain workers. These are not only welfare measures, but also smart economics as well. The General Services Administration of USA estimates that if the federal employees telecommute at least one day every week, federal agencies could boost productivity by more than $ 2.3 billion annually.

Wikipedia reports the results of a Reuters poll, according to which approximately "one in five workers around the globe, particularly employees in the Middle East, Latin America and Asia, telecommute frequently and nearly 10 percent work from home every day". The guiding motto behind this is : "Work is something we DO, not a place that we GO". According to Wikipedia, over

fifty million U.S. workers – that is, about 40% of the working population, could work from home at least part of the time. The number of employees reported to have actually worked from their home on their primary job in 2010 was 9.4 million. In that year, U.S. Federal Government passed the Telework Enhancement Act 'in order to improve Continuity of operations and ensure that essential Federal functions are maintained during emergency situations; to promote management effectiveness when telework is used to achieve reductions in organizational and transit costs and environmental impacts; and to enhance the work-life balance of workers'.

The 2011 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey indicates that in 13 government departments, more than half the employees reported teleworking, including 69 percent from the Dept. of Education, 74 percent from the Office of Personal Management and 76 percent from the National Science Foundation. Forrester Research's US Telecommuting Forecast reports that 34 million Americans work from home and 'the number is expected to reach a staggering 63 million – or 43% of the U.S. workforce – by 2016'. Cisco reports that the company has generated 'an estimated annual savings of $277 million in productivity by allowing employees to telecommute and telework'. In the UK, in 2012, over 4 million employees out of a total workforce of 30 million were teleworkers.

Let us look at the potential benefits of telecommuting should we introduce it in India. It would allow employees to better manage their work together with family obligations. It will lead to more freedom, more resilience, greater productivity, improved staff retention and lower operating costs. The most significant impact will of course be on our city environment. Think of Delhi, with a population of 18 million and a working population of about 6 million. Even if a third doesn't have to report to the office everyday, that means 1 million vehicles less on the roads. Think about the impact of this on vehicular pollution.

Many government departments and ministries, public sector organsiations, think tanks, IT/ ITC industries, design and development orgnaisations, taxation departments etc. can seamlessly shift to such a work culture by appropriate planning and reengineering of their works. Only those employed with organsiations whose business involves dealing with the public, like banks, academic institutions, trading and business, transportation and the like will have to commute daily, but they commute faster since the roads will be decongested. Life for everyone will be simpler and more free, and the air purer to breathe.