Missing in Budget 2023: Proactive Steps to Tackle the Rising Air Pollution

Featuring "green growth" as one of its seven priorities, Union Budget 2023-24 announced some encouraging initiatives towards meeting its environmental targets. While many of these would indirectly aid air pollution control – a critical component of green growth – comprehensive proactive steps to tackle the rising air pollution were given a miss.

Of the total budget allocated to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) this year, 29% focuses on the Control of Pollution scheme and funding to the Central Pollution Control Board and the Commission for Air Quality Management. This is an increase of 23% over last year. However, there is no clarity on whether the funds under the scheme will be allocated to state pollution control boards or non-attainment cities. Either way, the allocated fund is insufficient to set up the required monitoring stations, conduct scientific studies, or implement actions at a city level.

When it comes to resource allocation for making transportation greener and sustainable, Budget 2023-24 is a mixed bag. The near doubling of the allocation for the FAME (Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Electric Vehicles) scheme to subsidise the purchase of electric vehicles, and the push for vehicle scrappage (specifically government-owned vehicles that are 15 years old or more) are brilliant moves. However, no resources have been allocated for developing charging stations and infrastructure support needed for effective green mobility transition. Also, the scrappage policy is not likely to work unless the required number of scrap yards is established. While scrapping old government vehicles is a welcome move, extension of the same to commercial and private vehicles through a proper compensation framework is desirable.

Similarly, the promotion of coastal shipping through public-private-partnership and viability gap funding is a good initiative, but fund allocation for new metro-rail projects or suburban railway systems is absent. Given the potential of functional suburban railway systems (in tier-I cities) to reduce the number of on-road vehicles, this is a clear miss from the perspective of air pollution mitigation.

Further, the budget allocated for liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) connections to poor households has also been slashed drastically. As most of the underprivileged sections in our country still depend on solid fuels (a prominent source of air pollution) for cooking and heating purposes, this step can have adverse implications for air pollution control, particularly indoors**.**

For the agriculture sector, the allocation of Rs 1,050 crore towards digital infrastructure and promotion of technology-driven agriculture will facilitate timely communication for crop planning, access to crop residue management machines and markets for selling stubble, which will lead to a decrease in stubble-burning events, bringing down agricultural emissions eventually. But funding for digitising some other crucial sectors (health and environment) – which could help in the widespread dissemination of knowledge about the risks of pollution on public health and enable informed decision-making – was absent.

The green announcements in Budget 2023-24 are promising for sure, but the lack of dedicated air pollution control and mitigation measures makes it an inadequate strategy for green growth. The government should focus on bringing together the key ministries to form a high-level committee, where all the entities can work in concurrence to achieve the National Clean Air Programme targets and tackle the air pollution problem in mission mode. Without such a collaborative endeavour, forging ahead on a green path seems far-fetched for India.

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