

## **Voluntary Compliance: Better Governance with Lesser Government**

*Analysed from various perspectives, the success of a recent experiment of regulating car traffic on the streets of India's capital city of Delhi – in order to control air pollution – shows the possible benefits of minimum 'government' for maximum governance.*

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The 'odd-even' experiment of regulating the movement of cars on the streets of India's capital city, Delhi, to cut back the pollution levels in the city has largely been hailed as a success. The odd- and even-numbered cars were allowed to ply on the streets of Delhi on alternate working days during the 15-day experiment that concluded recently. Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has even organised a public rally to thank the residents of Delhi for cooperating with the government. In his view, the citizens cooperated because the government sought to conduct the experiment through a consensus-building approach, and did not propose harsh penalties for the defaulters. How much of the pollution levels were contained by the experiment is anybody's guess, but the fact was that traffic congestion levels did decline quite substantially. However, quite a wide cross-section of people are fairly surprised at the conscientiousness displayed by the residents who are not really known to follow norms! How did this come about,

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and to whom should the credit go for inducing this newly-observed behavioural pattern among the citizens who came forward to perform a public-spirited role. As for the recent floods in Chennai, which witnessed enormous public suffering, the general belief was that the flagrant violations of building laws, largely by builders and individuals with 'connections' – which led to the blockage of normal water channels and obstructed drainage, were the cause. There is a video/photo, which has gone 'viral' in the social media, showing a young lady officer who operated a bulldozer herself, when driver on duty had abandoned the vehicle, scared of razing a ruling party leader's building which was impeding the natural flow of water into a channel. Seating herself in that vehicle, she ensured that the obstructive building was removed so as to allow free drainage of the flood waters. This is not a common occurrence, considering the total dominance of political parties over urban local bodies, and the fear they instil among officers with their so-called 'connections'. How have citizens, otherwise constituting a silent majority, come to the fore to ensure that they play a participative role alongside the administration in ameliorating people's miseries and promoting public welfare?

I do not propose to go in to the merits of the success of the 'odd-even' formula in Delhi, and the extent to which pollution levels were curtailed. There are conflicting claims, with people trotting out arguments and statistics to suit their viewpoints. It is a fact that the biggest impact of the experiment in Delhi has been the creation of awareness among the general public for the need to curb pollution. Among the various initiatives taken up by public-spirited groups of citizens, a people's group styled 'Help Delhi breathe', has been conducting road shows, stand-up comedy shows, poetry-reading sessions, and the like to sensitise public opinion to the grave hazards of high levels of pollution.

People have stepped out of their comfort zones and made sacrifices to cooperate with the 'odd-even' experiment. One of the very first supporters of the move was the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court who publicly declared that he was willing to team up with his colleagues to ensure that they adhered to the 'odd-even' formula. This definitely must have set an example for even the well-heeled. However, the pessimists still believe that the success came about largely because this was only an experiment over a fortnight and people were more than willing to rough it out for the few days that it lasted. There is also the fact that schools were closed and hence a smaller number of buses/persons were out on the roads.

The reactions of some persons who were interviewed by the media have been quite revealing. One citizen expressed the view that such a policy of restricting the movement of cars on the road would help build public opinion for improving the quality and efficiency of public transport. It can certainly be true in the long-run. More importantly, the very fact that different groups are reacting in different ways to the idea of a long-term policy-formulation shows that citizens are beginning to occupy the centre-place over policy issues affecting the common man. Class-biases appeared to have taken a back seat in the desire to play along. The basic fact is that the resident of Delhi got his place under the sun, and appears to have made the most of it.

The people's unconditional response to the 'odd-even' experiment and their cooperation have led to analyses of why the reaction was so positive. More so, because Delhi is not known to be harbouring a very law-abiding population. Is this the success of Mr Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party? Is it a campaign that he and his party-men engineered? Is it possible that the ordinary citizen has finally come to recognise that it is he, and he alone, who will have to contribute to the improvement of the environment and that politicians will play their little games which may not be about his welfare at all?

The 'odd-even' experiment deserves to be analysed for its success in galvanising opinion to launch a public-spirited campaign for the benefit and welfare of the citizens. It needs no emphasising that the pollution levels in Delhi had reached dangerous levels, and were causing untold harm to the health of the citizens. There also appeared to be no easy and short-term solution, either. So the Delhi Government, which was having its daily dose of differences with the Lieutenant Governor, the Police and the Central Government, thought of this scheme which could be a win-win proposition for the Delhi authorities and the people. It was also calculated that, if the Central Government cooperated, and the Delhi Police played along, it would ensure the success of the experiment. Another calculation could have been that, in case the Central Government did not cooperate, it would provide the Chief Minister one more issue on which he could pillory Prime Minister Narendra Modi for attempting to de-stabilise the Delhi Government. Hence, targeting only the car-owners, who in any case are known to be low-polluters, was the low-hanging fruit that the Delhi Government chose to pluck. The car-owners responded positively, as they could resort to other options, and in any case, it was only a fifteen-day experiment. The main polluters such as the two-wheeler vehicles were exempted. The time was also opportune, as schools were closed for vacation. The Delhi Government built consensus among the public, and adopted the silken-gloved approach. No harsh fines, only

mild sanctions. The ordinary resident of Delhi, already at the end of his tether in suffering from lung- and throat-ailments, was a willing ally. Voluntary compliance was the real victor. The people and the authorities displayed restraint. Hence the implementation was easier, and the result positive.

The other major cause for the reduced congestion on the roads, as a result of voluntary compliance, was that the problem affected everyone equally, and this enabled willing participation. People were willing to try out something which could ameliorate the problem to some extent. This was coupled with a realisation among the decision-makers in government that the solution lay not in playing up the issue but in appealing to the conscience of the public, realising full well the limits to governance. This worked.

What is the moral of the story? Negative approaches do not create solutions which positively impact on public welfare. Governments need to recognise, that at least in urban areas, the ‘white-collar’ citizen has become an active participant in the opinion-building phenomenon. Appealing to his good sense, rather than reprimanding him, can produce positive results. This is what governance is all about, where the administration merely facilitates the adoption of a solution, which the community is encouraged to implement, by itself. This will prove the maxim – minimum government for maximum governance.

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