

For a choking capital, going electric is the way out

By *Amitabh Kant*

Every winter, Delhi becomes a stark warning to the world. Children breathe air that would trigger emergency responses in any global city, and hospitals fill with respiratory cases. And every winter, we return to the same short-term playbook: emergency orders, traffic restrictions, school closures and the ritual invocation of GRAP. These ad hoc, bandaidd measures deliver neither relief nor resolution. They manage symptoms, not the disease.

Transport is the single largest controllable source of Delhi's air pollution. Multiple scientific studies confirm that tailpipe emissions, congestion, idling and ageing vehicles together account for 25–40% of PM_{2.5}. If Delhi wants clean air, the battle must be fought on its roads. Yet instead of accelerating action, the city appears to be slowing down at precisely the moment when pollution peaks.

Delhi was once India's fastest-growing EV market, but that leadership is slipping. In 2025, the city recorded no electric-auto registrations, compared to 1,426 e-autos in 2024. Electric two-wheeler registrations have also declined, with 35,909 so far in 2025, lower than 37,472 in 2023. The Fleet Aggregator Scheme, designed to push large commercial fleets toward electrification, has not been fully operationalised. This does not appear to be a market failure but a policy vacuum. With the new EV policy still awaited, incentives have disappeared and consumers are left in limbo. A city that pioneered India's EV transition cannot afford drift when pollution is at its worst.

Delhi cannot solve a structural problem through seasonal theatrics. What it needs is a permanent clean-transport war room and a unified five-year mission, anchored in predictable funding, clear accountability and enforceable targets. Clean mobility must be recognised as essential public-health infrastructure. Delhi must move from episodic firefighting to year-round planning that makes clean air the norm.

A credible strategy must rest on four pillars.

Firstly, go all electric and accelerate EV adoption across Delhi, while phasing out new sales of non-electric two-wheelers and three-wheelers starting 2026.

Delhi must decisively promote the sale and adoption of electric vehicles across segments through stable incentives, clear policy signals and consumer confidence. At the same time, two-wheelers and three-wheelers, which together account for 80% of Delhi's vehicular fleet and are a major source of emissions, must transition fully to electric. From 2026 onward, all new two- and three-wheeler registrations should be electric. A firm deadline creates certainty for

manufacturers, financiers and consumers and sends an unmistakable signal that public health will not be compromised. Predictable transitions are how cities across the world have cleaned their air, and Delhi must do the same.

Secondly, build a world-class electric bus system.

No global city has cleaned its air without a strong, reliable bus network. Delhi currently operates only 7,000–8,000 buses for nearly 30 million residents. While around half are electric, bus ridership is falling. Services are being scrapped faster than new buses are procured, steadily weakening the backbone of clean mobility. Delhi needs a public transport revolution, not a token electric fleet. The city must commit to at least 20,000 electric buses over the next five years, with buses every five to seven minutes on major routes and seamless last-mile connectivity. When public transport becomes safe, dignified and predictable, people shift naturally. Every electric bus removes thousands of kilometres of daily tailpipe emissions. Nothing reduces pollution faster.

Thirdly, phase out old polluting vehicles and restrict entry of non-BS IV/VI vehicles year-round.

Delhi cannot breathe clean air while its dirtiest vehicles remain on the roads. Older CNG trucks, pre-BS-IV vehicles across segments and ageing taxis emit many times more pollution than newer models. Delhi needs an aggressive scrappage and replacement programme combining incentives, strict enforcement and firm deadlines. This must be reinforced with year-round restrictions on the entry of all non-BS IV/VI commercial vehicles into Delhi. Polluting vehicles cannot be allowed to poison the air that 30 million people breathe. Automated enforcement and clean freight zones can eliminate some of the worst pollution hotspots at Delhi's borders.

Fourthly, build charging and swapping infrastructure that stays ahead of demand.

Electric mobility cannot scale without accessible and reliable charging. Delhi needs thousands of new charging and swapping points across residential areas, markets, industrial hubs, office districts and transport corridors. Yet the city has not issued a single major state-level tender in recent years to deploy new public charging or swapping infrastructure. The result is a fragmented network with weak monitoring, uncertain uptime and non-functional chargers. For many users, there is little confidence that a charger shown on a map will actually be operational, discouraging EV adoption and locking people into polluting vehicles. Scaling up will require upgraded distribution systems, transparent pricing, real-time uptime dashboards and strict accountability for operators. Charging infrastructure is not optional. It must be treated as a public utility.

A five-year clean-transport transformation can change the lives of millions. It can restore Delhi's leadership in electric mobility. Most importantly, it can give citizens the basic dignity of clean

air. The time for caution is over. The time for ambition is now. **Delhi should aim to become the first all-electric city in the world.**

Delhi has the will, the policy instruments and the institutional capacity to take up this challenge. What is required is a clear choice and sustained execution. By committing to a city-wide all-electric transition and delivering on it, Delhi can show that even a complex megacity can act decisively when public health is at stake. This is a challenge worth taking on, and one that Delhi should meet with confidence and resolve.

Delhi must choose clean mobility today so its people can breathe tomorrow.

(The author is a Senior Adviser to Fairfax and former G20 Sherpa and CEO, NITI Aayog, Government of India. Views expressed are personal)