

ON 1ST JULY, 2016, the Delhi edition of the Indian Express quoted Stephen Hawking — among the tallest modern thinkers today, as saying that greed and environmental pollution were the biggest threats to mankind globally.

The Indian government's 'Incredible India!' campaign to attract foreign tourism, is as sharp as the World Health Organisation's data on air pollution, identifying New Delhi as the most polluted city in the world. It also puts some other important cities of India in its list of the top ten polluted cities.

India is truly incredible — both captivating and heartbreaking. The irony lies in the fact that behind the vibrant, diverse, enticing and encapsulating "Incredible India", is a degrading and deteriorating environment — a ticking time bomb that is about to explode. The contradiction is in our attempt to deflect attention from the fact that environmental issues in India are crying out for serious, effective and immediate actions.

Much of our environmentalism in the early 1900s and even post 2000s, were court inspired and had a definite impact on forest and wildlife conservation. India is the second most populated nation in the world. It has managed to protect its forest and wild animals because of the inspired work of various non-governmental organisations and an active judicial system.

Our present Prime Minister is an environmentalist at heart. His campaigns on climate change and the Swachh Bharat Mission were direct interventions to put India's environmental positioning on a solid foundation

A Ticking Time Bomb

Balancing infrastructure development with environmental concerns remains a challenge



and create a huge expectation from him on environmental protection. As chief minister of Gujarat, he had in a swift move, appointed special counsels to get faster convictions for poaching Gir lions, setting a model for wildlife conservation in the country. I was fortunate to have been appointed a special counsel by the state of Gujarat then.

The new wave of infrastructure development in the country, has also paved the way for newer environmental challenges. It completely baffles me that there is no sense of urgency to address these issues among governments,

policy makers or statutory authorities.

Of late, several Indian cities have acquired the reputation of being among the most polluted cities in the world. The attempt by our governments to deny and contradict this reality, is ad hoc and knee-jerk. Water scarcity is expected to be a major cause of national and political conflict in future. No steps have been taken, or initiated to address the alarming wastage of water for uses like washing vehicles, or the illegal extraction of water by a variety of companies and corporations. The urban and the rural population of several parts of the country face enormous difficulties in procuring water for daily needs. Potable water is a distant dream in several areas.

These issues have brought India's environmental concerns to a tipping point and policy makers need to take effective steps to conserve water and protect the environment from air pollution. The courts are overlaid with pleas against air pollution. The automobile manufacturers, who are at the receiving end of these complaints, have no clue about a future course of action. Meanwhile, the government is busy fire fighting, which mostly involves disputing the data on air pollution. The courts, which had always been at the forefront in protecting the environment and have played a role in protecting rivers, wildlife and forests, are now faced with the challenge of balancing environmental safeguards with economic growth.

Percolation of prosperity to all strata of society is important, but so is balancing growth and infrastructure development with environmental concerns. That remains a challenge. **BW**

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