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ECONOMIC GROWTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT: INDIA CONFRONTS THE LINK BETWEEN AUTOMOBILES AND CLIMATE CHANGE

by Rahul Saksena*

As a result of economic growth, India is experiencing vast changes in the country's social, political, and environmental landscape. One such change is the rapid increase in automobile usage. This drastic increase has serious environmental implications, but addressing the issue — and solving the problems that it creates — will not be an easy task.

India is riddled with transportation problems. As India's population increases, this problem further intensifies. Economic growth has precipitated the expansion of India's cities and suburbs. Between 1980 and 2003, India's urban population nearly doubled, and it is expected that in 2031, 40 percent of India's total population, estimated to be 1.42 billion, will reside in urban areas.¹ Predictably, India's urban growth is accompanied by a sharp increase in motor vehicle ownership: "the total number of registered motor vehicles increased from 1.86 million in 1971 to 62.7 million in 2003."²

As India's urban population expands, so do the geographic boundaries of Indian cities. Poorly-planned urban and suburban expansion often leads to environmentally-unfriendly sprawl, longer commutes, and bad traffic caused by an increasing dependence on automobiles. One of the numerous negative results of increased urban air pollution is the emission of greenhouse gases, which contribute to the global problem climate change.³ Locally, the impacts of climate change are evidenced by the shrinking of the Himalayan glaciers, reminding lawmakers that this problem cannot be ignored.

A number of policies have already been implemented in dif-

ferent parts of India to deal with automobile pollution. In Delhi, for example, pursuant to Supreme Court orders, the city's fleet of 80,000 buses, taxis, and auto-rickshaws has been converted to run on Compressed Natural Gas.⁴ The cleaner public transportation requirements resulted in a noticeable improvement to the city's air quality.⁵ Delhi has also completed the first stage of a massive, ultra-modern subway system, designed to decrease road traffic.⁶

While these improvements are a step in the right direction, they are not enough, and, more importantly, they have not been implemented in other Indian cities. The major cities of India need to take further steps by improving public transportation infrastructure, putting more resources and effort into sustainable urban and suburban planning, and implementing stricter emissions regulations on private automobiles.

While automobile pollution may be just one factor affecting global climate change, it is an important factor, and it needs to be addressed in India, where economic growth is bringing opportunities to implement sustainable development. India must take advantage of these opportunities immediately, as the shrinking Himalayan glaciers are proof that the disastrous effects of climate change are not too far in the future.



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* Rahul Saksena is a JD candidate, May 2008, at American University Washington College of Law.

Endnotes:

¹ ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK, ENERGY EFFICIENCY AND CLIMATE CHANGE CONSIDERATIONS FOR ON-ROAD TRANSPORT IN ASIA (May 19, 2006), available at http://www.cleanairnet.org/caiasia/1412/articles-70656_draft2.pdf (last visited Feb. 10, 2007).

² ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK, *id.* at 115.

³ ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK, *id.* at 111.

⁴ Mumbai Newline, *Smog City to Clean Capital: How Delhi Did It* (May 26, 2004), available at <http://cities.expressindia.com/fullstory.php?newsid=85665> (last visited Feb. 10, 2007).

⁵ Mumbai Newline, *id.*

⁶ See generally Delhi Metro Rail Corporation Ltd. website, available at <http://www.delhimetrorail.com/index.htm> (last visited Feb. 10, 2007).