

Can LPG fuel a real consumer revolution?

Does the proposal to limit a family's consumption of subsidised LPG cylinders to four a year indicate a realisation that we can no longer afford to subsidise the lifestyles of the rich? If the poor can face all kinds of restrictions on their consumption of natural resources etc, why not the rich, asks **Ashish Kothari**.



The central government's proposal to limit a family's consumption of subsidised LPG cylinders to four per year raises interesting questions, beyond the immediate issue of its impact on family incomes, and the need for the government and gas companies to curtail their losses. As has been rightly said, why should India's billionaires be able to buy subsidised gas? They can of course buy more than four cylinders, but would have to then pay the full cost of about Rs 800, twice that of the subsidised cylinders.

But beyond this, is the proposal also an indication of society finally waking up to the need to curtail unlimited consumption, or at least to curtail unnecessary subsidisation of the lifestyles of the rich? If so, could it be the first of many other such steps that are urgently needed?

We live in an upside-down world in which the poor continue to face all kinds of limits to their consumption, while the rich have a virtual free-for-all. Take, for instance, natural resources. Communities living inside or adjacent to forests have quotas on the amount of timber, non-timber forest produce, fuel, and other such products they can use. If they happen to live within a wildlife sanctuary or national park, the restrictions are even stricter, and in some cases absolute (for example, in a national park all uses are stopped). This is justified in the name of forest and wildlife conservation.

But is there any such limit on rich (mostly urban) consumers? Their distance from forests and other natural ecosystems makes their use of natural resources virtually invisible, but it is very real. So, for instance, there is no limit to how much electricity an urban (or rich rural) family can consume, notwithstanding that it comes from power stations or dams that have had major ecological impacts on forests, wetlands, grasslands or marine areas. There is no limit on the amount or kind of minerals they can use, regardless of the fact that well over 100,000 hectares of forest land have been diverted for mining in the last 30 years, and countless rivers and lakes have been

polluted beyond repair by mining run-off. There is no limit on how much vehicular fuel they can use, for we are collectively blind to the impact this has on areas from where fuel is extracted, or the pollution and climate change being caused by vehicular emissions. Or, for that matter, the enormous losses that the government has to bear subsidising such fuel.

Limiting consumption

If indeed we are truly concerned about saving forests and wetlands, about reducing our impact on the climate, about the economic losses that the government (read: Indian society) incurs, then the LPG proposal has to be supplemented with a number of others. Here is a sample, based on the simple understanding that neither Indian society nor the earth can afford unlimited consumption:

- Every household of average size is to be allowed only x kw per month of electrical power from the grid, at a subsidised rate (it can buy more at the full cost incurred to supply it, but up to a limit of y kw); concomitantly, the government commits to vigorously promoting energy-saving in all devices so the family quota can go a longer way.
- Every household of average size is allowed only one private motorised vehicle and can use it only occasionally, say once a week; concomitantly, the government commits to urgently improving public transport, cycle lanes and footpaths, in all settlements.
- Every household of average size is allowed a maximum of x sq ft built-up area for its dwelling; anything in excess of this already owned or used by the household will be made available for housing the homeless or those with less than average built-up area.
- Every individual is entitled to a maximum x trips by air and by train in a year.
- Every household of average size can generate only x kg of waste in a month; anything in excess has to be recycled, composted, or otherwise dealt with within its premises or the premises of the community/colony in which it resides; for its part, the government commits to eliminating all wasteful use of materials in all products (for example, in packaging), and facilitate household and community-level recycling, composting, and other safe disposal of waste.
- Every household of average size is allowed only x litres of water in a day.

And so on...

Setting the limits

How would the actual amounts in each of the above be calculated? One option is to calculate what would be a sustainable *ecological footprint* per person, building in the

impacts of use of power, water, food, minerals, and services like transportation, and then working out the per capita that could be allowed if the total footprint was not to cross India's ecological and social capacity. This is of course simpler said than actually worked out, but it is possible to get a rough idea and keep refining it over the years.

Heavy disincentives and penalties will need to accompany such rules, as also a system of incentives for those who proactively and voluntarily comply. There would need also to be some exceptions built in, for instance in the case of travel for essential services like medical professionals, government officials on necessary duty, etc. I am not quite sure whether some system of 'consumption trading' should be allowed, in which individuals and families can use the quota of those who voluntarily agree to use less than what they are entitled to. Like carbon trading, such a system is prone to serious misuse.

We would also need to build into the equation the impacts Indians are having abroad, for instance in the form of timber import from south-east Asia, or the takeover of land to grow crops in Africa. One could extend the above argument globally, assigning each individual a consumption limit based on what the earth can afford, and then demanding that the rich in all countries be forced or incentivised to reign in their unsustainable consumption. Citizens in the West are by far still the major defaulters here, but a class of Indians is fast catching up. For instance, Greenpeace India estimates the richest Indians are already reaching the global average of per capita carbon emissions (of about 5 tonnes per year); and that their emissions are almost double the per capita limit (2.5 tonnes) considered necessary if we want to restrict temperature increase to below 2 degrees.

Unfair and unfeasible?

Most readers will think that these ideas are downright unfair, and impossible to implement. But think again. For forest-dwellers, it would seem equally unfair that they can take out only as much firewood as they can lift on their heads, when they could be cutting much more to sell. We think it is justified to put this limit because the forest needs to be protected from over-harvesting. Then why not the same for our consumption which has an equally if not worse impact, albeit often in faraway ecosystems invisible to us? As for being impossible to implement, that's a function of governance and of course of convincing people that this is for their (our) own good... or at least the good of our children. In any case, if a limit on LPG is considered implementable, so should other limits.

The other day I was at a panel discussion on the Forest Rights Act, where a number of senior officials (serving and retired) warned of climate change. To the extent that the

Act could lead to some fresh deforestation (by those hoping to get rights to such land, though the Act does not permit it), the connection made is valid. But quite apart from the fact that the Act could lead to more effective protection of a much larger forest area, what I found strange was that none of these worthy people thought it worth questioning their (our) own climate impacts. They had all come in cars, some occupied only by one individual; we were using a large amount of power in the hall; tea was served in plastic glasses that require petroleum to make; and so on. The blind spot we have towards our own culpability in climate change (or other environmental problems) is, to put it bluntly, criminal. And yet the system run by these officials, and condoned by most of us, labels as criminal the forest-dweller who cuts a tree for fuel, not you and me.

Lest there be a misunderstanding, I am by no means advocating unlimited use of forest produce or other natural resources by adivasis or other rural communities. I'm simply saying that a system that puts limits only on them, and leaves the rest of us to consume with profligacy, is flawed and unjust. And it is sheer hypocrisy on our part to demand or condone one and not the other.

Let the LPG limit be the first in a series of measures aimed at curbing our consumption. Not only will forest-dwellers be convinced we are really serious about the environment and the future, but the earth too will breathe a bit easier.

Infochange News & Features, July 2011