Promote electric scooters to win clean air battle

In April last year, Piyush Goyal, former power minister, came forward to give a clear direction about the future of mobility in India. Aspiring to have 100 per cent electric vehicles sales in India by 2030, Goyal, later joined by Minister for Road Transport & Highways, Shipping and Water Resources, Nitin Gadkari, put an ambitious vision in the public space.

Why e-scooters?

The question that rises then is how does one fill this space? One possible way is through e-scooters. In early 2018, Tamil Nadu government finally launched what is called the ‘Amma Scheme’ — a programme to subsidise scooters for working women in the southernmost part of the Indian subcontinent. Prime Minister Modi personally inaugurated the scheme on February 24, 2018 — the 70th anniversary of the then Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, J. Jayalalithaa. However, since then, the scheme has been put on the backburner which is surprising because cleaner energy can be better
accomplished if women take the lead in opting for cleaner modes of transport.

There are good reasons for pushing Jayalalithaa’s clean air initiative through e-scooters. People all over India have a preference for two-wheelers. With high traffic density in urban India and lesser developed rural areas, two-wheelers are the most convenient, time-saving and cost-effective mobility solution for many people. Since two-wheelers also form a large majority of traffic vehicles in India, it makes more sense to target them first in a clean air initiative. In this regard, Jayalalithaa’s inducements to get women to opt for e-scooters could also be made part of a general national green programme.

Test case

Any national programme needs a test case through a state and the most logical place to start would be in Tamil Nadu itself. According to the National Family Health Survey 2015-16, official household electrification in Tamil Nadu is almost 100 per cent. The state is also leading in renewable energy installations. In 2016-17, roughly 20 per cent (10.6 GW) of India’s entire renewable energy production was generated in Tamil Nadu. Such high and growing level of renewable energy generation is the ideal breeding ground for environmentally sound vehicle electrification and Tamil Nadu would set a pioneering example for other Indian states in realising the central Government’s vision of complete vehicle electrification by 2030. The challenge is that the current market for electric scooters in India is rather small. Out of 1,90,000 registered electric vehicles all over India, roughly 70,000 are two-wheelers, 4,500 of which are registered in Tamil Nadu, less than 6.5 per cent. With these figures, the Centre’s goal of six to seven million electric vehicles by 2020 remains quite far out of sight.

Regular scooters versus e-scooters

Such a challenge can, however, be overcome. Supply of electric two-wheelers is guaranteed by a range of Indian companies, including Ajanta Manufacturing, Ampere Vehicles, Avon Cycles, Chris Motors, Electrotherm India, and Hero Electric Vehicles. Second, the highlights of e-scooters need to be played up. When compared to scooters with an internal combustion engine (ICE), the mechanical parts in the electric scooter are significantly lower in number and thus require less servicing, while the electricity gets directly converted into kinetic energy, making the vehicle markedly more energy efficient in use and more convenient to handle. Third, the positive long-term benefits must be continuously stressed on. For instance, on the environmental front, the use of electric vehicles can reduce carbon dioxide emissions over the vehicle’s lifespan, compared to petrol scooters, especially when powered by renewable energies. Fully electric vehicles also avoid other local emissions such as nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide and particulate matter, helping to pave the way for a more environmentally conscious society.

Finally, it is a popular belief that electric scooters are very expensive. In fact, the price of an electric scooter ranges between Rs 30,000 and
Rs 60,000, which can be lower than the market price of a conventional scooter even without any monetary government support. According to Hero Electric’s savings calculator, the money saved on petrol and maintenance will help recover the entire cost of the vehicle in less than two years.

**Leading with ambition**

It must be noted that every large-scale diffusion of a product starts small at some point. While phase-I of FAME India programme has been extended, the willingness of the Tamil Nadu government to provide a subsidy for two-wheelers should also not exclude registration of electric two-wheelers. This subsidy programme should be fully dedicated to promoting e-scooters as an environmentally sound decision and an affordable and cost competitive alternative for working women.

More generally, concerted action by central and state governments is needed to attune all primary stakeholders in the establishment of a robust electric mobility ecosystem that will ultimately attract new investments, create jobs and sustainable business models, while supporting a transition to cleaner energies and modes of transport. Then, and only then, India will live up to its ambitions and become a global leader in clean energy mobility.

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