

# Preface

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**T**he *Right to Clean Air Campaign* is rooted in an angry question of Anil Agarwal, the late founder director of the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE). One day in 1995, when he was made to stand in a queue to get his car tested for emissions, he asked: why did Indian vehicles pollute so much and would this checking of the tailpipe be effective? It was his curiosity and anger that propelled CSE on a journey to find answers to a highly complex problem. With Anil, CSE evolved its perspective and understanding of toxification of the urban environment. Wrote Anil: “I had advised the country’s leaders in 1986 that rural environmental problems — because they affect many more millions of poor people in India — are far more important than urban environmental problems. Ten years later I realise how stupid and ignorant I was. I had no clue about the speed with which pollution problems would grow.”

Anil was an environmental activist. But he was also a victim of environmental pollution — he fought a long and painful battle against a rare form of cancer. He was an environmentalist who searched for the genesis of his cancer in environmental degradation. He understood how every poison we put out in the environment comes right back at us, in our air, water and food. Anil hit out at the inefficient state for failing to balance responsibilities and precautionary activities; for letting air pollution grow to a highly poisonous level; and for attempting to shield its own corruption and incompetence by putting an undue blame on the ordinary motorist.

Putting together this book brings back some of the principles that Anil had scripted — understand the issue in depth; get a good grasp of the state-of-the-art. Nobody will listen to us if people do not have confidence in what we are talking about. A book is a tool for spreading a message. Come in contact with the constituency. Get prepared with knowledge and answers so that we can push for solutions and bring change. It happened with the campaign’s first book, *Slow Murder: The deadly story of vehicular pollution*. Anil believed books, if rich in values, would explode one day like a bomb. But we must learn to shorten the fuse — we must campaign.

For us, the campaign — when it unfolded — presented a new challenge. When the big fight ensued over toxic particulates, invasion of dirty diesel cars and CNG phase-in, public interest in our work grew exponentially, activities intensified rapidly. Life as a campaigner transformed completely. We had to keep information flowing; keep our constituency informed; continue policy research to remain prepared to respond to any criticism or resistance; develop our own capacity to demystify science. Anything could be thrown at us — and a lot of it would be disinformation — and we needed to be ready to respond.

Our own transformation as change makers was also fulfilling a very specific societal need. It was about building technical skill and capacity in the public domain to confront the pollution challenge. Globally, civil society has forced governments to bring environment into the decision-making process. But this has remained weak in India. Pollution issues are highly technical and scientific research on them remains poor in India. This can be a severe disability if civil society institutions do not develop good technical expertise to challenge the government to act. A mass of information confined to only research papers cannot be used to create mass awareness.

The campaign reached a critical stage in the late 90s, when CSE demanded hard decisions and action to control the deadly particulate pollution. CNG emerged as a flagship campaign to get past dirty diesel. Despite his illness and pain, Anil closely watched the CNG drama unfolding in Delhi and guided the campaign. For him, the CNG crisis was nothing less than a crisis of governance.

Anil did not live to see the last diesel bus being flagged off from Delhi, but he has left us the means to carry forward the tasks that he had set out — clean up the air in our cities. The challenge is becoming increasingly more complex, demanding newer solutions all the time. We are already amidst the next stage of our campaign — preparing for the second generation reforms. There are new demands on us. This marks yet another transition for us — from policy advocacy to detailing of policies and implementation: how to inspect in-use vehicles, plan public transportation systems and develop action plans for air pollution control in cities. It is time to set new agenda for debate and action. This book is our attempt to understand the future challenge and the way ahead. We look forward in hope and confidence that we will fight the pollution battles and win them too. We have a rich legacy of passion, commitment and anger.

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