

## THE CNG CONTROVERSY (Delhi Case)

On July 28, 1998 The Supreme Court of India ruled that all eight-year-old buses and pre-1990 three-wheelers and taxis would have to be converted to compressed natural gas (CNG) by March 31, 2000. For the rest of the buses, three-wheelers and taxis, the deadline was fixed as March 31, 2001. This order, however, is getting to be the most difficult to implement. Resistance from the diesel lobby and lack of support from the government nearly sabotaged the initiative. It is only because of the strong stand taken by the Chief Justice bench that some progress is being made. Instead of building up consumer confidence in the CNG market, the government and industry alike have tried their best to propagate myths about CNG to mislead people. Even biased expert comments have been flaunted to discredit the move to bring in CNG. Without explaining the public health benefits expected



out of the CNG strategy, administrative lapses and technical snags have all been mixed up to create confusion about CNG technology. Instead of taking pride in the fact that one of the largest CNG programmes of the world has been launched in Delhi, efforts are being made not to let it happen. Despite the opposition, Delhi today boasts of more than 2,200 CNG buses, 25,000 CNG three-wheelers, 6,000 CNG taxis and 10,000 CNG cars.



International experience shows that moving to any new technology is always beset with hurdles, primarily opposition from entrenched business interests. But other governments have taken strong proactive approaches to counter such opposition, and raise public awareness. A notable example is the public notification that was issued by the US Department of Energy to separate myths from facts about CNG when similar barbs were hurled at it in the US. To counter what it calls 'industry folklore', the US Department of Energy issued the notification, entitled Natural Gas Buses: Separating Myth from Fact, in April 2000. The release deals with every issue that is confusing Delhi's decision makers: cost, effect on global warming, safety, and health effects of nano particles or ultra-fine particles from CNG. "It becomes very difficult for people to understand the benefits of an alternative fuel programme if they are confronted with misinformation or poor comparisons based on false assumptions," points out the notification.

Similarly in Delhi, ever since the Supreme Court orders have come into effect, there has been a spate of statements from government officials, politicians, some experts and by the media on CNG.