National Clean Air Programme

Why in news?

Four years since the launch of the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP), analysts found that progress has been slow and pollution only incrementally reduced in most cities.

What is the National Clean Air Programme?

- Earlier, it was found that many Indian cities were among the most polluted in the world.
- So, the government launched the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) that committed funds as well as set targets for 131 of India's most polluted cities on January 10, 2019.
- The 131 cities are called **non-attainment cities**, as they did not meet the national ambient air quality standards (NAAQS) for the period of 2011-15 under the National Air Quality Monitoring Programme (NAMP).

To know more about the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP), click here.

What are the target levels?

India's current, annual average prescribed limits for particulate matter	
PM2.5	40 micrograms/per cubic metre
PM10	60 micrograms/per cubic metre

- The NCAP initially set a target of reducing key air pollutants PM2.5 and PM10 by **20-30% in 2024**, taking the **pollution levels in 2017 as the base year** to improve upon.
- In 2022, however, the Centre moved the goalposts and set a new target of a **40% reduction** in particulate matter concentration, but **by 2026**.
- To meet these targets, approximately ₹6,897.06 crore has been disbursed to the cities by the government.
- For administering funds, the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), which coordinates the programme, looks at a city's PM10 levels - the relatively larger, coarser particles.
- However, PM2.5 - the smaller, more dangerous particles - aren't monitored as robustly in all cities, mostly due to the lack of equipment.
- Cities must quantify improvement starting from 2020-21, which requires 15% and more reduction in the annual average PM10 concentration and a concurrent increase in "good air" days to at least 200.
- Anything fewer will be considered 'low' and the funding, provided by the Centre via the Ministry of Environment, will be reduced consequently.

How effective has the NCAP been?

- The Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA) has conducted an analysis of the four-year performance of the NCAP.
- Only 38 of the 131 cities were given annual pollution reduction targets under agreements signed between State Pollution Control Boards, Urban Local Bodies and the Centre managed to meet the targets for FY21-22.
- The CREA noted that 37 cities have completed the source apportionment studies (which quantify the major sources of pollution in a city).
- However, most of these reports weren't available for the public and no city action plan had been updated with information from these studies (as they were supposed to be under the NCAP programme).

The CREA estimates that India will need more than 300 manual air quality monitoring stations per year to reach the NCAP goal of 1,500 monitoring stations by 2024. Only 180 stations have been installed over the last 4 years.

Has NCAP managed to reduce pollution?

Monitoring by NCAP Tracker

- The NCAP Tracker is a joint project by two organisations active in air pollution-policy, Climate Trends and Respirer Living Sciences.
- The NCAP Tracker has been monitoring progress in achieving the 2024 clean air targets set under the NCAP.
- Among these cities, the national capital of Delhi ranked the most polluted in 2022, with an annual average PM2.5 concentration of 99.71 ug/m3.
- But Delhi's PM2.5 levels have improved by over 7% compared to 2019.
- Most cities in the top 10 most polluted list of 2022 were from the Indo-Gangetic Plain.
- All three of Bihar's non-attainment cities, Patna, Muzaffarpur and Gaya, feature in the top 10 most polluted cities on the basis of PM2.5 levels.
- Nine of the top 10 most polluted cities (2019) have reduced their PM2.5 and PM10 concentrations.
- But, the levels in these cities remain much higher than CPCB's annual average safe limits for PM2.5 and PM10.

Monitoring by Centre for Science and Environment

- In 2022, the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) reported that based on PM2.5 levels, only 14 of 43 (NCAP) cities registered a 10% or more reduction in their PM2.5 level between 2019 and 2021.
- Only 43 cities were considered as only they had adequate data to scientifically establish a long-term trend.
- Out of 46 non-NCAP cities with adequate data, 21 recorded significant improvement in their annual PM2.5 value with 5% or more decline between 2019 and 2021.
- There were 16 NCAP cities and 15 non-NCAP cities that registered a significant increase in their annual PM2.5 levels.
- This suggested that non-NCAP and NCAP cities were as likely to be polluted, with the

NCAP regime having limited effectiveness.

Reference

1. The Hindu Explained | Where do Indian cities stand on toxic air?
2. Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change | NCAP Report

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