Winter and Pollution in North India

What is the issue?

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With winter approaching, North India is likely to encounter the pollution challenge.

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What is the continuing pollution menace?

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- The onset of the winter season has come to be associated with toxic atmospheric pollution in North India.
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- Road dust and pollution from heavy vehicles are primarily responsible, especially in Delhi and other urban centres.
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- But besides this the burning of paddy stubble by farmers to clear their fields for the next crop is responsible for 20% of the smog.
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What are the measures in place?

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- The Supreme Court-constituted Environment Pollution (Prevention and Control) Authority (EPCA) issued directions.
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- So the Centre is partnering with Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh in this regard.
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- They provide farmers with a range of mechanised implements to clear fields of paddy crop residue to prepare for sowing wheat.
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- There is a 50% subsidy to farmers, farmers' interest groups or gram panchayats to buy such machines.

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- Also, there is a 75% waiver to cooperative societies, agencies that rent out the equipments.
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- States have got nearly Rs. 650 crore to help farmers buy subsidised equipment such as Happy Seeder, paddy straw choppers and Zero Till Drill.
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What are the concerns and ways out?

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- Farmers, particularly those with land holdings of less than 5 acres, remain sceptical of the efficiency of these machines.
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- There are concerns if these machines would affect productivity and cause damage to the soil.
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- So, just making technological tools available may not be enough to bring an appreciable change.
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- There needs to be proactive engagement to both persuade and reassure farmers.
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- Ironically, it was technology that contributed to the problem in the first place.
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- The rising cost of labour made farmers adopt mechanised equipment.
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- While being efficient, they left behind much longer stalks of paddy than what the traditional practice of removing them by hand did.
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- The greater availability of machines should be utilised to refine the crop-clearing process, but in an ecologically sound manner.
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- A sense of proportion is also essential, as 80% of atmospheric pollution in Delhi in winter draws from sources other than burning stubble.
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- Given Delhi’s geography, low wind speeds and a spike in local pollution raise the particulate matter count dramatically.

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- Thus, to be effective, the fight against pollution must necessarily be broad-based.
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Source: The Hindu

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