



India's New 'Attack' on Air Pollution

(The editorial is based on the article "India's New 'Attack' on Air Pollution" which appeared in The Livemint for 15th February 2019. In this editorial we'll see whether air pollution in India can be contained using policy interventions.)

Air pollution is one of the biggest global environmental challenges of today. A time bound national level strategy for pan India implementation to tackle the increasing air pollution problem across the country in a comprehensive manner in the form of National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) has been launched under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.

The National Clean Air Policy lays down the road map for Indian cities to clean up their act in the next five years.

Background

- India is committed to clean environment and pollution free air and water. In fact, it is mandated in our constitution [**Article 48A** - Protecting and improvement of environment and safeguarding of forests and wildlife; **Article 51A (g)** - It shall be duty of every citizen of India to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife and to have compassion for living creatures.]
- India's commitments and obligations to conservation and protection of environment within the ambit of targeted goals on environmental sustainability under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is manifested in the fact that several administrative and regulatory measures including a separate statute on air and water pollution are under implementation since long. [**Article 253** - Legislation for giving effect to international agreements]
- **The Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981, was enacted under Art. 253 of the Constitution to implement the decisions taken at the United Nations Conference on Human Environment held at Stockholm in June 1972, in which India participated.**
- Sustainable development, in terms of enhancement of human well-being, is an integral part of India's development philosophy.

National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) - How Does it Work?

- **There's no dearth of plans to combat air pollution, but the new policy attempts to pull them all together under a single strategy** that focuses on improving the air quality in 102 'non-attainment cities' across the country.
 - **Cities are declared 'non-attainment' if they consistently fail to meet the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) for PM10 or Nitrogen Dioxide over a period of five years.**
- The policy was **launched by the environment ministry**, but it is massively cross-cutting, **involving the ministries of road transport and highway, petroleum and natural gas, new and renewable energy, heavy industry, housing and urban affairs, agriculture, and health.** Also involved are the government **think tank NITI Aayog, the central pollution control board, experts from the industry, academia, and civil society.** The programme will

further **partner with multilateral and bilateral international organizations, philanthropic foundations and leading technical institutions.**

Key Findings from the NCAP Report

- The policy document acknowledges that initiatives to combat air pollution have been in place “since long”, with implications for the health of Indians, and it also tries to show how and why air pollution is increasing.
 - India has been going through a phase of accelerated industrial activities for the past three decades. The associated growth in terms of industrialization and urbanization has led to manifold increase in pollution issues more specifically air pollution issues.
 - In recent years, medium and small towns and cities have also witnessed spurt in pollution thus getting fast reflected in the non-attainment cities of India.
 - **The reported perplexing statistics in various international reports, drawing correlation of air pollution with various aggravated figures on health, without validation on Indian population further complicates the issues by creating a flawed public perception.** [*international research and reports showing correlations between air pollution and health can be often inapplicable to the Indian context because Indian socio-economic scenario and people’s physiological types are not the same as Europeans, Latin Americans, Africans etc; for example, “The Lancet (a weekly peer-reviewed general medical journal, it is among the world’s oldest, most prestigious, and best known general medical journals), had said that 1.2 million deaths of Indians in 2017 could be attributed to air pollution]*
 - Air pollution emission issues are associated with many sectors which inter alia include **power, transport, industry, residential, construction, and agriculture.**
 - **The impact of air pollution is not limited to health but it gets extended to agriculture and general well-being of human, floral and faunal population.**
 - **Furthermore, since air pollution is not a localized phenomenon, the effect is felt in cities and towns far away from the source. Thus creating the need of inter-state and inter-city coordination in addition to multi-sectoral synchronisation.**
 - While the problem of air pollution is mainly urban centric, studies show the regional scale pollution, which is **more concentrated in entire Indo-Gangetic plains of India and more industrialized states.**
 - Incidences of episodic air pollution during winters in Delhi NCR in recent years have **attracted significant media attention thus bringing the entire issue of air pollution under regular public scrutiny.**
- The report also reads - “It is also clear that the actions listed in the poor category need to be implemented throughout the year” which is admission of the fact that realistically speaking we are not anywhere close to achieving ‘good’ air quality in our cities, at least not yet.

In order to address the air pollution issue, the Government has undertaken many significant steps which inter-alia include:

- Notification of National Ambient Air Quality Standards and sector specific emission and effluent standards for industries;
- Setting up of monitoring network for assessment of ambient air quality;
- Introduction of cleaner gaseous fuels like CNG, LPG etc and ethanol blending;
- Launching of National Air Quality Index (AQI);
- Universalization of BS-IV for vehicles by 2017; leapfrogging from BS-IV to BS-VI standards for vehicles by 1st April, 2020;
- Banning of burning of biomass;
- Promotion of public transport network;
- Pollution Under Control Certificate; [**The Non Polluting Vehicle** mark is a mandatory certification mark required on all new motor vehicles sold in India. The mark certifies that the motor vehicle conforms to the relevant version of the Bharat Stage emission standards.]
- Issuance of directions under Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981;
- Installation of on-line continuous (24×7) monitoring devices by 17 highly polluting industrial sectors;
- Ban on bursting of sound emitting crackers between 10 PM to 6 AM;

- Notification of graded response action plan for Delhi and NCR identifying source wise actions for various levels of air pollution, etc.

Way Forward

- The government has made a beginning of sorts by putting in place a series of monitoring stations in towns and cities. These stations measure air quality for standards laid down by NAAQS.
- The resultant Air Quality Index, or AQI, in turn is meant to alert citizens about the air quality for the day by five categories: public health emergency, severe, very poor, poor and moderate—part of what is called a graded response action plan, or GRAP.
- **So, can the National Clean Air Policy make a difference? It probably can, for the following reasons:**
 - **Media will keep air pollution a burning issue:** *In India, the media can be influential when it comes to public health issues, especially those that affect the middle classes and above, and air quality is an obvious campaign issue.* Every winter, television news reports highlight the poor quality of air in cities. **Regular reports appearing in the international press add to the pressure on authorities.**
 - **The Government may have to address air pollution for political gains:** *The government is worried about the failure of previous interventions:* **for example, the extreme caution in the wording of the policy document is important to note -** “With... recent policy interventions, air quality has purportedly shown some minor improvement in some major cities in recent time which as of now cannot be called as trend”; it further says - **“This is not sufficient and higher level of focused time bound initiatives at both city and rural level now appear obligatory to address the issue in comprehensive manner at national level”.**
 - **Lot of steps have been taken and a lot of initiatives are already in place:** *the Government has clearly done quite a lot, linking the various bits and pieces of long-running government interventions on air pollution.* **AQIs, for instance, are supposed to inform government response on a day-to-day basis.** This level of engagement from the Government certainly goes a long way in trying to contain air pollution.
 - **There is a clear target:** It is to bring down particulate matter 10 and 2.5 levels in the 102 non-attainment cities by 30% by 2024. Having this target will definitely make the NCAP more and more relevant in the coming days.
- Lastly, we can say that the problem of policy interventions in India is the obvious one and is common with any scheme in India. **The problem is of implementation. The policy has no teeth, it’s not legally binding.**
- **However, it does have a “three-tier mechanism for review of monitoring, assessment and inspection for implementation” under which trained manpower and regular inspection drives will be ensured for “stringent implementation”.** But disappointingly, is the perhaps the weakest section of this document as it is too short and vague on specifics.
- But in a desultory [*i.e. marked by lack of definite plan*] landscape, it’s a start. **Whether it manages to restore the air quality in India without the backing of the law, remains to be seen.**

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