Press release

Only 4% of polluted cities in India covered under National Clean Air Programme

New Delhi, 9 January 2026 – A new analysis by the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA) shows that only around 4% of polluted cities in India are covered under the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP). What's more, close to half (44%) of all Indian cities remain in chronic $PM_{2.5}$ non-attainment, with no year of compliance recorded for over five consecutive years. This persistence of pollution highlights that the problem is year-around rather than episodic, driven by continuous emission sources from the transport, industry, and power plant sectors.

Widespread non-attainment beyond NCAP coverage

Using satellite data, we assessed $PM_{2.5}$ levels in 4,041 Indian statutory towns (hereafter referred to as cities). Of these, 1,787 cities exceeded the national annual $PM_{2.5}$ standard in every year across five recent years (2019-2024), excluding the COVID-affected year of 2020. This means nearly 44% of Indian cities face chronic air pollution, indicating a structural problem driven by persistent emission sources rather than short-term episodes.

Yet, India's flagship NCAP covers only a fraction of this burden. Just 130 cities were included under NCAP, and only 67 overlap with the 1,787 persistently non-attainment cities. As a result, NCAP currently addresses only 4% of India's chronically polluted cities, leaving the vast majority outside targeted clean air action.

Uttar Pradesh leads with 416 cities in non-attainment, followed by Rajasthan (158), Gujarat (152), Madhya Pradesh (143), Punjab and Bihar (136 each), and West Bengal (124).

23 NCAP cities have increased PM_{10} levels

Out of 130 NCAP cities, 28 still lack continuous ambient air quality monitoring stations (CAAQMS), and among the 102 cities with stations, 100 cities reported 80% or higher PM_{10} data coverage.

Progress on PM_{10} control remains mixed. Twenty-three cities have achieved the revised 40% PM_{10} reduction target, 28 cities have recorded 21-40% reduction, 26 cities show modest improvements of 1–20%, while 23 cities have in fact experienced an increase in PM_{10} levels since the program's inception.

India's most polluted cities in 2025

The $PM_{2.5}$ assessment for 2025 ranks Byrnihat (Assam), Delhi, and Ghaziabad (Uttar Pradesh) as India's top three most polluted cities with annual concentrations of 100 µg/m^3, 96 µg/m^3, and 93 µg/m^3, respectively. Noida, Gurgaon, Greater Noida, Bhiwadi, Hajipur, Muzaffarnagar, and Hapur ranked as the 4th to 10th most polluted cities in India based on $PM_{2.5}$ concentrations.

For PM_{10}, Delhi tops the list with an annual average of 197 µg/m^3, three times the national standard. Ghaziabad and Greater Noida follow with averages of 190 µg/m^3 and 188 µg/m^3, respectively. Rajasthan has the highest number of cities in the Top 50, 18 in total, followed by Uttar Pradesh (10), Madhya Pradesh (5), and Bihar and Odisha (four each).

NCAP funding, mitigation measures

Since the program's inception, ₹13,415 crore has been released under NCAP and XV-Finance Commission grants, of which ₹9,929 crore (74%) has been utilised. Road dust management accounts for 68% of spending, followed by transport (14%) and waste and biomass burning (12%), while industries, domestic fuel use, public outreach (each <1%), and capacity building and monitoring (3%) received limited allocations.

Reported NCAP progress is largely concentrated on infrastructure and service measures such as road paving, mechanical sweeping, greening, and waste processing, while actions directly targeting emission reduction at source remain limited.

'*India's only way forward is to strengthen the country's air quality governance through targeted, science-based reforms. This means prioritising $PM_{2.5}$ and its precursor gases (SO_2 and NO_2) over PM_{10}, revising the list of non-attainment cities under NCAP, setting stricter emission standards for industries and power plants, allocating funding based on source apportionment studies, and adopting an airshed-based approach to address air pollution at a regional scale,*' said Manoj Kumar, India Analyst, CREA.

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About CREA

The Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA) is an independent research organisation focused on revealing the trends, causes, and health impacts, as well as the solutions to air pollution. We use scientific data, research and evidence to support the efforts of governments, companies and campaigning organisations worldwide in their efforts to move towards clean energy and clean air. www.energyandcleanair.org.