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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

# Air Pollution Needs Political Will, Not the Election Cycle

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# Air Pollution Needs Political Will, Not the Election Cycle


**The Indian Express**    3 July 2026    **GS3**

Source: [ujjyari.com](http://ujjyari.com) — researched, fact-checked & UPSC-mapped



## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"Why does the smog return every winter despite years of clean-air schemes? If air pollution kills quietly all year, why does policy only wake up in the season before it becomes visible, and votes?"*

Source: [Original editorial](#)  [The Indian Express](#)


**Every fact web-verified against primary sources** (<https://ujjyari.com/how-we-verify/>)

## WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

India's air-pollution response spikes every **winter** when smog turns visible and politically salient, then fades, tracking the **electoral cycle** more than the science. The **National Clean Air Programme** (<https://ujjyari.com/schemes/ncap/>) (**NCAP**), launched in 2019, remains **city-centric**, even though pollution is **transboundary** (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/transboundary/>) and drifts across boundaries. With only a minority of cities meeting early **PM10** targets, the case for **airshed-level planning** and lasting political will is urgent. For an aspirant, this is a core GS3 case on **environmental governance, public health and federal coordination**.

## THE CRUX IN 60 WORDS

India treats air pollution as a **seasonal, reactive** problem, acting when winter smog becomes visible and votes are near, then relaxing. But pollution is **transboundary**, so **NCAP's city-by-city** framework is undercut by wind-borne pollution from outside. Durable clean air needs **airshed-level planning, multi-year financing**, stronger monitoring, and **accountability that outlasts any single election cycle**, will, not the calendar.

## THE ISSUE, DECODED

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CONCEPT	WHAT IT MEANS	WHY IT MATTERS
<b>NCAP</b>	National Clean Air Programme (2019)	India's flagship clean-air framework
<b>Non-attainment cities</b>	Cities failing air-quality standards	NCAP's unit of planning and targets
<b>Airshed</b>	Zone sharing a common air mass	Right scale, since pollution is transboundary
<b>PM10 / PM2.5</b>	Particulate matter pollutants	Core health-damaging metrics tracked

## THE ANALYSIS: WHY THE SMOG KEEPS RETURNING

- 1 Action follows visibility, not exposure.** Pollution harms all year, but it becomes politically salient only when winter smog is visible, so interventions cluster seasonally and then recede.
- 2 The framework is city-centric.** NCAP assigns each non-attainment city its own targets, but pollution is transboundary and wind-borne, so a city's plan is undercut by pollution drifting in from outside.
- 3 The right scale is the airshed.** Managing air quality across the entire zone that shares an air mass, spanning municipal and state lines, is the only way to tackle transboundary sources coherently.
- 4 Progress has been limited.** Only a minority of cities met early PM10 reduction targets, reflecting weak sustained financing, monitoring and enforcement across governments.

## DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

**National Clean Air Programme (NCAP)**, launched **2019**, targeting **PM10** reductions across **100-plus non-attainment cities**; original goal of up to 40% reduction by 2025-26. **Bodies:** Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC); **Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB)**; State Pollution Control Boards; **Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM)** for the NCR and adjoining areas. **Tools:** Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP); National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS); Air Quality Index (AQI); source apportionment (<https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/apportionment/>) studies. **Concepts:** airshed, transboundary pollution, non-attainment city, particulate matter (PM10, PM2.5), stubble burning, cooperative federalism (<https://ujjiyari.com/terms/cooperative-federalism/>). **Data point:** only a minority of NCAP cities met early PM10 targets, underlining the financing and enforcement gap.

## THE DEBATE

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**Argument that seasonality is the core failure:** Tying action to visible winter smog and the electoral calendar means chasing episodes, not sources; without airshed planning and year-round will, targets keep slipping.

**Argument that electoral pressure helps:** Politics is what forces governments to act at all; visible winter interventions do deliver some short-term relief, and federal and jurisdictional complexity makes airshed governance genuinely hard to implement.

**Balanced verdict:** Electoral attention can start action but cannot sustain it. The reactive, seasonal model produces episodic relief, not durable clean air. The answer is to keep the political energy but redirect it into multi-year, airshed-scale governance with steady financing and accountability.

## HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (TRANSFERABLE SKILL)

*A problem governed at the wrong scale cannot be solved, however sincere the effort. Air pollution is an airshed-scale phenomenon addressed at city scale, so it leaks across the mismatch. When you analyse any policy, ask whether the unit of action (city, state, sector) fits the true boundary of the problem (the airshed, the river basin, the market). Scale mismatch is a recurring, diagnosable cause of policy failure.*

## DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

Air pollution harms all year -> becomes visible in winter smog -> politically salient near elections -> reactive seasonal curbs (GRAP, halts) -> air clears, attention fades -> sources untouched -> NCAP city-by-city framework -> but pollution transboundary, drifts across boundaries -> city plans undercut -> shift to airshed governance + multi-year financing + year-round accountability -> durable clean air

## THE WAY FORWARD

- ① **Move from city-centric to airshed governance.** Plan and act across the whole air mass under NCAP, not city by city.
- ② **Guarantee multi-year financing.** Fund clean-air action on stable, predictable budgets that outlast a single term.
- ③ **Strengthen monitoring and source apportionment.** Expand real-time monitoring and identify the actual sources to target them precisely.
- ④ **Build cross-state institutions.** Extend CAQM-style coordinated bodies to other airsheds for regional cooperation.

## 5 **Make clean air a year-round metric.** Tie accountability to sustained annual air quality, not seasonal emergency response.

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### THE TAKEAWAY BOX

*Argue that India's air-pollution governance is reactive, seasonal and electorally timed, that NCAP's city-centric design ignores transboundary pollution, and that durable improvement needs airshed planning, multi-year financing and lasting accountability.*

*"Clean air cannot be delivered in a single season or a single term."*

*NCAP (2019); non-attainment cities; PM10 and PM2.5; NAAQS and AQI; CPCB and MoEFCC; CAQM; GRAP; airshed and transboundary pollution.*

*When a harm is invisible for most of the year, how should a democracy sustain attention and funding beyond the moments when it is politically convenient?*

*UPSC has asked on air pollution, urbanisation and environmental governance. This editorial adds the airshed-versus-city-scale and political-will dimensions.*

*environmental governance, public health, cooperative federalism (<https://ujjyari.com/terms/federalism/>), urbanisation, NCAP, CAQM, particulate pollution, climate policy.*

**Sources:** *Indian Express* (<https://indianexpress.com/section/opinion>), *Central Pollution Control Board* (<https://cpcb.nic.in>), *Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change* (<https://moef.gov.in>)

Source: Air Pollution Needs Political Will, Not the Election Cycle — Ujjyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

**KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE**

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**India's air-pollution response remains reactive and seasonal, driven by electoral timelines, so durable improvement requires long-term political will, airshed-level planning under the National Clean Air Programme, and accountability that outlasts any single election cycle.**

 **SUPPORTING**

- Action spikes in winter when smog becomes visible and politically salient, then fades, so the response chases episodes rather than sources.
- NCAP's city-by-city, non-attainment-city framework ignores that pollution is transboundary and moves with the wind, making airshed-level planning essential.
- Without sustained financing, monitoring and enforcement across governments and years, clean-air targets slip, as limited progress on PM10 reductions shows.

 **COUNTER**

Some argue that electoral pressure is precisely what forces governments to act at all, that visible winter interventions do deliver short-term relief, and that federal and jurisdictional complexity makes airshed governance far harder to implement than to prescribe.

 **WAY FORWARD**

Shift from city-centric to airshed governance under NCAP, guarantee multi-year financing, strengthen monitoring and source apportionment, build cross-state institutions, and make clean air a year-round accountability metric rather than a seasonal campaign.


**MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK**

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**QUESTION**

*"India's air-pollution governance remains reactive and seasonal, tied to the electoral cycle rather than the airshed." Critically examine, and suggest how the National Clean Air Programme can deliver durable improvement. (250 words)*

**INTRODUCTION**

Air pollution is one of India's largest public-health burdens, yet the policy response to it behaves like a seasonal event. Attention rises with the winter smog and falls with it, tracking the electoral calendar more than the science.

**BODY**

The pattern is reactive by design. Pollution becomes politically salient when it becomes visible, in the winter months over the northern plains, so interventions cluster then, emergency curbs, construction halts, odd-even schemes, and recede once the air clears and the news cycle moves on.

This chases episodes, not sources. The deeper flaw is structural.

The National Clean Air Programme, launched in 2019 to improve air quality in over a hundred non-attainment cities, is built city by city, with each municipality responsible for its own targets. But air pollution does not respect municipal or state boundaries; it is transboundary and moves with the wind, so city-specific plans are undercut by pollution drifting in from outside.

That is why an airshed approach, planning across the whole geographic zone that shares an air mass, is essential. Progress has been limited: only a minority of cities met early PM10 reduction targets, reflecting weak financing, monitoring and enforcement sustained across governments.

The counter, that electoral pressure at least forces some action and that federal complexity makes airshed governance hard, has merit, but it explains the difficulty rather than excusing the seasonality. Durable clean air needs will that outlasts a single term.

**CONCLUSION**

Clean air cannot be delivered in a single season or a single term. Shifting NCAP from city-centric to airshed governance, guaranteeing multi-year financing and building year-round accountability would turn a reactive campaign into a durable public-health mission.


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