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Mains Practice Questions

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Q. Tackling air pollution has rarely been a priority in policymaking. Analyse the statement in the light of ongoing health emergency declared in the National Capital Region. (250 words)

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Approach

- Introduce by mentioning about the recent public health emergency in Delhi.
- Mention factors which indicate that air pollution has been a low priority.
- Mention the initiatives taken by the government to combat air pollution.
- Suggest remedial measures in the way forward.

Introduction

Recently, the **Environment Pollution (Prevention and Control) Authority- EPCA** declared a public health emergency in New Delhi as pollution levels entered the '**severe plus**' category. Factors such as stubble burning, vehicular emissions, firecrackers, and dust from the construction sector have deteriorated the condition further.

Body

Factors which indicate that air pollution has been a low priority:

- **Lack of political attention:** Air pollution as an issue is raised only when there is a severe public outcry that too on limited occasions. Public health has never been a priority area or an election agenda.
- **Toothless Watchdog:** Under the **Air Act 1981**, the **Pollution Control Boards** are presently unable to fulfil their mandate as watchdogs against polluters.
- **Pollution Liability:** India's pollution liability regime has never prioritised the adverse impact of pollution on health. In its present form, India's Air Act does not mention or prioritise the importance of reducing the health impact of rising pollution.
- **Power to Levy Penalties:** Presently, boards cannot levy penalties. They are not empowered to encash environmental compensations from polluters to make up for the cost of mitigating the damage that they have caused.

The government has taken several initiatives to combat air pollution:

Government Initiatives to Combat Air Pollution

- 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);
- Leapfrogging from BS-IV to BS-VI standards for vehicles by 1st April 2020;

- Installation of on-line continuous (24x7) monitoring devices by 17 highly polluting industrial sectors;
- Regulating the bursting of pollution-emitting crackers;
- Notification of **graded response action plan** for Delhi identifying source wise actions for various levels of air pollution, etc.

Way Forward

- Pollution control boards should be empowered to **declare public health emergencies** in case of toxic air quality, with the power to temporarily shut down all polluting activities.
- Paying **compensation for gross violations** by industry would be a strong reinforcement for polluters to adopt cleaner technologies and comply with standards.
 - **Accountability** and **deterrence** are essential in making sure polluters comply with emission standards.
- **Coordination among multiple authorities:** The causes of air pollution are multifold and several agencies and ministries are involved, therefore appropriate legislative measures for multi-sectoral participation and collaborating the efforts of state and federal pollution control boards should be taken urgently.