Clean Air for Indian Cities: An Action Plan

What a city, its institutions and its citizens can do, source by source. 3S and Our Health, 9 November 2026.

Why it matters

Air pollution is one of the largest risks to health in India. The India State-Level Disease Burden Initiative estimated that about 1.67 million deaths in India in 2019 were attributable to air pollution (The Lancet Planetary Health, 2020). India's annual standard for fine particles (PM2.5) is 40 µg/m³, while the World Health Organization's 2021 guideline is 5 µg/m³, and most large Indian cities exceed even the national standard. Children, the elderly, pregnant women, people with asthma or heart disease, and those who work outdoors suffer most.

The good news is that most of a city's pollution comes from sources the city can act on: vehicles, dust, open burning, industry and generators, and household fuels. The National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) already asks its 131 cities to cut particulate levels, and ranks them each year in the Swachh Vayu Survekshan. This plan sets out what works.

How to use this plan

Each city should begin with its own evidence: measure, find out which sources matter most, act on the largest first, and publish the results every month. The ten areas below can be adapted to any city, large or small.

1. Know the air: measure, attribute, inform

- Complete the monitoring network with continuous stations, and add low-cost sensors at schools, hospitals, markets and industrial areas.
- Commission (or update) a source-apportionment study and emissions inventory, so that money goes to the sources that matter most in that city.
- Publish the daily AQI with a simple health advisory in Hindi and English, with alerts for schools, hospitals and outdoor workers on bad days.
- Release a monthly city air report card on an open dashboard.

2. Transport: move people, not vehicles

- Expand and electrify city bus fleets; add last-mile e-rickshaws and feeder services.
- Build safe, continuous footpaths and cycle tracks; manage and price parking.
- Enforce pollution checks (PUC), using remote sensing where possible; take visibly polluting and very old diesel vehicles off the road; stop engine idling.
- Schedule heavy goods traffic away from peak hours and congested areas; build an EV charging network.

3. Dust: roads, construction and open land

- Sweep the dustiest roads mechanically and sprinkle water; pave or green unpaved shoulders and medians; repair broken roads quickly.
- Make every construction site use covers, wind barriers, wheel-washing and water spraying, and carry material covered; register large sites and require dust self-audits, with penalties for violations.
- Process construction and demolition waste as the national C&D waste rules require, instead of dumping it.
- Green or cover exposed soil and open plots.

4. Stop burning: waste, leaves and biomass

- Enforce the ban on open burning of garbage, leaves and plastic under the solid waste rules, backed by door-to-door collection, segregation and composting of wet waste.
- Prevent and put out landfill fires; cap and clean up old dumpsites.
- Move eateries and street vendors from coal and wood to LPG or PNG; promote electric or gas crematoria.
- Work with neighbouring districts on crop residue: in-field machines, bio-decomposers and markets for straw.

5. Industry, energy and generators

- Shift industries in and around the city to cleaner fuels such as PNG, with online stack monitoring displayed in public.
- Move brick kilns to cleaner technology such as zig-zag firing, and enforce emission norms.
- Cut diesel generator use through reliable power supply, and require cleaner or retrofitted generators.
- Inspect regularly, penalise repeat violators, and publish their names.

6. Homes and neighbourhoods

- Ensure clean cooking fuel (LPG or PNG) in every household, especially in poorer settlements, with support for refills.
- Provide winter heating for night workers and the homeless, so that no one has to burn waste to keep warm.
- Form ward-level clean air committees with resident welfare associations.

7. Green and plan the city

- Grow urban forests and roadside green belts of native, dust-trapping species, with green buffers around industrial areas.
- Plan land use so that people can live near work and public transport, shortening daily trips.
- Protect lakes, wetlands and open green spaces.

8. Bad-air days and festivals

- Adopt a city-level graded action plan, on the lines of GRAP in Delhi-NCR: agreed steps as the AQI worsens, such as stopping construction, intensifying sweeping, restricting polluting vehicles and generators, and adjusting school hours.
- Celebrate festivals with light, not smoke: community celebrations, diyas and lights in place of firecrackers, and only green crackers within permitted hours, if any.
- Coordinate with neighbouring districts during the crop-burning season.

9. Protect health

- Track respiratory and heart-related hospital visits against the AQI, and prepare hospitals for winter peaks.
- Move school sports and assemblies indoors on poor-air days, and improve ventilation and air cleaning in classrooms.
- Give clear advice to vulnerable groups, including N95 masks on severe days.

10. Govern, fund and account

- Set up a city clean air cell under the Municipal Commissioner, with the pollution control board, traffic police, transport, public works, health and industry departments, and review progress every month.
- Spend NCAP and Finance Commission air-quality funds on the largest sources, and link spending to measured results.
- Run one complaint channel, such as CPCB's Sameer app, with time-bound action, and publish how complaints were resolved.
- Publish an annual public report on air quality and on the actions taken.

What citizens and civil society can do

- Spread awareness through campaigns such as "Roshni ka parv, dhuen ka nahin", school and college clean-air clubs, and health camps.
- Act locally: report open burning and dust, run waste-segregation drives, plant and care for trees, and try car-free and carpool days.
- Practise citizen science: put sensors at schools and clinics and share the data with the city.
- Hold the city to account: follow its clean air plan and ask for its public report card.

Timeline

Immediate (0–6 months)	Short term (6–18 months)	Medium term (18 months–3 years)
• AQI alerts and health advisories • Enforce the burning ban and construction-dust rules • Mechanised sweeping of the worst roads • A bad-air-day graded plan • A city clean air cell	• Source-apportionment study • More electric buses, footpaths and cycle tracks • A C&D waste plant • Clean fuel for eateries • Landfill fire control • Sensors at schools	• Public transport at scale • Industrial fuel shift with online monitoring • Urban forests • Old dumpsites cleaned up • Land-use planning for shorter trips

Measuring progress

- Annual average PM2.5 and PM10, and the number of days with good or satisfactory AQI.
- Share of roads swept mechanically; share of waste collected, segregated and processed; open-burning complaints resolved within 48 hours.
- Buses per lakh population, the share of electric buses, and kilometres of footpaths and cycle tracks.
- Respiratory hospital visits on bad-air days, and school days with outdoor activity moved indoors.
- Funds spent against results achieved.

Clean air is a shared task: the city acts on its sources, and every citizen on their own smoke.