



Rendering The Perennial Lifeless

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(The editorial is based on the article “Rendering the Perennial Lifeless” which appears in EPW on 1st December 2018.)

The pollution of the Ganges is a huge challenge. It has already shown its adverse impact on the environment, ecosystem, and animal and human health. About 40 percent of India’s population across 5 states (Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and West Bengal) is dependent on the river for its water, but unfortunately, the water is severely polluted.

While other rivers are equally in danger and are no doubt equally significant, the Ganga has been in a precarious condition despite of the government’s added attention towards it.

Causes of Pollution of the Ganges

- **Industrial Waste** – There are a large number of industries on the bank of the Ganges in cities like Patna, Kanpur, Varanasi, and Allahabad. Numerous tanneries, slaughterhouses, textile mills, hospitals, chemical plants, and distilleries dump untreated wastes into the river resulting in pollution of the river. Out of the total volume of effluent reaching the river, 12% is contributed by the industries.
- **Human Waste** – The Ganges flows through 52 cities and 48 towns. The domestic water used by the population in these cities and towns adds to the pollution of the river.
- **Religious Traditions** – More than 70 million people bathe in the Ganges during the festive season. Food, leaves, flowers, diyas and other wastes are left in the Ganges that adds to its pollution. According to Hindu tradition, if a deceased person is cremated on the banks of the Ganges then that would bring instant salvation. This results in thousands of bodies being cremated on the banks of the river every year, many of which are only half-burnt, thus, adding to the pollution.
- **Dams are also one of the main cause of pollution** in the Ganga. Dams obstruct the flow of the river and make it slow which hinders the self-purification capacity of the river.

- **The high use of fertilizers and pesticides** in agriculture field directly flows to the river through rainwater adding to its pollution level.
- Many **hydropower projects** planned on the Alaknanda and Bhagirathi in Uttarakhand pose a threat to Himalayan ecology and severely impact Ganga's natural flow.



Action Plans to Save The Ganga

- **National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG)** envisages five-tier structure at national, state and district level to take measures for prevention, control, and abatement of environmental pollution in river Ganga and to ensure continuous adequate flow of water so as to rejuvenate the river, Ganga.
- **Namami Gange** integrates the efforts to clean and protect the Ganga River in a comprehensive manner.
- **National Ganga River Basin Authority (NGRBA)** has been mandated as a planning, financing, monitoring and coordinating authority for strengthening the collective efforts of the Central and State governments for effective abatement of pollution and conservation of river Ganga so as to ensure that by the year 2020 no untreated municipal sewage or industrial effluent will flow into the river Ganga.

Loopholes in the Policies to Clean Ganga

- **Treatment infrastructure could not be in line with the scale of pollution**, and riparian states and the Centre had not ensured that pollution was checked at the source before being emptied into the river.

- **Lack of political will** has been one of the major issues. Pollution has rarely been an electoral issue. Employment, economic growth, and poverty alleviation are more urgent.
- Even though policies for cleaning the Ganga mention partnerships with Gram Panchayats there is **almost no involvement of civil society or any citizen participation for monitoring the sustainability of the policy implementations.**
- **Rampant violation of laws, ubiquitous corruption** and absence of coordination between the Centre and States along with the delays in reviewing projects, poor inter-agency cooperation, funding imbalances across sites add to the woes of implementation of the policies.

Way Forward

The health and aliveness of a river is no longer seen in its ability to support the beings living in harmony with it, but it has come to mean how much it can be used for commercial purposes, as a waterway, as energy, as sludge flush, and for religious tourism.

- As long as the river continues to be seen merely as an entity for extraction, its further concretization and pollution will continue unabated. This mindset has to change.
- **Making violations cognizable offenses** and bringing in an armed Ganga Protection Corps under the National River Ganga (Rejuvenation, Protection, and Management) Bill, to be tabled soon, will be able to put a stop to pollution offenses.
- **Accept that the river needs water to dilute waste.** In India, where the cost of pollution control is unaffordable and massive, a cheaper option is to dilute the waste with clean and flowing water. The standards for water quality also provide for a dilution factor of 10, but it is not followed. This is why discharge standards for water bodies are set at 30 biological oxygen demand (BOD), while bathing water quality standard is 3 BOD. So, even after the best treatment, the river needs 10 times the water to bring it to acceptable quality.
- **Funding for various projects can be kept conditional** for the State government and it should be held accountable for maintaining the ecological flow of the river in all its stretches.
- **River-centric urban planning** that strengthens decentralized public participation is the need of the hour.
- The private sector can be given a wider role in installation and management of the STPs (Sewer Treatment Plants), besides launching schemes for cultural and tourist-interest activities, including development, maintenance, and management of bathing and cremation ghats, without impairing the sanctity and dignity of the river.
- **We need more publicly available data and more local analysis of this data.** There is also a need for more education and awareness on the health effects of pollution, as well as the very causes of pollution.

- **The government needs to take a comprehensive look at the interconnection between policies** - such as subsidies, electricity consumption, power use patterns, industrial development, urbanization plans - and pollution.
- **All these policy measures should be supplemented by creativity, innovation, discipline, transparency, and strong leadership.**