

# ISSUE BRIEF

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INTRA-REGIONAL GANGA INITIATIVE

# Ganga, Its Activism & Media

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#### **Abstract**

he pattern & expression of activism & media response in context to river Ganges has to be appreciated in the light of general psyche of Indians towards their national river. The pattern remains an enigma as the river is revered & polluted simultaneously. Clearly it is an issue of micro level reverence versus macro level insensitiveness towards the river that sustains not only greater part of India but the subcontinent.

The river gets polluted & environmentally degraded continuously by a barrage of pollutants, ranging from untreated sewage to industrial effluent to solid waste dumping to open defecation to religious activities including immersion of idols. Climate change and events like melting of glaciers is adding to the threat and vulnerability.

As a matter of fact, religious leaders, in the last few years, have taken a pivotal role in bolstering activism against Ganga degradation and substantially added voice to what environmental activists and experts have been warning since long. The campaign of religious leaders against Ganga pollution have actually forced Government of India to abandon the largely unsuccessful and unproductive Ganga Action Plan-conceived about 3 decades back to clean up Ganga but had significantly gone wrong even after an expenditure in the tune of nearly 500 million dollars - and introduced much wider & comprehensive National Ganga River Basin Authority (NGRBA) under the chairmanship of Prime Minister to conserve the river.

### Introduction

Ganga is merely not only a flowing sheet of water but much more to millions who live and find livelihood based on the river which has been declared a national river by Indian Prime Minister in

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2008. It is merely an extension of what first Indian Prime Minister had remarked more than half a century back in his book, "...The Ganges, above all, is the river of India which has held India's heart captive and drawn uncounted millions to her banks since the dawn of history. The story of the Ganges, from her source to the sea, from old times to new, is the story of India's civilisation and culture. However impact of Ganga and the riverine system that it nourishes is not only restricted to India, and rather spread over entire South Asia.

As a matter of fact the sheer numbers do tell the story of the river. It is stated that one out of every 12 people in world one live (around 450 million within its basin area) within the river that has a total flowing length of 2,525 km; flowing area of 1.016,124 sq. km; contains water volume of 525 km3; catchment area of 10 lakh hectares and harbours 100 cities and numerous villages and locations in its basin area. This huge pressure also tells on the river health. The range of anthropogenic activities, legal and illegal, apart from growing impact of climate change has been putting the river under severe stress, especially during the recent decades. The activism to save the river has grown alongside; so does the media responses.

#### Status of the river vis-à-vis Government actions

The river has been affected by a range of factors; over exploitation of water to unabated pollution, commercial activities to religious activities. Ganges flows through the most densely populated sections of India passing through 29 cities with population over 100,000, 23 cities with population between 50,000 and 100,000, and about 48 towns with less than 50,000 people. A significant proportion of effluents from these areas, often untreated, continually add on to the river caused through domestic usage like bathing, laundry and public defectaion. Pollution from industrial sources is even more important due to the sheer volume of their effluent as well as the poor quality.

As a matter of fact the pollution in river Ganges first came into focus—and also in public domain—visà-vis the industrial pollution. Innumerable tanneries, chemical plants, textile mills, distilleries, slaughterhouses, jute mills, hospitals and likewise constantly contribute to river's pollution by dumping untreated toxic and non-biodegradable solid waste apart from the considerable liquid waste. It is believed that the bevy of pollutants released into river everyday trigger irreparable damage to its ecosystem.

In the 'Bonn Declaration on Global Water Security', during an international meeting on water issues held at Bonn in 2013, river Ganges has been christened as one of the most polluted large rivers in the world. It is stated that each year it carries 16,000 tons of ash from cremated bodies along with a mixture of sewage and toxic chemicals; a fallout of dense population and rapidly developing economy. The national figures are equally emphatic. A report prepared by Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) of India shows that the average BOD values of the river–BOD is the Biological Oxygen Demand which indicates the gross organic pollution of the river–have crossed the

maximum permissible limit of 3 milligram/1itre at 24 of the total 54 sampling points; a whopping 45% of the sample areas. Major part of river is not even fit for bathing, forget about drinking, due to high coliform count which indicates the mixing of untreated sewage in the river. The statistics show the volume of coliform and faecal coliform bacteria were above limit in about 75% of the sampling points. In certain parts of the river at about certain time, the figures were found to be 500 times over the standard of 5000 MPN/100 ml. In response to a parliament question in May 2013, it was shared that presently 3000 mld (million litres daily) of liquid waste contaminate the river. Various reports from CPCB, CSE (Center for Science and Environmnt) as well as other government agencies also indicate the high level of industrial pollution affecting the river.

According to an affidavit filed in the Supreme Court by National River Conservation Directorate of the environment ministry in 2007, 661 grossly polluting industries (each with over 100 kg BOD load per day) were located along the Ganga. Of these around 12% were defaulting in terms of managing pollution. In 2012 CPCB estimated that roughly 500 mld of industrial discharge flows into the river from 764 industries. Definitely the actual level and scale of pollution is much beyond what transpire in these official datasets.

However the latest—and one of the severest—impact on river has come from the number of dams and barrages, which have either recently installed or in pipeline for irrigation, power and other collateral requirements, Experts opine that there would be no water in large stretches of Alaknanda and Bhagirathi riverbeds—part of Ganga basin-if the Uttarakhand government goes ahead with its plan to build 53 power projects on these two rivers which join at Dev Prayag to form the Ganga, reported Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) on April 1, 2010. A CAG inspection report submitted to the Uttarakhand governor says that already the riverbed is completely dry at Shrinagar (Garhwal) and if all projects are allowed to execute then the aquatic biodiversity of the river basin will become nonexistent.

The CAG has also criticized the state government's power policy which has allowed a private company to divert maximum 90% of the river water to power turbines, leaving only 10% to flow in the natural course of the river. As a matter of fact, there has been serious threat of Ganga disappearing close to its origin. In all, 12 large and medium hydroelectric projects are either functioning, are under construction or have been proposed between Gangotri and Haridwar. Ecologists feel that there will be no free-flowing water for about 250 km of India's holiest river if all the projects are executed.

The efforts to counter and minimise this pollution loads began in right earnest in 1985 when the union government had launched the Ganga Action Plan (GAP). The Rs 462-crore initiative was targeted at improving the water quality to acceptable standards (defined as suitable for bathing) by intercepting the sewage and treating it before the river discharge. The programme selected 25 towns located along the river in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal, all riparian states. GAP has

continued for close to three decades. However GAP has been identified as a relative failure by most experts for a range of reasons; mostly for the reason that it has failed to achieve what it was meant to be, improving the river water quality. As various points of country, the river water quality has actually deteriorated post GAP, which was undertaken in two phases.

The complaints are many: infrastructure installed failed to close the gap on the sewage generated and treated in the basin, operations and maintenance of the commissioned plants was often affected by logistic problems, erroneous positioning of treatment plants which means most operated well below capacity while bulk of sewage get mixed with river untreated. However the biggest complaint against GAP was it was all along a completely hardware and technocratic approach without any accommodation for an inclusive and participatory approach.

While it became apparent that GAP had failed to deliver, government took initiative to undertake an even bigger and more ambitious project to save Ganga. Prime minister announced the proposal to set up a separate high powered Ganga River Basin Authority to stop its pollution and degradation. On April 28, 2011 the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs has approved the Project for cleaning of River Ganga to be implemented by the National Ganga River Basin Authority (NGRBA) at an estimated cost of Rs. 7000 crore. It has been postulated that another two decades would be required to cleanse the revered Ganges, one of the world's dirtiest rivers.

# Activism to save Ganga and Media

The root of activism apparently lies in the ways of operation and mindset that the government showcases towards looking at the river including its future; which grossly differs from community and civil society mindset and way of consideration. Governments broadly consider the issue of managing the river from strictly engineering and resource mobilization point of views while the civil society looks at the river from the standpoint of reverence and sustenance. However it is strange to note the micro-macro mindset conflict within community itself as the river is revered and catered to rot simultaneously.

The activism to save Ganga operates at various layers. While social activism has been in place for more than five decades; the legal activism is about three decades old. However religious activism, which is relatively new, has become one of the most powerful tools of activism of late. It is also interesting to note that though often various forms of activisms overlap but generally they tend to work in isolation. Media, mainly the mainstream print and audio-visual, have played a key role in highlighting the issues in public domain and influence policy decisions as activisms often rightfully piggyback on media. It needs to be mentioned that the issue is often raised now in new media especially aftermath of recent Uttarakhand disaster when the broad issues pertaining to development and river's existence came under scanner.

#### A. Social activism

The social concerns and activism—overt and covert—about Ganga is quiet old. Noble laureate Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekanada had repeatedly written and expressed their anguish about the deteriorating status of Ganges. The cudgel has been successfully carried by the likes of Padmabibhusan Sundelal Bahuguna, Water Man Rajendra Singh and likewise in more recent decades. In 1998, Smt Rama Rauta, the founder of National Women's Organization (NWO) under the leadership of Dr. Sushila Nair, started Save Ganga Movement - against the pollution of Ganges and its tributaries - based on the principles of nonviolence and tried to mobilise within people at large. Eminent Gandhians joined the movement subsequently. Also agonized by the government's inaction towards saving Ganges, Ganga Mukti Sangram Saamiti decided to initiate a mass drive by gathering thousands of Ganga Devotees along with the Ganga Rath which traveled through Varanasi, Allahabad, Kanpur, Matura, Vrindavan to finally reach Delhi.

Noted environmental activist, Prof. G. D. Agrawal sat for fast unto death on twice in 2008 and 2009 to protest building of dams in the upper stretches of Ganges. On both occasions, Dr. Agarwal succeeded in stopping the construction in this sensitive and sacred portion of India. Social activists like Anna Hazare also lent support to the voice. Under pressure Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh accepted publicly that there would be no more hydroelectric damming of the Ganga in Uttarkhand. Prime Minister also called for a National River Ganga Basin Authority (NRGBA) meeting and urged the authorities to utilize the 2,600 crore (~520M USD) sanctioned to clean up the river by creating sewer networks, sewage treatment plants, sewage pumping stations, electric crematoria, community toilets and development of river fronts.

Other nonprofits also contributed in various scales. A Kolkata based nonprofit, Environment Governed Integrated Organisation , took initiative from 2007 in association with various governmental and other agencies to promote the use of non-toxic colour in idol making as otherwise toxic paints , mixing with river water during immersion of idols, significantly pollute the river water and affects its biodiversity apart from proving a threat to millions as the same water is used for drinking purpose with standard treatment which does not fully neutralize the pollution from heavy metals embedded in these paints. The effort has been able to generate significant awareness and now nearly 60% of idols are prepared from nontoxic paints from almost zero percent even five years back. The initiative has received accolades nationally and internationally.

# B. Judicial Activism

In 1985, the pollution in Ganga has come into the public domain when Advocate M.C. Mehta filed a writ petition against Union of India and others - the first river pollution case in environmental public interest litigation—alleging unabated pollution from some tanneries in Kanpur and charging that , despite having adequate legal sanction, government authorities had not taken effective steps to

prevent environmental pollution of the river Ganga. Using the judicial route, Mehta called upon state agencies to prevent leather tanneries and the municipal corporation of Kanpur from disposing of industrial and domestic effluent in the river. Justice Kuldip Singh expanded this petition to include all large cities in the Ganga basin and the "Ganga Pollution Case" was born; which has not only catered better Ganga governance but also led to formation of bevvy of environmental norms in the country. In 1990s, the Supreme Court stepped up the gear by passing orders that reprimanded government agencies for dereliction of duty. Three landmark judgments and a number of orders against more than 50,000 polluting industries in the Ganga basin were passed from time to time. A substantial success has been achieved by way of creating awareness and controlling pollution in the river Ganges.

In this case, apart from industries, more than 250 towns and cities have been ordered to put sewage treatment plants. Six hundred tanneries operating in highly congested residential area of Kolkata were shifted out of the city. A large number of industries were closed down by the Court and were allowed to reopen only after these industries had set up effluent treatment plants and controlled pollution. As a result of these directions millions of people have been saved from the effects of air and water pollution in Ganga basin covering 8 states in India. Supreme Court also penalized State Pollution Control Boards for faulty reporting and also pressed the Ministry of Environment to become more forthright in its approach. Subsequently several high courts took the cudgels and also passed significant orders in this respect. The case in point is the Calcutta High Court, which had not only directed range of measures to clean up Ganga within state of West Bengal but also set up a high power committee to monitor the river on its behalf and report back to court in regular intervals.

Media lapped up this mode of activism. With the high news value inbuilt with a judicial process along with courtroom dramas, fines and punishments, the judicial activism became immensely favourable fodder for media; which by default also created an impact as decision making and implementation level. Yet on the long run this judicial activism proved limited and got struck by the very system it sought to check: by calling on the same agencies it reprimanded to implement its orders. Still there is no denying the fact that judicial activism created more than a flutter and also triggered media interest in the matter of Ganga, which has a much larger importance.

# C. Religious activism

The story of the Ganges, from her source to the sea, has always been the story of India's civilisation and culture; and above all its religion. However till about a decade back, religion was bracketed as the cause of degrading the river. It's not that religious contribution to river's poor health has gone down significantly in recent years. Even the 2013 CPCB report shows that the most revered points in Ganga–Haridwar, Allahabad sangam, Vridaban, Dakhineshwar and likewise–also happen to be most polluted. However in parallel with this trend of contributing pollution, now the religious fraternity has been undertaken significant activism in demanding cleaner Ganges. Eminent saints

#### ISSUE BRIEF • Ganga, Its Activism & Media

refused to take holy baths in various Kumbha melas—the holiest of Hindu event-due to polluted water and many feel, have actually forced union government to undertake the highly ambitious and costly NGRBA project. There have been various modes of religious activisms; some muted, some magnified.

In early 2011, a Hindu seer named Swami Nigamananda Saraswati fasted unto death, protesting against illegal mining happening in the district of Haridwar in Uttarakhand) causing in pollution. Following his death in June 2011, his Ashram leader Swami Shivananda fasted for 11 days starting on November 25, 2011, taking his movement forward. Finally, the Uttarkhand government released an order to ban illegal mining all over Haridwar district. It is stated that the quarrying in the Ganges will now be allowed once the related environmental impacts on river are assessed and necessary clearances are obtained. Due to heavy load of pollution the religious community has decided that henceforth the sadhus would be given a land burial instead of the traditional water burial, which has been an age old tradition. General Secretary of Juna Akhara, India's biggest akhara, Mahant Hari Giri said that the decision had been taken to preserve the sanctity of the holy river. Sheers like Swami Chidananda Saraswati amd Ananda Swarup have taken significant stand in this context. Former IITian turned saint, G D Agarwal also fasted number of times on Ganga pollution issue and forced the government to backtrack from the "anti river" stand.

What is more interesting that the anti Ganga pollution stand of sheers has also been embroiled in political controversy, especially with next parliament election within sight. The whole saga has been lapped up by the media enormously, mainly the Kumbha controversy and various activisms of front line sheers. The attendance of media in last Maha Kumbha at Allahabad reached all-time high with journalists from both within country and beyond covered the event. The same needs to be seen in the longer context of media reporting about Ganga. Though Ganga is generally widely covered, historically they are stand-alone modes and also less in mainstream English media which showed a rise at the aftermath of Supreme Court orders but then generally had died down with relaxing of judicial interest. The religious leaders have rekindled the same.

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