

Yamuna, Ganga clean-up: Fact or Fiction?



On 10th October, a bench comprising of Justices Swatanter Kumar and Madan Lokur of the Supreme Court of India expressed its disappointment on the current levels of water pollution in the Yamuna River based on a report submitted by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB). The bench remarked that: “It is unfortunate that huge public funds were spent without showing any improvement in the water quality of Yamuna”, and went on to say: “It has been brought to our notice that despite the Centre spending more than Rs 1,062 crores in addition to amount being spent by local authorities in Delhi, Haryana and UP, the pollution of Yamuna has increased by the day”.

The Court asked the Chief Secretaries of the three states, Union Secretaries of Urban Development and Environment and Forests and the important civic authorities of Delhi, to file affidavits before 30th October giving details of funds spent, information on current sewage treatment plants and their functional efficiencies, time needed to complete pending projects under the Yamuna Action Plan and other associated information. It should be noted that this is not the Supreme Court’s first attempt to clean-up the river Yamuna. As early as in 1994, it initiated a suo moto proceeding alarmed by a newspaper report “And quite flows maili Yamuna”. Later on, in a detailed judgment, delivered on April 12, 2005 the bench comprising of Justices Y.K. Sabharwal and Tarun Chatterjee took Union Government to task for failing “in its public duty to the people of Delhi”, and chided the Delhi Government for lacking the political will to remove the unauthorized colonies on its banks which discharged all its liquid wastes to the river, thus causing significant pollution.

The bench then also noted that: “It seems the government and functionaries have failed in their public duty towards the citizens of Delhi all these years as they have not been able to provide even C-category water in the Yamuna”. It went on to say that “Though about Rs. 9 billion (since 1994) has been spent under the Yamuna Action Plan I and II, to net result is zero”.

Not only Delhi was not treating its wastewater in 2005 and dumping it straight into Yamuna but also thousands of industries were doing exactly the same. According to one of the affidavit that the Government of India filed to the Court, nearly 35 percent of Delhi’s population lived in the slums and illegal settlement with no sewer facilities. The bench correctly noted that the illegal encroachments on the river banks would not have been possible without the “convenience of officials”, and the government did not have the political “will” and “determination” to address this “self-made” problem. The bench further was shocked to find out that from the government’s own affidavit that it had no programme to “arrest the pollution on account of faecal coliform” even though the government admitted the situation was “alarming”.

Since 1994, enormous quantities of polluted water have continued to flow in river Yamuna, and also in all the Indian rivers in or around urban settlements. This is costing the country hundreds of crores of rupees every year in social, economic and health costs. The Third World Centre for Water Management has estimated that less than 10 percent of wastewater generated in the country is now properly collected, properly treated and then discharged to rivers and lakes in an environmentally safe manner.

The water pollution problem has been known for decades. However, the absence of political will at central and state levels, bureaucratic infighting, bungling and incompetence, inertias of water and environmental institutions at all levels of governments, public apathy, absence of sustained media scrutiny and extensive corruption have all contributed to the current problem. Extensive and serious river pollution has now become a formidable national problem whose magnitudes, extents and complexities are increasing each passing day due to inaction, foot-dragging and inappropriate policy decisions.

The situation in the Yamuna is in fact far worse than what the Supreme Court was led to believe by CPCB. Sadly, neither the CPCB nor the State Pollution Control Boards now have the management or technical expertise for controlling pollution of the Yamuna.

Sadly, the stretch of Yamuna that the Supreme Court considered has been an open sewer for years. Its water quality is far inferior for any form of human use, and the aquatic ecosystem has been decimated for decades. Under Indian requirements, total coliform count in the river water must not exceed 500 MPN/100 litres if it is to be used for bathing. Sadly, coliform counts at Nizamuddin, Kalindi or Okhla are in the stratosphere, an incredible 1700 crores MPN/100 ml, which means this stretch of Yamuna is not a river but an open sewer.

It is a really a serious indictment of very poor water quality management especially when it is considered that when this data was collected there was very significant flow in the river because of the monsoon rains which diluted the concentration of the pollutants. In other words, during non-monsoon months, water quality was far worse. It is not only Yamuna that is suffering this indignity. The Ganga which is the holiest of the Indian rivers and to which the Indians are attached to spiritually and emotionally has been facing the same level of mismanagement as the Yamuna for at least the last four decades.

The Ganga Action Plan was initiated in 1986, ostensibly to clean-up the river. Some 25 years later, and again having spent thousands of crores of rupees, the river is more polluted than ever. The question that must be asked and answered is why rivers like Yamuna and Ganga continue to be polluted after such heavy expenditures? River water quality management is not a rocket science. India has the expertise, technology and investment funds. Why then is thousands of crores of investment funds have gone literally down the drain and show no improvement?

There are many reasons, and the most well-known are political interferences and rivalries (for example, different political parties are at central and state levels which do not see eye to eye and in fact sometimes make determined attempts to undercut each other), inadequate implementation capacity at all levels, extensive corruption, poor operation and maintenance practices, public apathy, and plenty of political rhetoric but no real sustained political will.

In addition there are two very important factors which are basically neglected in both Yamuna and Ganga clean-up plans. First, if the river pollution is to be cleaned up, planning must be future-oriented. In 20 years' time, India's population will be much higher and human and economic activities will explode. It will be a different country in 2030 compared to 2010. Thus, if Yamuna and Ganga are to have better water quality in 2030, planning must consider the likely conditions then and not now. Take Ganga Action Plan which planned to treat 2,794 million litres/day (mld) of sewage, even though total sewage generated at that time was 5,044 mld. With rapid urbanization and expansion of industrial activities, the plan was totally inadequate even when it was conceived to solve even the existing problem, let alone of the future needs.

Second, India must learn from successful river cleaning experiences of other countries. Take the case of Singapore River which used to be as seriously polluted in the 1960s as many Indian rivers. It needed sustained political interest from the highest level of government represented by Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, then Prime Minister. He required monthly progress reports to be submitted to him and gave the bureaucracy only ten years to complete the clean-up. This was done within budget and time. The reason the clean-up was so successful was because the government resettled all the hawkers and slums dwellers to new areas. As a consequence, Singapore River banks now are prized areas for economic activities. A cursory analysis will show that the benefits of cleaning the river was at least 10 times what it had cost, in addition to the enormous intangible social and environmental benefits. This clearly indicates that river cleaning is not only possible but also on a long-term basis, it is far cheaper to live clean than dirty.

On the basis of the current plans to clean-up Yamuna and Ganges, one thing can be predicted with complete certainty: unless the existing plans are radically overhauled, the two rivers will be more polluted than ever before in history by 2025, in spite of the thousands and thousands of crores of rupees that have been and will be spent to improve the situation.

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