

Streams OF FILTH

Money is flowing like water into prominent government projects on river conservation, but there is little effect on the nation's lifelines

By Shyamlal Yadav

In a fantasy India, a cinematic, fictitious one, the River always flows with serene timelessness. Wherever it goes—icy crags, dusty, thirsty plains or through heavy, damp air—the River contains spiritual depth and emotional weight. All this is lovely to dream, and ideal for tourist brochures where India is called incredible. But to believe that the River in India is both holy and pure is to believe that fiction is fact.

In just over a decade, India's major rivers have been desecrated. Urban filth and industrial pollution are scientific causes, but what drives them is personal greed and administrative indifference. Environmentalists believe that apart from slaughterhouse, dhobi ghats, crematoria and slums are the major sources of pollution in these rivers. Every year, religious idols are immersed in rivers which lose a little more of their life as they are choked yet again. Recently the Supreme Court rejected a PIL filed by a Delhi resident Salek Chand Jain seeking a ban on immersion of idols in rivers and said, "The court can't ask so many states to impose a ban. You may approach appropriate authorities to have your grievance redressed." In major towns, as riverbeds run dry with an expanding sheet of silt, the construction business steps in to offer roughly built brick structures that can be ashrams as well as apartment blocks.

Take Delhi for example. As the host for the 2010 Commonwealth Games, an athletes' village was built on the Yamuna riverbed by arm-twisting the law and court rulings. This, when Delhi's sewage mechanism is teetering on the verge of collapse. The total sewage generated is 3,470 million litres per day (MLD) in a city that has a treatment capacity of around 2,325 MLD. What really works in that treatment capacity is only about 1,570 MLD due to the inefficiency of the sewage treatment plants and all 11 common effluent treatment plants in Delhi. The required technology is not available, says Chief

THE YAMUNA

With increasing sewage and industrial waste, and no flow of required fresh water, the Delhi stretch of the Yamuna is almost dead. Efforts to resuscitate the river have been futile as it turns into one big sewage drain.

THE CENTRAL POLLUTION CONTROL BOARD'S FINDINGS SAY THAT MOST OF THE RIVERS IN INDIA ARE NOT JUST POLLUTED BUT SEVERELY TOXIC.



THE GANGA

After Rs 780 crore, the holy Ganga is still no cleaner. Now, even with the World Bank agreeing to an initial assistance of \$1 billion, it's doubtful if money can bring the river back to its health

OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES, POLLUTION IN THE GANGA RIVER HAS GONE UP THREE-FOLD AND THAT IN THE YAMUNA BY SEVEN TIMES.

Minister Sheila Dikshit, "The Yamuna Action Plan I and II have not yielded the desired results despite crores of rupees being spent on them. Though teams were sent to see the Thames and Seine, it would take another seven-eight years for the Yamuna to be like them." The Yamuna's violation continues as it moves eastward. In Mathura, the Yamuna is getting silted as pillars are being constructed by the Mathura-Vrindavan Development Authority in the middle of

the riverbed as part of a road which will be parallel to the 16th-century ghats.

Chennai's four sewage treatment plants take care of 264 MLD of sewage instead of the required 530 MLD. In Jharkhand, the presence of unregulated mining and mineral industries have silted the Subarnarekha. It is not as if these incidents are the fallout of India Shining. The National River Conservation Plan (NRCP) was launched in 1995 to clean up major rivers.

The plan was an expansion of the 1985 Ganga Action Plan, covering 18 grossly polluted river stretches in 10 states at a projected cost of Rs 772 crore. It has now spread to 167 towns in 20 states and includes 38 rivers, including its latest entry, the Panchganga in August 2009.

Today, the NRCP is not a focussed, successful environmental plan but a bureaucratic abacus whose only job is to add up the moving columns. Officers of NRCP have so far spent over Rs 94.97

lakh on foreign trips to the USA, the UK, Israel, the Netherlands, Japan, Austria and Australia to study the pollution control mechanism of these countries. Its programme has cost an enormous Rs 3,892 crore, but the consequences have been a series of failures. Before August 2009, the NRCP had to focus on around 2,500 km of polluted stretches from the 22,127 km of 37 rivers. Even as the expenditure for every kilometre of polluted river has risen over

THE KHAN

The Indore stretch of this 56-km long river is the most polluted among the rivers of Madhya Pradesh. Since 1995, Rs 39.55 crore have been spent on a clean-up but it still remains filthy

CHOKED CHANNELS

Biochemical Oxygen Demand (BOD) reading is a parameter to judge the general quality of water

A BOD reading of 2mg/l or less means the water is potable without treatment; 2-3 mg/l means it is drinkable only after treatment; over 3mg/l, it is unusable even for fish and wildlife

RIVER	BOD Ratings*
Ganga	21 at Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh
Godavari	20 at Tapovan
Gomati	14 at Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh
Khan	50 at Indore, Madhya Pradesh
Krishna	17.6 at Mahuli, Maharashtra
Musi	34 at Rangareddy, Andhra Pradesh
Narmada	11.4 at Hoshangabad, MP
Sabarmati	48 at Vautha, Gujarat
Satluj	48 at Ludhiana, Punjab
Tapi	21 at Ajnand, Maharashtra
Wainganga	10.5 at Ashti, Maharashtra
Yamuna	70 at Okhla, Delhi
Subarnarekha	10.5 at Tatisilwai, Jharkhand

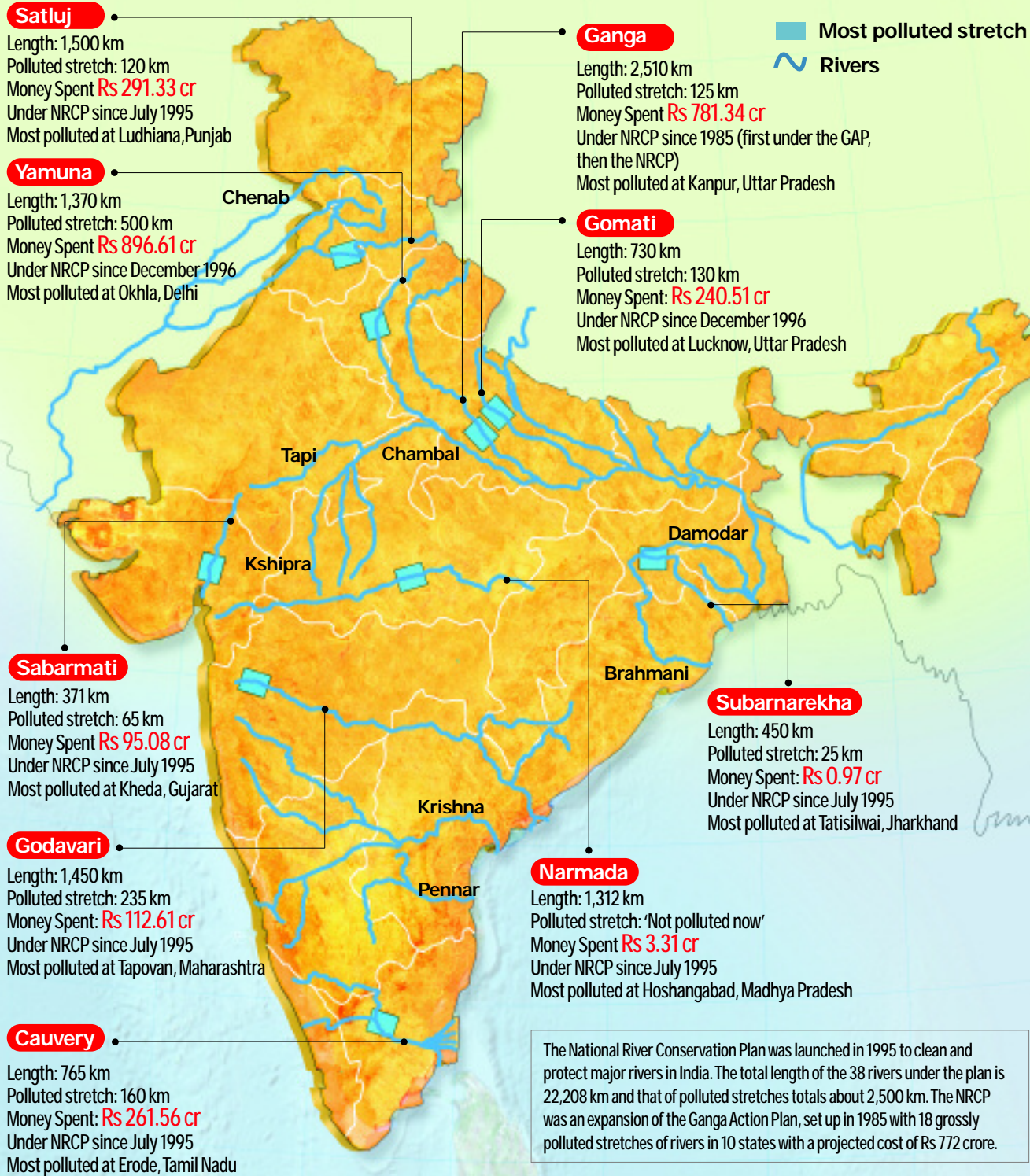
The readings are from the Central Pollution Control Board

SANJAY SONKAR



DOWN THE DRAIN

Even after hundreds of crores spent by the NRCP, almost all our rivers remain terribly polluted



MONEY SPENT SO FAR ON BATTLING RIVER POLLUTION: RS 3,892.32 CRORE*

Rivers covered 38 States covered 20 Towns covered 167

*This includes Rs 429 crore that was spent on the Ganga Action Plan before the NRCP. The expenditure figures are till 30th June 2009. The length of the rivers is approximate.

"The required technology is not available. Though teams have gone abroad to see the Thames and Seine, it would take another seven-eight years for the Yamuna to become like any of these rivers."

SHEILA DIKSHIT, Delhi Chief Minister



Rs 1.5 crore, only two rivers out of the 37 (the Narmada and Mandovi) are now deemed clean. But the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) contradicts itself while making the claim that these two rivers are "not polluted now", as it itself gave the BOD of 11.4mg/litre for the Narmada at Hoshangabad and 4.7mg/litre for Mandovi at Tonca, Goa.

An INDIA TODAY investigation into the NRCP's entire misadventure, for which more than 30 applications were filed under the RTI Act, has revealed its failure as authorities like the CPCB still say our rivers are dirtier than they used to be. Two decades of failure around the Ganga project led Minister of State for Environment and Forests Jairam Ramesh to admit in Parliament that the quality of the Ganga and Yamuna is as bad as it was 20 years ago. The reason, he said, was that the pollution load, "has increased much beyond our expectation. The sewage treatment plants have not been

THE CHAMBAL

Rs 3.58 crore has already been spent on it since it came under the NRCP in 1995. Almost 50 km of the 425-km Chambal is polluted; it's the filthiest at Kota, Rajasthan.



PURUSHOTTAM DIWAKAR / www.indiatodayimages.com

THE SATLUJ

Rising from beyond Indian borders in Tibet, the Satluj is no more than a drain as it crosses Punjab where it is dirtied by the industrial and urban pollution of 12 major cities

RS 1.5 CRORE HAS BEEN SPENT TO CLEAN UP EVERY POLLUTED KILOMETRE.

running at their full capacity due to the inability of the urban local bodies to provide for full operation and maintenance cost”.

The CPCB's findings about the NRCP's rivers state that most of them have BOD (biochemical oxygen demand) readings that are not in the merely polluted range but in that representing severe toxicity (see box). Even though the readings of the CPCB and the CWC are conflicting, experts believe that even in their most poisonous parts, some of India's most famous rivers are merely urban ditches. What makes the matter worse is the construction of dams on various rivers. Noted environmentalist Anupam Mishra says, “We can't stop river pollution until we stop construction of big dams, which was the reason behind the flood in the southern states this year.”

For the rest, time has changed very little, other than the rise in rivers' pollution levels. When the GAP-I was initiated in 1985, the BOD in the Ganga at Kanpur was 6.9mg/litre while the latest sample of CPCB marks it at 21. In 1980, the BOD in the Yamuna at Okhla was 10.6mg/litre, but is now 70. Pollution in the Ganga has gone up three-fold and in the Yamuna by seven

times. The NRCP's files, of course, read perfectly: the programmes include construction of sewage treatment plants, low-cost sanitation works, electric or improved crematoria, river front development and public participation. None of these have been made to work like it should. Every river across India has a sorry story: down south in Chennai, the Cooum and Adayar rivers are famous for industrial pollution. Under the NRCP, Rs 491.52 crore have been sanctioned to clean them while other rivers in the state have been sanctioned Rs 616.17 crore to have particular stretches cleaned. The state's environment council president L. Antonysamy accuses the Chennai endeavour of lack of accountability. “Chennai Metrowater emphasises that only treated sewage is discharged into the water courses. But it is not happening.”

Kerala's Pampa, the lifeline of central Kerala and a water source for 30 lakh people, was included in the first phase of the NRCP in 2003-04 and was slated for cleanup by 2008-09. Today, most of the 11 NRCP projects are under construction and work is yet to begin on the largest one. The state Government moved to set

THE YAMUNA

In Vrindavan, greed is taking concrete shape as pillars are being constructed in the middle of the riverbed as part of a motorable road which will run parallel to the 16th-century ghats

BANDEEP SINGH / www.indiatodayimages.com



“The scheme of abatement of pollution can't be successful until we stop construction of big dams. Rivers should be allowed to flow naturally to remain unpolluted.”

ANUPAM MISHRA, Environmentalist

INTERVIEW | JAIRAM RAMESH

"If we do not change the National River Conservation Plan, the money will continue to get wasted"

Minister of State (independent charge) for Environment and Forests Jairam Ramesh hardly finds time to speak on rivers. Special Correspondent SHYAMLAL YADAV spoke to him at his office about the NRCP's state of affairs. Excerpts:

Q. Has the NRCP failed?

A. I will not say it has failed. The situation would have been even worse had the scheme not been there.

Q. What lessons have been learnt from this?

A. We are now focusing on basins while earlier it was town-specific. There is a National Green Tribunal Bill pending before Parliament.

Q. Does the NRCP need to be replaced/ redrafted?

A. If we will not change it, the money will continue to get wasted.

Q. What other problems you faced while dealing with rivers' pollution?

A. In the case of the Bhagirathi, Alaknanda, Ganga, Tista and many other rivers where big dams are being constructed and hydel projects being installed, the water is going into tunnels. The NGRBA has discussed this. We will bring a policy within next two-three months. On new projects, we will go ahead only after planning it well.

Q. Some less important southern rivers have been included in the NRCP because of coalition politics.

A. I can only say that the politics will not be the basis of selection of rivers for the NRCP anymore. We will take



YASBANT NEGI / www.indiatodayimages.com

decisions only on the basis of need.

Q. Also, the financing formula for the NGRBA has not been finalised yet.

A. We proposed a 70/30 formula: 70 per cent from the Centre and 30 per cent from the state. Two states demanded that it should be wholly financed by the Centre. One state demanded that it should be 90/10. But in my view the 70/30 formula is alright. There must be participation of the states.

Q. Do you have any proposal to fix accountability for the implementing authorities and officials?

A. Yes, we are going to sign tripartite agreements among states, urban local bodies and the Centre in which the responsibilities will be clearly mentioned.

up an authority to monitor the slothful work only as late as in August 2008.

The Chambal in Rajasthan has not only suffered from being dirtied but is also the victim of a Centre-state clash over NRCP funding. In 1995, the state asked for Rs 30.53 crore but received only Rs 13.13 crore. A peeved state Government refused to spend any money on the project. A 2005 request was also turned down, but two years later the state agreed to cough up 30 per cent of a Rs 150-crore project to clean the river. Many project reports have been prepared regularly but there is no certainty when the government will start executing the work. Last week, Punjab Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal sought immediate release of Rs 302 crore from the Central Government for controlling pollution in the Sutlej and Ghaggar.

Once again, the focus of attention—and the funding—has been the Ganga and our self-ob-

essed capital's much-abused Yamuna. In 2007, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had set up a high-powered committee for conservation and development of the Yamuna and a National Ganga River Basin Authority (NGRBA) in February 2009, being chairman for the both. The first meeting of the NGRBA recently resolved that the Ganga will be pollution-free by 2020 and will cost around Rs 15,000 crore. The World Bank recently agreed to provide an initial assistance of \$1 billion for NGRBA in the next four-five years.

No matter how well charted those presentations may be and those funds may sound, India's solution to its river pollution does not depend on money. What matters is the integrity of those in the business of implementation and the swiftness and conscientiousness of the NRCP.

with Ambreesh Mishra, Rohit Parihar, M.G. Radhakrishnan, Arvind Chhabra, Swati Mathur, Amitabh Srivastava, Farzand Ahmed and Adhi Valliappan