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The Sacred River and the Secular Failure

Why the Ganga Cannot Be Cleaned by Policy Alone

By: Ruchi Khanna,Manish Tiwari

The Ganga is two rivers simultaneously: the polluted terrestrial river, and the the sacred river that purifies all that is living. Unless they are brought together in the minds of devotees, cleanup missions are set up for failure.

On a winter morning in Varanasi, we watched a man stand at the edge of Dashashwamedh Ghat for several minutes before stepping in. He came from Jaunpur, a place three hours away. He carried a small brass pot and a garland of marigolds already wilting in the cold. He walked in slowly until the cold water reached his waist, filled the brass pot, raised it above his head with both hands, and poured it over his face in one long, deliberate motion. Then he went out and waded, wrung his dhoti and sat for a long time on the stone steps with his eyes closed. He knew, when we spoke to him afterwards, that the river was polluted. He had heard about it. It did not affect him, and it was not a problem to him that it did not affect him.

That is what this article seeks to understand: what took forty years of water bodies earmarked for government control, an estimated Rs 30,000 crore invested, to yield little tangible improvement in the crisscrossed reaches of the river that are most utilised? We would assert here, as we will continue to do, that the problem from the beginning was wrongly identified.

The Ganga is two rivers simultaneously. One is the terrestrial river, which flows from Gangotri to the Bay of Bengal, contaminated with sewage and industrial effluents, and chemicals. The other is the sacred river: Ganga as *mata*, as goddess, as liberator of the dead, as purifier of the living, and it is in a cosmic register which has nothing to do with water quality. The man from Jaunpur wasn't bathing in the first river. He bathed in the second. No data about the first will ever disturb his relationship with the second.

Until Indian policy takes the issue of the distinction seriously, it will keep spending money on a problem that it doesn't fully grasp.

Kashi Beyond Geography

There is something about Varanasi itself that makes this separation vivid. Kashi is not an ordinary city, according to Puranic belief. It is said to be standing outside the geography and on the trident of the god Shiva, eternal and indestructible. Its sacred reality is prior to its physical location. The same principles also extend to the Ganga flowing through it: The purity of the water is not a matter of opinion; rather, it is one of her cosmic nature-none of her actions can jeopardise her purity.

> The biological self-purifying capability of the Ganga, which is seen in the presence of unusually high levels of bacteriophages, has not been wrecked. Remove enough of that pressure, and recovery begins.

The Puranic texts are consistent on this. The Ganga is *swayambhu*: self-arising, self-purifying, constitutionally beyond contamination. According to the *Skanda Purana*, her touch wipes away sin for seven generations. The *Narada Purana* elaborates: It is impossible for Ganga water to become contaminated, just as it is impossible for sunlight to get dark. Diana Eck describes the Ganga as a *tirtha*, a crossing place where the boundary between the physical and divine is thinner than elsewhere (Eck 1982). At such places, the water is incidental to the crossing.

The practical implication was aptly stated by Ramakrishna Paramhansa when he said that the Ganga washes away all our sins, but the sins rise on the tree of the bank and jump back to us when we step out of the river. He was not being cynical. The purification is real within the sacred register, but leaves the physical world unchanged. The transaction was never about water.

This trend was observed in our fieldwork in Varanasi from July to December 2023, which involved thirty semi-structured interviews with ghat users, priests, and residents, plus two focus group discussions. Those who cited NMCG pollution measurements talked of a daily immersion as an "act of spiritual necessity" which physical reality could not reach. We have written about this as 'devotional dissonance', drawing on Festinger (1957) and Bandura (1999), but that framing is not quite right. Dissonance implies a felt tension. What we saw was not a tension: the physical and the sacred are very distinct. No contradiction because there is no contact between

them.

The consequence for the cleanup policy is stark. Since the Ganga's purifying power is without any conditions, the devotee does not incur any spiritual liability while pouring a plastic garland in the river. The onus falls on those seeking to change behaviour, and they carry evidence from a register that devotion has placed beyond its own authority. This is not ignorance. It is a coherent theological framework that forty years of cleaning up missions never seriously confronted.

The Architecture of Perpetual Failure

The expenditure record is long and bleak. The government's auditor, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), has found that Rajiv Gandhi's Ganga Action Plan of 1985 achieved only 39% of its targets. It was followed by the National Ganga River Basin Authority in 2009. Then came *Namami Gange* in 2014, with a budget now at Rs 26,824 crore through 2025-26. India has spent an estimated Rs 30,000 crore on this river since 1986. According to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), in January 2023, 71% of monitoring stations were still reporting polluted levels of faecal coliforms (Down to Earth 2023). In a 2026 CAG report on Uttarakhand, not a single household had been linked to 21 sewage treatment plants constructed under *Namami Gange* in seven towns. On paper, plants are complete and open drains discharge as before into the river.

> Including Mallah and Nishad communities in programme design would address something that technical interventions cannot substitute for. Their multi-generational observation of the river is a more granular data resource.

This recurring pattern has a structural explanation. The centre commissions infrastructure and names it in the press releases. It has to be operated and maintained by state governments, who have to connect individual households-unglamorous work that offers no ribbon-cutting. So it tends not to happen. According to data from the National Mission for Clean Ganga, sewage production in the basin is about 12,000 million litres per day (mld) while treatment capacity is 4,000 mld. A threefold gap, after 40 years.

However, another meaning of *Namami Gange* is more unsettling than the structural explanation. What if the spending can be seen less as a restoration project that has fallen short of expectations, and more as a kind of veneration? When a devotee pours milk over a Shivalingam, the point is not to clean it. The act of pouring is the offering. Its value lies in the scale and sincerity of devotion expressed, not in any physical outcome. *Namami Gange*, read this way, has succeeded as devotion even as it has failed as water management. The physical condition of the Ganga was never quite the point. The river cannot truly be defiled. Restoring her physical condition is a gesture of reverence, not a repair job, and gestures of reverence are judged by their scale and ceremony, not by what they change.

This reading helps explain the government's response to inconvenient data. A report by the CPCB submitted to the National Green Tribunal revealed that faecal coliform was detected at multiple Sangam sites on high bathing days, with values four times the permissible limit at Maha Kumbh 2025. The government cited median water quality values over the entire monitoring period, which were within acceptable limits. Technically, it is defensible but in practice misleading: 400 million pilgrims were not evenly spaced across a monitoring window. They appeared on special auspicious days and when the concentrations were too high for any treatment system to handle. The peak-day figures describe what those pilgrims bathed in. The decision to quote the median is a political one. But it could signify something more profound: a true theological carelessness of the river's physical condition on a given day. The mission was accomplished. The pilgrims had gathered. The sacred river had received them.

Why Hinduism Has Not Saved the Ganga

The most fundamental question that lies beneath the governance failure and the exclusion of communities is why the Hindu tradition, which views the Ganga as more sacred than any river in the world, has not developed a convincing theological argument for her physical protection? The argument is situated in the tradition. It has just never made any kind of a mark.

> Whether the sacred river and the terrestrial river must remain forever separate, or whether the tradition that made one sacred can be brought to feel responsible for the other.

The *Atharva Veda* has injunctions against fouling water. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* specifies penalties for polluting rivers. The theology that calls the Ganga *swayambhu* too says that there is a duty on the devotees to protect what is sacred, in a few passages that are not often read at the ghats. The tradition isn't, even in its entirety, oblivious to her physical condition. But the passages that are calling for protection have always been losing ground to those saying that she cannot really be harmed.

Sunderlal Bahuguna saw the stakes clearly. From the 1970s, he became not only an environmental critic of the dam projects but a theological one also: limiting the flow of the river was a desecration of her sacredness. Similar petitions existed as early as the colonial period. The argument was logical. It never gained momentum to change practice.

Veer Bhadra Mishra tried most persistently. The mahant of the Sankat Mochan temple and a professor of hydraulics at Banaras Hindu University, he has been saying for four decades that to throw a plastic bag into the Ganga is a form of desecration, and not devotion; that the tradition which venerated her must demand her physical protection. His authority was real. His argument was theologically coherent. Yet, the river segment where he has spent his life has one of the worst physical conditions of the channel.

Why? The theological position that the Ganga cannot truly be defiled is more consoling than the position that a devotee's own acts are defiling her. Traditions tend toward doctrines that relieve rather than demand. The argument is undermined by the political economy of religious institutions: the temples rely on pilgrims who visit because the Ganga is sacred and pure, and when the leadership of the religious institutions argue that the water is polluted by devotional activities, it undermines the promise that underlies the very existence of the institution. Mishra could hold the position because his hydraulics professorship gave him an independent institutional base. But the Ganga has been co-opted into the Hindu nationalist fold, and that makes it even harder: a tradition whose bedrock is proximity to the state has a problem holding it to account for the river it pledges to uphold.

David Haberman's (2013) study of tree worship in Rajasthan is instructive here. Sacred groves protected by religious obligation can generate real environmental outcomes, but only when the physical condition of the sacred object is understood as religiously relevant. The Ganga tradition has taken the opposite road, towards a theology in which the state of the river is beneath her sacred nature to be influenced by. A Hindu ecotheology of the Ganga would need to reverse this. The textual resources exist. The institutional conditions for transmitting them do not.

What Could Change, and What Cannot

The governance weaknesses can easily be remediated in principle: funding on the basis of measurable water quality and not on the basis of infrastructure commissions; household sewer connections as a formal precondition before signing off on building plans; and monitoring that is independent from the agencies being assessed. During the lockdown in 2020, it was seen what improvement looks like. The water quality improved significantly throughout the basin when industrial discharge ceased for 8 weeks. The biological self-purifying capability of the Ganga, which is seen in the presence of unusually high levels of bacteriophages, has not been wrecked. It is being overwhelmed. Remove enough of that pressure, and recovery begins.

> Nehru asked, in his will, that a handful of his ashes be scattered on the Ganga. Not from religiosity, but because the river was India's past flowing into its future.

Including Mallah and Nishad boatmen in programme design would address something that technical interventions cannot substitute for. The river communities carry the costs of treating the Ganga as a technical problem. The people who work the ghats daily are about 8,000 in number, and there are approximately 50,000 people in the city who have known this river from generation to generation, which drains affect which flow, where the fish were, and when. They were aware that fish populations were dwindling years before formal monitoring had begun to yield data on it. Their multi-generational observation of the river is a more granular data resource than remote sensing provides, and their exclusion has cost *Namami Gange* its most reliable feedback on what is happening at the water's edge.

This knowledge has not been tapped. *Namami Gange*'s riverfront development instead brought in commercial cruise operators who added new waste pressures and ousted the traditional boats from ghats these riverfront communities had worked for generations. Prithvinath Sahni, from the Maa Ganga Nishad Raj Seva Trust, puts it simply: Varanasi is kept together by Mallahs, Pandas and Doms. The government does not interfere with priests or cremation workers. The boatmen are constantly disrupted. As the conservation scholar Divya Karnad says, "Fishermen are the canaries in the coal mine of river health. If you exclude Mallahs and Nishadas from decision-

making, you are cutting the most sensitive feedback system of the programme".

But neither change reaches the deepest problem. The two Gangas remain separate in the minds of those who use the river and those who govern it. Mishra spent his life trying to bring them together. Bahuguna marched for the same argument. Gandhi pointed toward it in 1916. The argument is available within the tradition. What is missing is the institutional and political context in which it can be made with the authority it needs.

Nehru asked, in his will, that a handful of his ashes be scattered on the Ganga. Not from religiosity-he was too clear-eyed for that-but because the river was India's past flowing into its future. That image holds. The question no cleanup mission has yet found a way to ask is whether the sacred river and the terrestrial river must remain forever separate, or whether the tradition that made one sacred can be brought to feel responsible for the other.

Ruchi Khanna is a doctoral scholar in sociology at the National Institute of Technology, Patna. Manish Tiwari is an assistant professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the National Institute of Technology, Patna.

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