

# **Ganga: taking it back to its purity**

The Ganga, a symbol of religious and spiritual faith of India, is one of the most polluted rivers in India today. Not only untreated sewage is dumped but also toxic waste from hospitals and tanneries is thrown into it.

Prof Devendra Swaroop Bhargava, former professor of Environmental Engineering at IIT Roorkee, said that the Ganga, besides being one of the most polluted rivers in the country, is also one of the 10 most threatened river basins of the world.

“On November 4, 2008, the Ganga was officially declared India’s ‘national river. But there is a flip side to the story,” he told The Pioneer. “The quality of Ganga’s water is steadily worsening. Not only it is unfit for drinking, but would also be harmful if used for agricultural purposes,” he said. The level of coliform bacteria, a type of bacteria that indicates the purity of water, should be below 50 for drinking and below 5,000 for agricultural use. The present level of coliform in the Ganga at Hardwar is 5,500.

A study conducted by the Uttarakhand Environment Protection and Pollution Control Board (UEPPCB) slotted river water into four categories: A — being fit for drinking, B — for bathing, C — for agriculture and D — for excessive pollution level. However, Ganga’s was given a definite D, he further added.

The population explosion which has led to industrialisation, urbanisation and poverty has put great pressure on the river. Most of the river’s pollution is due to the careless disposal of human faeces, urine and sewage which is directly disposed into the river, all the way from its mouth at Gaumukh (the river’s source) till Hardwar, the former IIT professor said.

Almost 1.4 billion litres of untreated sewage is disposed off into the river, from each of the 27 cities located along its banks. During the pilgrimage season, the amount is even higher, as almost 15 lakh pilgrims visit the State and pay a visit to the holy river.

It is not just sewage that is polluting the river. Hardwar being a holy Hindu ground is used for post-cremation rituals. Medical waste, which is toxic and harmful, from the base hospital in Srinagar, is also dumped into it.

Over the years, people have become more aware of the dangers Ganga poses for both human life as well as the eco-system. The very river that is the life source of many is fast turning poisonous. Various steps have been taken to protect and restore the Ganga.

The Ganga Action Plan was launched in 1986 by the Government of India. Despite heavy expenditure, the plan was not a success. Now, the Centre has promised that by 2020, the Ganga will be free of pollutants. On November 1, 2010, the 135 km long stretch between Gaumukh and Uttarkashi was declared an eco-sensitive zone. Three hydro projects proposed on the river were also discontinued.

Finally, on June 28, 2011, an agreement with the World Bank was signed for a \$1 billion loan that would finance the first major effort after 20 years to clean the river. This loan is part of the project started in 2009 that replaced the 1986 Ganga Action Plan.

Renowned environmentalist Ranjit Bhargava has been making efforts towards getting the Ganga declared as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. He said that the UNESCO representatives he has met in this connection have given a positive response.

“But the joint efforts of the State and Central Governments is required to get going the process of having the Ganga declared as a world heritage site”, he said. “It is my appeal to the Uttarakhand Government and the Centre to take up this matter seriously instead of squabbling over partial proposals to save the Ganga,” Bhargava said. He said that no purpose would be served by declaring the Ganga from Gaumukh to Uttarkashi as an eco-sensitive zone.

“We should go the whole way and have it declared as a world heritage site. The Ganga and its tributaries is the lifeline of the Ganga valley which sustains 40 per cent of India’s population and are the bedrock of India’s civilisation and heritage. The flora of this area also acts as a major carbon sink of Asia and has a unique climate diversity right from the upper Himalayas to the plains of Uttarakhand. With a cluster of ancient religious townships and rich tradition of fairs and festivals, the Himalayan and sub-Himalayan surroundings of the Ganga are among the richest fountainheads of the culture of mankind,” he added.

Making this area a world heritage site would encourage international tourism as well as local heritage tourism, handicrafts, floriculture, health camps and non-

polluting industry resulting in the economic benefit of the people of Uttarakhand (Pioneer 11-10-11).