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Namami Gange project: Let the rivers talk to each other

The programme can potentially leverage Delhi's Yamuna cleaning project towards the broader goal of rejuvenating India's rivers



The NGP, launched in 2014 as the Government of India's flagship programme, can boast of a discernible impact in improving the water quality and ecological status of the Ganga.



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Cleaning the Yamuna is among the top priorities of the newly elected BJP government in Delhi. The keen interest from the central government, also led by the BJP, favours the project. The project also has the advantage of the Yamuna being part of the Namami Gange Programme (NGP). Delhi's state-driven effort to clean the Yamuna carries the prospect of valuable reciprocal learning, which can help shape a comprehensive policy ecosystem for rejuvenating India's rivers.

The NGP, launched in 2014 as the Government of India's flagship programme, can boast of a discernible impact in improving the water quality and ecological status of the Ganga. Besides the recent cleaner Maha Kumbh, the National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG) offers the rising populations of keystone species such as the Ganges dolphin as evidence of the improved ecological status of the river. In over a decade of its implementation, the NGP's responsive policy and institutional experiments stand out as a departure from the earlier Ganga Action Plan.

Implemented in mission mode, the NGP has interesting legal and institutional innovations to its credit. The foremost among these is that it has shifted from the regulatory framing of what was the Ministry of Environment and Forests to an executive approach, in the Ministry of Jal Shakti (earlier the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation). The programme also marks a shift from pollution abatement to improving the ecological condition of the river. The NGP has pursued a river basin approach informed by a plan produced by a consortium of the Indian Institutes of Technology. In celebrated river restoration programmes, like those in Europe, such shifts took decades. The International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine (ICPR), established in 1950 to restore the River Rhine, made these shifts only after the Sandoz disaster in 1986.

The NMCG was accorded the status of an authority soon after it was launched through the River Ganga (Rejuvenation, Protection and Management) Authorities Order of 2016. The National Ganga River Basin Authority, constituted earlier, was dissolved through this order and was replaced with a National Ganga Council (NGC). There are other institutional innovations that show an unusual agility in policymaking. The NGC is headed by the Prime Minister with the chief ministers of the riparian states and 10 Union ministers as members. The NGC guides an empowered task force headed by the Union Minister for Jal Shakti, and an executive council headed by NMCG's director general with extensive financial and regulatory powers.

The most striking feature of the 2016 order is the recognition of the subnational governments as important partners. It mandates a layered structure of state Ganga committees and district Ganga committees — accommodating the important roles of governments at different levels. Despite this deliberate effort, the subnational participation in Namami Gange has not been very encouraging. The absence of ownership of the programme — the basin states' legal, institutional and budgetary responses — raises questions about its enduring impact.

This is where the NGP can leverage the [Delhi](#) government-driven project of cleaning the Yamuna for a model that can be scaled. The project can reveal the missing and less understood drivers, motivations, and channels of subnational mobilisation for river rejuvenation.

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Delhi's Yamuna project is a particularly complex one and can therefore make a useful contribution. The Yamuna, like all other major Indian rivers, is an interstate river. Improving its ecological status depends on reliable interstate cooperation mechanisms for enduring outcomes — a challenge that Delhi will need to address. At the same time, it faces water quality deterioration due to a pollutant load of close to 80 per cent from the city-state of Delhi. This singular characteristic brings the role of a distinct territorial entity, that too of an urban agglomeration, into sharp focus for improving river water quality. Studies have shown that Delhi's uncaptured and untreated sewage is responsible for the pollution load in the Yamuna. This is a classic instance where improvement in river water quality directly depends on improved urban governance. Delhi can, therefore, demonstrate what states should do

for enduring outcomes for the NGP, and the nature of Centre-state collaboration that is required to achieve this.

In Europe, it took a long time to get to the foundational Water Framework Directive. That experience is all about how institutions such as the ICPR mobilised the internal responses of sovereign nations in Europe. The NGP can potentially leverage responses like Delhi's cleaning of the Yamuna towards creating a policy and institutional ecosystem to rejuvenate India's rivers.

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Ganga

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