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Ganga at Varanasi: Lessons from Environmental Abuse

VENKATESH UPADHYAY

The Ganga continues to be threatened by environmentally unsustainable development projects, of which the Ganga Expressway is the most recent example. But the campaign to save the Ganga is seemingly caught in recrimination and bad governance.

Epitomising India's multicultural ethos and syncretism, the river Ganga represents what Jawaharlal Nehru, famously, called "the very symbol of Indian civilisation". However, the spiritual and cultural lineage of this river has hardly helped to relieve it from the ever-growing threats of pollution and desiccation. Despite frequent public pronouncements and resolves, very little is being done to rectify the situation both in terms of public policies and community responsibilities.

In this article, I highlight how the proposed Ganga Expressway spells a grave threat to the river. I have also focused on the attempts to clean the Ganga at Varanasi and the subsequent problem which people have faced in doing so.

Ganga Expressway

The Ganga Expressway is a contentious project which may put the river under serious risk of desiccation. The project launched by Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati Kumari in 2007 aims to construct a 1,047 km access controlled eight-lane expressway providing high-speed connectivity between the eastern and western boundaries of Uttar Pradesh.¹ The officials endorse the project on the ground that the construction on the river's left embankments would pre-empt floods and ensure farmers of these areas to cultivate two crops providing much needed succour to the millions residing in the densely populated and chronically poor Ganga-Yamuna Doab.

The detractors of the project, however, point out the environmental consequences of the expressway have not been evaluated seriously for the river and those who live by it. They fear that the expressway and its adjoining bridges will prevent many of the 200-odd tributaries from emptying into the Ganga with catastrophic results. Disrupting the flood pathway

all along the 853 km could also lead to unforeseen consequences.

The embankment, which would come up as part of the Ganga Expressway, will act as a barrier for the free flow of water current. While the embankment on the left side of the river might block the flow of rain water from reaching the river, the raised right bank would also lead to huge amounts of mud getting deposited on the riverbed, thus decreasing the cross-sectional area of the river. Unable to splay out its sediments on both of its banks, the river would naturally deposit its sediment load in its channel, thus disrupting the hydrodynamics of the river. It might also lead the river to discharge its water to escape routes via the tributary streams which would lead to a flooding of nearby habitations.

Evidently, the Ganga Expressway project has raised the spectre of desertification in ways that were never considered during the project's planning stage (Dwivedi et al 2006: 407-08). The digging up of the adjoining belt would lead to the creation of low lying areas, which would collect rainwater on the offside of the river, thus creating huge chunks of sodic and saline soil leading to the progressive development of a desert area. In addition, the temporary lentic ecosystem will become a source of various water-borne diseases such as dengue, malaria and encephalitis.

"The expressway project is ill-conceived and recklessly planned", says S N Upadhyaya of the Institute of Technology at the Banaras Hindu University and the Sankat Mochan Foundation (SMF), a non-governmental organisation that is involved in improving the water quality of the Ganga in Varanasi. According to Upadhyaya, "This project will consume 58,632,000 sq m of fertile agricultural land of Doab.² There is no justification to sacrifice such a huge piece of agricultural land. Billions of tonnes of fertile soil deposited by the Ganga annually along the river basin would not be of any agricultural use.

"This [the project] would also not be the end of the problem. Supposing the project is a success and it is able to attract the projected 500 large and 7,000 medium industries, these would only add to the

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pollution and convert the Ganga into a drain” adds Upadhyaya.³

Instead of building new roads, it would have been wiser to extend and maintain the existing roads. The government could utilise barren land for this purpose, where agriculture is not the major occupation. One such region could be the Jhansi-Allahabad corridor on the right bank of the Ganga, which falls in the drought-affected Bundelkhand region. The construction work could offer jobs and facilitate growth around the site. Similarly, the revival of river transport could be an option offering a low-cost link between western and eastern flanks of the state (Dwivedi and Shashi 2008).

It is surprising that the negative environmental effects of the Ganga Expressway project did not attract the public attention. There was hardly any hue and cry in the media and the politicians from opposing camps could soon sense that they could not draw much political mileage out of this controversy. Is it that the people do not care about protecting their natural environment or do they find the issue secondary to their basic human needs? Perhaps, a closer look at the campaigns to protect the Ganga from pollution would help in understanding the matrix of public policy issues and community responsibilities.

Public Attitudes

Millions of Indians take a holy dip every year in the Ganga on the unique seven km stretch of ghats of Varanasi. But the respect for the holy river does not prevent the uninhibited pouring of raw sewage and industrial waste in it. The river is in serious trouble and may desiccate if drastic actions are not taken. Latest reports⁴ state that the level of pollution in the Ganga has reached alarming proportions, and at present, the water is not suitable for agricultural purposes. The situation has reached this critical juncture due to the indifference and apathy that has plagued the issue all this while. It is bewildering to note that a river that enjoys such an exalted position in the common Indian mind is being strayed aside for trivial gains.

Campaigns to clean the Ganga were launched in the early 1980s in Varanasi, when pollution of the river had gained wide

attention. Community-based initiatives like the Clean Ganga Campaign (*Swacha Ganga*)⁵ were inaugurated in 1982, followed by the launching of the government-sponsored Ganga Action Plan (GAP), conceived by Rajiv Gandhi in 1986, to create treatment facilities for the sewage around the stretch of the river. The GAP, which was launched with much fanfare, was not able to achieve its objectives despite a total expenditure of Rs 901.71 crore over a period of 15 years.⁶

The plan was flawed from the beginning as it relied heavily upon the increased supply of electricity, which is still to be attained. The failure of GAP I to pre-empt and treat the flow of sewage in Ganga prompted many stakeholders to propose innovative methods to be included in the second phase of the GAP.

One of these proposals came from the SMF. Their model had low operation and maintenance costs and depended least on external factors such as electricity.⁷ However, the proposal has lingered for a long time in the corridors of the local and state governments seeking an approval over the choice of the nodal agency and appropriate technology. The second phase of the GAP includes setting up of sewer lines in eight cities located on the banks of the Ganga. The bureaucratic delays in the implementation and the mismatch in the public-private partnership seem symptomatic of the lack of good governance which plagues India.

Pandit Vir Bhadra Mishra of the SMF is widely seen as the face of the conservation efforts at Varanasi. He had proposed a plan through which all the waste could be diverted away from the river – much before the government announced the GAP in 1986. Mishra believes that the glitch is not at the level of public policy but rather at the implementation level. “The government has really been indifferent towards this issue. We were assured by Sonia Gandhi when she was in the opposition that they would put the Ganga on the top of their priorities when they come to power, but we have heard only high-flowing rhetoric from the government”, he says. Another problem that such organisations face is the inability to garner adequate funds.

But what about the community involvement in the cleaning process? The question

of poor governance on this issue also reflects on poor community participation. The government is not concerned about the Ganga because the people do not consider it as an important issue.

The religious significance of the river has not translated into practical steps to keep the river clean. One possible way is to sensitise the people towards the threats posed by river pollution. “The people are very reluctant to believe that the river is in dire need of protection. The common belief is that the river is omnipotent and it is ultimately they who are in need of any protection from her ire”, says Karan Madhok,⁸ a young journalist of the city. It might appear that such anthropomorphisms might be futile at this point but because the Ganga is so inexorably linked in Varanasi with religion and spirituality that this aspect must also be explored if a viable solution is to be found. Madhok, however, sensed a dominant feeling of helplessness amongst the people: “Most average people whom I meet on the beat are, just too embroiled in their day to day problems to care much about the river.”

Madhok adds that, unfortunately even those who are well-off remain insensate towards the issue. The same nonchalance marks the attitude of local administration. “People in high posts are just concerned with plum positions and pleasing their political bosses”, he adds.

There also exist administrative incompatibilities where the treatment of rivers around the cities and cleaning of sewers fall under the jurisdiction of the municipal authorities but the decision-making powers are under district officers such as district magistrates and divisional commissioners.

Garnering political consensus on the issue also has its share of problems. For example, it is probable that the state government may not cooperate with the centre if both have different political parties in power. Sceptics harbour reasonable doubts on spreading environmental awareness through the agenda of political parties as these efforts may not adequately translate into practical action to save the river.

Most of the people do not see the desiccation of the Ganga as a challenge to their survival. For the millions afflicted by extreme poverty, the cleaning of the river is hardly consequential. People still do not

see the Ganga as an irreplaceable part of their life. But a deeper understanding would dispel much of such cynicism. The truth is that if urgent measures are not taken to stem the fast-growing river pollution, the very survival of people who live by it would be threatened. In this case, the river cleaning issue has to be raised as an urgent need, as a conscious drive may bring about the desired change in the public attitude and governance.

As already mentioned, there has been an increase in the number of protests and awareness rallies that are being taken out to sensitise the people towards the river's current state of distress. The problem with such a form of agitation is that it does not necessarily address the root cause of the problem. The public, even now, does not perceive the current situation as a threat to their existence. Rather, they act out of the illusion that everything will be taken care of by the river. So all the rallies being sponsored by political organisations, schools and NGOs in different parts of the city everyday to generate awareness seem ultimately inconsequential.

A Way Out

Any solution to the problem of the Ganga would have to encompass a multidisciplinary approach. The following are some suggestions:

– One way-out could be to “securitise” the issue. People need to understand that the pollution of the Ganga poses an existential threat. In summer there was an increase in the number of stories about the receding level of the Ganga. Invariably, all of these stories concentrated upon the river as an abstract quantity, something that was in severe need of attention, but any mention of the plausible catastrophic consequences the desiccation of the river might entail was censored.

– An inspirational model is the successful reinvigoration of the 160 km long river, Kali Bein in Hoshiarpur district of Punjab by the efforts of Sant Balbir Singh Sechewal, and his followers.

– The authorities need to realise that their main source of revenue is at stake. Along with being a major pilgrimage site, the Ganga at Varanasi is also a major tourist attraction. If the river dries up, the tourism industry at Varanasi would virtually collapse.

The local hotels and district authorities must work together to develop new ways by which they can combat non-point pollution.⁹ Both these groups must understand that they have a lot to lose if the pollution levels in the Ganga increase even a bit. It is not as though the administration cannot do anything about the pollution. In 2008, when the then new elected chief minister of the state was to arrive, the local administration spent Rs 1 crore on the beautification of the ghats and adjoining areas. All the work stopped once she left.¹⁰ Tougher implementation of the Public Nuisance Act¹¹ can go a long way in stemming the non-point sources of pollution.

– It is the responsibility of the people to raise this issue at the highest level. If there is enough pressure from the local populace on the authorities, things will begin to change. Since the quagmire of problems related to the river are inevitably so interlinked, the effect of progress in any one avenue would go a long way in solving the bigger problem. One such example is the Snowy River in Australia¹² where the public put pressure on the government to increase the water supply to the main tributary of this river. If the subject garners enough support so that the pollution of the river becomes an important electoral matter, only then would a public campaign be successful.

Conclusions

The problem with these solutions is that there exists a conflict of interests. This is exactly where stakeholders and the common people need to be included in making policy decisions. Most people believe that their voices will ultimately not be heard. It is absolutely necessary that all the stakeholders are taken into confidence before making important decisions. Only by doing so we can ensure greater accountability and involvement by the public.

Finally, as already stated, the condition of the Ganga is part of a much larger problem regarding the conceptualisation of progress and development. The present mode of development has threatening ramifications for our natural resources and it is necessary to initiate a broad-based debate to choose the path of development that draws upon our own experiences as well.

NOTES

- 1 The expressway will be 100 m wide with a road width of 14.5 m from all sides and a height of 7-8 m. There will be four major bridges, three major bridges on canals, eight railway over bridges, 256 small bridges, eight flyovers on crossings of national highways, two flyovers on crossings of state highways, 40 flyovers and 225 under passes on crossings on district roads.
- 2 *Doab* is Hindustani for a fertile tract of land lying between two confluent rivers. It is specifically used for the region, which lies between Yamuna and Ganga.
- 3 Interview with the author, 20 July 2008.
- 4 Sankat Mochan Labs, 20 June 2008.
- 5 Sankat Mochan Foundation runs the Swatcha Ganga (Clean Ganges) programme comprising many senior academics of Banaras Hindu University, trained technicians, concerned and enlightened citizens.
- 6 The government claims that the schemes under the Ganga Action Plan have been successful, but actual measurements and scientific data tell a different story. See http://www.cag.gov.in/reports/scientific/2000_book2/gangaactionplan.htm
- 7 The proposal was inspired by the Advanced Integrated Wastewater Pond Systems (AIWPS) developed by Professor William J Oswald and his co-workers at the University of California, Berkeley over the past four decades.
- 8 Interview with the author, 24 July 2008.
- 9 The pollution to the Ganga has been divided into two large categories: point and non-point. While point source of pollution refers to the sewage disposal and other large checked outlets, non-point refers to the pollution that is generated from floating sources such as stalls and fairs. Also the waste that is dumped straight into the river also comes under this banner.
- 10 *Times of India*, Varanasi edition, 3-8 May 2008.
- 11 Section 268 through 290 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860, provides for the Public Nuisance Act to be used in case of environmental pollution. The following is in the case of pollution of water resources (S 277): Whoever voluntarily corrupts or fouls the water of any public spring or reservoir, so as to render it less fit for the purpose for which it is ordinarily used, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description, a term which may extend to three months, or with fine which may extend to Rs 500 or with both.
- 12 In the 1950s, as part of the Snowy Mountains Scheme, a network of dams was built to collect and divert 99% of the Snowy River's flow through the mountains, to provide more water to the Murray River and Murrumbidgee River for irrigation and to generate electricity. During the 1990s the low level of water in the Snowy River was a major environmental concern in Victoria, with a political campaign to increase the water from 1% to 28% of its original flow from the dam at Jindabyne.

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