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Scaling up Namami Gange for Rejuvenating India's Rivers

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India's Namami Gange shows how agile policies and institutions can accelerate river rejuvenation, offering lessons for all interstate rivers.



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The *Namami Gange* Programme (NGP)—launched in 2014 as the Government of India's (GoI) flagship programme—has had a visible and tangible impact in improving the water quality and ecological status of the Ganga River. There have been several well-documented improvements in water quality indicators, including the growing population of keystone species, Gangetic dolphins. To its credit, NGP makes significant departures from the earlier Ganga Action Plan (GAP). An important feature of NGP that is often not adequately articulated or celebrated is the policymaking and institutional agility towards realising its goal of cleaning the Ganga. This is also crucial from the perspective of national policymaking for rejuvenating India's rivers. The essay presents an analytical narrative of this potential, supplemented by a comparative study of European experiences with river rejuvenation, and a special focus on the Rhine River rejuvenation.

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Since its launch in 2014, NGP's responsive policy and institutional experiments stand out. One of the first departures is the shifting of the programme from the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) to the Ministry of Jal Shakti (then the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation). This shift enabled the mission to expand its scope of leverage to the developmental and other interconnected forces, which is illustrated by other accompanying shifts as follows. The framing of the mission shifted its focus from the narrow pollution abatement goal to a broader goal of improving the ecological condition of the river. As the sections below indicate, a similar shift in the European efforts took a much longer time in comparison. The other key shift is that the NGP is driven by a river basin approach informed by a plan produced by a consortium of Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs). These shifts were accompanied by a very agile policy and institutional response framework, which led to the clearly discernible impacts of the programme. The discussion will be revisited following a brief examination of the European experiences of Rhine River restoration under the leadership of the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine (ICPR).

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Rhine River Restoration

The Rhine River restoration story—in contrast to the celebrated condensed narratives—has a slow, long-drawn trajectory with its own distinct and specific historical and institutional evolution. It is a case of gradual incrementalism beginning with episodic bilateral responses and fragmented approaches, often focused on river stretches. Eventually, it moved to a multilateral response, expanding its scope to a river basin approach and shifting to the larger goal of improving the ecological status of the river.

Consensus-building was central to mobilising collective action from the 11 sovereign nations sharing the basin. ICPR began with the convening of the environment ministers of the basin states through the Rhine Ministers' Conference and transformed itself into an avenue for anchoring a deliberative process and collective action of the nations.

ICPR was founded in 1950, initially focusing on research, analysis, and anchoring discussions to address the immediate problem of chloride pollution in the river. It took 13 years, in 1963, for it to attain legal status under the Convention on the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine against Pollution, also known as the Berne Convention.

Nonetheless, the Berne Convention did not translate into any tangible impacts. However, ICPR used this to convene regular meetings of environment ministers (Conference of Rhine Ministers). This eventually led to its first breakthrough, the 1976 Salt Convention (Convention on the Protection of the Rhine against Pollution with Chlorides), where the basin states agreed to share the costs of reducing chloride pollution.

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- National Ganga River Basin Authority
- National Mission For Clean Ganga
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(RAP)—a comprehensive restoration programme aimed at ecosystem-oriented river management with the goals of reinstating the Salmon population by 2000 and utilising the Rhine water for drinking water supply.

Furthermore, parallel developments at the European Union (EU) augmented this development. The EU adopted the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Water Convention in 1992—a legal framework for transboundary water cooperation. This led to various other cooperative initiatives, extending the scope of the RAP. Key features of these developments were (a) Basin Approach, extending the scope of engagement to the entire Rhine basin; (b) Ecosystem Goals, setting measurable targets in the areas of ecology, floods, water quality, and groundwater protection; and (c) Multi-Sectoral engagement for restoration of aquatic health, production of drinking water, and conservation and restoration of the North Sea—the mouth of the Rhine. Though these are all binding on the nation-states, there was no specified enforcement authority or capacity. They still relied on self-reporting of implementation measurements and emphasised negotiation and arbitration as the means to mitigate any disputes. However, the sustained consensus-building efforts led to the eventual adoption of the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) in 2000, which not only generated compliant policy and institutional responses from individual nations but also provided an enforcing mechanism. This led to the much-celebrated improvement in the ecological status of the Rhine.

NGP's Responsive Policymaking

NGP was launched on the remnant institutional ecosystem of the GAP, which focused primarily on infrastructural interventions to build sewage treatment plants. As a continued effort to clean the Ganga after GAP, the GoI established a National Ganga River Basin Authority (NGRBA) in 2009 using the provisions of the Environmental Protection Act, 1986 and under the aegis of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF). Later in 2011, the NMCG was formed as a society for implementing the NGRBA-related activities. Since its inception in 2009, a total of INR 5004.19 crore has been allocated to the NGRBA till 2014. *The actual utilisation, however, remained low.*

In 2014, GoI launched the NGP with an unprecedented outlay of INR 20,000 crores. The NGRBA and NMCG were shifted to the Ministry of Water Resources—renamed as the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development & Ganga Rejuvenation—stressing the importance attached to cleaning Ganga. Soon after, in 2016, the GoI issued the River Ganga (Rejuvenation, Protection and Management) Authorities Order of 2016. This order dissolved the NGRBA, and the NMCG was accorded the status of an authority. A National Ganga Council (NGC) was created to oversee and guide the NMCG. The NGC is a representative and deliberative body with extensive political heft. It is headed by the prime minister with the chief ministers of the riparian states and 10 Union Ministers as members. NGC functions through 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 subnational responses, though nascent, suggest an evolving policy ecosystem for accommodating subnational interests and accountability structures.

The 2016 order also recognises subnational governments as partners through the creation of State Ganga Committees and District Ganga Committees, with defined functions for implementing the NGP. However, these structures have yet to operate at their full potential, largely due to the absence of subnational ownership—evident in the lack of adequate legal, institutional, and budgetary responses from basin states. At the same time, there are signs of evolving interest and accountability. Basin states are actively participating in measures to address water quality concerns, while state- and district-level committees are increasingly being held accountable for inaction by judicial bodies such as the National Green Tribunal.

Scaling up NGP for Rejuvenating India's Rivers

The above trajectory of the NGP indicates dynamic policymaking and innovative institutional responses. In comparison to the long-drawn European experiences, the NGP has, within a comparatively short time, established the right frameworks for producing enduring outcomes: river-basin approach, aiming at overall improvement in ecological status, and multisectoral engagement. The subnational responses, though nascent, suggest an evolving policy ecosystem for accommodating subnational interests and accountability structures. These can be augmented by investing in consensus-building among basin states towards greater subnational ownership of the NGP. Such consensus-building can be incremental and episodic—as the European experiences suggest. Those would eventually become building blocks for a more inclusive consensus and collective action.

More importantly, the NGP's implementation by NMCG while navigating the complex federal dynamics is generating a repository of experiential wisdom to consider, conceptualise, and create policy and institutional elements towards a national framework for rejuvenating India's rivers. It is imperative to curate this wisdom and distil its lessons. Given that all Indian rivers are interstate (except one), NGP's experiences of working with basin states can be instructive towards the larger goal of creating a policy ecosystem for rejuvenating India's rivers with enduring outcomes.

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