

Why Clean Ganga project has a long way to go

Devotees take a dip in River Ganga at Haridwar. | Photo Credit: [Virender Singh Negi](#)

It is a registered trust that runs the 'Namami Gange' mission — India's most ambitious endeavour to clean the Ganga river. The NMCG has a 20,000-crore, centrally-funded, non-lapsable corpus and consists of nearly 288 projects. Previous attempts to clean the river have been unsuccessful because treatment infrastructure never kept pace with the scale of pollution and riparian States and the Centre had not ensured that pollution was checked at source before being emptied into the river. The NMCG's thrust is on roping in the private sector to not only set up sewage treatment plants but also maintain them. In return, the government offers to contribute 40% of the capital costs upfront and disburse the rest — with a profit margin — over 15 years subject to performance indicators being met. The mission also has projects to clean the ghats, rid the river of biological contaminants and improve rural sanitation and afforestation.

Most of the Ganga's pollution is due to five States on the river's main stem — Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar and West Bengal. Approximately 12,000 million litres a day (MLD) of sewage is generated in the Ganga basin, for which there is currently a treatment capacity of just 4,000 MLD.

Industrial pollution from tanneries in Kanpur, distilleries, paper and sugar mills in the Kosi, Ramganga and Kali river catchments is a major contributor.

Last week, the National Green Tribunal (which is hearing petitions around Ganga-cleaning projects) pulled up the government for its tardy job and said that the stretches between Haridwar and Unnao were "unfit for drinking and bathing" and that authorities should display "health warnings". Union Water Resources Minister Nitin Gadkari has promised that 80% of the river will be cleaned by May 2019. His predecessor, Uma Bharti, had promised a clean river by 2018. So far, the State governments have concentrated on superficially cleaning the river by using trash skimmers and improving crematoria-infrastructure.

The Union Water Resources Ministry has been focussed on ensuring a transparent tendering and bidding process. Only this year have treatment plants at Haridwar and Varanasi begun to be constructed. In May 2014, there were 31 treatment plants with a capacity of 485 MLD. As of May 2018, 94 projects, with a treatment capacity of 1,928 MLD, were under way. A financial audit in March suggested that while 20,601 crore had been sanctioned for 193 projects, only 4,254 crore had actually been spent on their implementation.

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