

CORPSES DID NOT ADD TO GANGA POLLUTION: CENTRE

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Pollution - Air, Water, Soil & E-waste

Revered rivers: Pilgrims at the Sangam, the confluence of rivers Ganga and Yamuna, during Ganga Dussehra festival in Prayagraj on Sunday. AP

The dumping of bodies in the Ganga, allegedly of those who died of COVID-19, did not increase pollution in the river, the Jal Shakti Ministry has said.

The National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG) had solicited reports in May from the Centre, the State Pollution Control Boards of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and the Central Water Commission on whether the disposal of corpses in the river had affected water quality.

Data for April-June suggested that the water quality in terms of pH, DO (dissolved oxygen), BOD (biochemical oxygen demand) conformed with the bathing water quality criteria except “marginal deviations at few locations” and these were not dissimilar from the water quality observed in previous years. They may not be attributed to incidents of floating bodies, the NMCG said in a report based on responses from these departments. *The Hindu* has viewed this report.

On May 14, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) had asked the Centre and the Bihar and the Uttar Pradesh State governments to furnish a report following a complaint by a private citizen that several unclaimed or unidentified, unburnt/ partially burnt bodies were found floating in the “sacred” river Ganga. Some of the bodies were suspected to be of COVID-19 victims.

The complainant alleged that the disposal of bodies in and around the river would not only pollute the river but also seriously affect all those persons who are dependent on the river.

Sample study

Along with assessing water quality, the Secretary, Jal Shakti Ministry decided after a meeting with the Chief Secretaries of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar on May 18 to study if the river water was contaminated with SARS-CoV-2 from the bodies being disposed in it. They also wanted to know if the virus could spread and infect those who came into contact with the water.

The ICMR-National Institute of Virology was approached to study water samples from the river but they declined to take part in the study. The CSIR-Indian Institute of Toxicology Research (IITR), Lucknow has now been entrusted with the project.

Results awaited

They have collected samples from burial sites (Kannauj, Unnao, Kanpur, Prayagraj and Ghazipur districts) in Uttar Pradesh and Buxor and Saran districts in Bihar though results of the analysis are not yet public.

Previous studies from the CSIR-Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad have shown that the coronavirus can be found in sewage and wastewater, and these have been used to estimate the prevalence of the infection in other urban locations.

The NMCG, a Jal Shakti Ministry body, is the nodal agency tasked with coordinating the over Rs. 20,000 crore initiative to clean the Ganga, a flagship programme of the government. One of the measures employed is to discourage a practice of disposing bodies in the river. To this end, the NMCG had funded projects to improve crematoria along the banks of the river in riparian States.

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