

I/169822/2024

The Hindu - 17 April-2024

Nine years after green panel's directions, Yamuna floodplain yet to be demarcated

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NEW DELHI

The process of physical demarcation of the Yamuna's floodplain - a basic step to help identify and protect the sensitive ecosystem from encroachment - is still incomplete despite court orders.

While the Delhi government had claimed in submissions to the National Green Tribunal (NGT) that "100%" physical demarcation of a major stretch of the Yamuna's floodplain in the city has been done, visits to the sites in question and interviews with officials by *The Hindu* have confirmed that major gaps persist.

Moreover, nine years after the NGT asked authorities to identify encroachments in the floodplain, this process, too, has not been done, and was not initiated even after the devastating July 2023 floods that saw the Yamuna rise to unprecedented levels. In fact, illegal permanent construc-

tions on the floodplain have only grown since the NGT's directions in a landmark judgment in 2015, according to latest satellite images.

"Demarcation of a floodplain is not rocket science. If it is not being done despite court orders, it is because of the dishonest intentions of bureaucrats and the government's Executive wing," said Shashi Shekhar, former Secretary at the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga

Rejuvenation. He added that there was a "strong land mafia" that was "grabbing" the floodplain. "This cannot happen without the connivance of officials and politicians."

Rising encroachment

Encroachment into the floodplain intensified in the 1990s, with several illegal colonies mushrooming on the site. Over the years, multiple developmental projects, such as the Commonwealth Games Village, the Yamuna Bank Metro Station, and the Delhi Secretariat, were also con-



Those who live on the encroached floodplain are at higher risk when the Yamuna floods. FILE PHOTO

structed on the floodplain.

After the 2015 judgment in a case filed by ex-IFS officer Manoj Mishra, the NGT formed the 'Mali se Nirmal Yamuna (From Dirty to Clean Yamuna) Revitalisation Plan, 2017', with the intent to restore the river's floodplain to its natural state by March 31, 2017.

The NGT's judgment, warning of "grave environmental disasters", had directed the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) - a civic body administered by the Centre - to physically demarcate the entire floodplain, and prohibited any construction in the demarcated area. But the DDA

missed the deadline.

'Demarcation done'

However, from April 2021, the Delhi government, based on the submissions made to it by the DDA, has been claiming in different reports to the Centre and the NGT that physical demarcation of the floodplain has been completed from Wazirabad to Jaitpur.

"100% work for demarcation of floodplain has been completed. 591 bollards marked with GPS coordinates, 375 flag posts, and 27 signboards for the entire stretch from Wazirabad barrage to Jaitpur have been installed," stated a re-

port submitted by the Delhi government to the NGT on December 12, 2023.

But when *The Hindu* visited different parts of the floodplain from Wazirabad to Jaitpur, the bollards could not be found in many areas.

"The demarcation has been done from Wazirabad to Okhla, but has not been completed from Okhla to Jaitpur. Most of the floodplain in Jaitpur does not belong to the DDA, so to complete the process, we will have to do a joint exercise with the Delhi government," a DDA officer said.

At Batla House, too, the demarcation could not be

found except for one bollard. DDA-appointed guards at the site said they had not seen any more bollards. "The physical demarcation has not been completed here due to pending court cases," another DDA official said.

Potential issues remain unaddressed even in the stretches which are demarcated, multiple official sources told *The Hindu*.

The minutes of a meeting of the Principal Committee - a panel appointed by the NGT to monitor the implementation of its 2015 judgment - on January 14, 2022 show that issues were raised about the demarcation already done by the DDA. "It was pointed out to the DDA that the bollards fixed by them at some areas excluded a large part of the floodplain and a meeting was suggested to discuss that. But the meeting never happened," said a Central government official. The information was confirmed by a second source.

The NGT's direction to identify encroachments and suggest recommendations for demolition, too, was not done. "The Principal

Committee was supposed to ensure the DDA did this, but it never happened," the official said.

Delhi floods

After the 2023 floods, the NGT took suo motu cognisance of a newspaper report and formed another committee headed by the Chief Secretary in October last year. The green panel's directions to the new committee echoed almost exactly what it had told the Principal Committee eight years prior - to physically demarcate the floodplain and suggest measures to remove encroachments.

The new committee was set a deadline of three months, but the deadline was missed. In January this year, the committee asked for three more months to comply with the NGT's directions.

"It was proving to be a difficult task to carry out these directions, as the DDA and Revenue Department did not have proper maps of the area in the required format," a Delhi government official said.

On March 21, the NGT directed the Delhi govern-

ment to demarcate the floodplain keeping in mind the risk of floods that occur once every hundred years. Earlier, demarcation was being done based on a 25-year flood frequency. The new direction will result in a much larger area being termed as floodplain.

"We will have to make the maps again, and then demarcate the floodplain," the official said. "It would take much more time."

More construction

Even as the new committee struggles to identify and remove encroachments in the floodplain, several new constructions could be seen in Jaitpur, New Usmanpur and Garhi Mandu. At Jaitpur, there were hundreds of illegal constructions which stretched even beyond the Delhi border.

A shopkeeper at Jaitpur said the change had happened right before his eyes. "Twenty years ago, there were only five or ten houses on the floodplain. But over the years, a whole colony has developed there. Construction can happen if you pay the right people," he said, his voice trailing off.



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The Hindu Business Line - 17 April-2024

Rajasthan's water woes hit farming hard

DRY AND DESPERATE. Lack of crop insurance, fair MSP add to crisis; agrarian communities across constituencies express their frustration

Dalip Singh
Nagaur

Farmers' anger, which reflected in the ouster of the Ashok Gehlot government around four months ago in the 2023 assembly elections, still persists in Rajasthan, where wheat harvesting is currently under way. All 25 Lok Sabha seats in the State go to polls in the first and second phase on April 19 and April 26, respectively.

Though agriculture and its related sectors contribute 28.9 per cent of the GSDP of ₹7,99-lakh crore and more than 63 per cent of total households in the State are directly linked to it, the agrarian community across parliamentary constituencies collectively express their frustration over the severe water crisis, inability to get MSP for wheat, spices, and other crops, and costly diesel and crop insurance compensation. They said it has a bearing on their income.

Ramswarup Singh, a 67-year-old farmer in Barbara village of Alwar LS seat, laments that the water table in his area has receded to a depth of 600



PARCHED DREAMS. Severe water crisis and lack of a proper water distribution network have worsened the desert State's plight during the wheat season SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

feet. "We don't have water for drinking and farming. Farming has become very difficult and too costly... there is no water and the rainfall pattern in our desert has also become erratic," the farmer of four children belonging to the village dominated by Gujjars said.

A few kilometres away in Puthka village, which connects Bharatpur LS seat to the adjoining Alwar district, Sandeep Kumar Saini has the same concerns. "The tap water comes once in ten days; we

have to go a distance to collect water even for drinking. Our crop yield has come down due to water scarcity. There is no canal to feed our farmland," he lamented.

The agony of 76.5 lakh farmers of the State found a voice in Gothu Ram in Nagaur. He said they are not getting an adequate rate for their wheat despite the government announcing increased MSP for the farmers.

Interestingly after coming to power in the State, BJP

bus stand here. He said they are hardly getting ₹6,000 per quintal for moong dal at the market though the government price is ₹8,000 per quintal. Likewise, the 'gunwarfali', (Cluster beans) a vegetable, is getting them just ₹5,100 per quintal. "Sacks of gunwarfali are lying at my house since we cannot meet the expenses incurred at this price," he stated

THE CANAL CONUNDRUM

Meanwhile PM Narendra Modi in his election campaign has alleged that the previous Congress government in the State scuttled the Eastern Region Canal Project (ERCP) that is expected to water 13 districts of Rajasthan. He, however, told that its 'Modi ki guarantee' that the canal project will be executed in his third term at office.

Former Congress MP from Alwar and ex-Union Minister Bhanwar Jitendra Singh, who is a Congress general secretary at present, accused the Modi government of not honouring the promise on the water project. Union Water Minister Rajendra Singh Sekhawati, who is seeking re-election from Jodhpur, cre-

ated hurdles in the implementation of the ERCP since he thought the Gehlot government will get the credit in the assembly elections, he told *businessline*.

Bhagirath Chaudhary, Founder-Director of the Jodhpur-based NGO, South Asia Biotechnology Centre, told this reporter that politicians don't deliver on the promises made during elections and that agri-related issues that need urgent policy intervention to defuse farmers problems in the long-term.

He also agreed with farmers over the need to have a water distribution network in Rajasthan. "We need something like Narmada water distribution network of Gujarat to wet our desert, missing since the last 40 years," Chaudhary remarked.

In Rajasthan, politics divides farmers on strong *khap* loyalties, fragmenting possibility of having one common identity. Perhaps that explains why farmers fail to raise their voice emphatically at the national stage the way their counterparts from Punjab and Haryana do, said Laxmi Narayan Meena, also a farmer, on the outskirts of Jaipur.