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New study aims to put people at heart of Ganga revival plans

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Experts have wrung hands over the Ganga's worsening pollution for decades, but the communities whose livelihood depends on the river have really borne its brunt. Now, as government schemes begin to have a positive impact on water quality, the people who live along the Ganga are hopeful.

"Improvement in water quality has attracted more tourists and helped us earn more," Chintu Sahani, a boatman at Varanasi's Assi Ghat, told a joint team of experts from IIT-Kanpur and Melbourne's La Trobe University that visited Varanasi and Kanpur recently. These two cities account for 60% of the Ganga's pollution.



WATER WARRIORS: IIT-Kanpur's Anjali Yadav is collaborating with Prem Kurup (second from left) from Melbourne's La Trobe University for the Ganga revival project

The two institutions have tied up to put people at the heart of the Ganga rejuvenation programme. They want to understand the socioeconomic impact of pollution, and for this they meet all stakeholders – especially residents of the riverbanks – to understand their social customs, practices and traditional knowledge systems. "Understanding people's perception of Ganga pollution, their risk assessment and the way it influences their decision-making forms the crux of our study," said Anjali Yadav, a joint doctoral student leading the study.

People-First Programme

Prof Prem Kurup, a STEM academic from LaTrobe University, said, "We are following a 5P approach with the first P standing for people's participation." The next four Ps are policies, procedure, process and practice. Here, process means public engagement based on norms, and 'practice' or implementation is a voluntary cooperative venture undertaken by all stakeholders to mitigate pollution in the Ganga.

Prof Kurup said the people they met on their visit reported improvement in water quality. "The stakeholders told us that significant changes have been made in water governance of the Ganga post-

2018, and credited them to the central government's Namami Gange project."

In Varanasi, boatmen, washermen, shopkeepers and even tourists mentioned cleaner ghats, better solid waste management around the ghats and strict law enforcement by the 'Jal Police'.

Plugging The Leaks

People's perception of water quality differs markedly from the scientific assessment done by Central Pollution Control Board's monitoring stations. It could be because the people are not familiar with scientific measures of water quality, such as dissolved oxygen, biological oxygen demand and coliform count.

Even though all polluting industries in Kanpur have been relocated, the problem of effluent discharge remains, said Prof Kurup. "Toxic and untreated effluents are released directly into the river late in the night and early morning. Similarly, at some places and ghats in Varanasi, untreated or partially treated sewage is released directly into the river."

"With strict monitoring, corpses are no longer thrown in the main stretch of the Ganga, but you can still see them in the unmonitored stretches," a Varanasi resident said.

Anjali said people throw solid waste and the waste from rituals directly into the river, so they need to be sensitised about its harmful effects. The government should encourage people to move towards sustainable religious practices so that pesticides, insecticides and other harmful chemicals are not carried to the Ganga through the tonnes of flowers that are thrown in the river.

A Burning Issue

Swami Digvijaynath, a seer and proponent of sustainable religious practices at Varanasi's Harishchandra Ghat, stressed on the need to modify religious rituals that affect the river: "I feel people should transform or forgo rituals that harm the Ganga."

For example, few families opt for electric cremation at Harishchandra Ghat and Manikarnika Ghat even though it costs about a third less than a wood pyre. Anjali said the administration should involve priests, seers and pandas to make people aware of the environmental cost of firewood-based cremation, and end the stigma related to electric cremation. In the next phase of the study, the team will look at ways to strip water testing of jargon, so that the common people can understand test results. They will also develop a people-friendly test kit.

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Nitish to launch today scheme for use of Ganga floodwater

Patna: Bihar CM Nitish Kumar will Sunday inaugurate the Ganga Water Supply Scheme, touted as a novel plan that aims to channel the floodwaters from the state's river-ravaged north to parched swathes in the south, reports **Abhay Singh**. After the inauguration at Rajgir in Nalanda, stored and treated floodwaters sourced from Ganga will be supplied to households of this town for drinking.

The CM will inaugurate another segment of the scheme on Monday. "The treated Ganga water will also be supplied to hotels, schools, colleges, hospitals and all other institutions in these towns," water resources minister Sanjay Kumar Jha said.