

The Whole Ecosystem of and Around The Ganga Is Getting Transformed:

G. Asok Kumar



Naina Gautam

Q What have been the highlights of Namami Gange in the last financial year?

Financial Year (FY) 2022-23 is a watershed year for Namami Gange programme in terms of outcome, expenditure, expansion of activities and accolades received. It saw the highest actual expenditure in any FY since inception in 2014. The year saw the completion of many projects, creating a sewage treatment capacity of about 1,224 Million Liters Daily (MLD) as against 990 MLD created cumulatively in eight years since 2014. Another 1,000 MLD will be completed in the next three months.

Under Arth Ganga, many multi-departmental activities like natural farming, development of tourism, reuse of treated water in power plants, etc

G. Asok Kumar, fondly called the Rain Man of India, is the Director General of the National Mission for Clean Ganga. In an interview with Naina Gautam, Kumar talks about how he is leading the initiative to connect multiple dots around the river Ganga to promote a thriving relationship between the river and the human-kind, people and the planet, and economics and the environment. Edited excerpts:

were started. The second meeting of the National Ganga Council was held in Kolkata. Above all, the United Nations recognised Namami Gange as one amongst the top ten Eco- Restoration Flagship programmes of the world in the COP 15 meeting at Montreal in December 2022. National Mission for Clean Ganga's documentary along with National Geography got three awards in the Asian Academy Creative awards.

But the underlying achievement is that the quality of water has improved, which can be even gauged by the dips and splashes of the increased numbers of dolphins. The main thrust of Namami Gange so far has been on creation of infrastructure of Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs), which are now rebranded as Nirmal Jal Kendra. We are now working on regaining the traditional glory of the Ganga river, following up on the directions of our Prime Minister to be proud of our culture and heritage. The whole ecosystem of and around the Ganga is getting transformed.

Q This year's Budget has increased allocation for the Department of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation. What

are your plans this year?

With the increased actual spending of Rs 3,000 Crore achieved in FY 2023, we have got the largest BE of Rs 4,000 Crore for the next FY. This is a big challenge, after the introduction of Single Treasury Accounting system last FY. With this, unless the money is actually spent, it would not be counted as expenditure. It means that parking of funds to masquerade as expenditure is no longer possible.

Q How will you achieve your targets overcoming the challenges like delays in some ongoing projects?

We are confident of achieving our targets. We analysed and identified the causes of delay in the last few years and took steps to correct them. For example, availability of land was a major issue. So last year we took a tough stand that if the states are not providing the land, then the projects will be cancelled. Then suddenly land issues started getting sorted out. States were not concerned because the projects were fully funded by the central government and the extra cost due to change of site was not a concern of the states. NMCG had to re-estimate, re-design and re-sanction with increased costs. After we took the tough decision

that any escalation in the cost of the project due to land change will be borne by the state government, this tendency also got sorted out. Permissions and clearances stuck with various state and central government departments were vigorously followed up to cut the delay.

Q What is the status of Arth Ganga?

We have embarked on an important shift in the Namami Gange activities and are focusing on enabling a river-people connect. The Prime Minister gave this concept in December 2019, but due to Covid not much happened in 2020 and 2021. So we picked it up in 2022. It has progressed immensely after that. We are in the midst of high activities of Arth Ganga.

Q Please elaborate?

Under the Arth Ganga concept we identified six verticals, including livelihood generation. For this we have the Jalaj model, where the Ganga Praharis are supported for income generation activities like selling local products, facilitating supply chains for hotels or providing home stays, acting as tourist- guides, organising river cruise tourism, etc.

In Parmarth Niketan, Rishikesh, 60 people were trained in conducting Aartis on rivers banks. This is to bring in some standardisation and quality improvement in Aartis. We are pushing the Ghat Mein Haat initiative for sale of local products. We also did a lot of river ranching. About 20 lakh fingerlings were put into rivers so that the fishermen get good catches later.

Q The Budget focused on promotion of chemical-free natural farming to help farmers improve their income as well as promote sustainable agricultural productivity. What kind of increased synergies do you see with your work? What about other verticals?

Under Arth Ganga, another pillar is natural farming for increasing the net-income of farmers. Earlier we talked about "more crops per drop",



but now the focus is on "more net income per drop". With natural farming, no chemical fertilisers are used and the inputs are minimal, mostly natural and recycled. We have tied up with Sahakar Bharti, Patanjali, Art of Living, and other farmer-based organisations for promoting this sustainable concept of natural farming. The other verticals include monetisation of treated water and sludge; institutional capacity building, etc. We have signed MoUs with a power department last December for using treated water for their thermal power plant. We have also given water to IOC, Mathura. We have formed over 139 District Ganga Committees (DGCs) and have been holding regular monthly meetings of these DGCs (DGC 4M meetings) for decentralised monitoring and ensuring people's participation.

Q How are Sahakar Ganga Grams helping?

Sahakar Ganga Grams are the outcomes of the MoU with Sahakar Bharti, who will make farmer-based organisations, create awareness among farmers on natural farming and handhold them for some period. Marketing support will be also provided. We have registered trade mark of the Namami Gange Arth Ganga as a brand. All products produced by these farmers will be collected by FPOs and marketed through Sahakar Bharti. Sahakar Ganga Grams is a cooperative movement that will be self-

sustaining.

Q Sustainable tourism is picking up. How are you tapping into it?

If you have to sustain tourism, it has to be responsible tourism. We are also training Ganga Praharis to act as ecology savers and earn income from them. We have now traditional routes charted for Char Dham. So now we have given them trainings to act as local guides. There are many sites of historical and cultural importance on the banks of Ganga. We have partnered with INTACH to list out the intangible and tangible heritage properties like fairs, cuisines and heritage structures like forts, old bridges, etc. We have started out with very innovative ideas like Ghat Mein Yoga and short river cruises

Q What about engaging partners to make more impact?

With National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA), we have started preparation of an urban river management plan. Rivers were not part of urban planning. We are now making a lot of effort to include river as a central theme of planning in cities on the banks of rivers. We held the first annual meeting of the River City Alliance (RCA) in Pune on 13-14 February, 2023. RCA now has 107 member cities. These will go a long way in getting people and local bodies involved in the Ganga cleaning and making it a sustainable endeavour, as desired by the Prime Minister.