



From Namami Gange to Clean Yamuna: The Road Ahead

In conversation with

Mr. Asok Kumar G.

Advisor (PWD) to Government of NCT of Delhi
and Former Director General of Namami Gange

Few public servants in India have shaped the country's water governance narrative as decisively as Mr. Asok Kumar G., widely known as the 'Rainman of India'. From pioneering community-led water and sanitation initiatives at the district level to steering national missions such as Namami Gange and Catch the Rain, his career reflects a rare blend of institutional reform, people's participation, and on-ground impact. Recently appointed as Advisor (PWD) to Government of NCT of Delhi, Mr. Kumar brings this extensive experience to bear on some of India's most complex urban water challenges. In this conversation with Water Digest, he reflects on his professional journey, the transformation of river restoration into a people's movement, the evolving challenges of cleaning the Yamuna in Delhi, and why water security must remain central to India's development and climate resilience agenda.

Water Digest: WD You have served in several pivotal roles, including Director General of the National Mission for Clean Ganga. You are also popular as the Rainman of India. Could you share your journey in the water and environment sector, and what shaped your commitment to river rejuvenation and public water governance.?

Mr. G. Asok Kumar (GAK): Being an Aquarian, I am naturally attracted to water and its elements. Water is the basis of life, often taken for granted as it is a common good and is largely unpriced. So, I wanted to work on this neglected but vital resource and give water its due respect.

As far back as 2001-03, when I served as the District Collector of Nizamabad (in present-day Telangana), I initiated several pioneering interventions in the water and sanitation sector. Under an initiative called Shubrata, we constructed nearly 1.43 lakh pucca individual household toilets, including those in 1,000 schools, with strong community participation. This was achieved years ahead of the Swachh Bharat Mission, by converging funds from schemes such as Food for Work, TSC, EGS, and other state and central programmes, along with locally mobilised resources.

In parallel, we constituted 1,168 Habitation Drinking Water Committees across all Gram Panchayats in the district. These initiatives, later circulated as the “Nizamabad Initiatives” across the then undivided Andhra Pradesh, had a profound impact on public health. Within 15 months, annual diarrhoea cases dropped from over 5,000 to just 157.

During my tenure as Vice Chairman of the Hyderabad Urban Development Authority, and later as Managing Director of the Hyderabad Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board, I initiated and successfully implemented several major water-sector projects in Hyderabad. These include the introduction of Daily Water (DW) supply in the city in 2008; after a gap of over 24 years; the commencement of works to source drinking water for Hyderabad from the Godavari,

located 186 km away, and the completion of the Krishna Phase II Daily Water Supply Scheme.

We also commissioned multiple sewage treatment plants with a cumulative treatment capacity of 700 MLD. Notably, we were among the first utilities to extensively adopt technology in the daily water supply sector, introducing systems such as SCADA, GPS-based tanker monitoring, and remote reading of water meters.

Later, at the national level, my tenure as Mission Director of the National Water Mission saw the launch of sustained campaigns such as Catch the Rain and Sahi Fasal, as well as the Water Talks platform that enabled water warriors to showcase their work nationally. I also initiated the National Water Mission Awards, which later evolved into the National Water Awards. Institution-building was a key focus - establishing Jal Shakti Kendras in districts, setting up the Bureau of Water Use Efficiency, and creating a national database of water bodies through crowdsourcing.

From 2019 to 2024, as Executive Director (Projects) and later Director General of the National Mission for Clean Ganga, I had the opportunity to contribute to the widely acknowledged rejuvenation and cleaning of the River Ganga and its tributaries.

WD: You recently took on the role of Advisor to the Delhi Government. What motivated you to accept this responsibility after your retirement, and what aspects of Delhi's water and sanitation challenges do you find most compelling?

GAK: I believe this opportunity reflects recognition of the work I have done in the water sector over the years. Delhi presents uniquely complex challenges—historical, institutional, and operational. Multiple agencies are involved in water and sewerage management, making coordination particularly difficult.

The Yamuna River, which flows for 1,376 km, experiences nearly 98 per cent of its pollution

load within just a 22 km stretch in Delhi. The lack of adequate environmental flow for much of the year, combined with continuous discharge of untreated sewage and industrial effluents from both banks, poses a major challenge to river rejuvenation. Additionally, large parts of the city remain unsewered, including many JJ clusters.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge is coordinating among the many stakeholders - MCD, DDA, NMCD, Departments of Irrigation and Flood Control and PWD etc. of Government of NCR of Delhi, and Central Government ministries like Ministry of Jal Shakti, National Mission for Clean Ganga etc. are just some of the key players involved. Then, there is requirement of coordination with neighbouring states like Haryana, UP etc. for the management of water in River Yamuna.

WD: During your tenure at the National Mission for Clean Ganga, initiatives such as transforming Namami Gange into a “people’s movement” and expanding the River Cities Alliance were widely appreciated. Could you highlight one milestone from that period that you believe created the strongest long-term impact?

GAK: One of the most significant achievements was transforming the Clean Ganga programme from a contractor-driven, engineering-focused initiative into a people’s movement through the Arth Ganga framework, while simultaneously building robust institutions and stakeholder capacities.

This approach delivered tangible outcomes. In December 2022, at CoP 15 in Montreal, the United Nations recognised Namami Gange as one of the world’s top ten ecosystem restoration flagships for its efforts to “halt and reverse environmental degradation, improving bio-diversity – all with people’s active participation”. We also witnessed a significant increase in dolphin populations, an important indicator species, and their expanded habitat range. Most importantly, over 63 crore pilgrims who participated in the Mahakumbh at



Prayagraj in 2025 appreciated the visibly improved river conditions.

The six pillars of Arth Ganga included promoting natural farming, monetising treated water and sludge from STPs, livelihood generation initiatives such as JALAJ, enhanced public participation through cultural and religious engagement, strengthening district-level institutions like District Ganga Committees, and capacity building for municipalities through Urban River Management Plans.

Digital monitoring platforms such as PRAYAG (Platform for the Realtime Analysis of Yamuna and Ganga) enabled daily monitoring of nearly 300 STPs in the Ganga basin, significantly reducing untreated sewage inflows. Industrial effluent treatment units, particularly in places like Kanpur, curtailed industrial pollution. Decentralised planning, execution, and monitoring - backed by people’s participation - have created lasting impact.

WD: Urban flooding and sanitation planning are among the major issues in Delhi. As an advisor, how do you plan to approach these challenges, and what systemic reforms do you believe are essential for sustainable outcomes?

GAK: Urban flooding has become a serious issue across Indian cities due to unplanned

urbanisation. The disappearance of traditional water bodies, excessive concretisation, reduced groundwater recharge, and faster surface runoff have all exacerbated flooding, particularly in low-lying areas. Climate change, with its increasing rainfall intensity, has further worsened the situation.

The solution lies in truly implementing the principle of “Catch the Rain, where it falls, when it falls”, which formed the basis of the Catch the Rain campaign launched in 2020, later endorsed by the honourable Prime Minister and scaled nationally as Jal Shakti Abhiyan – Catch the Rain, under the Ministry of Jal Shakti. Encouraging RWAs and citizen groups to adopt rainwater harvesting will be a key priority.

Additionally, desilting and redesigning drainage systems, reclaiming Yamuna floodplains, identifying temporary floodwater holding zones, and coordinating barrage operations upstream will be essential. The Government of Delhi has also prepared a Sewerage Master Plan 2024, identifying vulnerable areas and technical solutions. Its phased implementation, estimated at Rs. 57,000 crore, will require significant financial mobilisation.

WD: Delhi’s Clean Yamuna mission requires strong coordination across agencies, citizens, and technology partners. What strategies do you believe are key to ensuring accountability and measurable progress in river restoration efforts?

GAK: The biggest challenge lies in aligning multiple stakeholders, such as MCD, DDA, NMCD, Departments of Irrigation and Flood Control and PWD etc. of Government of NCR of Delhi, and Central Government ministries like Ministry of Jal Shakti, National Mission for Clean Ganga etc. and coordinating with neighbouring states like Haryana, UP etc. When there is strong political will and leadership, coordination becomes far more effective.

This was evident in early 2023, when the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi chaired a



High-Level Committee to address Yamuna pollution. Monthly reviews, clearly assigned targets, and accountability mechanisms led to visible improvements in water quality. Unfortunately, after the committee’s leadership changed following Supreme Court directions, coordination weakened and momentum slowed. Luckily since all concerned leaderships, from the Central to the state governments and even the local bodies, are aligned politically now, there will be a strong political will and hence make better coordination possible.

WD: Please share a message with policymakers, urban planners, and citizens who are deeply invested in India’s water security and river health, and the readers of Water Digest and viewers of WD News.

GAK: Water is an extremely precious resource and must be respected and valued. India is not inherently water-scarce; the challenge lies in management. Improving water-use efficiency, particularly in agriculture, which consumes nearly 85–89 per cent of our water, is critical.

We must maximise rainwater harvesting, prevent solid and liquid pollution from entering rivers and water bodies, and embrace water circularity by reducing, reusing, and recycling water. Over time, we should aim to ensure that potable water is not used for non-potable purposes.

While this may seem ambitious, I firmly believe it is achievable through greater awareness, people’s participation, strong institutions, and effective water governance.