

# Flowing Back To Life

**G Asok Kumar** highlights the crucial role of constant vigilance in Ganga pollution abatement and responsible river management

The mighty Ganga River, revered for its spiritual significance and life-sustaining water, faces a formidable foe: pollution. Untreated sewage, industrial effluents, and agricultural runoff threaten the river's ecological balance and public health. However, hope glimmers through initiatives like Namami Gange, an Integrated Conservation Mission endorsed by the Indian government focusing on closely monitoring the river's water quality.

In an exclusive interview with us, **G Asok Kumar, the Director General of the National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG)**, talks about how constant vigilance plays a crucial role in ensuring the effectiveness of pollution abatement projects, safeguarding biodiversity, and fostering responsible river management. Excerpts from the interview here.



G Asok Kumar IAS

**Q How does monitoring river water quality impact the cleanliness of the Ganga River?**

Ensuring the effectiveness of pollution abatement infrastructure, such as Namami Gange, NRCP, and AMRUT initiatives, requires consistent river water quality monitoring. Operational Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs) must meet designated Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to address pollution from sewage and industrial effluents. Without diligent monitoring, costly investments risk becoming mere projects for contractors focused on capital expenses rather than sustained outcomes. Notably, initiatives like Namami Gange, incorporating a 24/7 monitoring system like PRAYAG (Platform for Real-time Analysis of Yamuna And Ganga and their tributaries), have yielded positive results. Real-time analysis through platforms such as Ganga Tarang and PMT Dashboard ensures efficient project management, contributing to improved river water quality, enhanced biodiversity, and increased public engagement in events like Magh Mela.

**Q Can you explain how the live feed cameras from Sewage Treatment Plants (STP) projects contribute to keeping the**

**Ganga River ecologically balanced?**

Live feed cameras from STPs ensure operational status and corroborate sensor data at input and output points. They aid in monitoring both ongoing construction and the functionality of STPs, enabling identifying and removing bottlenecks without compromising time or cost. This continuous monitoring enhances the performance of STPs, preventing the discharge of untreated effluents into the Ganga River and maintaining ecological balance. The positive impacts of these interventions are evident through the resurgence of endangered biodiversity in the river Ganga, highlighting the importance of efficient STP performance for environmental preservation and sustainability.

**Q What does "Aviral Ganga" mean, and why is it essential for the continuous flow of water in the river?**

The Namami Gange mission's five programmatic pillars are crucial, particularly Aviral Ganga (enhancing ecology and flow) and Arth Ganga (establishing a socio-economic connection with the river). Maintaining flows with specific magnitude, timing, frequency, and duration is essential for sustaining a holistic flow regime in river-dependent ecosystems. Striking a

balance between human usage and the river's environmental needs is vital across all river basins. The National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG) established the minimum ecological flow in the Ganga, with the Central Water Commission (CWC) designated as the authority and custodian of data. Responsible for supervision, monitoring, and flow regulation, the CWC has been conducting e-flow monitoring since January 1, 2019, submitting quarterly progress reports to NMCG for comprehensive assessment and management.

**Q What's the significance of the River Basin Management Unit established in December 2023 for the sustainability of Namami Gange's efforts?**

As part of the Namami Gange Programme, a thorough River Basin Management Plan for the Ganga was crafted by a consortium of seven IITs in 2014, aimed at restoring the wholesomeness of the Ganga ecosystem and enhancing its ecological health. The plan encompasses decentralised river basin management initiatives. In the Ramganga River, a major Ganga tributary, model District Ganga Plans (DGPs) were developed for four districts in 2023, aided by technical support from German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ) and World Wildlife Fund (WWF). A River Basin Management Unit (RMU) was established within NMCG to bolster capacity building and knowledge dissemination in December 2023. These comprehensive plans address the entire riverine ecosystem and provide sustainable, need-based solutions, contributing to the long-term sustainability of Namami Gange's efforts.

**Q What role does the Ganga Monitoring Aqua Lab/Centre at the Wildlife Institute of India play in assessing the health of the Ganga basin?**

The purpose of the Ganga Aqualife Conservation Monitoring Lab/Center is to facilitate science-based conservation planning and the dissemination of information supported by data. The centre is actively building a scientific knowledge



base on aquatic wildlife in the Ganga River basin through field visits, observations, and surveys. Samples collected during field studies undergo comprehensive biological, chemical, and microbial analyses using advanced equipment funded by the National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG) and the National River Conservation Directorate (NRCD).

In addition to scientific research, the centre promotes the sustainable utilisation of resources and services provided by the riverine ecosystem. This is achieved by mobilising local communities and establishing groups of volunteers, referred to as "Ganga Praharis," "Ganga Doots," etc. These volunteers are trained in scientific methods to protect the biodiversity of the Ganga River and its tributaries.

**Q How does the involvement of stakeholders contribute to the success of Namami Gange's initiatives?**

Any program's success hinges on stakeholders' active involvement, aligning with the Hon'ble Prime Minister's vision of transforming "Jal Andolan" into a "Jan Andolan" (people's movement). NMCG has taken significant steps to foster a collaborative and participatory approach, particularly by strengthening the functioning of 139 District Ganga Committees (DGCs). The DGCs have initiated forum meetings, known as District



Ganga Committees 4M (Monthly, Mandated, Minuted, and Monitored). These meetings will serve as the central hub at the district level to oversee the implementation of the DGPs. Furthermore, a dashboard, launched in April 2022, monitors DGC performance, and the cumulative number of minuted DGC meetings has risen to nearly 2500 by December 2023. Volunteers like Ganga-Praharis, Ganga Doots, and the Ganga Terrestrial Forces (GTF) actively create awareness at the grassroots. NMCG has established MoUs with ten government ministries, engaged with academic institutions, international organisations, and countries worldwide, and collaborates with NGOs and private sector entities.

**Q How does the facelift initiative for Ayodhya align with the overall goals of Ganga rejuvenation?**

Namami Gange focuses on the Ganga and its tributaries, including the Sarayu

Above and left: Mural painting done by NMCG of Lord Ram in Ayodhya; The PRAYAG room in NMCG office

River near Ayodhya. Nirmal Ganga (Unpolluted flow) and Arth-Ganga (River-people connect) are pivotal pillars, with Tourism/Cultural Heritage and Livelihood Opportunities as sub-pillars. Ayodhya, home to the Ram Mandir, has become a key heritage site with a transformative facelift. Under Namami Gange, Interception and Diversion (I&D) works have kept Sarayu clean, and a 33 MLD STP is underway. Riverside Ghats, restored traditional water bodies, and Ayodhya's inclusion in the River Cities Alliance (RCA) with an Urban River Management Plan showcases the commitment to holistic development.

**Q What upcoming projects or initiatives are in the pipeline as part of Namami Gange's future plans?**

Namami Gange's future plan is ambitious, focusing on the widespread promotion of wastewater reuse across various sectors. The initiative aims to adopt cutting-edge technologies and techniques to prevent pollution, enhance monitoring and planning, and ensure continuous stakeholder involvement. Embracing decentralised water governance approaches is vital to fostering an environment that enables the efficient protection, conservation, and rejuvenation of the Ganga and its tributaries.