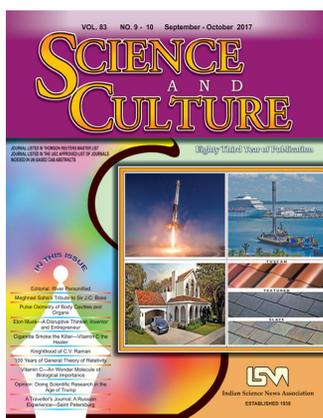


RIVER PERSONIFIED



In a historic judgement given on 20th March 2017, the Uttarakhand High Court declared that Ganga, Yamuna and its tributaries are to be considered as “juristic/legal persons/living entities having the status of a legal person”. India is the second country in the world where rivers have been granted

legal human status by the court—just five days earlier, the river Whanganui in New Zealand became the first river in the world to acquire such a status. To many Indians this is neither surprising nor original because in Hindu mythology, natural resources like rivers, trees, mountains are not only adored as a living being but are also sometimes given the status of superpower as deities.

The Ganga was declared as our “National River” on November 4, 2008 by the then Prime Minister of India Shri Manmohan Singh as a tribute to the emotions of the Indians linked with this river. As mentioned by the Prime Minister, this emotional link needed to be recognised to set up a model for river cleansing through the new institutional mechanism. A high-

powered Ganga River Basin Authority (GRBA) was also formed headed by the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, for pollution abatement, sustainable use of water and flood management. It may be recalled that the Central Ganga Authority was established in 1985 under the chairmanship of Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, for similar actions under the Ganga Action Plan (GAP). Spending thousands of crores of rupees in a decade, it was found to have failed in lowering the pollution level significantly. The present Government introduced a flagship programme in June 2014 called “Ganga Rejuvenation”, which is an integrated conservation mission with a budget outlay of Rs, 20,000 crore to accomplish the abatement of pollution, conservation and rejuvenation of Ganga. The

name of the Ministry of Water Resources has been rechristened as “Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation”. Sufficient time has not yet elapsed to assess the success of the project.

In a four-day conference on the theme “Rivers in Crisis” held in New Delhi by a consortium of five institutions (SANDARP, INTACH,

Toxics Link, WWF and Peace Institute) adopted and issued a declaration titled “Let Our Rivers Live” in which a prescription for restoration and maintenance of river health was announced.

What is needed is a holistic approach to a river's life. Controlling pollution is just a part of the whole problem, and apropos the proverb “beauty is only skin-deep”, resonates with the idea that superficial clean-up at the surface level ignores other serious problems that prevent a healthy life.

For India, Ganga is more than just a river—it is a respected and sacred symbol of nature that is needed in every aspect of Indian lives. According to Bella Bathurst, the author of the book *The Weekenders: Adventures in Calcutta*, “without it [the Ganges], nothing exists, no birth, no death, no regeneration, no God”. An estimated 20,00,000 Indians bathe ritualistically in Ganga every day. The faith in the Ganga is so monumental that Indians believe that by just touching the river, sipping her water or even sprinkling of water on the body would make one pure in body and soul. Paradoxically, Indians in general, are oblivious of her purity and unabashedly discharge pollutants or carry out non-civic practices regularly on Ganga. We witnessed how polluted the river Ganga is during our visit to IIT, Kanpur a few years back and reported it in the *Science and Culture*.

In their judgement, the judges have included streams and lakes, meadows and dales, jungles and forests, grasslands and wetlands, springs and waterfalls and air as well. All of them have been given a legal status capable of holding the same right as other non-human ‘personalities’ such as deities, temples and trusts. No one has any right to destroy or damage them. With this judgement rivers and other natural resources may now get a fresh lease of life.

The judgement, no doubt, is important and comes at a time when we have given up all hopes of revival or survival of the river. But having a judgement may not be enough for the rejuvenation of rivers—I mean here all rivers, not just the Ganges—because flouting the judicial directive is not uncommon in this country. What is needed is a holistic approach to a river’s life. Controlling pollution is just a part of the whole problem, and apropos the proverb “beauty is only skin-deep”, resonates with the idea that superficial clean-up at the surface level ignores other serious problems that prevent a healthy life.

The life of a river lies in its flow. A river is ‘living’ as long as it flows its full course from its origin to the sea. It not only carries water but carries with it sediments, other nutrients and many living creatures. As soon as a river ceases to flow its full course, it is no longer a river, rather we call it a ‘dead’ river. When deteriorating flow combined with discharge of toxic effluents affects the health of a river, we call it a ‘dying’ river.

In many cases the flow is obstructed or diverted and a river is not allowed to flow its full course in the name of ‘development’, which severely affects the life of the river. Therefore, for the revival or survival of a river,

controlling pollution or discharge of effluents is only one part of the story. The bigger question is how to make a river healthy in terms of its flow. If I may use a metaphor here, a hospital is known to be a place for sick people who require treatment to get back their healthy life. The world would be a different place if the basic philosophy of the hospital was to keep people healthy instead of treating people only when they were sick. Similarly, instead of turning

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a river sick first and then trying to recover and make it healthy, the approach should be to keep rivers healthy throughout their life. After all, prevention is not just better than cure, but in most cases, it is easier and more cost-effective. And just as each human being is different, so is each river and therefore requires a different kind of care and treatment.

To some, a river is just a line in the map; to many others, it is a channel to transport materials from one place to another. To some, a river is a resource to be exploited beyond limit for human use; to some others, it is a commodity to be harnessed for economic development. I am not an expert in river science but I feel it is important to recognise that a river is connected with our lives, our culture and our religion, and that this relationship—which has grown over centuries—needs to be strengthened. □

S.C. Roy