

Ishaan edit

A 2015 National Green Tribunal (NGT) judgment formed the basis of the *Maili se Nirmal Yamuna Revitalization Project* that aimed to bring down the soaring pollution levels of the river; by 2018, a total spend of Rs 4,000 crore on the project was envisaged. That kind of spending on the river, you would expect, would have helped make the river significantly cleaner, but a study commissioned by the NGT Monitoring Committee for the River Yamuna now says “through the years 2015-2020, it is observed that there is no significant change in the water quality of river Yamuna with respect to DO (dissolved oxygen), pH, BOD (biological oxygen demand) and FC (faecal coliform)”.

It points to instances of ‘algal bloom or eutrophication’ indicating high organic load in the river. The monitoring committee is appreciative of the steps taken by various governments but notes that the measures with regards to cleaning up of the river have been marginal.

There is a legacy of decades of efforts lagging intention when it comes to the cleaning up of the river. The first action committee for the river was set up in 1993, but the river remains as polluted as ever. Delhi is only able to treat 63% of its total daily sewage load. This does not take into account the sewage from unauthorised colonies—the monitoring committee talks of 561 unauthorised colonies without proper sewage systems. More important, even the sewage treatment plants that have been installed have not been operating at ideal levels.

An analysis shows that till October this year, less than a third of the sewage treatment plants were meeting the 2016 standards set by the government for treatment. Moreover, many of these plants were operating at half their capacity. How dire the problem is evident from an analysis of the monitoring committee saying that even if Delhi were to treat its entire sewage generated to the best of standards, the river’s waters are not going to be of bathing quality. In order to achieve this, the environmental flow—the quantity and quality of freshwater required to sustain natural ecosystems and human livelihood and well-being—has to increase manifold. Despite the NGT highlighting this, little has been done, and most policies seem to be at a consultative stage.

While renegotiating water-sharing agreements so that there is more flow downstream, there is an urgent need to create incentive structures and implement the polluter-pays principle. Delhi

and adjoining states seem to be in no mood to improve working standards. The issue of charging households for sewage treatment has not been implemented since 2015, and the monitoring committee believes Delhi has no concrete plan to implement any of its proposals. In one case, it says “it cannot accept the timelines given by DJB as there are several imponderables and there is no zeal to cut short delays”.

Until the NGT or the courts impose costs on governments and errant parties, the situation may not change on the ground.