

Call to make 'Clean Ganga' a people's movement

Hindu
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Members of Parliament promise to take up issue of pollution

Aarti Dhar

VARANASI A small group of politicians from different ideologies and academicians gathered here at the famous Tulsi Ghat along the Ganga to spare a few thoughts on saving the holy river from pollution. They also discussed the issues that had led to the "failure" of the ambitious Ganga Action Plan phase-I.

The day ended with some Members of Parliament calling for making 'Clean Ganga' a people's movement, others promising to take up the issue in Parliament and a newly appointed Union Minister, Chandra

Shekhar Sahu, assuring to send a note on the matter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and United Progressive Alliance Chairperson Sonia Gandhi so that the hurdles faced in the cleaning of the river were removed.

The occasion was a two-day seminar on 'Ganga' organised by the South Asia Foundation, SVARAJ and Sankat Mochan Foundation, a non-governmental organisation that has been championing the cause of clean Ganga for more than two decades now.

The holy town of Varanasi has been identified as one of the five

most polluted towns along the Ganga and already crores of rupees have been spent on cleaning the river stretch passing here under the Ganga Action Plan (GAP) phase-I. However, if a pilot study conducted by a team of experts in 2004 was to be believed, the water at the bathing ghats was still highly polluted, and the residents using the river water are affected by water-borne diseases. Risk factors for disease listed in the study include lack of fillets and sewerage and the use of the heavily polluted water. The high volumes of Biochemical Oxygen Demand and faecal coliform count are indicative of serious pollution from sewage.

The study points to the urgent need for effective sewage collec-

• Water in bathing ghats highly polluted in Varanasi

• Pumping stations not able to stop the flow

tion and treatment in Varanasi. But, the issue now is not just the implementation of the GAP-II. "The second phase of the Ganga Action Plan is again being implemented in the same manner as the earlier which would not serve any purpose," pointed out Professor Veer Bhadra Mishra of the Sankat Mochan Foundation. The domestic sewage of the city continues to flow in the Ganga from all 30 identified points and the five ghat sewage pumping

stations are incapable of stopping the flow. The three sewage treatment plants, too, have failed to serve the purpose because of inappropriate technology adopted. Also, these plants are not functioning properly due to erratic electric supply. Professor Mishra pointed out. The treated effluent being used by the villagers of six villages for irrigation had created havoc, he added.

The Foundation had, in fact, been asked by the Uttar Pradesh Government to draw up a new plan to overcome the flaws in the earlier plan, which it did with public-private partnership. The Project Feasibility Report was duly ratified by the Varanasi Nagar Nigam under the powers granted to it in the 73rd and 74th

Amendment of the Constitution. However, the State Government for some reason did not accept the report and instead prepared its own report to get funds from Japan and the phase-II of the GAP. The matter is now pending in the court as the local body feels that the State Government had infringed upon its rights.

"A political and media intervention is badly needed at this point of time to salvage the 74th Amendment of the Constitution to save the river, which is the source of fresh water for over 40 per cent of India's population and which is an object of faith and respect for one billion people spread all over the world and an identity of India and a precious national heritage," the Foundation believes.