

Massive Clean-up of the Yamuna: Three Year Target by the Delhi Government

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Summary

Plans to clean up the rivers, Yamuna and Ganges, have been launched since 1985. However, both rivers continue to be heavily polluted. Now, the newly elected government of Delhi has announced an extremely ambitious 30-point plan to clean the Yamuna River in three years. The plan focuses on reducing pollution in the Yamuna by improving sewage treatment, waste management and sanitation in cities along the river. Eleven rejuvenation projects, spanning 1,600 hectares of the floodplain, have been launched. Eco-tourism and riverfront projects are also being launched.

A key election promise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the run-up to the recent Delhi Assembly elections was to clean the Yamuna River, which flows through the city. Attention was drawn by all parties to the extreme levels of pollution in the river, lamenting that the city's lifeline had turned into a dark, toxic stream. Despite multiple initiatives and substantial financial investments, the 22-kilometre stretch of the river passing through New Delhi continues to resemble a sewage canal. The failure to achieve tangible improvements underscores the urgent need for a structured, accountable and result-oriented action plan to restore the Yamuna to its natural state.

Post the BJP government being formed in Delhi, the announcement of the Yamuna clean-up project has met with the support and encouragement of the public of Delhi. However, if one were to go by the track record of former governments who launched multiple projects to clean the Yamuna and, in fact, the Ganges, the task is challenging. The Ganga Action Plan, as it was known, was initially launched in 1985 with the objective of minimising pollution and improving the water quality. The project was divided into two phases: Phase-I started in 1985 and covered the three states of Uttar Pradesh (UP), Bihar and West Bengal. Phase-II was launched in 1993, and covered seven states that include Uttarakhand, UP, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Delhi and Haryana. In the second phase, the Ganga Action Plan was extended to include its tributaries such as the Yamuna, Mahananda, Gomti and Damodar.

In 2014, the present government started the Namami Gange Mission to ensure a clean Ganga. The plan focused on reducing pollution in the Yamuna by improving sewage treatment, waste management and sanitation in cities along the river. Lack of data on wastewater generated, direct discharge of faecal sludge from desludging tankers into the river or drains at several locations and mixing of treated and untreated water in some drains are some of the main reasons for pollution in the Yamuna. After the present BJP government came to power in Delhi, through a dedicated Special Task Force, it has finalised a [30-point action plan](#) to rejuvenate the Yamuna. The plan is a comprehensive, sustainable and scientific approach to river rejuvenation. It focuses on targeted interventions. It involves enhancing the environmental flow of the river by managing drains and removing

encroachments from floodplains. The main points of the plan to clean the Yamuna are environmental flow in the Yamuna, drain management, solid waste management and sewage management. This includes governance and enforcement, floodplain protection/river-front development activities, septage and dairy waste management and a public outreach programme. The Special Task Force has also been tasked with removing floodplain encroachments within a year, targeting a completion date of September 2026.

The government has set about its task in a very systematic and committed manner. However, experts believe that the 13-kilometre stretch from the Signature Bridge to the Okhla Barrage is heavily polluted, with about 20 drains discharging directly into the river. To clean the river, all these 20 drains will have to be connected to sewage treatment plants (STPs). Since these are not sufficient to treat all the sewage that is flowing into the river through these 20 drains, additional STPs will have to be constructed. Additionally, the key factor will be to provide additional manpower and financial resources to ensure that these STPs function to their capacity and proper maintenance is ensured. All households will have to be connected to these drains, and it has to be ensured that all industrial units have adequate effluent treatment plants. The government plans to install around 13,000 new sewer connections in slum areas and 250,000 sewer connections in unauthorised colonies and other residential areas. Additionally, initiatives such as recycling and the reuse of 50 million litres of water per day are on the cards.

The Yamuna action plan needs, for its success, much more than monetary resources. It will need to recognise the reality that a fairly substantial proportion of the population of New Delhi lives in unauthorised colonies where sewage is not intercepted and, hence, not treated. The reality also is that there is no dissolved oxygen in the river from the point it enters New Delhi. The two major drains discharging into the river are the Najafgarh and Shahdara drains. There is a need to rework the interceptor drain plans for these two drains.

The government has also intensified its efforts to rejuvenate the river through 11 rejuvenation projects spanning 1,600 hectares across the floodplain. Creating these green areas around the banks of the river will help to enhance water infiltration, preventing runoff, reducing soil erosion and creating habitats for diverse flora and fauna. The planting of around 5,500 trees, native to the area, has started attracting migratory birds. It is also proposed to fast-track the 30-hectare eco-tourism area and a 25-hectare River Front Project. To signal its intent to protect the Yamuna, the Delhi government has requested the Territorial Army to safeguard the river from dumping, mining, encroachment and theft. The Territorial Army has an Ecological Task Force, which is dedicated to environmental protection tasks, and it could be an effective agency to protect the river from further pollution or degradation. This decision of the government aims to preserve the river in its natural form. It proposes to achieve the target of cleaning the Yamuna within three years.

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