



# Saving rivers

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## **Highlights**

- The finding of the Central Pollution Control Board that the number of critically polluted segments of India's rivers has risen to 351 from 302 two years ago is a strong indictment of the departments responsible for environmental protection.
- The data show that the plethora of laws enacted to regulate waste management and protect water quality are simply not working.
- The study also underscores the failure of many national programmes run by the Centre for river conservation, preservation of wetlands, and water quality monitoring.
- Tests of Ganga water indicate it has fared better in Uttar Pradesh; but then, the clean-up plan for the river has received dedicated Central funding of Rs.3,696 crore over three and a half years, compared to Rs.351 crore given to 14 States to conserve 32 rivers.

## **Why the issue still persists?**

- The failed efforts to control pollution are all too evident in Maharashtra, Gujarat and Assam, which account for a third of the degraded river segments.
- Their problems are worsened by the poor infrastructure available in a large number of cities and towns located near rivers.
- It is notable that these results come from a CPCB audit that was carried out at the instance of the National Green Tribunal.
  - Ideally, the Board should be reporting more frequently on pollution, and carrying out intensive measures through State Pollution Control Boards to eliminate pollutants, starting with sewage and industrial effluents.
  - Managing sewage requires steady funding of treatment plants for all urban agglomerations that discharge their waste into rivers, and also reliable power supply.
  - The deficit between sewerage available and the volume generated along the polluted stretches was estimated by the CPCB last year at 13,196 million litres a day.
- Rapid urbanisation is widening the gap, since infrastructure planning is not keeping pace with growth in housing.
- Moreover, with low priority accorded to enforcement of laws by the SPCBs and Pollution Control Committees — something that is unlikely to change quickly — the immediate plan should be to expand the supply of treatment plants.
  - Sustained civil society pressure on governments is vital to ensure that this is done in a time-bound manner.
- On the industrial side, the plan to bring all liquid effluent discharge from textile units and tanneries to zero has to be pursued vigorously, giving industries the assistance to help them choose the best technologies for the recovery of waste water for reuse.

- These measures are urgently needed to revive India's many dying rivers, protect its agriculture, and prevent serious harm to public health from contaminated water.
- A 2013 World Bank study estimated that environmental degradation is costing India at least \$80 billion a year, of which losses to rivers form a significant part.
- This is indeed a problem of catastrophic dimensions.

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