

“If you don’t understand the river system, all efforts to rejuvenate it will be wrong or incomplete” – Manoj Misra

India’s rivers are in a critical state, with many of the major water systems dead or dying. At India @ 70: LSE India Summit, campaigner Manoj Misra argued that the rivers will not be saved unless decision makers take a holistic approach to understanding and reviving the river systems. After the session, he spoke to Sonali Campion about the Yamuna Jiye Abhiyaan campaign, and wider efforts to restore India’s rivers.

In your LSE India Summit presentation, you emphasised that ‘rivers are not just water’. Could you explain what you mean?

I am convenor of Yamuna Jiye Abhiyaan, which is a civil society campaign for the restoration of the river Yamuna as an ecological entity, not just the cleaning of the river. There is a myth that has been perpetuated by Western interests, which reduces our understanding of rivers to the water. The fact is that a river is a living entity, and that is something that judicial pronouncements have now established.

A river has a life of its own: it’s the channel where the water flows, it is the flood plain that the river requires when it floods, it has its own biodiversity which is very distinct. Almost 16 per cent of global biodiversity is aquatic and lives in rivers. The river is a provider of so many different gifts (others call them “services”, we call them gifts). So it is far more than just the water.



Image: Taj Mahal, on the banks of the river Yamuna. Credit: [Roehan Rengadurai](#). CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

When we talk in terms of ‘restoration’ or ‘rejuvenation’ we have to look at all the components, we cannot just try to clean the water which is flowing in the river. This overemphasis on rejuvenating rivers through the creation of sewage treatment plants and things like that, all of which are money intensive, is therefore misplaced. Rivers need only to be left alone, they don’t need to be helped or managed.

The other thing that has to be recognised is the basic quality of a river is the fact that flows. This distinguishes it from all other aquatic systems. When you inhibit the flow of a river you actually transform the entire system: if you put a dam or a barrage you turn a flowing system into a static one. It's a trauma. This realisation somehow doesn't get mainstreamed, because rivers have all along been seen as an engineering construct. The engineer supposedly understands what should be done with the river, which is another view that is absolutely misplaced.

You presented an alarming statistic, namely that 70 per cent of India's rivers are dead or dying. If it is not possible to leave rivers alone completely, what can be done to restore or revive them? What do you campaign for?

Our campaign aims to improve the understanding about river systems amongst the decision makers and the general public, which is extremely important. If you don't understand the system all the solutions will be wrong or incomplete, which is what has been happening. The main thrust of our campaign has been to highlight what makes a river system. We hope that with this better understanding people will realise it doesn't cost much to rejuvenate a river, and that it's about crucial decisions.

For example, everybody has been talking about the rejuvenation of the River Ganga (Ganges). The fact remains that money will not solve the problem. Some portions may get cleaned up, but even that cleaning will not be sustained. The River Ganga will not come back until we have fixed the problem of the dam at Tehri, and the barrage at Farakka. Until these two structures are fixed, the river will not be rejuvenated.

What do you do? You don't just remove the dam; you look at the benefits this dam is providing. What is the life of this dam today? How can we go about increasing the release of water from these dams in the short term, so some of the downstream impacts that they have brought in can be reduced? Then we must remember that any civil structure will have a finite life. We will always have the River Yamuna and the River Ganga, but we cannot imagine that we will always have the dam at Tehri. In due course that dam will have to be removed. So we must start planning for that period right away: this is the lifespan, these are the benefits, now after this year the benefits will start reducing. At the moment that planning is missing. These are some of the things we have been advocating for, and we hope that things will change.

A lot of the controversy centres around the industrial use of water and how uncontrolled it is. How can industry be more responsible in how it uses water?

Recycling water is the only option today. Industry and other sectors should be allocated x amount of water, which they can then recycle for their various uses. More water will only be allocated for domestic purposes. Recycling and treating water has to get mainstreamed, whether it is in industry, cities or any other area.

There have been significant tensions over the sharing of water since independence. How can the protection of rivers and sharing of waters be managed effectively to prevent conflict?

When the dams were built, the flow of water to those living downstream was disrupted and the conflict began. This inequality of the upper riparian people (those living upstream) vis-à-vis the lower riparian is the root cause of all these conflicts. There have been experiments; even in places like the upper Kaveri, where the farmers from different parts of the river have come together and said, "this is the total amount of water available, this is the way we will share it going forward". They came up with people to people solutions.

Once the engineers and bureaucrats etc. get involved, the issues will never get resolved. There are river boards in this country which have been created specifically to ensure that water is equitably shared, but they have never delivered. If they have come up with solutions, their solutions have not been accepted, and therefore nothing has come out of those efforts. It has to be people to people if it is to make a difference.

There is an experiment which has been started on the Mahanadi River, where meetings have been organised in Chhattisgarh and farmers and other activists from Orissa have come and participated. At the same time meetings have been organised in Orissa and people from Chhattisgarh have attended. Once you see for yourself what the actual situation is on the ground, it is very difficult for somebody else to come in and tell you "this is what is happening".

You can watch the India @ 70: LSE India Summit Water Security Panel [here](#).

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About the Author

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