



RIVER OF LIFE

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(Mains GS 3 : Environment Conservation & Environmental pollution and degradation)

Context:

India witnessed the world's largest religious congregation as millions of pilgrims gathered for a holy dip in the Ganga during the Kumbh Mela at Haridwar.

Brief about Kumbh mela:

- Since time immemorial, the Kumbh Mela has been a melting pot for varied beliefs, practices, philosophies and ideologies.
- Its earliest mention can be found in the Rigveda Parisista (Supplement to the Rigveda 1200-1000 BCE).
- The Mahabharata (400-300 BCE) also mentions a bathing pilgrimage at Prayag as a means of atonement for past mistakes and guilt.
- According to Hindu mythology, Kumbh Mela is an important and religious festival which is celebrated four times over the course of 12 years.
- The location of the festival keeps rotating between four pilgrimage sites situated on the banks of the holy rivers.
- These places are Haridwar on the Ganges in the Uttarakhand, Ujjain on the Shipra river in Madhya Pradesh, Nashik on the Godavari river in Maharashtra and Prayagraj at the confluence of three rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati in the Uttar Pradesh.

Pollution in river Ganga:

- Unfortunately, over time, the increase in population, coupled with unregulated industrialisation and unsustainable agricultural practices, have led to a significant increase in pollutants in the river.
- As a result, Ganga, which once sustained various forms of life, struggled to support its rich biodiversity.
- Depleting numbers of the Gangetic dolphins was a glaring example of this.

Government's efforts to clean Ganga :

- Erstwhile governments tried to address the pollution problem of Ganga, but their efforts didn't make a mark. Perhaps, the challenge was graver than perceived.
- In 2014, the Central government started a flagship programme called "Namami Gange".
- It adopted a holistic approach which is termed as a "Sangam" of public policy, technology intervention and community participation.
- In 2016, the government issued a notification to authorise the National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG) to exercise powers under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.
- As a result, NMCG officials regularly conducted surprise checks on sewage treatment plants (STPs) and issued notices/directions to authorities wherever required.
- NMCG also issued directives regulating mining activities on river banks, prohibiting encroachment and regulating activities like the immersion of idols.

Efforts in right direction:

- NMCG adopted cutting-edge technologies like satellite imagery, remote sensing and geospatial solutions which facilitated real-time monitoring of pollutants in Ganga and its tributaries.
- Scientific forecast models were deployed for designing new sewage treatment infrastructure.
- As a first, a hybrid annuity model was adopted for project implementation, thereby entrusting long-term responsibility for operations and maintenance on the project executors.
- A total of 342 projects worth over Rs 29,000 crore have been sanctioned, out of which 145 are completed.
- Given Ganga's central role in cultural rituals and rites, 123 ghats and 36 crematoriums have been constructed so far, while the Ganga Avalokan Museum has been set up at Chandighat in Haridwar.

Ensuring community participation:

- To encourage community participation in cleaning the river, an awareness campaign is regularly carried out in cities, towns and villages alongside Ganga through a newly-established community force called "Ganga Praharis".
- Through them, the government seeks to transform "jal chetna" into "jan chetna" and turn it into a "jal andolan".

Restoring biodiversity of the ganga:

- To restore the river's biodiversity, NMCG is actively collaborating with premier institutes like the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, ICAR-Central Inland Fisheries Research Institute, Kolkata and the Centre for Environment Education, Ahmedabad.

- A baseline survey for mapping the biodiversity has been completed and more than 50 per cent of the river now offers high biodiversity value.
- NMCG, in association with the Ministry of Agriculture, is also promoting organic farming in villages of Uttarakhand (50,000 ha), UP (42,000 ha), Bihar (16,000 ha), Jharkhand (4,500 ha).
- A long-term Intensive and Scientific Afforestation Plan is under implementation in the river basin along with the Forest Research Institute, Dehradun.
- So far, 26,764 ha of area has been covered with local varieties of trees with an expenditure of Rs 337.2 crore.

Conclusion:

- For better results of the programme, governance needs to be decentralised with more involvement of people living in the Ganga basin.
- Thus a bottom-up approach ensures efficient and holistic implementation of the programme and gives desired results.