

Rivers: Our Most Threatened, Endangered Species!



River Cauvery at Shivasamudram: Threatened by a cascade of hydel projects Photo: SANDRP

World Rivers Day¹ is a time to take stock of how we are treating our rivers and the communities that depend on them. And the scene looks bleak today. Indian rivers are so threatened that if they were species instead of our life support systems, they would have been declared as endangered, red data book species. Dams, hydropower projects, diversions, pollution, floodplains and river bed encroachment, bad water management practises have all but destroyed rivers and the ecosystem goods and services they provide to millions. Rivers from Alaknanda in Uttarakhand to Krishna in Andhra Pradesh, from Sutlej-Ravi-Beas in Himachal to Godavari in Maharashtra, from Brahmaputra in Assam to Sabaramati in Gujarat, from Yamuna in Delhi to Netravathi in Karnataka, from Chenab in Kashmir to Chalakudy in Kerala all are facing crisis and need urgent help.

As India prepares to host the upcoming 11th Conference of Parties at the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in Hyderabad during October 8-19, 2012, it needs to take a look at the pathetic state of Indian rivers, riverine and connected terrestrial biodiversity and communities. Even as the Indian Environment Minister for State Ms Jayanti Natarajan made public statement that biodiversity assessment will *now* be included in the impact assessment, the fact of the matter is that the government has absolutely no effective policy, law or programme for protection of India's rivers. Even as the Government (Union Ministry of Environment and Forests) reported in its latest submission to the CBD that it has increased protected areas from 1.33 lakh square kms to 1.56 lakh sq kms, the fact is that India has next to none protected areas for explicit protection of rivers and freshwater biodiversity. Only exceptions are National Chambal Sanctuary, Ken Gharial Sanctuary, Sanjay Gharial Sanctuary, Vikramshila Dolphin Sanctuary, etc., and even these Protected Areas are facing huge water abstraction pressures from upstream and downstream. For example, the Ken Gharial Sanctuary will be destroyed by the proposed Ken Betwa River Link Proposal if it comes up.

Looking at the immense ecological, economic, social and cultural value of Indian Rivers, we urgently request the Government to come out with a policy and law for protection of rivers and also declaring certain rivers in each state as no go areas, and leave them in their natural state, not allowing any dams, hydropower projects or such structures on them. Millions in India depend on rivers for their livelihoods, but there is no protection for them when their livelihoods are affected² by upstream dams and other interventions.

Shockingly, India does not include 'Rivers' in its definition of wetlands. Nearly all the Ramsar Sites of India are lakes or reservoirs. Even they are getting affected by upstream dams and abstraction and no effective protection is accorded to them³. There are hardly any legal instruments to protect rivers and ironically, it is

¹ See: <http://commons.bc.ca/worldriversday/> the World Rivers Day celebration started in 2005 on last Sunday of September, following endorsement of UN and UNU. This was following up on the British Columbia (a state of Canada) celebrating the BC Rivers day since 1980. In 2011, the website says, several millions celebrated this day in over 60 countries.

² For example, for details on impact of dams on fisheries, see:

http://sandrp.in/dams/Impacts_of_Dams_on_Riverine_Fisheries_in_India_ParineetaDandekar_Sept2012.pdf

³ For details, see: http://www.sandrp.in/rivers/Indias_wetlands_in_peril_Feb_2011.pdf

'legal' to completely dry and kill Perennial Rivers. It is tragic that rivers, which play such an important role in our lives from birth to death, should be entirely side-lined and neglected.

The reality of plans like National River Conservation Program, Ganga Action Plan, Yamuna Action Plan, the recently constituted National Ganga River Basin Authority, etc., is that none of them have any success to show in terms of protection or rejuvenation of a river. CAG report on Water Pollution 2011-12 has said that India's 14 major, 55 minor and several hundred small rivers receive millions of litres of untreated sewage, industrial and agricultural wastes. Presently, only about 10 per cent of the waste water generated is treated; the rest is discharged as it is into our water bodies. 38 years after enactment of Water Pollution Control Act in 1974, the only noteworthy thing one can say is that the Pollution Control Boards that have been formed under it have all been complete failures and are known as dens of corruption.

In this situation, there is an urgent need:

- **To protect the last remaining free flowing rivers of the country from any further dams through legislation like Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in US, Heritage Rivers Act of Canada, Wild Rivers Act in Australia, etc.,**
- **To protect rivers with high ecological significance like Netravathi and Gundia, Rivers with high cultural significance like Ganga, Alaknanda, Bhagirathi, Mandakini, Pinder, including their Origins and Confluences of rivers, estuaries, etc. , using progressive and participatory legislations and Community and Conservation reserves which do not impinge upon community rights over their river**
- **To urgently Gazette the Notification declaring 135 kms of Bhagirathi from Gangotri to Uttarkashi as a eco sensitive zone which has been pending with the MoEF for over a year**
- **To provide urgent protection to riverine community conserved areas like Temple fish sanctuaries from dams and other pressures.**
- **To allocate freshwater flows all round the year downstream from all existing, under construction and planned dams. The assessment of how much water needs to be released for each stretch should be done in consultation with the communities.**
- **To make all existing, under construction and planned dams as fish-friendly as possible through e-flows, fish ladders and passes, by pass channels, etc.**
- **to undertake a biodiversity assessment of all major rivers in the country before any further projects are cleared.**
- **Do declare at least one river in each state and many in North East India as no go zones for dams and hydropower projects.**



Dry Ganga downstream Bhimgoauda barrage in Uttarakhand. Photo: SANDRP

And lastly, to make honest efforts to involve ecosystem dependent, marginal communities like fishermen, riparian farmers, boatmen, estuarine fishermen, in management of their rivers and biodiversity. It is high time to learn from past mistakes and take a strong and positive step ahead towards conservation and wellbeing.

Parineeta Dandekar (parineeta.dandekar@gmail.com), Pune M: 09860030742
Himanshu Thakkar (ht.sandrp@gmail.com), Delhi M: 09968242798
South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers & People (www.sandrp.in)