

English

English > In-depth > Development

Cleaning up Nepal's sacred river

By Bob Forsberg
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Nepal's most sacred river has, for generations, been used for recreation and religious purposes. The Bagmati is the largest of the Himalayan kingdom's 6,000 rivers, celebrated in music, poetry and literature. Its source at Bagdwar is believed to be the product of divine powers. But it is threatened by pollution, having effectively become a vast rubbish dump. The water is black and poisonous, crawling with flies and contaminated with sewage. It supposedly purifies bodies and souls, yet gives off a terrible stench.



The decline of the Bagmati - dubbed the Ganges of Nepal - has been rapid. Middle-aged people who live near its edge along the Katmandu Valley can remember the water being clean. "When I was a child we used to swim in the river but right now it's like a sewer," says Keshab Poudel. "I cannot



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believe that. It's a national tragedy because it's our holy river. From birth to death, it's a link with our life. Today, people don't even like to be cremated at the riverside, which used to be so holy."

Population growth over the past 30 to 40 years, excessive extraction of sand for building work, the rise of industrialisation as well as government mistakes have all contributed to the degradation of the river's ecology, according to agricultural engineer Huta Ram Baidya.

Untreated effluent



"The influx of job seekers and the establishment of health and education facilities, real-estate ventures and industries in an unplanned and arbitrary way have destroyed the Bagmati by overdrawing her water and sand resources," he says.

"Untreated effluents from factories, hospitals, slaughterhouses, schools and government buildings are discharged into the Bagmati river system at various points in the valley."

People have forgotten their divine link with the tirthas, the holy bathing places, and the government has forgotten its social and administrative responsibility towards the Bagmati, he adds.

The World Conservation Union (IUCN) in Nepal believes the Bagmati, which is central to the Katmandu Valley's culture and heritage, is in great danger and must be revived.

"Most of the mountain areas in Nepal, and particularly this area, have three months of rainfall and nine months of dry season," says IUCN country representative Dr Mahesh Banskota. "So, having a river with water throughout the whole year is vital for agriculture, for the people, for recreation and for aquatic life."

Much of the wetland, which was a seasonal home for migratory birds, has been destroyed, he adds. Bringing back water would boost the area's bio-diversity, enhance the environment and add much to the quality of life.

Rehabilitation project

The Nepali government has begun a project to try to rehabilitate the once pristine river and its surroundings. It acknowledges the scale of the problem and admits the Bagmati Area Sewerage Project is only the start of cleaning up and conserving the river and its tributaries. However, the scheme offers hope to the country's Hindus and Buddhists, for whom the river has so much religious and spiritual value.



"Right now the Bagmati is quite clean and we have done our job already in a very satisfactory manner," claims government spokesman Ramesh Nath Pandey. "The important question now is, how to maintain it? To clean a major river like the Bagmati is a major task. We have done a little bit, particularly in the holy area. To clean it first and then to maintain this cleanliness, I think we need a lot of international support."

But the project is not sufficient to save the sacred river, according to Nepali commentator and columnist CK Lal. "The government's approaches have been very piecemeal," he says. "They have done something near the Pashupati temple, where some improvement can be seen, but apart from that the root causes of pollution are not being addressed."



Controls necessary

Firstly, there must be controls on the disposal of raw sewage directly into the river, he explains. Secondly, the catchment area of the Bagmati has to be improved and, thirdly, the tributaries must be controlled.

"If necessary, it may even mean canvassing international support from donors, because this is a river on which the social, cultural and economic lives of most of the valley's people depend," adds Mr Lal. "It's a serious issue."

As one of the poorest countries in the world, Nepal cannot afford to tackle key environmental problems. It will need community involvement and awareness, as well as worldwide help, to ensure the Bagmati does not remain sacred in name alone.

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