

The National River Conservation Authority has not met at all during the entire UPA rule**Why is the UPA showing such utter disdain for Rivers?**

The disdain that our politicians, engineers and bureaucrats have for rivers is well known. Even then the indifference that the UPA I and now UPA II is showing towards rivers seems scandalous.

There can be different ways that this can be shown. Let us look at the government's most important river conservation initiative called the National River Conservation Plan, managed by the National River Conservation Authority. The Authority is chaired by the Prime Minister, no less. And believe it or not, that authority under the Prime Minister has not met at all since June 16, 2003, when the last meeting of NRCA was held. What this means is that during the entire five years of UPA I and also the last fifteen months of UPA II, Dr Manmohan Singh has not found time for the meeting of the NRCA. Even the steering committee of the NRCA, chaired by secretary, Union Ministry of Environment and Forests, has not met since December 20, 2007, when the last, the 52nd meeting of the committee was held. What this means is that for the last 32 months, including the entire period of UPA II, the steering committee has not met. Even between June '03 and Dec 2007, the Steering committee met just four times when it should have met eighteen times. It is supposed to meet every quarter, as per its terms of reference.

Remember that this is the flagship, National and the only programme of the government for conservation of rivers. Remember also the roots of the programme was in the Ganga Action Plan started by the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1985. The apex governing body of the Ganga Action Plan was the Central Ganga Authority, chaired by the Prime Minister. On Sept 5, 1995, the CGA was converted into the NRCA, since the GAP had expanded to become National Rive Action Plan. One would think that the connection with Rajiv Gandhi would provide a better treatment in this regime under Dr Manmohan Singh, but even that hope is misplaced, it seems.

Importantly, some of the key functions of NRCA include: To lay down, promote and approve appropriate policies and programmes, to examine and approve priorities of NRCP, to review progress of implementation and give necessary directions, among others. Similarly, the steering committee too has very important functions to perform in its quarterly meetings.

When we asked about this, the officials of the MEF said in their written reply, "Revamping of the river conservation strategy was initiated in 2007 by the Government and the process led to the setting up of National Ganga River Basin Authority in Feb 2009 for conservation of river Ganga with a river basin approach. The first meeting of the NGRBA was held under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister in October 2009. The experience of this revised approach would be adopted for conservation of other rivers."

This response does not answer any questions, but only raises more. Does the constitution, structure, objectives, the functioning of the authority for the last 19 months and the conduct of its first meeting of the NGRBA raise any hope for better future of our rivers? Is there any difference anywhere here that shows that Ganga or other rivers for which the same approach is to be adopted are going to be treated any better? Unfortunately, we see no positive signs in any of these. Moreover, it should be remembered that the NRCP continues as the only National Programme that deals

with conservation of rivers, huge amounts of public money continues to get spent and even the NGBRA is supposed to deal with only Ganga, without any fresh approach. Hence to argue that under this new attempt there is no need for meetings of NRCA or its steering committee would be irrational.

Similarly in the last meeting of steering committee of NRCA it was mentioned that the all funding related to sanitation, laying of sewers and sewage treatment would be taken up under JNNRUM and UIDSSMT under Union Ministry of Urban Development. But that too cannot be a justification to give up all work on river conservation, since river conservation is not the mandate of JNNRUM or UIDSSMT projects or the Union Ministry of Urban Development.

Incidentally, the process initiated in November 2007 through a cabinet note from MEF mentioned in the MEF reply above resulted in a naught. This is because, on 24.7.2008 this issue was considered in the cabinet and a decision was taken to form a Group of Ministers. But again, disturbingly, that GOM never found time to meet and got disbanded with the formation of UPA II.

Some may ask, would the rivers have got better treatment if Dr Manmohan Singh had found time for the NRCA meetings? Not very likely, considering the general approach of the governments towards rivers. But not to have NRCA or its steering committee meeting would certainly be abdicating the government responsibility. Moreover, the failure in river conservation so far should actually lead to more attention, work and higher priority and not to stop all work on river conservation.

Our rivers, including Ganga have bleak future. Even Mr Jairam Ramesh, who gets such high marks from many observers for his handling of environment issues on many other counts, has given absolutely no hope for rivers. The conclusion is inescapable: the disregard of UPA I and II for our rivers is unprecedented.

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