



## **DISTRICT GANGA COMMITTEES: A DECENTRALIZED APPROACH TO REJUVENATE GANGA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Decentralization of power and authority is central to the success of public sector projects in all spheres. The role of local administration acquires even more importance in effective management of a natural resource as fundamental as water in all its forms, especially rivers, as it requires decentralized planning. This is the reason why water subject has been put in the State list. The constitution of District Ganga Committees (DGCs) as part of the federal government's Namami Gange Programme is a step in the right direction for prevention, control and abatement of pollution in India's National River Ganga. This paper demonstrates that the decentralization and devolution being brought about by the creation of DGCs in 61 districts abutting Ganga and its tributaries so far is increasingly enabling the administrative smoothness and local ownership for the effective implementation of the herculean Ganga Rejuvenation Project in India.*

**Keywords:** *Ganga Rejuvenation, Decentralization, Devolution, District Ganga Committees, Namami Gange Programme, District Administration.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Historically, De-centralization of power has been gaining significance in the Indian sub-continent. Even the British Empire, which was highly Unitary in nature, ceded considerable amount of autonomy to local provincial arrangements in many matters. They understood the need for devolution of power in order to rule a territory as vast as the Indian sub-continent. The independent India acknowledged it constitutionally in 1992 with the passage of 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments that legislatively recognized the third layer of governance to the federal political system of the country. Before this historic development, the Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957), the Ashok Mehta Committee (1978) and the registration of District Rural Development Agencies (1979-80) underlined the importance of panchayats/local self-governments as the "basic unit of democratic decentralization"<sup>1</sup>. The Amendments filled the gap created due to the absence of constitutionally recognized institutions at the district and sub-district levels that gave overriding powers to the State Government acting through the District Collectors.

Theoretically, decentralization is referred to as the transfer of power from the central government to lower levels of a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy. Administrative decentralization, also known sometimes as de-concentration, refers to the transfer of authority to a

lower-level jurisdiction who would be upwardly accountable to the central government.<sup>2</sup>

Decentralization of administrative authority and management functions becomes all the more important in cases of big public programmes like Ganga Rejuvenation, one of whose prerequisites is local partnership. This aspect of Clean Ganga Project was given the kind of attention it deserved for the first time with the launch of Namami Gange Programme after decades of one-directional centralized polity that was not conducive to the desired outcomes of the previous efforts to clean Ganga.

Under the Namami Gange Programme, the hierarchical structure was recalibrated resulting in the birth of District Ganga Committees (DGCs) in October 2016, with a vision to provide the necessary thrust to decentralized planning for not just cleaning but rejuvenating Ganga. Such an approach is premised on the fact that people's relationship with River Ganga should find expression in any effort to restore the river's health. DGCs strive to achieve that exactly. So far, 59 DGCs have been formed, six of which are in districts along tributaries of Ganga.

The theoretical framework of this paper traces the evolution of decentralization in India. After looking at some of the past efforts to Ganga cleaning, this paper emphasizes on the benefits of decentralization and calls for a more nuanced approach as envisaged in the Namami Gange Programme given the complexity of the task at hand. The inclusion of Namami Gange Programme in the prestigious Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Public Administration 2020 attests to the importance given by the federal government to decentralized planning vis-à-vis public sector programmes.

In the last part, the study examines the administrative structure of the DGCs and their role in the management of

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<sup>2</sup> Arun Agrawal and Jesse Ribot, "Accountability in Decentralization: A Framework with South Asian and West African Cases", *The Journal of Developing Areas*, Vol. 33, No. 4, Summer 1999, p.475.

the mandate of the Ganga Rejuvenation task. This paper also assesses the performance of some of the DGCs in the States of Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh in administratively facilitating the activities done for Ganga Rejuvenation under various central, state and district level schemes. The role of district administration in garnering local support has also been explored in this study.

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF DECENTRALIZED PLANNING IN INDIA**

The idea of devolution of power to local self-government took legislative shape in India with the passage of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments, which provides Constitutional recognition to a third tier of the federal structure. These Constitutional Amendments, which were passed by the Parliament in December 1992, provided the necessary impetus for the consolidation of a decentralized polity. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment also added Part IX titled “The Panchayats” to the Constitution for better management and resolution of issues at the village level. Panchayats, hence, are looked upon as instruments of grassroots governance and participatory development. The Father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi had strongly pleaded for strengthening of the village panchayats for effective decentralization of economic and political power in India. Even the British rulers who ended up institutionalizing a highly centralized state structure to keep the control of Indian affairs in their own hands acknowledged the importance of local self-government in India. Lord Mayo, the then Viceroy of India, passed a resolution suggesting decentralization of powers in Indian administration in 1870. It was a landmark step in the evolution of colonial policy towards local autonomy followed by the local self-government resolution (1882) of Lord Ripon. Another significant British-era development in the direction of local self-government was the “Royal Commission on Decentralization” which was constituted in 1907 under the chairmanship of Charles Hobhouse. It presented its comprehensive report in 1909 which suggested “relaxation of control of higher authorities and simplification of administrative methods”. One of its key recommendations was “to expand the area of working of the local self-government.” The Commission further expressed the desirability, in the interest of decentralization, to associate people with the local tasks of administration that could be done by constituting and developing village Panchayat and municipalities for the administration of local village affairs.<sup>3</sup> The Government of India Act 1919 enabled establishment of several village Panchayats in a number of provinces, a trend that continued after the Government of India Act 1935. It is because of this reason that in the Constitution of independent India, Water was included in Entry 17 of the State List, subject to the provisions of Entry 56 of the Union List. Impregnated in the evolution of this brief legislative history of de-centralized planning in India are the roots of District Ganga Committees, institutionalized

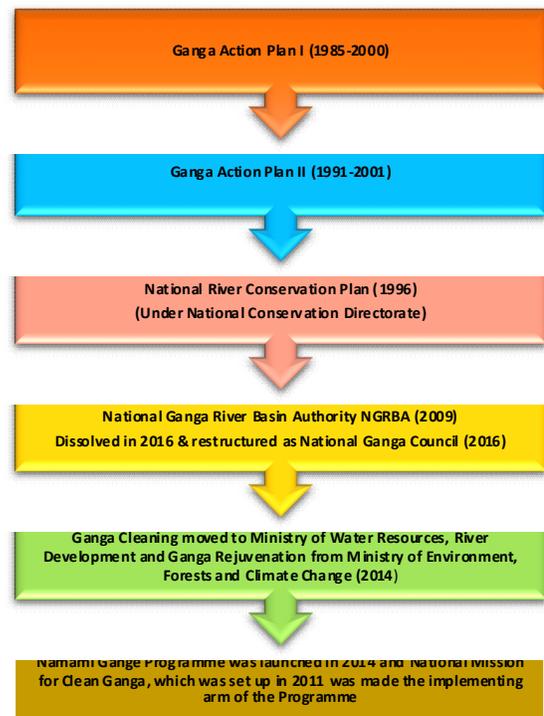
<sup>3</sup> Report of the Royal Commission Upon Decentralization in India, Vol. 1, Darling and Sons Ltd.

in 2016 for “the prevention, control and abatement of environmental pollution in River Ganga”.

## **PAST EFFORTS TO CLEAN GANGA**

The first considerable initiative taken in the direction of Ganga cleaning dates back to 1985 when a Central Ganga Authority (CGA) was set-up and a Ganga Project Directorate was established as a wing of the Department of Environment giving birth to Ganga Action Plan-I. The CGA was renamed as National River Conservation Authority in 1994 as per which 18 major rivers other than Ganga spanning 10 states of India were identified for pollution control.<sup>4</sup> This was the beginning of Ganga Action Plan-II in which, broadly, Yamuna, Damodar and Gomati rivers and the big cities along these Ganga tributaries were covered.<sup>5</sup> However, local government institutions were missing from the organizational structure of the National River Conservation Authority and there was very little accountability among state and local government institutions.<sup>6</sup>

After more than two decades of no tangible results, National Ganga River Basin Authority (NGRBA) was formed in 2009 immediately after declaring Ganga as the National



**Fig 1: Tracing the Evolution of Ganges Clean-up Program**

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Environment and Forests, *Annual Report 1995-1996*, Government of India, New Delhi, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Ora-orn Poocharoeu, Robert James Wasson and Xun Wu, *Ganga Rejuvenation: Governance Challenges and Policy Options* (London: World Scientific, 2018), p.2.

<sup>6</sup> Priyam Das and Kenneth R. Tamminga, “The Ganges and the GAP: An Assessment of Efforts to Clean a Sacred River”, *Sustainability*, Vol. 4, 2012, p.1656.

River of the country in 2008. National Ganga River Basin Project was the first ever basin-level initiative in India to manage an inter-state river for water quality and environmental protection and did envisage to build capacity of the local institutions to manage a project as comprehensive and vast as Ganga cleaning.<sup>7</sup> But the real problem lay, as Sara Ahmed pointed out, in the continuation of government's "top-down" approach which considered that institutions are not problematic at all.<sup>8</sup> In other words, as K.D. Alley argued, "Centralized resource management policies marginalized urban (and rural) institutions and divested them of the power to manage sewerage and water services."<sup>9</sup> Ganga Action Plan was re-launched in the form of National Mission for Clean Ganga in 2011 although there was not much difference in the implementation of the Clean Ganga Project. This demonstrates that despite provisions in the Indian constitution, especially the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment, encouraging decentralization, the central and state governments were found to be reluctant in devolving administrative and financial powers to the lower tiers as far as cleaning Ganga was concerned.

From 2014 onwards, the cleaning of Ganga got an unprecedented priority from the political leadership at the national level and was moved to Ministry of Water Resources from the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change. The former was renamed as Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation. In May 2015, Namami Gange Programme got the cabinet approval and NMCG was elevated to the status of an Authority under the Environment Protection Act in October 2016 leading to dissolution of NGRBA. A National Ganga Council was established under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister of India.

### **NAMAMI GANGE PROGRAMME: A RENEWED APPROACH WITH FOCUS ON DECENTRALIZATION**

For the first time in the history of independent India, a holistic and integrated approach was taken to make River Ganga 'Aviral' and 'Nirmal' again. The Namami Gange Programme was launched with an integrated goal of development of sewage treatment infrastructure, river front development, river surface cleaning, bio-diversity protection, afforestation, public awareness, industrial effluent monitoring and Ganga Gram development among others.<sup>10</sup> The launch of the Namami Gange Programme

marked a paradigmatic shift by first acknowledging the severity of the threat to Ganga and then planning to rejuvenate the river rather than just limiting the efforts for the abatement of domestic and industrial pollution in a phased manner. A whopping budget outlay of Rs. 20,000 crore including World Bank 1 billion US\$ support was accorded to the Programme for five years, four times than the total of past 30 years. Namami Gange Programme was kept as a 100% centrally-funded scheme. Learning from past mistakes, the operation and maintenance of sewage and effluent management assets under the Programme is planned for 15 years. For the first time in the water sector, the sewerage infrastructure projects are given under Hybrid Annuity based PPP model in which payments to the contractors are spread from the construction of sewage plants to its operation and maintenance over fifteen years<sup>11</sup> to ensure optimum performance. In addition to this, proper mechanisms for cooperation and coordination with other central ministries and states have been put in place. For the first time, bio-diversity protection has been made an indispensable part of the Ganga Rejuvenation Project. Besides, entry-level activities like river surface cleaning, river front development, ghat and crematorium development, drains cleaning etc. have been carried out. The central government also notified environmental (e-flow) norms for River Ganga in October 2018, a step in the right direction to ensure its 'Aviralta'. There are many result-oriented firsts in the Namami Gange Programme as compared to past efforts and the positive results seen in the past two years attest to this statement. In this paper, however, we will limit ourselves to discuss in detail the special focus given to the local bodies and resorting to decentralized planning in getting the desired results, as exemplified by the formation of a five-tiered institutional structure (from national to state to district level) to ensure smooth functioning of the Namami Gange Programme. Maitreyee Mukherjee lists the levels as follows:

- \* National Gange Council (NGC) under the chairmanship of Prime Minister of India (federal authority).
- \* Empowered Task Force (ETF) under the chairmanship of Union Minister for Ganga Rejuvenation (ground force appointed by the central ministry).
- \* National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG) as the implementation arm of the federal system.
- \* State Ganga Committees (SGCs) as state-level agency.
- \* District Ganga Committees (DGCs) as district-level agency.<sup>12</sup>

It is the last level of the administrative structure that this paper will now turn its attention to.

<sup>7</sup> Author Anonymous, "India-National Ganga River Basin Project", *World Bank*, Vol. 1, Report No. AB-6013, Washington DC, 2011, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Sara Ahmed, "The Rhetoric of Participation Re-examined: The State, NGOs and the Water Users at Varanasi", *Environmentalist*, Varanasi, 1994, p.14.

<sup>9</sup> K.D. Alley, "Urban Institutions at the Crossroads: Judicial Activism and Pollution Prevention in Kanpur", *Urban Anthropol*, 1996, p.24.

<sup>10</sup> Maitreyee Mukherjee, "Agenda Setting in India: Examining the Ganges Pollution Control Program Through the Lens of Multiple Streams Framework" in Heike M. Grimm (ed.), *Public Policy Research in the Global South: A Cross-Country Perspective* (Cham: Springer, 2019), p.238.

<sup>11</sup> Victor Mallet, *River of Life, River of Death: The Ganges and India's Future* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.249.

<sup>12</sup> Mukherjee, "Agenda Setting in India: Examining the Ganges Pollution Control Program Through the Lens of Multiple Streams Framework" in Grimm (ed.), *Public Policy Research in the Global South: A Cross-Country Perspective*, pp.238-239.

## DECENTRALIZED PLANNING: DISTRICT GANGA COMMITTEES

There is no scarcity of literature to show that bottom-up approach is a key to projects like Clean Ganga that requires coordinated management of one of the most important natural heritages of our country. There is also ample evidence to contend that a decentralized approach augments public participation, another essential ingredient for a comprehensive and vast Programme like Namami Gange.

This was the idea behind the historic passage of the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment which sought to strengthen local governance by devolving power to urban local bodies and Panchayats. However, still, effective decentralization remained piecemeal and scattered in most cases. The past Ganga cleaning efforts also showed that lack of natural participation of the local bodies resulted in bad implementation of the projects. The contemporary policy analysis also points to this institutional lacunae while recommending enhanced involvement of local administration to plug the gaps vis-à-vis local ownership, local context and effective coordination. Some of the listed advantages of good quality local collaboration include identification of institutional barriers in implementation, building up of trust between the central, state and local governments and improved coordination.<sup>13</sup> Smoke and Manor also argue that decentralization ensures efficiency by making decision-making participatory and more accountable to local population.<sup>14</sup>

In the backdrop of the vitality of the role of local administration in the success of such public programmes, it is understandable that one of the targets of a 7-point plan prepared for rejuvenation of Ganga in October 2014 clearly delineated the importance of involvement and capacity building of local bodies. The inputs of an interim report submitted in August 2014 by a Committee of Secretaries for Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation and two national debates organized in July and October 2014 were incorporated in the plan, which, in turn, became the foundation of the features of the Namami Gange Programme, one of which accorded prime importance to the role to be played by the local administration and stakeholders.

Flowing from this acknowledgment of the significance of local authorities in the task of Ganga Rejuvenation, the constitution of District Ganga Protection Committees also known as District Ganga Committees, was made compulsory as per clause 53 (1) of the NMCG Authority

order notified on 7<sup>th</sup> October 2016.<sup>15</sup> A 13-member Committee with District Collector as its Chairperson was mandated to “prevent, control and abate pollution in River Ganga” and “take suitable administrative and other measures to give effect to the provisions of the Authority order.”<sup>16</sup> The DGC comprises members as shown in Table I below:

**Table-I: Members of District Ganga Committees**

Stakeholder	Post
District Collector	Chairperson
Two nominated representatives from municipalities and gram panchayats	Members
One representative each from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public Works</li> <li>• Irrigation</li> <li>• Public Health Engineering</li> <li>• Rural Drinking Water Department</li> <li>• State Pollution Control Board</li> </ul>	Members, ex-officio
Two environmentalists associated with River Ganga protection	Members
One representative of local industry	Member
One Divisional Forest Officer	Member, ex-officio
One district official to be nominated by DC	Member

Source: NMCG Authority order available at nmcg.nic.in

The composition of the DGC is a testament to the participatory-driven agenda of the body to involve all relevant stakeholders at the local level. Furthermore, in order to accord prime importance to the grassroots, as per clause 56 of the Authority order it is required for the DGC to nominate the *Sarpanch* of Gram Sabhas or the chairperson of municipality planning committee (if not a village) as the nodal officer. This has been done to keep the gram panchayats and municipalities at the helm of all activities planned under the Namami Gange Programme. It is also compulsory for the DGC to meet every three months and keep reporting to higher authorities about the actions planned and undertaken. There are also provisions for stringent monitoring of the execution of plans, programmes and projects by the state governments.

The broad functions of the DGC are clearly delineated in sub-sections of clause 55 of the Authority order which includes identifying and remedying any threat to the River. It is necessary for the DGCs to inform the higher authorities at the state and central levels in case it is unable to deal with a situation to enable proper resolution of each and every anomaly. In any case, the clause 55 (2) (d) states that it is incumbent on the DGCs to “take suitable administrative and other measures to give effect to the provisions of the Authority order” in a time-bound manner which shows

<sup>13</sup> Dawa Tshering, Denny Ariaputra, Soh Siew Luie, Tashi Tobgay and Wang Nian, “Historical Evaluation of Ganga Action Plans” in Poocharoeu et. al., *Ganga Rejuvenation: Governance Challenges and Policy Options*, pp.41-42.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Smoke, “Fiscal Decentralization in Developing Countries: A Review of Current Concepts and Practice”, *United Nations Research Institute for Social Development*, Geneva, February 2001 and James Manor, *The Political Economy of Democratic Decentralization* (Washington DC: World Bank, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> The NMCG Authority order is available online at: [https://nmcg.nic.in/districtganga\\_committees.aspx](https://nmcg.nic.in/districtganga_committees.aspx)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

appropriate administrative devolution of power to the lower tiers of the government with necessary monitoring mechanisms in place. In addition to this, the DGCs are also required to conduct Ganga Safety Audits in coordination with State Ganga Committees (SGCs). It is often found out that the administrative decentralization does not keep pace with the fiscal decentralization leading to delays in execution of projects.<sup>17</sup> In respect of fiscal decentralization, as per clause 57(2) and 58, the DGCs are mandated to attach the “expenditure involved” with their plans in addition to the “preparation of budget for every financial year” respectively. At the central level, it is ensured that the money is dispersed without any delays through SGCs of the main stem basin states. NMCG has also set up a mechanism to provide revolving (seed) funds to the DGCs to carry out basic activities to prevent any lack-of funds situation.

### **DGCs IN ACTION: CASE STUDIES OF UTTARAKHAND AND UTTAR PRADESH**

So far, District Ganga Committees have been constituted in 61 districts of five main stem Ganga basin states – Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal. While 53 DGCs are on the main stem of river Ganga, the remaining eight have been formed in Ganga tributary districts. There is ample evidence to show that the local administrations of not just main stem but also of districts along tributaries of River Ganga are showing keen interest in the rejuvenation work. The following table lists the state-wise constitution of DGCs:

**Table-II: List of DGCs in Main Stem Ganga Basin States**

State	Number of districts where DGCs constituted	Number of meetings
Uttarakhand	7 (main stem)	126
Uttar Pradesh	26 (main stem) and 4 (tributary)	185
Bihar	12 (main stem) and 2 (tributaries)	55
Jharkhand	1 (main stem)	5
West Bengal	7 (main stem) and 2 (tributaries)	Nil

Source: NMCG Official records

Some of the key areas in which DGCs of all states are taking action include sewerage management, decentralized solid and liquid waste management, Open Defecation Free (ODF), formation of Urban and Village Ganga Samitis, plantation activities with a focus on promotion of cultivation of medicinal plants, riverbed organic farming, identification of industries releasing effluents into the River and taking remedial actions, promotion of sustainable agricultural practices like organic farming, drip and sprinkler irrigation, disposal of bio-medical waste, drain

tapping, afforestation/tree plantation, restoration of water bodies and wetlands, spring shed management, pond construction for idol immersion, cleaning and development of ghats, modernization of crematoria etc. Interestingly, the setting-up of a biodiversity park is mulled by most DGCs, which is inspirational from the ecological point of view. Biodiversity conservation is one of the most important components of the Namami Gange Programme.

The performance of the States of Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh, both crucial States with respect to Ganga Rejuvenation has been encouraging as far as administrative and social mobilization through District Ganga Committees is concerned.

### **DGCs in Uttarakhand**

In the State of Uttarakhand, River Ganga originates at Gomukh and gets its name at Devprayag at the confluence of Bhagirathi and Alaknanda. It flows for about 96 kilometers<sup>18</sup> before it enters plains at Rishikesh, one of the holiest cities in India.<sup>19</sup> It is a matter of great satisfaction that in Uttarakhand, River Ganga has effectively become sewage-free. Uttarakhand has seen some remarkable participation and commitment from the district administration to carry out the tasks mandated under the Authority Order of 2016. Seven districts of Uttarakhand – Chamoli, Dehradun, Haridwar, Rudraprayag, Tehri Garhwal, Uttarkashi and Pauri Garhwal – sent their nominations for the Prime Minister Awards for Excellence in Public Administration 2020. An analysis of the entries by the district administrations demonstrates the increased preference given to Ganga Rejuvenation in the past few years, a necessary departure from the past. The completion of nearly all sewerage infrastructure projects within record time is also indicative of the unprecedented support received from the local administration in execution and running of projects. As many as 27 sewerage infrastructure and management projects costing Rs. 882.89 crore have been completed since the launch of the Namami Gange Programme which has created/upgraded the sewage treatment capacity of 146.19 Million Liters per Day (MLD) and laid down the sewer network of 140.88 kilometers. The role of District Ganga Committees as the enablers of this achievement has been instrumental. A sense of ownership also reflects in the proper monitoring of the assets vis-à-vis operation and maintenance by the district administration. The successful completion and subsequent operation and maintenance of first-ever STPs at Jagjeetpur (68 MLD) and Sarai (18 MLD) under Hybrid Annuity based PPP Mode within stipulated time also testifies to the extraordinary coordination between the central, state and local tiers of the government.

Efforts to rejuvenate Himalayan Rivers Mothugad in

<sup>18</sup> Ravi Chopra and Aprajita Singh, “State of India’s Rivers” for India Rivers Week, 2016, Uttarakhand, URL: <https://sandrp.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/uttrakhand-report.pdf>, p.13.

<sup>19</sup> Radhakant Bharati, *Rivers of India* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2014), p.129.

<sup>17</sup> Das and Tamminga, “The Ganges and the GAP: An Assessment of Efforts to Clean a Sacred River”, p.1660.

Chamoli district and Heval River Landscape in Tehri Garhwal exemplify the priority accorded to small rivers/watersheds/streams in the State. Some other interesting initiatives like Ganga Picnic, Ganga Vatika, Smriti Van, Bhu Samadhi, Paryavaran Mitras, Mahila Mangal Dals, Van Panchayats, Eco-Restoration of Meadows, Cleanliness Fee, Ganga Library, Snow Leopard Conservation, Gram Prahari, Swachhta Doots etc. aim at restoring the overall ecosystem associated with the River by taking a comprehensive approach.<sup>20</sup> This also shows the deserved attention being given for the improvement of People-River connect. The commendable job by district administrations in Uttarakhand with respect to waste segregation and door-to-door collection is also a case in point.

### **DGCs in Uttar Pradesh**

The State of Uttar Pradesh which consists of nearly half of Ganga's total length (about 1100 kilometers out of 2525 kilometers) has also lived up to the enormity of the role it has to play to make Namami Gange Programme a success. In its meeting on 17<sup>th</sup> July 2019, the DGC of Varanasi took some out of the box decisions that augur well for the overall arrest of pollution in the river. These include prevention of heavy engine boats in Ganga to control pollution and awareness creation in different languages at ghats in addition to other routine actions.<sup>21</sup> The district administration's role has also been pivotal in expediting the sewerage infrastructure work that has so far led to increase in sewage treatment capacity from 100 MLD to 360 MLD reducing the pollution load considerably, with some other important projects, most notably the 50 MLD Ramana STP under Hybrid Annuity Mode, in the final stages of completion. Some of the remarkable works with district administration at the helm in Uttar Pradesh include:

- The steps taken to take the civil society in Varanasi along have contributed in establishing a necessary dialogue with the people.
- In Prayagraj, plans are being chalked out to use the treated sewage water for Karkshana power plant to reduce intake of water from Yamuna. Prayagraj district administration also plans to do plantation on a 10 kilometer stretch on both sides of River Ganga.<sup>22</sup> They also developed 30 Ganga Maidans, a unique public initiative, along the River Ganga to promote sports in the district.
- Ganga Yatra organized by District Ganga Committee in Balia and promotion of Ganga Artis in villages by DGCs are also cases in point that show the enhanced involvement of districts in activities on Ganga to maximize awareness.

<sup>20</sup> Nominations of District Ganga Committees of Chamoli, Haridwar, Dehradun, Rudraprayag, Uttarkashi, Tehri Garhwal and Pauri Garhwal districts for the PM Awards for Excellence in Public Administration 2020 are comprehensive accounts of the work done by the district administration with respect to Ganga Rejuvenation.

<sup>21</sup> The Minutes of the Meeting are available online: <http://smcg-up.org/>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

- In an important initiative to ensure *Aviralta* of Ganga, Ghazipur directed the irrigation department to maintain base flows in all tributary rivers of Ganga and remove encroachments on the floodplains.

In Kasganj, work is being taken up to rejuvenate Boodhi Ganga, a tributary, through local participation. Kasganj also undertook a massive afforestation drive through a unique initiative of 'Bhagirath Van'.

It is noteworthy that some of the ideas of DGCs are the direct result of enhanced involvement of local stakeholders in decision-making as they are better aware of the ground situation and prioritize action best suited to them according to the socio-economic setting of the region. This, in many ways, serves the purpose for the creation of DGCs that look for solutions arising out of local experiences.

As part of the holistic approach taken under the Namami Gange Programme, the cleaning of Ganga's tributaries that contribute significantly in polluting the river, has received renewed attention. In what could be seen as an encouraging sign, the districts along tributaries of River Ganga are showing eagerness in the Namami Gange Programme in particular and water conservation in general. This is exemplified by some of the decisions taken by the DGCs in Hapur, Meerut and Moradabad, all towns situated on the banks of tributaries of Ganga:

- While Hapur has imposed total ban on plastic bags in the district, Moradabad DGC is actively pursuing the work of facilitating a river health index of Ram Ganga to be carried out by WWF-India.
- Meerut district has performed excellently by carrying successful plantation drives on 30 hectares of land in 2018 and 100 hectares in 2019.
- The formation of Bal Sena, a volunteer student cadre, in all schools of Bulandshahar district to spread awareness about River Ganga is also an example of the success of DGCs in galvanizing people at the local level, especially children, to make Namami Gange a mass movement.

A plantation drive in nearly 100 hectares of land was also undertaken in Bulandshahar district under the supervision of the DGC. The establishment of Ganga Vans and Ganga Upvans, among other initiatives, also goes to the credit of the DGC. It is also important to note that the administrations of the districts situated on tributaries of Ganga also remarkably scaled up the organic farming in villages.

### **CONCLUSION**

The new forms of governance have made a shift to decentralization as it stimulates creative and innovative responses that are locally-driven. The formation of District Ganga Committees (DGCs) in October 2016 provided the necessary impetus for the consolidation of a decentralized mechanism for effective execution of the politically-supported Namami Gange Programme. After decades of centralized planning in water resources management in

India, the long-impending need for devolution of power was fulfilled with the administrative empowerment of the DGCs. Whereas local ownership helps in completion as well as sustenance of government schemes, the administrative smoothness makes the implementation of any programme easier.

No wonder that the participatory-driven approach is ensuring diligent local participation as a direct consequence of more space given to them in governance in the massive task of Ganga Rejuvenation. The decision-making has become informed and a sense of ownership has become stronger as evident from the enthusiastic involvement of all local stakeholders in DGC meetings in the key States of Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh among others. This structure is futuristic and will be able to lay foundation for further in depth implementation of rejuvenation activities and also to expand to new integrated activities such as development of Arth Ganga.

There is no denying that still a lot needs to be done in terms of making the processes involved in decentralization simpler and smoother - one possible way of achieving which is the creation of all-encompassing river management plans by the DGCs to directly benefit the local community, economy and environment. Inter-district coordination is another factor that draws attention for mitigation of damage, sharing of experiences and rejuvenation of Ganga as a whole. Nonetheless, District Ganga Committees have delivered in the past few years. They are swiftly proving to be the engines on which the twin objectives of Ganga cleaning in particular and Water Conservation in general could smoothly run and show that institutional decentralization in both letter and spirit is one of the most important requirements for big public sector programmes like Namami Gange, a necessary lesson for rejuvenation of other rivers in the country as well.

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