

One river and multiple conflicts: the case of the Yamuna River

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The Yamuna River is an important source of freshwater for millions of people, birds and animals in the northern part of India. It is one of the important sources of freshwater for Delhi. It is also culturally and religiously significant, as it is regarded as a holy river by Hindus. Nevertheless, it is one of the **most polluted rivers** in India.

The river water covered on the surface with white forms, as visible in the photo below, is not an uncommon scene for Delhiites. While this is one of the visible symptoms of river pollution, there are also many other quality-related issues, such as chemical contamination, which may not be easily visible. The deteriorated or deteriorating condition of the Yamuna River has led to significant interventions by the government at the central level and state levels as well. A large amount of money has already been spent for cleaning the river with little or no effect. The issue of the bad



health of the river has also led to civil society movements and activists to initiate campaigns to save the river Yamuna (eg Yamuna Jiye Abhiyan).

The story of the river Yamuna (perhaps like any other river) cannot be reduced to one or more narratives. It is a complex set of multilayered and interconnected dimensions. This note briefly captures this multifaceted relationship between the river Yamuna and a range of living beings, including human beings.

The Yamuna River is a bone of

contention at multiple levels. First, it is an inter-state issue, particularly between the states of Haryana and Delhi. The issue regularly hits the news with allegations of water contamination, withholding of water, and mismanagement. For instance, in January 2025, the Chief Minister of Delhi accused Haryana of 'water terrorism', which reflects the high level of politicisation of the issue. The relationship between these two states is governed by a 1994 water sharing agreement. Although the Agreement is supposed to



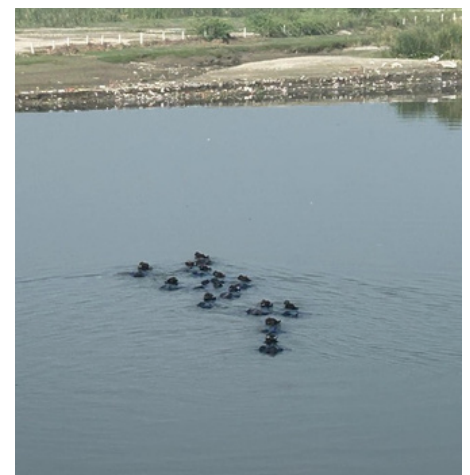
be reviewed in 2025, there does not seem to be anything concrete so far in this regard. Both quality and quantity seem to be the triggering factors of the uneasy relationship between Delhi and Haryana. At the same time, Delhi has been accused of being the major polluter of the river, leaving the downstream states as the key victims of it. Regardless of whether the conflicts between states are obvious or not, the position of different riparian states is that of both a perpetrator and a victim, leaving the health of the river and numerous living beings in peril.

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Second, the river has witnessed several controversies related to the use of its river banks. Many urban poor have been evicted from the river banks, including through the directions of the High Court of Delhi to protect the river from pollution and encroachments. The infamous Yamuna Pushta eviction led to the eviction of hundreds of thousands of slum dwellers, mostly working class families, from the banks and flood plains of the river. At the same time, permission was granted to construct places of worship and to organise religious, cultural and sports events on the banks and in the flood plains of the river. The river is indeed entangled with class and culture. It is also a space that reproduces prejudices and biases based on class, culture and religion.

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Third, the river Yamuna also exemplifies conflicts relating to livelihood, nature and public health. The banks and floodplains of the river are used for vegetable cultivation. Owing to the poor quality of the river water and the consequent public health concerns arising from the vegetables cultivated there, there have been legal restrictions on such cultivation. There were instances where the National Green Tribunal had banned vegetable cultivation due to public health concerns. Similar concerns could also arise in the case of fish harvested from the river. For instance, the photographs below clearly show the co-existence of pollution and livelihood activities like fishing and cattle rearing.



Several human rights (right to livelihood, right to health, right to environment etc.) are at risk in this scenario. It is also a case where different human rights of different classes of people are in conflict with each other, and some human rights of some people get priority over the others. For instance, the right to health of people in Delhi was prioritised over the right to livelihood of the farmers when the National Green Tribunal banned vegetable cultivation. In this context, the marginalised elements include the river and the numerous river-dependent species because their rights are not prioritised most of the time.

Fourth, river-dependent communities probably have a different story to tell about the river. On the one hand, their life and livelihood are closely connected to the river. Thus, better health of the river is necessary for their better life. They are likely to be the natural protectors of the river. On the other hand, there are certain troubled times during monsoon season when the river occupies most of its space (technically and legally known as a flood and a natural disaster). Numerous temporary shelters on the road are not an uncommon sight during such a period. The perceptions and understandings of such river dependent communities are extremely important to understand and regulate



human-nature relationships. For instance, a flood is not necessarily and always a negative incident particularly when the cycle of life of the river and river dependent communities are closely linked to events like this.

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Fifth, most of the discussions above reflect a human-centric utilitarian way of looking at the river. The narrative may get complicated when the inherent dignity and integrity of the river are taken into consideration. Any use of the river per se and its banks and catchments with unreasonable implications for the health of the river would raise justice concerns from the river's point of view. Until now, such an approach is by and large missing in the larger discourse. A notable example of this

approach is the discussion on environmental flow by the National Green Tribunal. Another related dimension here is the issue of the survival of other species that are dependent on the river.

Overall, multiple issues linked to the river co-exist. The issues range from inter-state issues, to the rights of birds and animals. **It also highlights the river as a space where myriad instances of realisation and violations of human rights happen.** The story of the river Yamuna shows how different actors negotiate their interests with the help of various administrative, judicial and political forums and how social, economic and political hierarchies influence the outcome of such negotiations. The multiple layers and scales of the issues highlighted above need separate as well as integrated analysis, which is a key objective of the WATCON project.

(The views expressed in the article are those of the author and do not reflect in any way his affiliation to any organisation or institution)



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