THE AGE OF ASIA

Hanns
Seidel
Stiftung

TALKING
ASIA POLITICS

# China India Dialogue

The Role of Civil Society in Addressing
Water Pollution in India

## Abstract

Pollution of fresh water resources can impact lives and livelihoods of millions. Indian constitution has several provisions for prevention of pollution of environment including water resources. Civil Society Organisations have key role to play towards enhancing public participation. Centre for Environment Education (CEE) has several innovative initiatives engaging different stakeholders including youth, farmers, women, teachers to build their understanding and capacity to protect and conserve local water resources.

Keywords: Water pollution – CEE initiatives – community participationn – ESD – youth

## Author

**Kartikeya Sarabhai**

Mr. Sarabhai is the founder director of the Centre for Environment Education headquartered in Ahmedabad, with offices across India. He holds Tripos in Natural Science from Cambridge University, UK and did post-Graduation work in Development Communications from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), USA. As one of the world's leading environmental educators, he has contributed immensely in the field of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) involved closely with UNESCO, UNEP and other UN bodies and Conventions. He is the editor-in-chief of the Journal on Education for Sustainable Development (JESD). Mr. Sarabhai has been recognized globally for his pioneering work in EE and ESD with several national and international awards, including the International "Brandwein Medal", the "Tree of Learning"award, "Sir C.V. Raman Memorial Award" and the "Padma Shri" one of India's highest civilian awards.

# The Role of Civil Society in Addressing Water Pollution in India

## || Kartikeya Sarabhai

The Indian civilization grew around its rivers. The Ganges in the North and several others were seen as holy rivers. The confluence of rivers were particularly significant and form an important part of the psyche of Indians. And yet this has not resulted in the rivers being clean and pollution free. Lakes and other water bodies have also historically been respected. Villages would usually have norms as to where they would wash clothes and from where they would draw out water to drink. But the pressure on our water resources is huge. Population has grown from about 350 million at the time of independence in 1947 to about 1.38 billion (World Bank Open Data, 2020), a fourfold increase. While India has about 17.5 percent of the world's population, (Census India, 2011) it has only 4 percent of the world's renewable water resources (Ministry of Water Resources, 2012). Rapid development and industrialization puts further pressure on fresh water resources. While several efforts are afoot, without the active involvement of civil society it would be nearly impossible to have pollution free water bodies.

The Indian constitution recognized this and emphasized that "It shall be the duty of every citizen of India to protect and improve the natural environment including Forest, lakes, rivers and wildlife and to have compassion for living creatures." (Article 51-A (g) of the Indian Constitution). Article 21 of the Constitution deals with the fundamental rights. Interpreting this, the Supreme Court ruled that fundamental rights includes the rights to free water and free air from pollution for the full enjoyment of life (Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar, 1991). But to a nation that is dealing with lifting a large part of its population out of poverty, achieving this is a major challenge.

At the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm, Sweden in 1972, India prioritized environmental concerns but put them with developmental needs. The then Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi was the only head of government who attended this first major conference on international environmental issues. She asked at the conference that "how can we speak to those who live in villages and in slums about keeping the oceans, the rivers and the air clean when their own lives are contaminated at the source"? She went on to say that the issue of poverty cannot be solved as long as the environmental issues are addressed. Two years later, the first major pollution prevention legislation was enacted in India, when the Water Prevention and Control Act came into force in 1974. The Central Pollution Control Board and

State Pollution Control Boards were set up. India also enacted the Environmental Protection Act of 1986, which dealt with mandatory environmental impact assessment and public consultation and getting people's views on larger environmental projects. There was already a sense of community participation and civil society participation in the act itself.

The Centre for Environment Education was set up in 1984 with a belief that India's strategy for conserving the environment can't just come through passing legislation alone. It also required people's understanding, capacity building, community and people's engagement with the project and research and demonstration. There was also a need to strengthen governance system from the village level upwards. It recognized the requirement of remaking the institutional set up. CEE was set up with the objective to improve public awareness and understanding of the environment with a view to promoting the conservation and sustainable use of nature and natural resources, leading to a better environment and a better quality of life. A major boost to these activities came in 1991, when a public interest litigation put forward the argument that it was not possible for a citizen to protect the environment if he or she had not studied it. It was essential for us to understand the intricate relationship between our actions and their impact on our environment. In the landmark judgements first in 1991 (M.C. Mehta vs Union of India & Others (1991), and again in 2003 (M.C. Mehta vs Union of India & Others (2003), the Supreme Court ordered that every formal educational programme in India, from primary school to secondary and at the college level, must have environmental education as an integral part of the curriculum. It was a landmark directive.

2005 saw the start of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). CEE organized the first international seminar of the DESD and was the nodal agency for India for the decade. The ESD approach further sharpened the way education could play a transformative role in development issues.

CEE has undertaken many projects related to water and water pollution that encourage and facilitate the engagement of civil society organization. CEE implemented a project titled 'Ganges river dolphin conservation'. Ganges is one of the largest rivers in India with the largest river basin in terms of catchment area, constituting 26% of the country's land mass catering to almost 11 states and 43% of India's population (National Mission of Clean Ganga, Ministry of Jal Shakti). The project aimed at educating schools and community for sustainable actions for conserving habitat of Ganges River Dolphin. Mythologically it is considered a Holy River by many Indians and there is sense of emotional affinity towards it but it has become one of the highly polluted rivers. The first thing CEE did was to develop indicators that people can use so that they can understand that the river is polluted and are motivated towards cleaning the Ganges River. The number of dolphins became an indicator of good water quality. The project used dolphins as a symbol and dolphin clubs were formed in many schools. The community was involved and were sensitized. Street plays and similar

activities were done on the banks of Ganges River. In Varanasi, a pilgrimage city in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India, an intensive project was launched that included 100 schools. A 14 day campaign was done on the river in 17 different locations. The main aim was to get as many local people as possible to get included in the pollution free drive.

Another type of initiative are those involving the youth where a lot of emphasis is put on behavioral change. Tools are developed to tackle issues and problem solving skills. One such project is the Plastic Tide Turners where CEE is working with United Nations Environment Programme, WWF and Ministry of Environment. Forests and Climate Change, Government of India. In the initial phase a partnership with Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung enabled CEE in reaching out to large number of Indian youth through adopting resource materials in Hindi, development of web portal and conduct trainings for youth leaders in states of Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh. During the three phases of the project, around 325000 youths were trained to fight pollution from single use plastics, plastic getting stuck in waterways and eventually ending up in the ocean.

Another approach involving youth and higher education institutions in achieving SDG[1] 6, along with other SDGs, is a CEE initiative called SDG Handprint Lab. The project involves a local area study and sustainability action pedagogy to enable youth to become active participants in achieving Sustainable Development through a higher education curricular

programme which empowers students in critical thinking, research, developing innovative solutions and taking handprint action, through engaging with the community.

Wetskills is another such programme that provides learning and international networking opportunity for students and young professionals with a passion for water. The programme focuses on finding creative solutions for water related issues such as pollution in river systems, role of women in water management, community involvement in water governance and flood and drought, and water in agriculture.

In CEE's water related projects involving the rural communities the emphasis is not just on the awareness but empowering the community. One such project was done in Gujarat, a state in western India, where CEE created a water management system with the villagers to manage clean water which was polluted with excessive fluoride content. Another rural water management and governance Project 'Jal Setu' supported by Hanns Seidel Foundation, was directed to empowering women elected representatives to water governance and relating that to climate change. This form of demonstration is done to make people realize that they can take charge of their own lives and make their own decisions regarding water issues. A very different type of programme is the blue flag, an international programme focused on beaches. Its aim is to bring international standards to measure water pollution in the beaches. The programme so

---

[1] United Nations Sustainable Development Goal

far covers 8 beaches in India. Industrial waste requires a different type of approach. CEE trains people to understand and follow the law and develop skills to tackle it.

NGOs work with a variety of stakeholders and emphasis is on partnerships - partnerships with industry, partnership with other NGOs, partnerships with schools and youth and joint research actions.

While NGOs and civil society organizations are playing an important role towards addressing pollution issues and environmental concerns, the government also emphasizes this. However, there are at times points where conflict occurs especially with those who are polluters and those who don't follow rules. Local interest groups at times try to suppress pollution data. Civil society awareness prevents this happening especially where citizens have access to directly complain to the authority. There are Apps created which facilitates citizen's access to information and register a complaint, such as Sameer App launched by CPCB provides citizen's access to air quality data and let them register a complaint if required. This is where the role of awareness comes in. CSOs[2] can help in enhancing understanding among industry that preventing pollution is in the long run economically viable, for example CEE works with industry to demonstrate how the 'waste from one industry can actually be a resource, how can water be recycled to reduce water usage and prevent pollution.

The experience of CEE and several others clearly brings out the important role CSOs play in tackling with issue of water pollution, through awareness, education and capacity building of various stakeholders.

### REFERENCES

M. C. Mehta, v. Union of India and Others, (1991). Supreme Court of India, 22 November 1991. Retrieved from: https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1918380/

M.C.Mehta vs Union of India & Others (2003), Supreme Court of India, 18 Dec 2003. Retrieved from: https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1419757/

National Mission of Clean Ganga, Ministry of Jal Shakti, Department of Water Resources, River De-velopment, & Ganga Rejuvenation, Government of India https://nmcg.nic.in/location.aspx

Ministry of Water Resources, Government of India. (2012) National Water Policy. http://jalshakti-dowr.gov.in/sites/default/files/NWP2012Eng6495132651_1.pdf

Census of India. (2011) Size, growth rate and distribution of Population, https://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data_files/india/final_ppt_2011_chapter3.pdf

Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar 1991 AIR 420, 1991 SCR (1) 5

World Bank Open Data, 2020, https://data.worldbank.org/

Gandhi, Indira (1992),Safeguarding Environment, Indira Gandhi Memorial Trust, The New Age International (P) Limited.

[2] Civil Society Organisations

Ganges River Dolphin: Story of an Amazing Aquatic Mammal, 2012, Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India and Centre for Environment Education

Blue flag certification- coastal and marine programme, https://www.cee-india.org/blue-flag-certification-coastal-and-marine-programmes

SDG handprint Lab, centre for environment education, https://www.cee-india.org/sdg-handprint-lab

Jalsetu, Centre for Environment Education, https://www.ceeindia.org/jal-setu-sustainable-rural-development

Wetskills India 2021, centre for environment education, https://www.cee-india.org/wetskillsDeutsche Welle, Germany launches Alliance for Multilateralism, 26 September 2019. https://www.dw.com/en/germany-launches-alliance-for-multilateralism/a-50600084