

Guardians of the Ganga: task force keeps a watchful eye on the river

Over 4,000 volunteers under the Namami Gange initiative have been keeping a check on littering and poaching in the river to make sure that its flora, fauna are intact; in return, the Wildlife Institute of India has helped them with livelihood training

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NARORA/BULANDSHAHR

Omveer Kumar, 41, picks up plastic bottles, pouches and food packets as he walks on the wet sand on the banks of the Ganga. As he hears a heap of garbage, Mr. Kumar sees an overturned turtle, its neck wounded. He rushes it to a nearby rescue centre for treatment.

Mr. Kumar, a resident of Narora town in Bulandshahr district of Uttar Pradesh, is a Ganga *Praharis* (guardian). This is a task force of volunteers constituted by the National Mission for Clean Ganga and the Wildlife Institute of India (NMCG-WII) under the Namami Gange programme to cover 8.61 billion sq.km of the river basin.

Since 2014, Namami Gange has aimed to clean the river, ecosystem, and the villages around, home to 40% of India's population at 520 million and 2,500 species of flora and



On a mission: The United Nations in 2022 had recognised the Namami Gange initiative as one of the top 10 World Restoration Flagships involved in reviving the natural world. R.V. MOORTHY

fauna. The United Nations in December 2022 recognised the initiative as one of the top 10 World Restoration Flagships involved in reviving the natural world – a project that has seen the Central government invest \$5 billion.

Since 2016, when the Ganga *Praharis* project began, Mr. Kumar, who has studied till high school, has learnt to identify aquatic species that survive in the

river by their scientific name. He can spot over 300 birds, both Indian and migratory, that arrive on the riverbank in different seasons.

His two children are also part of the project and are known as *Bal* (child) *Ganga Praharis*.

The job at hand

The task force, which now has over 4,000 volunteers in 100 districts across Uta-

rakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, and West Bengal, keeps a check on river protection, preventing people from littering, and reports poaching.

G. Ashok Kumar, Director-General of Namami Gange, said they were planning to issue ID cards to all the Ganga *Praharis*.

And while Mr. Kumar said that the first target of the project was to ensure that no untreated water –

sewage or industrial effluents – flowed into the river, Lakshman Sharma, *pati pradhan* (husband of the village *pradhan* Renu Sharma), points to sewage flowing directly into the river.

“I had complained to the panchayat officer, District Magistrate, even the Chief Minister, but this *nallah* is still flowing into the river,” said the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) worker.

Whether or not there has been an impact on the ecosystem, there has been some change in the lives of the people. To recruit volunteers, WII sets meetings with villagers through the *pradhan* and education institutions.

“An obvious question that comes out of the discussion is what they will get if they help. Then we mooted the idea of livelihood training,” said Vineeta Sagar, a field researcher with WII

From beautician to electrician, different kinds of skilling opportunities are offered to them. nwda.gov.in