

India's PM vows to clean up the sacred Ganges

A toxic mix of human waste and chemicals is polluting one of the world's most important and holy rivers. India's new prime minister has vowed to take action, but who is most to blame?



Abdul Kalam, 78, has lived all his life in Varanasi, one of India's holiest cities. It is said to be 'older than history, older even than legend' and is a revered place to which millions of Hindu pilgrims flock each year in order to immerse themselves in the sacred waters of the Ganges river. As a 10-year-old, Abdul would swim in its clear, green waters, and marvel at the river teeming with turtles, sawfish and crocodiles.

But today the water is dirty, black, and choked with rubbish. 'It has changed so much I cannot believe it,' he says.

The Ganges is the holiest river for Hindus and also an important way of life. From its source high up in the Himalayan Mountains, it flows 2,500 km (1,553 miles) out to the Bay of Bengal, **sustaining** the 450 million Indians who live beside it – around six per cent of the world's population.

But parts of it have turned into a giant flowing gutter, crawling with raw sewage, industrial waste and worse. Its levels of toxins

and dangerous bacteria are 3,000 times higher than what the World Health Organisation considers safe. India's new prime minister, **Narendra Modi**, who was officially sworn in to office last week, has vowed to clean it up. 'I feel **Mother Ganga** has called me to Varanasi,' he proclaimed at one rally.

One reason for this mighty river's tragic decline can be found in the blazing funeral pyres that dot its banks. According to Hindu scripture, to have your mortal remains cremated by the side of the water, and the ashes scattered on to its lapping waves, is the most blessed way to leave this life. It is a way to achieve '**moksha**', the liberation of the soul from the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

But this ancient holy ritual comes at a grim price. About 32,000 bodies are cremated every year in Varanasi – 88 every day. In the process, about 7,000 tonnes of ash are scattered into the Ganges, and

because of the high costs of sandalwood and corkwood used for the pyres, many families cannot afford to fully cremate their loved ones. As a result, 200 tonnes of half-burnt human flesh also end up in the water.

Costing the earth

For years, environmentalists have tried to put an end to the religious rites being carried out by the sides of the Ganges, despite fierce opposition. But the problem is now too grave to ignore. It is time for everyone who uses the Ganges for whatever purpose to be responsible for its revival.

But others argue that the pollution caused by funeral pyres is only a small part of the problem. Archaic sanitation systems and the rubbish and chemicals spewed out by factories are the real culprits. Picking on those who wish to continue centuries-old traditions is unfair, and won't save the river.

Sustaining ♦ The river is used for many daily activities, such as fishing and washing. It is also home to over 140 fish species and birds found nowhere else in the world. The basin is home to five species of freshwater cetaceans, including the endangered Ganges river dolphin which faces extinction.

Narendra Modi ♦ Modi swept to a landslide victory last month. He is the first Indian leader to win a clear, single party majority in 30 years. Some fear his Hindu nationalism, but he has a good record for fostering economic growth. His own parliamentary seat is in Varanasi, and he has made the city's revival a priority.

Mother Ganga ♦ Besides being a sacred river, Ganga is also worshiped as a deity in Hinduism and is respectfully referred to as 'Gangaji' or 'Ganga Maiya' (Mother Ganga).

Moksha ♦ Hindus believe that the soul passes through a cycle of successive lives, known as samsara, and the soul's next incarnation is always dependent on how the previous life was lived, known as karma. Moksha is the end of the death and rebirth cycle and is classed as the fourth and ultimate 'artha', or goal, for Hindus.

YOU DECIDE

1. Should the funeral pyres be banned?
2. Who is most to blame for this problem? Or is there a collective responsibility to keep the river clean?

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