

Indian River Pollution Background

Although India's rapid economic growth has improved the standard of living for many Indians, it has also had some negative effects. One consequence has been the large-scale pollution of India's rivers and waterways. This trend is expected to continue, and according to the World Bank, India's water resources will be under more pressure than those of any other country by 2020.

Like many of India's rivers, the Ganges River serves multiple purposes for the millions of people who live along its banks. Hindus, the predominant religious group in India, believe that the Ganges is the holiest river in the world and that its sacred waters have healing and restorative powers. They use the river for religious rituals and rites. Indians also rely on the Ganges' waters for food, drinking and bathing water, transportation, and agriculture. As a result, raw sewage and other biological waste have long contaminated the river. As India's population has grown, these "natural" pollutants have become more of a problem.

Additionally, the rise in Indian manufacturing has resulted in an influx of new and dangerous pollutants. Factories dump hazardous chemicals and industrial byproducts into the Ganges, often in violation of environmental regulations. Aggravating the problem is the government's inability to effectively treat industrial and biological waste. Official estimates in 2008 showed that India's water treatment plants can only address 18% of the sewage its cities produce each day. In reality, it treats closer to 13% due to shortages of power, water, and technical training. The combination of untreated biological, chemical, and industrial waste in the Ganges River has had disastrous effects on the health of Indians who depend on it for both religious and secular purposes. Many Indians have contracted painful skin conditions, respiratory diseases, and deadly waterborne illnesses such as typhoid, polio, and jaundice after drinking or bathing in the Ganges River.

Increased water pollution has affected cities and citizens all along the Ganges. However, the northern city of Kanpur has the notorious distinction of being situated along one of the most contaminated stretches of the river. Kanpur is home to numerous factories that support the cotton, textile, and leather industries. Leather production is of particular importance to the city's economy, and about 350 tanneries operate there. In addition to producing toxic chemicals and heavy metals, the tanneries also produce about 400 tons of solid waste each day. Many of these factories release their industrial waste—untreated—into the Ganges River. As a result, Kanpur's residents ingest polluted water, either directly through drinking or bathing, or indirectly through eating contaminated food.