

Ganga Action Plan, Launch Date, Objectives, Phases, Achievements

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Former Prime Minister Rajeev Gandhi launched Ganga Action Plan on January 14th, 1986 as a centrally sponsored scheme to reduce pollution and improve water quality by intercepting, diverting, and treating domestic sewage as well as current toxic and industrial chemical waste which was entering the river through polluting units. Ganga Action Plan has two phases out of which the first one was initiated by the Ministry of Environment and Forest in states including Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal.

Ganga Action Plan

The Ganga Action Plan was the First Government Led River Clean Up Mission in India, initiated in 1985 by the Ministry of Environment and Forests. The program aimed to reduce pollution levels in the Ganga by treating wastewater, improving sanitation infrastructure, and addressing industrial discharge into the river. To strengthen this initiative, the National River Ganga Basin Authority (NRGBA) was established, and the Ganga was officially designated as a National River of India.

Ganga Action Plan Need

By the late 1970s, rapid industrial growth and expanding cities led to a sharp rise in untreated sewage being dumped into rivers and other water bodies. The increased pollution led to rise in the risk of waterborne diseases like cholera and typhoid. The Ganga, already burdened by widespread open defecation and unchecked industrial waste, saw its contamination levels increasing. The major cause of the problem was a lack of public awareness and the absence of clear regulations to manage waste and industrial runoff effectively.

Ganga Action Plan Objectives

The Ganga Action Plan was a two phase project with the major aim of reducing the pollution and untreated industrial waste from the fifth largest polluted river. Below the list of Ganga Action Plan Objectives is discussed:

1. Focus on intercepting and diverting untreated sewage and industrial effluents before they reach the Ganga, followed by proper treatment.
2. Tackle pollution from dispersed sources like farm runoff, open defecation, and the disposal of partially burnt or unburnt human remains.
3. Promote research aimed at preserving the ecological balance and biological diversity of the Ganga ecosystem.
4. Introduce modern technologies like Up-flow Anaerobic Sludge Blanket (UASB) for wastewater treatment.
5. Use species such as soft-shelled turtles, known for their scavenging abilities, to naturally aid in cleaning up the river.
6. Develop the Ganga clean-up plan as a reference framework that can be replicated for restoring polluted stretches of other rivers across India.
7. Restore aquatic life and ecosystem balance both within the river and along its banks, ensuring long-term ecological sustainability.

Ganga Action Plan Phases

The Ganga Action Plan was carried out in two major phases, each designed to address rising pollution levels through targeted measures and long-term strategies:

Ganga Action Plan Phases	
Ganga Action Plan Phases 1	Ganga Action Plan - Phase 2
• Three states were covered in the first phase. • Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal are the three states that make up Uttar Pradesh. • Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Uttrakhand, Jharkhand, Delhi, and Haryana were included in Phase 2.	• The Yamuna, Gomti, Mahananda, and Damodar tributaries of the Ganga were included in Phase 2.

• GAP's first phase began in January 1986 and ended in March 2000. • This phase was a completely government-funded project aimed at preventing pollution of the Ganga. • The Ganga Action Plan Phase-1 cost a total of Rs.452 crores to complete. • This strategy was developed based on a study conducted by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) in 1984. • In 1985, the total sewage generated from 25 Class 1 municipalities was projected to be roughly 1340 million litres per day, according to the CPCB survey. • A total of 261 pollution abatement projects covering 25 towns in three states, namely Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Bihar, were sanctioned at a cost of Rs. 462 crore to complete this mission. • On March 31, 2000, the GAP-1 was declared closed. A sewage treatment capacity of 865 million liters per day was established as part of this proposal.	• Phase 1 of the Ganga Action Plan did not address the whole extent of the river's pollution, GAP Phase 2, which included plans for the Yamuna, Damodar, and Gomti in addition to the Ganga, was approved in stages between 1993 and 1996. • Under two different programmes, the Ganga Action Plan Phase – II and the National River Conservation Plan (NRCP), with the National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG) as its parent body, the initiative was extended to other major rivers in India (from the year 2014). • The Yamuna and Gomti Action Plans were adopted as part of GAP Phase II in April 1993. • Following that, in 1995, the NRCP approved projects for several major rivers. • Following the establishment of the NRCP in 1995, the Ganga Action Plan-2 was merged with the NRCP.
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Ganga Action Plan Achievement

- **Noticeable Water Quality Improvement:** Compared to pre-1985 levels, there was a measurable enhancement in the river's water quality in several stretches.
- **Project Completion Progress:** Out of 764 projects approved under GAP Phase II, 652 were completed by the year 2014, showing substantial on-ground implementation.
- **Expansion of Treatment Infrastructure:** Plans were made to set up 35 sewage treatment plants across five key states along the Ganga's course, aiming to curb pollution at the source.
- **A Shift in National Mindset:** Perhaps the most significant milestone was the official recognition of the Ganga's pollution crisis and the government's commitment to cleaning it, a critical first step toward long-term river conservation.

Role of JICA in Ganga Action Plan

- The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) partnered with India to offer technical expertise for a Development Study focused on managing the Ganga's water quality.
- Between 2003 and 2005, JICA carried out extensive studies in four major cities of Uttar Pradesh-Varanasi, Lucknow, Kanpur, and Allahabad.

- The goal was to prepare detailed Master Plans and Feasibility Reports covering both sewer networks and non-sewer interventions to improve sanitation infrastructure in these urban areas.
- Following the study, JICA entered into a loan agreement with the Indian government, committing around ₹1,640 crore to support pollution control efforts in the selected cities.

Ganga Action Plan Reason for Failures

- **Weak Sewage Infrastructure:** One of the biggest setbacks was the failure to build and upgrade sewage treatment systems. Limited funding and poor coordination among central, state, and local authorities left much of the plan incomplete.
- **Lack of Public Engagement:** The plan struggled to gain traction on the ground. Without enough community participation or awareness, efforts to clean the river lacked the grassroots support needed for lasting impact.
- **Persistent Industrial Waste:** Many industries continued releasing untreated waste into the Ganga. Despite the presence of environmental rules, enforcement was weak, and compliance was patchy at best.
- **Poor Regulation and Oversight:** Governance gaps, like lax monitoring and lenient penalties allowed polluters to continue unchecked. The absence of strict accountability mechanisms undermined the plan's credibility.
- **Scale of the Problem:** The Ganga flows through multiple states, covering thousands of kilometers. The sheer size of the river system made it hard to identify and manage every pollution source effectively.

Short-Term Fixes Over Long-Term Strategy: While the plan led to some visible improvements, it lacked a sustainable vision. Once short-term measures faded, pollution levels returned exposing the failure to build enduring solutions.

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