

## Learn to treat rivers well, respect them

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Cooum River

World Water Day on March 22 draws annual attention to the sustainable management of freshwater resources. UN-Water is the United Nations inter-agency coordination mechanism for all freshwater related issues, including sanitation. Wastewater is their 2017's theme, which will focus on aspects concerning people and sewage.

The Union Ministry of Water Resources framed the National Water Policy (NWP) in 2012. India depends on erratic monsoons for water and there are cyclical floods and droughts. According to the NWP, India has more than 18 % of the world's population, 4% of the world's renewable water resources and 2.4% of the world's land area.

The fast growing aspirations of our burgeoning population coupled with the deadly impacts of climate change strains the equitable use and availability of water.

Also there are seasonal challenges caused by uneven distribution that are both inefficient and insufficient. Annual disputes over Cauvery constantly remind us that water sharing will lead to seriously conflicts in future.

While stress due to inadequate water resources is sometimes understood, our inability to engineer and maintain rivers and lakes is quite baffling. For this, we only have ourselves to blame. Rivers coursing through cities and lakes within urban limits are becoming direct points for discharge of polluted wastewater. Riverbanks and lakebeds are encroached and abused. Research studies repeatedly show that densely populated cities have the most decrepit waterways.

At a recent panel discussion on the River Cooum in Chennai, I was asked what architects could do to improve the state of our rivers? Of course it requires sensitive urban planners to design "reciprocal cities," but more importantly it is about disciplined citizens choosing to lead holistically sustainable lives. The question could well have been "What could citizens do for our rivers, and prevent them from being polluted and choked with waste and garbage?"

Interestingly, the Whanganui River in New Zealand has just been declared a legal person. Now it can own property, incur debts and even petition the courts! Local lawyers think this ruling might help fight severe pollution. The rivers' defenders will no longer have to prove if polluting discharges cause harm, since any sullyng of the waters will now be a crime against the river itself. Hinduism personifies the river Ganga as a sacred goddess who confers Moksha.

Her waters are so pure and holy that mere bathing in the river delivers the believer from endless cycles of lives. Days after the law was passed in New Zealand, an Indian court declared the Ganges and Yamuna to be persons too! Now, any act against these rivers can be legally construed a criminal act and the person responsible for them could face action. We seem to shamefully need external prodding to awaken our civilisational sensibilities of nature worship.

While rivers have often been termed as gods, the way our citizens interact with them is far from sacred. Fresh water is a scarce natural resource, and rivers especially are fundamental to life, livelihood, food security and sustainable development. They symbolise our cultural heritage. So please respect and treat them like a fellow human being, wherever!

