

Reviving a 'dead' river: a cultural event to celebrate legacy of Yamuna

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The Yamuna, a river that environmentalists consider ecologically dead in Delhi, will now be the focus of a cultural push to renew India's civilisational and socio-religious connect with its waterbodies.

Come September, the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) will host a cultural programme on the banks of the river in Delhi, under its special project – Riverine Cultures of India – that began in 2018.

The highlight of the event will be a short festival of films on waterbodies, shot by children from across the country.

The programmes will include a photo exhibition comparing the Yamuna of today with what the river was like 50 years ago; symposia on various aspects such as ecology and conservation of India's rivers and their importance in the country's heritage; and an exhibition themed on 15 ghats across the country in *Sanjhi* or paper stencil art.

The larger project is focusing on six rivers right now: Ganga, Yamuna, and Sindhu in the north; and Krishna, Godavari, and Cauvery in the south. Dates of similar events on the other rivers are not known.



On edge: The Central Pollution Control Board declared the river 'almost dead' in 2015. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

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The project envisages festivals celebrating rivers in different cities, a study on these rivers in their contemporary context, and workshops along the banks involving environmentalists, cultural historians, anthropologists and folklorists. They hope to develop a major study on riverine cultures, along with one on the mythical river Saraswati to "understand its importance in the evolution of human cultures".

As of now, festivals have been organised on the banks of the Ganga in Munger (Bihar), Godavari in Nashik (Maharashtra),

Krishna in Vijayawada (Andhra Pradesh), and Hooghly in Kolkata (West Bengal).

An effort to reconnect Sachchidanand Joshi, Member Secretary, IGNCA, said, "We in Indian culture look at rivers very differently. We have an emotional bond with them. In many places rivers are worshipped; there is a regular connect with society. A river influences the socio-cultural life of the entire region, whether it is cropping pattern, festivals, or religious rituals." He also feels that India is "losing that connect very fast" and this project is an effort to reconnect with rivers.

Sources in the Ministry of Culture said that the government has tasked the IGNCA to conduct the cultural festival as a pilot for a

bigger project on the Yamuna.

The Yamuna's confluence with the Ganga and the mythical Saraswati at Triveni Sangam in Prayagraj is one of the country's most important pilgrimage spots for Hindus.

However, the river had been declared "almost dead" by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) in 2015 citing untreated waste flowing into it from several cities along its banks.

The definition of a river is that it must have life, which is measured by its capacity to dissolve oxygen. The dissolved oxygen content in the Yamuna as it passes through Delhi is zero.

Environmentalists feel that before recreating a cultural connect, the government needs to take measures to bring the river back to life. "The Yamuna in Delhi is in such a state that letting children do anything on its banks might harm their health," says Vikrant Tongad, founder, Social Action for Forest and Environment (SAFE), who has worked extensively towards the conservation of the river. He added that the government needs to think of protecting the river's flood plains before planning any kind of major event there.