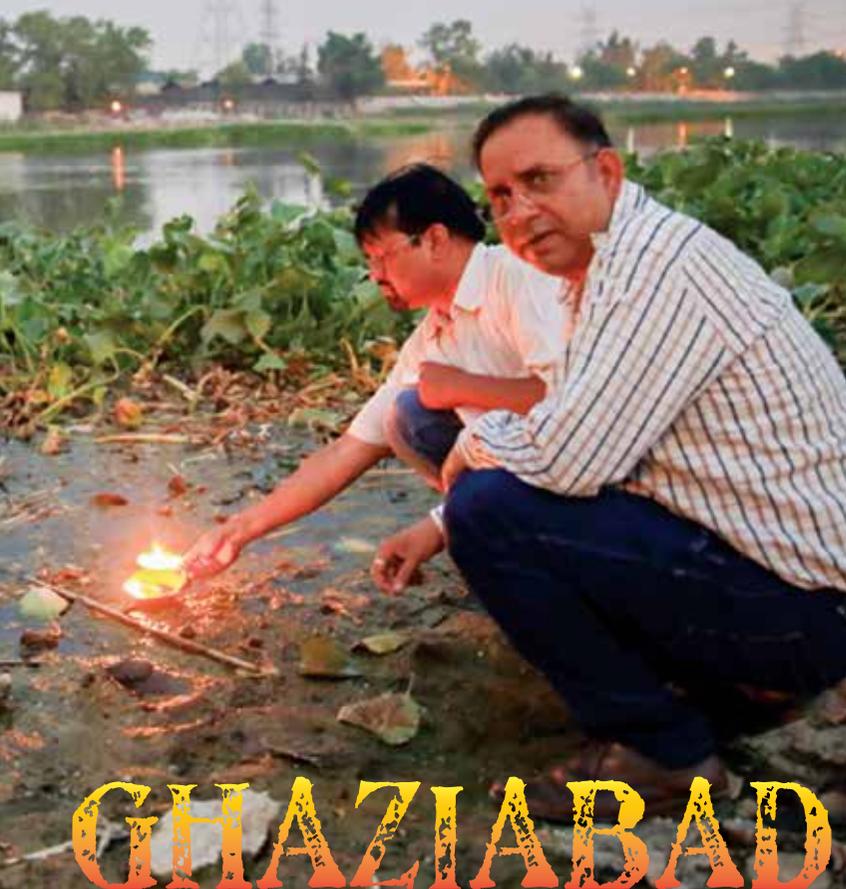
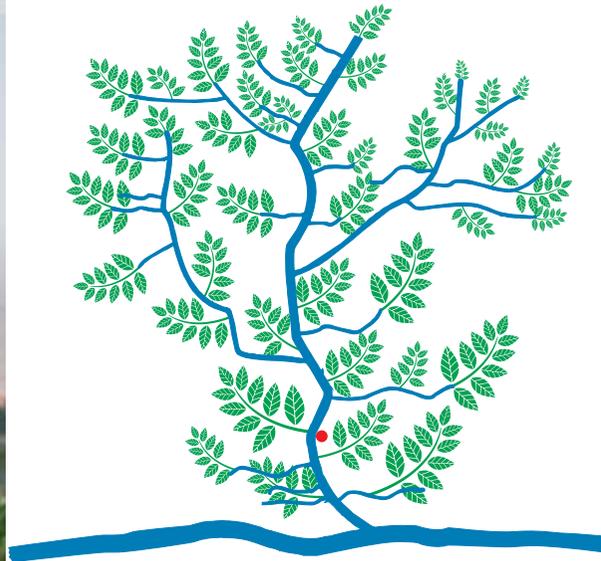


COMMUNITIES REVIVE AN
EMOTIONAL CONNECT
WITH THEIR RIVER

...through "aartis",
"charchas and chaupals" (discussions),
and river pond rejuvenation



GHAZIABAD



Popular festivals provide platform to create awareness

This year marks the third consecutive celebration of Ganga Dussehra and Dev Deepawali on the banks of the Hindon. Sanjay Kashyap and Sudeep Sahu are advocates, Navneet Singh is an engineer and Ankit Giri is involved in the real estate business. These four men serve as office bearers of the Namami Harnande Mission. They, along with members drawn from different parts of Ghaziabad have used the cultural and religious route to bring folklore, rituals and mythological stories connected with rivers, once again to people. Inspired by Dev Deepawali

*"The only way to **save the Hindon** is through the participation of the people who live around it". This is the motto of **driven individuals** who belong to NGOs and civil society groups that keep issues related to the Hindon alive. The Namami Harnande Mission (Harnandi Jagriti Abhiyan) established in the year 2013 has motivated similar groups to take up the cause of the Hindon; be it through **advocacy, community events, river pond rejuvenation** or water **conservation** efforts.*

festivals held in Varanasi, they held their own Dev Deepawali event on the Hindon river bank in 2013. The celebrations saw prayers, processions, discussions, speeches and lighting of diyas (oil lamps) on the bank of the river.

In 2014, a bigger event was organized with people from adjoining villages joining in. The year 2015 saw the event scaled up with over 500 people attending and more than a thousand diyas being set afloat on the waters, resplendent as they glowed with the hope of the people. The advocacy effort blossomed into a serious initiative as more people joined in giving suggestions, outlining strategies and creating linkages to officials in ministries and government committees.



The awareness effort developed a strong arm of campaigning including Mayors, Members of Parliament and other groups in Ghaziabad which began to consolidate their activities. Twice-a-month aartis began to be performed with entire communities participating in the event. This poignant coming together of people from all backgrounds for a common cause was on the initiative of Dharma Yatra Mahasangh, Sharda along with the NGO, Pehla Kadam.

Getting communities to realize that water is a precious resource

Choudhary Trilok Singh is a resident of village Garhi which is 1.5 kms from the Hindon in Rajapur block. He teaches English at Saraswati Vidya Mandir School. Eight years ago, he noticed that people were

completely unaware and callous in their water use. An inner urge told him that if they knew the implications of their actions, they would be willing to make the necessary shift in their behavior towards water conservation.

He started campaigning, going from one village to another, taking the message of water conservation. Today, he is a familiar face in more than 80 villages. The moment he approaches a village, children run to close dripping taps. He holds chaupals (gatherings) in the centre of the village, with the help of the sarpanch (village Headman). His words of wisdom are wrapped around folk tales, mythological stories and traditional wisdom. The impact sometimes is so profound that villagers indulge in impromptu playing of the dhol (drum) repeating messages on water and enacting street plays on the theme.



Finding Courage to speak up

“Hindon area getting a metro station was good news since connectivity would improve but when we heard that the station would be named Rajnagar Extension, we insisted that it be named Hindon Bank similar to Yamuna Bank. The suggestion is being considered.”

*Sudeep Sahu, Member
Namami Harnande Mission*



From awareness to action: Reviving encroached river ponds

Once the process of mobilizing people gained ground, mass events like Dussehra and Dev Deepawali institutionalized and conversations around water getting more visibility, work began on not only identifying but also finding ways to save river ponds which were in close proximity to Hindon. Many of these river ponds had been encroached upon illegally; converted into agricultural fields, godowns and in one case even construction with plans for setting up a residential colony. Sushil Raghav, RTI activist and Sanjay Kashyap who also runs an NGO Aranya Eco together with volunteers set about their task of locating these river ponds in Ghaziabad Nagar Nigam area. Their search led them to the site of 30 river ponds. While 17 of them were taken to

National Green Tribunal and revived, others are being tackled through RTI and PILs resulting in activities on these encroachments being stopped.

It was a matter of time before other social groups such as Environmental Awareness Society, Hindon Jal Biradari, Hindon Vahini, Pawan Chintan Dhara, Sadhit Foundation and Samvardhan Trust joined the movement. According to Sanjay Kashyap, “There is room for all our partners to work on different aspects of the Hindon be it individually or collectively since the end goal is the same.” While the movement has gained traction in the Ghaziabad region, their next step is to reach out to similar groups in the neighboring districts of Baghpat, Meerut and Shamli encouraging them to take up water issues in their own region.

WAY FORWARD

- Sanctity of the river and river ponds must be maintained by inculcating spiritual faith for rivers in the hearts and minds of people living around them, like our ancestors who safeguarded these life giving water bodies for many years.
- There should be a continuum for advocacy against exploitation of river ponds and river flood plains by land encroachments.

Dr. Veena Khanduri, Executive Secretary, India Water Partnership (IWP)