

PEACE Institute and the Yamuna River - Yamuna Jiye Abhiyaan

Since February 2007, PEACE Institute Charitable Trust has been conducting a campaign to save the sacred Yamuna River and surrounds. This is not only important to the hundreds or thousands of individuals and families living in the vicinity, and to Delhites for their future water supply but also to millions of Indian citizens who value natural resources even as part of their religious and cultural heritage.

The issue is the Nineteenth Commonwealth Games which are scheduled to occur October 3-14, 2010 in Delhi and which, under the present plan, unimaginable modification of the site, e.g. (simply put, the Yamuna riverbed) in order to accommodate a residential complex for the event. On top of this is the seemingly irresistible lure to profile New Delhi as a model city of the 21st (or maybe even the 22nd) century.

In the process an ancient treasure, the Yamuna River, which is critically in need of a very different kind of attention and improvement is, instead, going to be downgraded into total obscurity, and the very real potential still remaining for providing Delhi with water, into impossibility.

PEACE Institute has devoted an enormous amount of energy, time and well-researched documentation to this issue. If we still lived in a paper society, whole forests might have been cut over this beleaguered river. Thankfully, much of the work has been done over the internet. The River Yamuna is not for the first time getting attention, but PEACE has taken it up for the public good, instead of for contracts and other means of "open pocket-insert cash" activities.

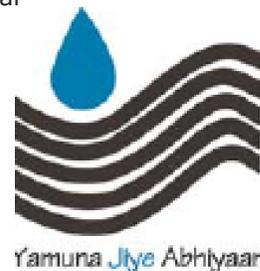
Previously, vast amounts of money have been spent to "clean the Yamuna", some of it grants from foreign countries. It has not worked but that probably means only that those in charge were not as interested in the public good as in their own cut and contract.

This commentary is a very inadequate summary of some of what PEACE has attempted and endured in their campaign to Save the Yamana. It will be followed by a few items, e.g., a shortlist of the letters and MOUs written, presentations given, PIL filed and awaiting judgement by the High Court and more, all of which is available on PEACE website www.peaceinst.org. Yamuna PIL is a joint effort of INTACH, Tarun Bharat Sangh (Rajendra Singh), Peoples Action (Sanjay Kaul) and Yamuna Jiye Abhiyaan (PEACE).

PEACE and the Yamuna

The individuals who drive Yamuna Jiye Abhiyaan (Save Yamuna River) knew very well to start early with their campaign in order to counter the inevitable strategy of vested interests which would say "its too late...we have to go forward." PEACE did their research and started their campaign to Save Yamuna River much in advance of the events which would indeed make it hard to turn back. They sent letters to dignitaries, technocrats,

commissions, etc. They brought out booklets and brochures, organised press releases, petitions, signature rallies, and made personal visits, just to name a few of their activities. They have arranged public lectures, television appearances and briefings. They did all these things as well as directed appeals to various members of India's executive branch for over eight months, February to September 2007, hoping that a "well researched voice of reason" would prevail and an alternative site with far fewer sacrifices for so many people and for the environment of Delhi itself could be selected.



PEACE took the position that the plan to construct the Games Village in the river bed was not only ill-advised for a spate of good reasons, but also totally unnecessary due to the availability of alternative sites as well as sufficient time left to change.

In their effort, PEACE encountered what must have been a maddening attitude. No one would hear any argument because there was no argument! Officials did not disagree with their position about the unsuitability of camping in the Yamuna River bed because PEACE had taken their information from reports which had been assembled by and originated from the officials' own sources, or other reliable, published documents. It was common knowledge! Once PEACE is realized that the problem they were having with officialdom was not the officers' lack of knowledge about the unfortunate impact of their plan but their determination to go ahead with it anyway, they had to try another tack.

At this stage, there was no alternative but to take it as a matter of public interest to the Courts. In October 2007, PEACE filed a PIL (Public Interest Litigation) in the High Court. The hearing went on for nearly 5 months on a weekly basis (unusual in Indian courts) till 23 Feb 2008 when judgement in this matter was reserved by the court, and is still pending. Unfortunately time is marching on and the momentum behind the supposition that there is no time to make another arrangement is being fired up by those with vested interests, and will soon start to convince the public that a model city is being sabotaged by "those obstructionist environmentalists".

Manoj Misra, Convenor of YJA, has made a long and careful study of deadlines which (allegedly) would prevent reconsideration and a fresh course of action. His reply to "no timers" is quoted in full below:

Why its NOT too Late:

October 3 – 14, in 2010 is the designated period for holding the Nineteenth Commonwealth Games in Delhi, voted at Jamaica in 2003 by a majority of the 72

associate associations of the Commonwealth Games Federation (a private sporting body based in London) when the Indian Olympic Association (a private body based in Delhi) outbid the competing Canadian association (bidding for the city of Hamilton) by offering payment of US \$100,000 (against US \$50,000 offered for Hamilton) to each of the 71 CGF member association ostensibly to 'train' their athletes. It would be interesting to determine if the IOA had the kind of money in its bank to make such a bold offer of USD 7.1 million, or the honest tax payer back home was being taken for granted?

Clearly the deadline is imaginary. There is no element of inevitability about it. As a matter of fact the initial dates (23 October – 3 November 2010) for the Games have already been changed once to 3 – 14 October 2010.

Even otherwise, we are in the month of August 2008 still months over two years away from the event. The IOA had assured the voting associations at Jamaica in 2003 that it shall not take them more than two years to build the Games Village. The construction technology has progressed by leaps and bounds and it may not even be necessary to go for permanent structures for the Games Village. Temporary dismantable structures should be fine for the purpose. Assuming, of course, that the basic purpose for the raising of the Games Village is to hold the Games.

We are aware that such an option would be opposed tooth and nails by the 'establishment' on the grounds of the contract having already been signed and sealed, part construction has already taken place, and it would take months to procure mandatory permissions for a new alternative site in the city. The city's traffic circulation planning has been done keeping the impugned site in mind for the Games Village etc etc.

All the above are valid excuses only when one is not willing to accommodate an alternate point of view. All non-private land belongs to the state. No agency responsible for a mandatory approval would overlook a good deed for saving the city's lifeline river and insuring its water security. All government contracts have requisite saving clauses in them. There is nothing overground at the impugned site at the moment. Even if it was, it can always be dismantled in favour of the river. The present traffic circulation plans linking the proposed Games Village to the JN Stadium are horrendously expensive and imperil the built heritage of the city just because a wrong site has been selected. Alternative sites for the Games Village with no such expense whatsoever involved (resulting in huge savings to the exchequer) are available.

The greatest tragedy is that the impugned site in the river bed was selected by the state without considering any alternative site, something which is the first step of sound planning and of the environ-mental impact assessment (EIA) exercise for a new project under the EIA notification. The matter of how then did the

Ministry of Environment and Forests clear the project is presently subjudice and hence is preserved for another story on another day!

The same builder could be asked to build at the alternate site, too. At least then the extra efforts required to be taken by the builder to make the buildings earthquake resistant and flood proof (for the present site is extremely unsafe and vulnerable to floods and earthquakes) would not be necessary.

Saving the river from threats is certainly in the public good. Because it is the security of the river (no matter how polluted at the moment) on which depends the water budget of this perennially parched city. Holding on time by the 'state' of basically a 'private' although global and mega (short-duration) event with potential to despoil the river can never be construed to be a competing public good?

The bottom line is that a public good can never be time-barred for ameliorative action both by the judiciary and the executive. And if all fails, it is then by the very public who's good is imperilled. (from www.yamunajiyeabhiyaan.blogspot.com).

Manoj Misra, Convenor

Clearly the PEACE Institute as the Secretariat of the Yamuna Jiye Abhiyaan, which is a consortium of various NGOs and the concerned citizens of Delhi who have come together for the revival of their life-line river, has left no stone unturned to bring home to whoever was willing to listen to them the well researched facts about the WRONGNESS involved in the manner in which the river bed is being encroached to construct a residential facility for a 9- day sporting event by the agencies of the state itself. This is in blatant violation of the principle of public trust, with which the state is mandated by the nation's Constitution and well-established national and international judicial pronouncements. We hope and wish that the hard work of PEACE and their associates under the Yamuna Jiye Abhiyaan, bears fruit in form of a favorable judgement by the High Court of Delhi and thereby a strong message gets sent out to all around the globe that India shall not allow the integrity of its natural heritage like rivers be compromised in any manner or for any reason!

The campaign and the systematic manner in which it has been steered is a fine example and a model conservation campaign. We hope that the Yamuna Jiye Abhiyaan would find time and resources to be able to publish their learnings from the campaign for the benefit of other such campaigners and similar causes. Still, the PIL verdict is pending and one can only hope that it is favourable to the River.

If you are moved by this and the related articles and would like to learn more, please see PEACE website www.peaceinst.org. Contact PEACE via email and to get involved in saving one of India's valuable rivers.

Sally Walker, Editor Emeritus