

GD Agarwal and River Ganga

Why in news?

GD Agrawal, a Save Ganga activist and former IIT professor, died on October 11, 2018 after 111 days of fast.

Who is G D Agrawal?



- G D Agrawal is a an IIT engineer-turned- activist and Hindu ascetic.
- As an environmentalist, he was vocal about disallowing hydroelectric projects in Uttarakhand along the Ganga.
- Agarwal began his career in the 1950s as a design engineer with the Uttar Pradesh Irrigation Department.
- After that he became a professor in the civil engineering department at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur.
- He was also the first Member-Secretary of the Central Pollution Control Board.
- He also dabbled as an environmental consultant and was part of Envirotech Instruments, a firm that specialised in preparing environment appraisal plans for projects and now makes air-pollution monitoring instruments.
- Agarwal, in the 1950s, inspite of being opposed to dams, was involved in the construction of the Tehri Dam.
- However, his scientific training helped him understand the risks of **hydropower projects in the pristine stretches of the Ganga and this informed his activism over the years.**
- He later took vows to become a Hindu ascetic and from then came to be known as Swami Gyan Swaroop Sanand.
- It was his ability to mobilize both science and religious belief to his single-minded pursuit of protecting Ganga that often made a wide coalition of environmentalists, activists, scientists as well as religious leaders coalesce around his efforts to make government respond.

What were his achievements?

- He observed several fasts over the years.
- These resulted in the establishment of the National Ganga River Basin Authority.

- It also paved for the way for the creation of concepts such as ecological flow while planning for hydro-electric projects.
- Ecological flow is the necessity to maintain a minimum quantity of water in a river at all times.
- The Bhagirathi eco-sensitive zone came into being after the government conceded to his demands made at one of his fasts.
- After his retirement, Agarwal chose to co-opt religion in his quest to preserve the Ganga.
- He argued that publicizing the needs of the Ganga from a purely scientific perspective would take too long, during which irreparable harm could come to the river.
- Therefore, invoking the religious sentiments of people and creating a public movement was the need of the hour.

What were his latest demands?

- Bringing the Ganga Act into law was one of Agarwal's key demands.
- To give legal standing to the Ganga Bhakti Parishad, this would have supreme power to decide on matters of the river.
- He had also sought a ban on all proposed dams on the upper reaches of the Ganga and on sand mining along the river.

How did the government respond?

- Over three years, the government prepared multiple drafts of the Ganga Act based on consultations with Ministries, think-tanks and religious groups.
- A final version of the draft Bill has been sent to the Law Ministry.
- Water Resources Minister Nitin Gadkari has committed to presenting the Bill in the coming session of Parliament.
- The government promulgated a notification, a day before he died, declaring a minimum ecological flow that ought to be maintained through the Ganga all year.
- However, demands for a Ganga Parishad were untenable as it would imply handing power to a religious body to decide on how the Ganga ought to be taken care of.

Source: The Hindu

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