

“Lasting environmental change requires bottom up and top down approaches”

In an interview with eSocialSciences, Abhishek Narayan, the founder of citizens group Clean Adyar Initiative, opens up on the importance of community involvement in bringing about environmental change. The Clean Adyar Initiative, which was founded in 2016, has been able to provide a platform for concerned citizens to participate in the cleaning up of River Adyar. In the interview, Narayan talks about how it all began, government funding, High Court rulings, partnerships with other organisations and much more.

Q) How did the Clean Adyar Initiative begin? What was the reason behind ordinary people deciding to clean up the river?

A) It started as an engineering project really. I was doing my undergrad in Chemical Engineering at SSN College of Engineering, Anna University and took up the Adyar river as a case study. During this project, I repeatedly heard that people wanted to do something for the river, but there was no platform available. That's when I decided that instead of waiting, we could create a platform ourselves and bring together all these concerned citizens together.

Q) Since the initiative began, how much progress has it made? Is there a noticeable change in the pollution levels?

A) Cleaning a river the size of the Adyar, 42Km long is a humongous task. What we have achieved is merely a small change in the narrative, showing that citizens are concerned. Although we organised over 25 clean up drives, there was little impact on the water quality and waste aggregation. That is simply due to the dynamism and continuous influx of pollution from the upstream of the river.

I would rather answer the progress question this way – We have begun a dialogue with the local municipal government on the restoration of the Adyar river, a plan that has been spoken of for ages. We brought in technology partners from Israel, liaised for a pilot project to show proof of concept. We have aggregated a huge volunteer base through various partner organisations and got ourselves a fair amount of influence to speak up at the table.

Q) Is there government aid to support the initiative? If yes, has it been of help?

A) The government has already allocated funds and even set up a body to take charge of the river restoration – Chennai River Restoration Trust. In the previous regime, a part of the creek was ecologically restored, and this is almost 10 years back. There has been very minimal progress on the main stream of the river itself.

There have been several funds from international donor organisations and even from the Central government. The municipal corporation and the state government have been able to obtain these funds, but lasting action has not been taken.

In 2005, Chennai received the highest amount about 15% of the national river cleaning budget¹. However, we can see that the conditions of the rivers have only worsened since.

In no way am I actually blaming the government. Cleaning a river is a huge and difficult task and most people within the bureaucracy are well meaning, but there needs to be a policy window and a political will to make the change. I think the time has just come for that, considering the floods of 2015 and the drought of 2016-17.

Q) While cleaning up existing pollution is an important process, it should also be ensured that there is no pollution being added to it. Otherwise, this will be a continuous cleaning up process. Has the government diverted the source of pollution?

A) The main source of pollution in the case of Adyar is the municipal sewage. So plugging the diffuse pollution, direct discharges and illegal connections into the storm water drainage are the first points of action. Luckily all of these are illegal, given our pollution framework. So acting on this is within the capacity of the local government and they have just started to do that.

Q) As sewage is one of the primary river pollutants, are there better ways to dispose this waste?

A) Yes, firstly, we should stop seeing it as 'wastewater'. In the developed countries, sewage is being viewed as a resource. We can recover not just grey water for non-potable reuse, which would hugely benefit our ever growing demands, but also nutrients and energy.

Secondly, the main problem, in case of Chennai, is the overloading of the existing Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs). Given the huge capital costs of building new STPs, rocketing land prices and associated pumping costs, the best solution forward is perhaps decentralisation of treatment plants. This is my opinion and has been the subject of research work at Oxford University too.

Q) The Madras High Court recently ordered the setting up of a panel to clean up the Adyar and Cooum rivers. What do you make of this move?

A) Yes, that is a much needed move. Our legal system is fairly strong and several environmental actions have been taken because of the NGTs.

But with respect to this particular order, from certain environmentalists, I gather that there are few loopholes regarding the timeline for action which the government might use. But then again, I haven't had the chance to read the judgement myself.

Q) Do you think that citizen involvement in such initiatives is important for them to succeed? Though several thousand crores have been spent on cleaning Ganga, it has not shown any results. If there is citizen involvement, would it fare better?

¹ <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/why-better-sewage-management-in-chennai-will-help-fight-floods-51993>

A) I strongly believe that for lasting environmental change, it should be both bottom up and top down. At the end of the day, it is the citizens who are having direct involvement with the river. In fact, I wouldn't say pollution is the fundamental problem of the river, rather the lack of care from the citizens that has led to this deplorable condition. So, I think communities must be brought closer to the river. They must be shown the benefits, the culture and the infinite possibilities that come with restoring the river. That is why advocacy campaigns are a critical part of our initiative.

Q) Has the initiative inspired other similar activities elsewhere? Have you formed a network with other initiative to enable sharing of information and ideas?

A) One thing I realised is, if you're driven for a good cause, people want to become associated with it. That way the Clean Adyar Initiative has made several promising partnerships and collaborative activities both locally and internationally. We are in talks with many agencies including the WWF International to get formally associated to facilitate transfer of technology and mobility of knowledge. We have already partnered with the World Rowing's World Water Alliance, through the Madras Boat Club on the banks of the Adyar river². We were also invited to make an Indo-Brazil collaboration with a similar restoration in Recife, Brazil and Indo-Ethiopian one as well in Addis Ababa.

² <http://www.worldrowing.com/news/how-the-public-getting-india-adyar-river-clean>