

Hinduism and the Transforming Affect of Devotion

open up the dialogue to diverse perspectives regarding the needs of humans, of the river, and of adjacent ecosystems as a whole. Mutually beneficial relations between humans and the river need to be reenvisioned, supported, and implemented, and this is the motivation for the Yamuna River Declaration in appendix E. These are significant challenges, but so is daily life in India for many people. Loss of fresh water is a problem for millions of people along the river.

Even walking through the narrow winding streets of Vrindaban can be hazardous. With wandering animals at our feet, one loses track of the monkeys. They perch on the edges of buildings waiting to jump unexpectedly onto one's shoulder and snatch one's glasses. They may return the glasses in exchange for food, or they may take them as an offering to Krishna. As a study in animal behavior, the purloining of glasses is remarkable. Gradually, all the monkeys in Vrindaban have learned how to jump and snatch glasses. However, John did not speculate on who taught the monkeys their trick. Rather, he held his glasses tightly as we made our way to the Yamuna River. Nonetheless, at a distracted moment one monkey leapt onto his shoulder, knocking his glasses to the ground. John managed to retrieve them before the monkey did, but he sensed that the monkey-god, Hanuman, was making a larger request of us than simply holding onto preconceived ideas or solutions.

We continued to the well-known Radharaman Temple. There we took off our shoes and entered the cool interior of the temple to make an offering and take our view (*darshan*) of the black rock image of the god Krishna. This particular image is legendary for its natural beauty, elegance, and grace. All during this visit to the temple, a chanter sang hymns of praise to Krishna and his lover, Radha. This love mysticism, like the *Song of Songs* in the Hebrew Bible, is reflected in the joyful devotion of practitioners to Krishna. This devotional worship, known as *bhakti*, is extended to the Yamuna River itself as a goddess.

As we came out of the temple, the hymns were still ringing in our ears. We followed the back alleys to *Keshi ghat*, a prominent pilgrimage site whose steps lead down to the river for placement of offerings on the water (figure 9.1). We removed our shoes and walked down to where the water was lapping against the steps. One woman in our group sat near the water's edge with a friend who was introducing us to the Yamuna River. A larger view of the dark river was denied us as mist shrouded it. Behind us the young temple priest tended the flower offerings he was selling to pilgrims coming to the river. We hunched down on the middle steps watching the two friends gently release their gift on the river. A small, lit

Yamuna: A Goddess Deified and Defiled

We had come to the city of Vrindaban along the Yamuna River, some 100 miles southeast of Delhi. This is one of the most significant pilgrimage sites in India. Both the city with its many temples and the river that is considered sacred draw millions of pilgrims each year. However, the river has become intensely polluted over the last several decades by the effects of rapid industrialization. To draw attention to this problem, we had helped organize a conference bringing together religious leaders, policy experts, and scientists. The aim was to consider interdisciplinary solutions for the long-term health of the Yamuna River.¹ This involved hydrologists and ecologists studying the state of the river, policy experts analyzing government action plans for the river, historians of religion discussing religious practices along the river, and religious leaders trying to educate the laity and encourage monsoon rain retention and water usage reduction. Chancellor Rajendra Pachauri supported a prior conference at The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) University in Delhi, through which the Yamuna flows. There, scientists reported on their studies of oxygen depletion in the river and on government plans to decrease industrial pollution and urban sewage.

The hope was that new policies might emerge on how to increase the flow of clean water for both human and aquatic life. This was an effort to

candle shone from that gathering of flowers set in a leaf, shaped as a boat. Gently the woman pushed it into the river. Ever so slowly this delicate craft moved out into the sluggish current. Then it seemed to stop as if mired and unable to move with the river's flow. She was weeping now, her hands joined in front of her on her lap, and he was softly singing. One could see how polluted the river was here in this sacred city of Vrindaban. Black sludge and garbage floated by the temple. How could we not weep, as some 60 million people depend on this river? This is the river that runs through Delhi, that flows behind the Taj Mahal in Agra and irrigates much of northern India's agriculture.

The devotional literature of Hinduism speaks of the endless love of the pilgrim for Sri Yamuna, the riverine goddess who is herself a lover of the god Krishna. Yet here the river is dark and dank with industrial pollution and urban waste from Delhi. Only about 30 years earlier people bathed and drank easily from the river. With rapid industrialization has come intense degradation of the water. The irony is that for centuries the Yamuna River was a vibrant example of the confluence of religion and ecology that joined together the natural and the sacred. But now it is a dying river.

Suddenly the fog cleared, and the river stretched out in front of us. Dappled waves reflected the morning sun briefly as the mist rolled back, giving us a sense of the expansiveness of the river in this ancient pilgrimage site. Unexpectedly, several tour boats with pilgrims were passing by and making offerings (figure 9.2). Our friend and guide gestured toward the boats: "See how the pilgrims continue to come to Vrindaban even though the river is so polluted. They say that the river can be dirty (*gandi*) but never loses its purity (*pavitra*)."²² This expresses the force of religious belief but also shows how religion can stand in the way of a scientific understanding of the hazards of pollution.

Some religious practitioners are reluctant to confront the dangers of river pollution. They cannot reconcile that a goddess can be defiled with religious devotion and defiled with industrial development and waste. "How can we awaken those who cannot see the pollution in the river as a real ecological threat? We are in a transformative time," our friend quietly observed, "where traditional devotional service (*seva*) to the Yamuna as goddess must change to loving service focused on the restoration of the river." Transformation of the river and religious practices are needed. Such commitment might help restore this river that is so essential to the lifeblood of India. To understand the problems of the Yamuna River it is helpful to have an overview of its path from its remote mountain source across the northern plains of India.



Figure 9.1 *Keshi ghat*—the pilgrims' stairway down to the Yamuna River; Photo credit: Elizabeth McAnally

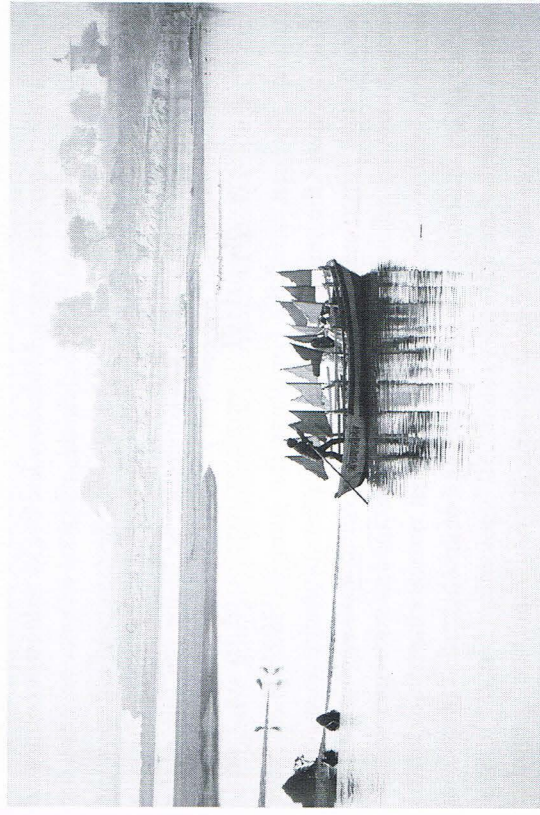


Figure 9.2 Pilgrimage boat on the Yamuna River; Photo credit: George James

Pull of Tradition: Religious Views of the Yamuna at Its Origin

The Yamuna River originates in a pristine area of the Himalayas at the Yamunotri glacier and at a hot spring in the region. Both of these sites have long been pilgrimage destinations. This revered river then drops down into the plains, where it meanders for 873 miles until it joins the Ganges at Allahabad and makes its way east to the Bay of Bengal. The religious relationships with the Yamuna at its glacial origins are different from those of the city of Vrindaban. In his insightful discussion of religion and ecology issues related to the Yamuna, David Haberman writes,

All of the pictures of Yamuna Devi [goddess] . . . portray her seated on a lotus on the back of a turtle floating on a river, with high mountains in the background. . . . She is four-armed, holding a pot in her upper left hand, a lotus flower in her lower left hand, and a string of meditation beads in her lower right hand. . . . The symbols of the bountiful pot and creative lotus make it evident that Yamuna Devi is a powerful goddess who manifests life-giving forces and blessings.³

The river is ecologically robust at Yamunotri and is imaged as Mother Yamuna. Even guided fishing trips are promoted on this part of the Yamuna River, with images that present her beauty and her sacredness as connected to the vitality of fish and bird life.⁴ As this religious imagery suggests, the river transforms those who come with reverent devotion to her.

The other source of the river is at a hot spring that gushes from a crevice in a massive rock face. This hot spring lies at the juncture of the Indian tectonic plate that has collided with the Eurasian plate for more than 70 million years. The force of the Indian plate slipping beneath the Eurasian plate has raised the Himalayas, the youngest and highest range of mountains in the world, generating the largest accumulation of ice and snow outside the polar ice caps. This tectonic collision also generated heat from contact with Earth's mantle. As water trapped in reservoirs deep in the crust of Earth is heated, it ascends through vertical channels to Earth's surface to generate hot springs, the signature of geothermal activity from shifting tectonic plates.

For the priests at the temple complex at Yamunotri there is another explanation for this thermal activity, a more poetic one that expresses the meaning of this source for the devout. The Yamuna is a living goddess who descended to Earth in answer to the prayers, austerities, and penance

of seven great *rishis*, or sages. For many years the *rishis* resided at that pond and underwent austerities entreating her to come down to Earth to instill loving devotion among the people. Moved by their austerities and touched by their prayers, she descended to the summit of Mount Kalinda at 20,000 feet, but finding the place too cold for devotees to visit her, she prayed to her father, Surya, the Sun, to make the place more pleasant. With this request, the Sun gave his daughter a single fiery ray that struck the rock face at the base of the waterfall, giving birth to a hot spring.

Pilgrims bathe in this hot spring to commune with the goddess. The temple complex there is dedicated to devotion of the goddess Yamuna through her image as Mother. Her devotees consider the natural form of the river to be a more important manifestation of the goddess than her image. The goddess is embodied in the river; the divinity is the river herself. Therein lies a paradox. Some argue that it is only in the mountains where the river is free and clear that the goddess is truly alive, for now as the goddess descends to the plains her evident purity and holiness seem to be compromised.

The Yamuna as goddess is consistent all along her route as selfless and giving of her sacred waters of life. But the endless giving of the Yamuna has come up against the demands of a new worldview, that of industrialization, to build a modern India. Just as the religious devotion to the river changes along the route of the Yamuna, so the ecological and economic relationships with the river have changed with rapid development over the last 40 years. The question now is, Can there be reconciliation between the demands of tradition and modernity? Can religious devotion and economic development be mutually enhancing? Is the sacred in nature becoming replaced by the sacred in technology?

The Call of Modernity: Sacred Technology and Engineering

The Yamuna River, like all the sacred rivers of India, is a significant site for orienting and grounding religious practitioners in the flow of time.⁵ As providers of nurturance and purification, these rivers are themselves places for transformation of mind and body. However, many of these functions, such as ritual and pilgrimage, have been subsumed by the allure of "sacred technology." Technology has become a means of transcending limitations and thus transforming the human condition.⁶ In this sense, technology becomes a religious dream of liberating humans through modern progress.⁷ This is evident in the statement of the first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru: "Dams are the temples of a

modern India regarding their capacity to provide hydroelectric power for massive production projects."⁸ Here we see that dams, not the rivers, are now considered sacred.

This engineering mindset has dominated India's political leaders as a way for the nation to enter into the modern status of an economically prosperous country. Much has been accomplished, but at great cost, and the Yamuna River bears witness to these costs. Dams have provided irrigation in the Doab region between the Yamuna and Ganges Rivers, but this management of the river has been almost totally oriented for immediate human needs. Rather than enhancing the flow of the river, it has radically altered and diminished it. Sustainable development has not been realized.

Guiding this engineering perspective is a bureaucratic mentality focused on centralized planning that largely ignores the human and natural communities along the river. This style of ecological management easily bypasses potentially creative local solutions regarding water usage in favor of a top-down model in which one size fits all situations. Thus, many residents remember interacting intimately with the Yamuna in religious rituals, recreation, and fishing into the 1970s. But centralized governance manipulated the river system so that these diverse local interactions were erased rather than incorporated into managing the river.

The situation in Delhi is instructive for understanding how centralized and provincial Indian governance has impaired regional water sources, knowingly and inadvertently. Lakes, natural catch basins, and wetlands along the river in the Delhi region have been largely drained for housing. Moreover, developers were allowed to use portions of the riverbed and the floodplain for buildings for the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi. Before the Yamuna River reaches Delhi there is life in the river; after Delhi it becomes nearly impossible to sustain aquatic life. In Delhi eighteen drains channel urban waste directly into the river.⁹ Delhi officials recommend that even animals should not be cleaned in the river. Yet more than 20 million people live in Delhi and depend on the Yamuna for their water supply.

With population growth and rapid modernization, human demands for energy, drinking water, and waste management have increased in the last 40 years at rates that the Indian government was unable to anticipate. Moreover, the increased demand for food has led to massive irrigation projects and increased use of chemical fertilizers. The consequence is river diversion, diminished flow, and extensive pollution. Central government decision making has guided the types of agricultural practices chosen.

For example, "green revolution" crops that held such promise have in fact required high chemical and water usage.

In 1993 the government of India launched the Yamuna Action Plan to clean the river, mainly through the construction of wastewater treatment plants located around the urban centers. Ironically, despite huge investments totaling US\$308 million between 1993 and 2005, pollution levels have increased dramatically. With the huge expenditure of funds spent on the river and the lack of concrete results, the question arises why the approaches taken have not proved effective.

One response is that research on the Yamuna and implementation of recommended policies are fragmented on many levels. In the first place, studies of conditions of the river in different regions are generally unrelated to research in other regions of the river. For example, studies of river issues in the mountain regions related to deforestation are not connected to research concerning river issues on the agricultural plains. Investigations of urban issues such as wastewater management are not related to rural concerns for drinking water, irrigation, and fishing. Scientists examining the hydrology of the river tend to dismiss the initiatives of grassroots organizations for local watershed management. Second, writing and research are fragmented in terms of the disciplines that examine the river. Hydrologists use a different language from ecologists, and natural scientists speak a different language from that of social scientists in fields such as sociology, anthropology, and policy that also pertain to the river. Third, government policy has not been able to anticipate fully the tremendous population growth along the Yamuna River, especially in the urban centers such as Delhi, Mathura, and Agra. This population expansion has been matched by increased water usage by people and by industry. These developments have overwhelmed the wastewater treatment plants that the government has managed to create. Fourth, research and implementation seem to be divorced from the values concerning the river that are embedded in the religious and cultural traditions of Hinduism. Bringing these studies into relationship with one another is one of the motivations for religion and ecology as a field. Finding ways to bring local voices of civil society and religious communities into centralized planning for water conservation, tree planting, landscape restoration, and rain runoff management is one of the transformative long-term goals for religion and ecology. This type of civil advocacy on the part of religious organizations working on behalf of natural systems is not new in India, but new forms are emerging with policy implications.¹⁰ Thus the conferences were organized in Delhi and Vrindaban.

Tension between Development and Devotion

With the influence in India of modern values of efficiency and growth, the relationship with the Yamuna has become more exclusively an economic resource to be exploited than a sacred source that transforms devotees. Life along the river has had to accommodate massive engineering projects driven by new economic agendas. It is the combination of numerous dams, unregulated factories, and untreated urban waste that diminishes the flow and pollutes the river. Whereas religious pilgrimage and tourism represent ancient and enduring relationships between Hindus and the Yamuna, more contemporary industrial and agricultural uses have undermined these religious and ecological relations with the river.¹¹

In 1991 a shift in official Indian development policy from the earlier Soviet-style socialism to Western-style capitalism did not alter the centralized planning or engineering mindset.¹² This shift was from a nationalist development ethos focused on large-scale state planning to more market-motivated expansion driven by competitive profit making and economic gain. The impact on the environment in both state planning and the market-driven development was deleterious and significantly increased with the latter. Flowing water, glaciers, mountains, minerals, soils, and biodiversity ceased to be manifestations of a unified reality evident in the ancient religious devotion to the river. To counter this economic exploitation, political rhetoric is invoked and gestures are made toward a religious appreciation of nature, but they rarely result in effective river cleanup. Some religious leaders, such as Srivatsa Goswami, have challenged the domination of economic profiteering, central planning, and massive engineering as the only acceptable approaches to treatment of the Yamuna River.

In subtle ways the older religious relationships allowed riverine biodiversity to flourish even as human populations increased.¹³ This is evident in the Yamuna image at Yamunotri, where the presence of turtle, lotus, and mountains highlights awareness and respect for nature's beauty. It is manifest as well in the loving relationships of devotees to sacred forests along the Yamuna that are now mostly cut for development, except for small remnants left for tourism.¹⁴ The centrality and value of biodiversity along the Yamuna reflect an enduring religious ecology within Hinduism. That is, it is understood that animal, plant, and human life occur in symbiotic relations with mountainous watersheds, mineral flows, and soil movements. This is an ecological vision that is present in the devotional practices found in Vrindaban, a vibrant pilgrimage city southeast of Delhi.

Devotion to Krishna and the River

Vrindaban is the setting for so many of the myths describing the life of the god Krishna. These stories of Krishna, and the religious ecology that has flowed out of them, suggest that in Hinduism the natural world is something beloved.¹⁵ Krishna is considered by many Hindus to be the most significant *avatar*, or incarnation, of the supreme being, Vishnu.¹⁶ In the stories of Krishna in Vrindaban, he plays (*lila*) with the Gopi maidens, the beautiful cow-herders who delight in him. Among the Gopi women, there is an intense devotion to Krishna and to Radha, his lover. Such devotion, known as *bhakti*, is a central religious practice of Hinduism, as seen in the *Bhagavad Gita* ("Song of the Lord").

Devotion to the god Krishna has resulted in an extensive religious ecology in Hinduism in which the natural world is interpreted as the manifestation of God's body.¹⁷ Transformative images of the divine are believed to occur in the natural world. Natural objects such as trees, stones, or monkeys may manifest themselves as an icon of the divine (*murti*). For the devotee these natural manifestations are not the absolute fullness of the sacred but fitting expressions through which reverent devotion can be given to the sacred deity.

In the stories of Krishna, the Yamuna River is presented as a *murti*, or appearance of the sacred. Many of these mythic stories are collected in a twelfth-century religious text called the *Bhagavata Purana*. The religious practices, stories, and commentaries constitute expressions of a religious ecology that can be retrieved and reevaluated for transformative reconstruction of Hinduism in relation to the Yamuna.

The *Bhagavata Purana* gives the life story of Krishna at Vrindaban and describes his miraculous birth in the nearby city of Mathura:

Then there was the supreme hour . . . with all the stars and planets in a favorable position. Everywhere there was peace, the multitude of stars twinkled in the sky and the cities, towns, and pasturing grounds . . . were at their best. With the rivers crystal clear, the lakes beautiful with lotuses and flocks of birds and swarms of bees sweetly singing their praise in the blooming forests, blew the breezes with a gentle touch fragrant and free from dust and burned the fires of the twice-born steadily undisturbed.

The sages and the godly joyous showered the finest flowers and the clouds rumbled mildly like the ocean waves when in the deepest dark of the night Krishna, the World's Well-Wisher, appeared [was born] from the divine form of Lord Vishnu . . . that wonderful child was resplendent with

lotus-like eyes . . . with yellow garments and a beautiful hue like that of rainclouds.¹⁸

The details are dazzling and highlight the cosmological character of the birth of Krishna, the World's Well-Wisher. The stars and deities, rivers and lakes, birds and insects all attend to and pay homage to his birth. The intimate relationships between Krishna and nature, especially the purity of the rivers, are evident. Throughout these stories, the love of Lord Krishna with and for the natural world is central. This is the *bhakti* that resonates between devotee and deity and is believed to be at the heart of all reality. In this religious tradition the heartfelt empathy for humans and nature is capable of transforming everything.

The numerous stories of devotion in the *Bhagavata Purana* tell how Krishna played as a child along the river and performed legendary deeds as an adult. There is a delightful human character to the stories of Krishna as a boy and culture hero. Krishna's divine and human character is layered in episodes that reflect dangers he faced. For example, in one story the demon Kaliya takes the form of a giant cobra who, motivated by revenge, completely poisoned the river.¹⁹ In the mythic stories of the *Bhagavata Purana*, Krishna dives into the river and subdues the demon, dancing on his seven cobra heads until Kaliya cries out for mercy. This mythic incidence of toxicity in the Yamuna is seen by many as a remarkable prefiguring of contemporary pollution.²⁰

These tales reflect the ancient mythology of Krishna, as lover and beloved, becoming one. In one of the famous hymns, an aspirant sings of this mystical vision yearning with devotion to partake in the river's embrace, the love bower itself. Hindu poet Chaturbhujadas extends this religious ecology into other symbiotic relationships in the natural world:

Shri Yamuna favors her devotees and grants entrance into the love bower.
There Krishna, the Supreme Connoisseur of Love, makes love night and day.

To what extent can one describe that gathering of love?

Hearing Krishna's flute, the river stopped flowing
and the women of Braj became enraptured.

No one can resist its sound.

Chaturbhujadas says: Yamuna is like a lotus,
My mind buzzes around her like a bumblebee.

As a mystical vision of union with the beloved god Krishna, these chants move the listener beyond divisions of the human from the divine. This religious ecology dispels sharp separations of nature from the human realm.

Indeed, this hymn reflects the devotion, *bhakti*, that strongly affirms the natural world as expressive of a larger unitive vision. This religious vision of the unity of all reality is present in the ancient literature of the *Upanishads* from the sixth century BCE. This oneness is named *Brahman*, and it is understood as residing within individuated reality as its *atman*, spiritual essence or self. In *bhakti* this experience of mystical union joins with emotional longing for the deity.²¹ One undertakes song, dance, and gestures such as reverently laying a flower before a manifestation of the sacred or placing a drop of water on one's chosen deity. These devotional acts are considered comparable to the meditative acts of a yogi or the denial of worldly pleasures by a *sadhu*, or ascetic.

In this *bhakti*, devotees are not taught how to turn from the world toward a distant paradise or empty themselves of material attachments. Rather, the *Purana* teaches transformation by filling the practitioner with love of Krishna and thus becoming united with all reality.²² In this vision, then, the devotee is welcomed into the love bower of the Yamuna River. In this loving interaction with the river, the pilgrim is affirmed by gazing on, bathing in, or sipping the water. This embodied knowledge provides insight into how devotion to natural systems enables transformation. That is, the practitioner forms deep experiential and symbolic bonding with such a natural feature as the Yamuna River. Traditionally, devotional practices have been largely personal, family, class, and caste related.

Throughout India these ancient practices are undertaken with sacred rivers, such as the Yamuna, Ganges, and Narmada. The water, or *jal*, of the river is understood as itself sacred and purifying of those who participate in its nurturance. For centuries, pilgrims have come to the rivers to express *bhakti* for personal transformation. Many Hindus come to die and be cremated along the banks as a final passage and purification for the next round of rebirth. These expressions of personal transformatory are now being recognized to have implications for environmental civil advocacy, especially as the paradox of purity and pollution is becoming more evident. The overwhelming feeling of the Upanishadic unity of all reality and the goodness of nature experienced by the practitioner of *bhakti* now confronts the diminishment of the unity and the degradation of nature in the river.

Paradox of Purity and Pollution: The Need for Transformative Action

As many in India have observed, the very rivers that are considered sacred and life giving are themselves becoming loaded with toxicities and thus death bringing.²³ It is evident that the river is dying with its toxic burden. Why the overwhelming pollution of a sacred river such as the Yamuna? How could such a paradox arise that a deified river goddess could become so defiled? What can inspire committed and long-term action to clean up this river?

Within the Krishna tradition it is possible to find many levels of realization of these environmental problems. In Vrindaban among religious leaders, laity, and civil society there is growing awareness that more must be done to restore the river. Still, some practitioners remain so absorbed by the powerful religious orientation to the purity of the river that they fail to acknowledge the reality of the river's pollution. Or, if they concede the pollution, they distinguish cleanliness from purity, saying the Yamuna could never lose its religious power to purify, no matter how intense the pollution. Thus, there is a tendency for some to deny the reality of the widespread pollution and hold only to the symbolic transformation offered by a religious ecology that developed over the centuries of the river's nurturance.²⁴

As indicated earlier, the sacredness of the natural world in India is anchored in the ancient wisdom of Upanishadic unity, often connected with religious devotion. Yet the connection of this deeper unity and of service (*seva*) with environmental transformation remains to be fully realized. In this regard, there is need for dialogue between scientific ecology and religious ecology that is informed and fully aware of the realities and complexities of the situation. Scientific research is useful for gathering data to understand the sources of diminished flow and river pollution. Moreover, scientists are seeking efficacious public policy and community support. Also, religious practitioners are becoming educated about river pollution rather than simply retreating into rigid doctrinal beliefs or unsanitary ritual practices. Religious leaders and practitioners are playing a role in helping to formulate local restoration plans that address riverine environmental problems.

Conclusion

Many questions remain unanswered. How will India find the political, economic, and moral will to do what has proven so difficult over the

past decades of the government-sponsored "Yamuna Action Plan"? Can religious leaders help to stem the tide of increasing pollution of the river from industrial and human waste?

Efforts to make positive changes in the flow and quality of river water have foundered in the face of political corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and economic greed. In many ways an ancient religious ecology of devotion and transformation shows more awareness of the interdependence of humans with biodiversity than much of the contemporary attention to development and engineering that has transformed the river for human needs. Yet just as religious ecology is necessary for mitigating the dire situation of the Yamuna River, it is insufficient without the empirical insights of science and the pragmatic contributions of effective policy. The future flourishing of the life of the Yamuna and the millions depending on it is a challenge of immense proportions whose outcome is still uncertain. Is restoration possible for this sacred river and for so many other rivers and bodies of water around the world? Can renewed devotion and sustained development find ways to collaborate?