



`Waterman' becomes Ganga's saviour

Pankaj Shah, TNN Sep 5, 2010, 04.31am IST

LUCKNOW: First, it was environmentalist GD Agarwal who went on a hunger strike to pressurise the Centre into abandoning a 600 MW Loharinag-Pala hydro-electric power project over the Ganga in Uttarakhand. And now, Magsaysay award winner Rajendra Singh plans to constitute `Ganga Panchayats' in towns and villages along the Ganga, similar to the one his group, Tarun Bharat Sangh, structured to revive the dying Arwari river in Alwar.

Spread over 90 towns and 1000 villages between Gaumukh in Uttarakhand and Gangasagar in [West](#) Bengal, these panchayats would oppose tooth and nail all such government projects between Gaumukh and Gangasagar which threaten the sanctity and ecological aspects of the sacred river. The first such panchayat would be formed in Haridwar on October 2.

Speaking to TOI on phone from Haridwar, Singh, popularly known as `Waterman of India', said they have dedicated members divided into two groups -- 10,000 members as part of the `Ganga Panchayats' and 500 members for `Ganga Sansad'. Singh, a part of the nine member core committee to look into environmental aspects of various hydro-electric projects over the Ganga, has already submitted a memorandum to the environment minister [Jairam Ramesh](#) announcing setting [up](#) of Ganga Panchayats.

Singh said the panchayats would keep a vigil on all government projects which potentially threaten the river, not only in Uttarakhand but also across the 2500 km stretch from Gangotri in the Himalayas to Gangasagar.

The stepping in of Tarun Bharat Sangh and its pledge to recapitulate the Arwari model in the Gangetic plains could spell a new lease of life for the river which has been at the receiving end of development and government apathy. Moreover, the Rs 1,500 crore Ganga Action Plan (GAP), launched in the 80s to clean the Ganga, too has been ineffective. In fact, there is concern for UP too as the pollution levels in the river in the state have been alarmingly high and are contributing to about 9% to 12% of the total disease burden in the state, a world Bank-sponsored study has concluded.

The group would also look into the various aspects of implementation of the GAP while also pressuring the government to change policies to suit the ecosystem of the river.

Incidentally, the Tarun Bharat Sangh has been playing a pivotal role in bringing the Centre to its knees over Loharinag-Pala project, even as Agarwal, the former head of the engineering department at IIT-Kanpur went on a hunger strike.