DETOXIFYING DIVINITY: SCIENCE, RELIGION,
AND THE RIVER YAMUNA OF NORTH INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Yamuna River covers a distance of about 1376 kilometers and has a catchment area of 366,223 square kilometers in the world’s second most populated country, India. The river is not only an important source of water for millions, it is also worshipped by Hindus around the world. This Science, Technology and Society (STS) article, explores the religious forces and perspectives that are seeking to rejuvenate the Yamuna River that has in the past been declared "dead", downstream of New Delhi, as it flows through Vrindavan, India. The article concludes that religious organizations can make practical contributions to the environmental cause, from within their own theological traditions. The following research details the causes and consequences of pollution in the Yamuna, the ongoing efforts to save the river, and the role of Gaudiya Vaishnava theology in the environmental politics related to its restoration.

Key Words: Yamuna, Environment, Pollution, Religion, Theology

INTRODUCTION

The Yamuna river, a lifeline to millions of Indians, a goddess to even more, has for the first time in recorded history, been tampered with and trampled over so grossly that it appears mutilated and deathly.1 Declared the sixth most toxic place to live in the entire world by the Mother Nature Network, the Yamuna is a public health issue unlike any other.2 But can those who are responsible for the river’s death revive its vitality? Abandoned by many who worship its divinity, estranged from those who depend on its waters, the Yamuna appears beyond recovery. Yet, over the past decade or so, devotees, pilgrims, farmers, environmentalists, lawyers, activists, engineers and others have begun a campaign to save the Yamuna. The fact that the Yamuna is a major pilgrimage site places religious organizations at the forefront of this activism, raising interesting questions as to the relationship between science and faith in a way not present in other areas of conservation. David Habermanin his groundbreaking work, River of Love in an Age of Pollution, gives a detailed account of the beginnings of the movement to save the Yamuna. The book documents the failure of the 1993 Yamuna Action Plan (YAP), the efforts of Mathura’s resident Gopeshwar Nath Chaturvedi and lawyer M.C. Mehta since and various other governmental and non-governmental efforts up until the early 2000s that aimed at reviving the River Yamuna from its current state of environmental degradation.3 However, what his book does not cover is the Save Yamuna Campaign led by religious leader Ramesh Baba of Barsana and the MaanMandirSevaSansthan, as well as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, which has since gathered much momentum and international attention.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

In this paper, I shall explore the role of Krishna devotees, specifically those within the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), in attracting national and international attention to the Save Yamuna Campaign. The paper will see the intersection of science and faith, empirical experience and transcendent revelation, an ongoing preoccupation in STS. How does a faith-based belief system engage with issues of science and
engineering in securing an environmental solution?In this paper, I argue that ISKCON has made a practical contribution to the environmental movement from within its own GaudiyaVaishnava religious and philosophical framework.

DISCUSSION
The Plight of Yamuna
The Yamuna River originates in the Indian Himalayas at a glacier called Yamunotri at the foot of Mount Kalinda. Here, pristine water flows unhindered, gathering volume as it is joined by other streams. Protected by the mountains, the Yamuna journeys a couple of hundred kilometers before it enters the Indo-Gangetic plains at Dakpathar. It meanders across valleys and leaps thunderously over cliffs, before the plains and urbanity, bringing an abrupt end to its vitality. This is not simply because the river slows down, but primarily because it now turns from an ancient force of nature to a resource claimed by humans for exploitation. As the river flows through the plains it is stalled for power generation at numerous dams, beginning with the Dakpathar Barrage, installed under the vision of independent India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru who famously declared dams as the temples of modern India.4 Downstream, in India’s leading agricultural state of Haryana, is the Tajewala Barrage near Hathnikund. According to author and activist Sarandha Jain, this is probably the most damaging structure on the river.5 Here, almost all the water is diverted into the Eastern and Western Yamuna Canals for irrigation. During some months, no water flows past this dam causing various segments of the riverbed between Hathnikund and Delhi to be completely dry. Before arriving at the Wazirabad Barrage in Delhi, the river regains some water from its tributary streams and groundwater accrual, but this is polluted with untreated effluents from the paper industries in Yamuna Nagar, the textile industries at Karnal, Panipat, and Sonipat, and tanneries in the area.6 Distillery effluents from the Yamuna Nagar region have also been found to be fatal for aquatic organisms.7 After traveling for a total of almost 400 kilometers, the river water is tapped again at Wazirabad Barrage beyond which, in the lean seasons, no water is allowed to flow. This is done in order to quench the thirst of Delhi, one of the world’s most populous cities at 18 million people.

Not too far downstream from the Wazirabad barrage, the dribble that is left of the Yamuna is joined by its single largest contributor of pollution, the Najafgarh drain. Professor at Indiana University, David Haberman writes that about 45 percent of Delhi’s total sewage discharge and 42 percent of the Biological Oxygen Demand (BOD) load in the river, an indicator of river pollution, comes from this drain.8 Downstream, 22 kilometers, the Delhi stretch of the river ends at the Okhla Barrage. As with the others upstream, no water is allowed to flow past this barrage in the dry season. The flow downstream of the Okhla Barrage consists primarily of domestic and industrial drain water from the Shahdara drain.9 Thus, the megalopolis of Delhi is alone responsible for 79 percent of the entire pollution in the River Yamuna.10 After Delhi, the river, in its compromised condition, meanders its way to the region of Vraja, in the state of Uttar Pradesh (U.P.). Vraja is a complex of cities, towns and villages, including Vrindavan, which have, for centuries, been a foremost pilgrimage site for Krishna devotees. In the Vaishnava traditions of the Vraja region, Yamuna is regarded as a deity and deeply revered as an intimate associate of Lord Krishna. Yet, the river that flows through Vraja is severely polluted. Therefore, many temple priests in the holy city of Vrindavan no longer bathe the deities, of Krishna or his associates, in Yamuna water. Instead, they use bottled water sold in the markets. There are still some who bathe in the Yamuna River every day, but many have had to abandon this daily ritual ablation for fear of contracting disease.11

Soon after Vrindavan, the river enters the holy city of Mathura. Shockingly, much of Mathura’s wastewater is discharged upstream of the bathing ghats, where pilgrims and devotees take ablations in the river. This also places the Gokul Barrage, the reservoir that supplies much of Mathura’s water demands, downstream of the wastewater discharge. This reveals a gross miscalculation or utter lack of foresight on the part of the authorities; including the U.P. Jal
Nigam, a government organization responsible for water supply and sewerage services. After Yamuna’s sojourn in Krishna’s Vraja, the river, still stinking and filthy, flows past the world famous Taj Mahal in Agra. It is only in Bateshwar, however, after traveling 512 kilometers past the Wazirabad Barrage in Delhi, that the river somewhat recovers as it is joined by its tributary Chambal. Combining with a few more tributaries further downstream, the River Yamunabecomes significantly more voluminous than before. Its pollution concentration having been diluted, it approaches its confluence with the famous river Ganga in the ancient pilgrimage city of Prayag also known as Allahabad. The blue waters, no longer called Yamuna, blend with the white, silt-laden, waters of the Ganga and together journey through East India until they finally meet the vast ocean at the Bay of Bengal. As depicted in the map (Fig. 1), the Yamuna river is often formally divided into five distinct parts of varying lengths: Himalayan Segment, Upper Segment, Delhi Segment, Eutrophicated/Mixed Segment and Diluted Segment.

According to Sarandha Jain, “the water that leaves Delhi is not even fit for animal bathing.” An article in Vrindavan Today, an internet news website, claims that according to the Uttar Pradesh Pollution Control Board (UPPCB) Yamuna water in Vrindavan falls under category D, fit only for fish and wildlife. Thus, it can be deduced from Tables 1 and 2, that even though the water quality improves from class E to class D, between Delhi and Vrindavan, it is nonetheless unfit for direct human contact. And, according to Fig. 2, as the river passes through Vraja, in the mixed section of the Yamuna, its BOD (Biological Oxygen Demand) levels have been measured to be much higher than those accepted as safe for bathing.

Fig. 1: Segments of the Yamuna river

Note: All figures are 1996 levels. a = Flow, in million litres per day; the amount of wastewater, domestic and industrial, that falls into the river; b = BOD load, in tonnes per day; volume of flow X concentration of BOD, or biochemical oxygen demand—a parameter to measure the amount of oxygen required to break down organic matter floating in it. Source: Central Pollution Control Board 1996, Report on Water Quality Monitoring of Yamuna, CPCB, New Delhi, mimeo.
Table 1: Yamuna water quality at different locations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hathnikund</td>
<td>2 km upstream of Tajewala Barrage</td>
<td>A &amp; B</td>
<td>Almost pristine Yamuna water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalanaur</td>
<td>7 km east of Yamuna Nagar at Yamuna Bridge</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Water quality impacted by SomNadi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonepat</td>
<td>20 km east of Sonepat city at Yamuna Bridge</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Water quality impacted by discharges from Karnal and Panipat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PallaGaon</td>
<td>23 km upstream of Wazirabad Barrage</td>
<td>C &amp; D</td>
<td>Water quality impacted by discharges from Sonipat district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nizammudin</td>
<td>13 km downstream of Wazirabad Barrage</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Water quality impacted by discharges from Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agra Canal</td>
<td>26 km downstream of Wazirabad Barrage</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Water quality impacted by discharges from Delhi after Okhla Barrage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Classification of water quality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Designated best use</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Drinking water source without conventional treatment, but after disinfection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Outdoor bathing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Drinking water source with conventional treatment followed by disinfection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Propagation of wildlife, fisheries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Irrigation, industrial cooling, controlled waste disposal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 2: BOD concentration in the five segments of the Yamuna river

Point sources are those sources of pollution that can be attributed to a discernible, confined and discrete source. Nonpoint sources are those sources of pollution that come from...
The major point sources of pollution in the Yamuna are: untreated domestic wastewater in the form of sewage and effluents from the hundreds of industrial units that can be found along the Yamuna and its tributaries. The major nonpoint sources of pollution in the Yamuna are: agricultural runoff from synthetic fertilizers and pesticides used in the Yamuna watershed and solid wastes such as human and animal fecal matter and garbage. Although non-point sources of pollution such as bathing in the river and offering religious oblationsto the river adds to the pollution, Sarandha Jain dismisses these as minor problems, insignificant when compared to the large volumes of domestic and industrial waste entering the Yamuna from point sources. Some other important factors that contribute to the worsening condition of the Yamuna are inadequate fresh water flow in the river, encroachment on the river banks, improper allocation of sewage treatment plants, mixing of treated and untreated sewage water and sewage generation far in excess of treatment capacity.

The impact of river pollution on the wildlife is evident. Mass deaths of fish have been observed in cities such as Mathura and much of the river at Delhi and beyond has little or no oxygen left to sustain any life. Thus, hundreds of fishermen have given up their traditional livelihood. The large river turtles that at one time thrived in the Yamuna have now mostly vanished. Not as evident, but equally disturbing, are the effects of the pollution on human health. India’s high infant mortality rate (more than seven times greater than that of the United States) has been attributed to the consumption of polluted river water. Another effect of Yamuna’s pollution has been a sharp rise in the cases of hepatitis A and typhoid fever. The Lancet, a British medical journal, declared that bacteria in New Delhi’s drinking water carry a gene, called New Delhi metallobetalactamase (NDM-1), for an enzyme that transmits resistance to almost all known antibiotics. It is estimated that about 500,000 people in New Delhi carry resistant bacteria which could render useless all kinds of routine medical procedures that depend on the ability to treat infections.

In the above section I have established a scientific basis for the worldwide concern about the River Yamuna’s health. In the next section, I will provide a brief description of one of the religious organizations that is lobbying for the revival of the struggling river.

**ISKCON**

Although founded on the 11th of July, 1966 in the state of New York, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) traces its lineage to the 15th century saint and avatar, Sri Krishna Chaitanya of West Bengal, India. Also known as the Hare Krishna Movement, ISKCON is the most widespread manifestation of the Gaudiya Vaishnava spiritual tradition; considered a part of the amalgamation that is Hinduism. Its primary texts are the Bhagavad Gita, the Srimad Bhagavatam and the Chaitanya Charitamrita. Prime among ISKCON’S stated purposes is to propagate Krishna (God) consciousness for the betterment of all people, through the congregational chanting of the holy names of God, as revealed in the Vedic literature and demonstrated by Sri Chaitanya. According to the historian and indologist, A.L. Basham, "ISKCON is historically very significant because for the first time since the days of the Roman Empire an Asian religion is being openly practiced by people of western origin in the streets of western cities."

In ISKCON’s paradigm, modern science and its conclusions are considered imperfect and an unreliable source of absolute knowledge. However, ISKCON’s leaders and adherents do not reject science and technology completely. In fact, they use modern technological devices, such as laptops and the internet, to further the movement. This is justified by the concept of YuktaVairagya, as enunciated by RupaGoswami, wherein an advanced devotee is able to engage the things of this world in service of the Supreme without being seduced by the material nature of the very objects. Yet, ISKCON devotees categorically claim that modern science’s theoretical conclusions (especially the Big Bang Theory and Darwin’s Theory of Evolution) are not absolute and likely to change in the future, just
as they've been changing throughout history. They also maintain that spiritual (i.e., eternal and not composed of matter) subjects cannot be proven or disproven by the empirical sciences. Since these are beyond the purview of the senses and the mind they can only be accessed by spiritual means and processes outside the paradigm of the current scientific method.

Krishna is considered by GaudiyaVaishnavas to be a historic personality who appeared on this earth approximately 5000 years ago and spoke the Bhagavad Gita, the song of the divine, to his dear friend Arjuna. According to the SrimadBhagavatam (1.1.1) and the Bhagavad Gita (10.8), Krishna is the absolute truth (God), the cause of all causes and the source of everything. Krishna descends onto the earth in every age, of which there are four, in one incarnation or another as confirmed by him in verses 7 and 8, chapter 4, of the Bhagavad Gita. However, he descends in his original form, as the Krishna of Vrindavan, only once in every cycle of four ages. In this current cycle of ages, the Krishna of Vrindavan is considered to have appeared approximately 5000 years ago in the town of Vrindavan, 150 kilometers South of India’s capital city, New Delhi. The SrimadBhagavatam, 10th canto, describes in detail Krishna’s life and activities in the forest groves of Vraja, the sacred area that includes the town of Vrindavan and other surrounding villages. The Yamuna river is an integral part of this holy landscape where Krishna is said to have once frolicked with his friends and lovers; displaying to the world the loving activities and exchanges of the Supreme Personality of Godhead with his dearest devotees.

In order to understand GaudiyaVaishnava, specifically ISKCON’s, interactions with and perspectives on the River Yamuna pollution and revival, it is crucial to be able to see the issue through their eyes. In the next section, we will see the interpretation of theology being shaped by the environmental crisis.

**Yamuna in the eyes of the Krishna devotee**

Mahanidhi Swami explains that when Lord Krishna descends to the earth, to display his transcendental but human-like pastimes, his internal energy expands into the land of Vrindavan. His eternal associates or entourage from the spiritual realm, also descend with him and expand into various aspects of that sacred village. One such associate is Vishakha, one of Krishna’s girlfriends. She expands into the liquid form of the Yamuna River in order to assist the aquatic adventures of the divine couple, Radha and Krishna.26

Many GaudiyaVaishnavas consider returning to Krishna in the spiritual world the object of their lives. And in chapter 9, verse 34 of the Bhagavad Gita Krishna asserts that, one who, being absorbed in him, becomes his devotee, surely goes to him. A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami explains that in order to become a devotee of Krishna one must approach Krishna through his pure devotees.27 This is because Krishna cannot ignore the plea of his pure devotees and also because pure devotees of Krishna are able to inspire love of God within one’s heart. Thus, Yamuna’s relationship to Krishna, as his pure and intimate devotional servant, is what makes her so special in the eyes of GaudiyaVaishnavas. For this reason RupaGoswami, disciple of Sri ChaitanyaMahaprabhu, praises Yamuna in his Stava-mala, as follows: “She increases the flow of confidential devotional service for Nandanananda (Krishna) within one’s heart and blesses everyone who simply desires to reside on her banks.”28

Unfortunately, the river in its polluted condition is no longer considered safe to bathe in, especially in the region of Vraja. Bhaktivedanta Swami, however, proclaims that sprinkling Yamuna water on the head is as good as bathing in the Yamuna.29 Although this might pacify devotees eager to gain the spiritual merit of associating with Yamuna, this may also discourage them from working to clean a river in which they need not necessarily take a dip. On the other hand, the major incentive for devotees to revive the River Yamuna is that such work, done with love for Yamuna, is considered devotional service to the Yamuna. Because devotional service will please Yamuna, the personality, she may then bless the devotee with love for Krishna and even petition Krishna to give such a devotee residence in the spiritual world.
Although the waters of the Yamuna are considered to have the ability to destroy one’s bad karma, give liberation and create auspiciousness -even more so than the Ganga-these are not the reasons why devotees of Krishna render service to Yamuna.\(^{30}\) The aim of the devotee is to establish oneself in unadulterated love of God, or prema-bhakti, without any ulterior motive or selfish desire. Pada-sevanam is one of the prescribed processes for cultivating such bhakti. In his commentary on verses 23-24, of the 5th chapter, of the 7th canto, of SrimadBhagavatam, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami writes that service to Yamuna is considered pada-sevanam.\(^{31}\) It is clear in the SrimadBhagavatam(8.8.10) that Yamuna has a personal feminine form, besides her obvious liquid form. Thus, some important considerations for devotees are: whether working to purify the waters of the Yamuna river is considered devotional service and if so, is such service to the liquid form equivalent to serving the feminine deity with offerings of food items, clothing, Jewelry, etc.?

Within GaudiyaVaishnavism it is accepted that Krishna’s pastimes are always taking place in Vrindavan, even today. However, they are hidden or un-manifest to the material vision, contaminated by lust, greed, anger, envy, illusion and madness. Only those with purified senses, attained by the practice of devotional service to the Supreme, are qualified to be able to experience the spiritual Vrindavan on earth and see the serene Yamuna flowing therein. Thus, what the untrained eye sees, through limited material vision, is the temporary material phenomena of dirt, filth and refuse in the Yamuna and along its banks. This presents a dichotomy between the material pollution and the spiritual purity of the River Yamuna. This interpretation is highly relativistic and puts the devotee in a difficult spot. Should the devotee choose to accept the reality of the material pollution in the river and thus attempt to clean it as an act of devotional service or should the devotee ignore the material pollution in an attempt to envision the spiritual waters of the Yamuna as described in scripture? In this connection, it is interesting to note that, bathing in the Yamuna cleanses the materially contaminated vision of the practicing devotee and also facilitates the devotee’s attainment of liberated, spiritual vision.\(^{32}\) Nonetheless, there is a possible contradiction, in this particular interpretation of theology, which needs rationalization: Is it considered non-devotional for a devotee to see the Yamuna as polluted?

The descriptions of the Yamuna, found in GaudiyaVaishnava texts, are very different from the Yamuna that most people witness today. Some of the words used in SrimadBhagavatam (10.22.37) and ChaitanyaCharitamritaAntya Lilato describe the said river aricrystal clear, sweet and wholesome, none of which can be associated with the earthly River Yamuna of the twenty-first-century. In Vaishnava theology, however, there is a pollution-purification episode. The Bhagavad Purana or SrimadBhagavatam, canto 10, chapter 16, describes one pastime of Krishna when a part of the Yamuna had been polluted. A certain lake within the Yamuna, situated apart from the main current of the river, was inhabited by a poisonous black serpent named Kaliya. Kaliya’s poison is described as so terrible that the wind blowing over the lake would carry drops of his poison which would kill all creatures and vegetation on the surrounding shore and any birds that flew overhead. Seeing the polluted condition of the River Yamuna, Lord Krishna took it upon himself to purify it. What ensued was a dramatic fight between a thousand-headed poisonous serpent and the personality of Godhead, wherein Krishna gracefully defeated Kaliya and banished him from the river. The moment Kaliya left, the Yamuna was immediately restored to its pure state. Krishna thus became the first person to save the River Yamuna from toxic pollution. Is it safe then to assume that he would want his devotees to do the same? Krishna says in Bhagavad Gita, chapter 3, verse 21, “whatever action is performed by a great man, common men follow in his footsteps. And whatever standards he sets by exemplary acts, all the world pursues.”\(^{33}\) This is one interpretation that many devotees, including Ranchor Prime and SrivatsaGoswami, often cite when trying to spur others to take action to save the River Yamuna.
BhaktivinodeThakura, a prominent acharya (teacher) in the GaudiyaVaishnava lineage, writes in his ChaitanyaShikshamrita that the Kaliya demon represents pride, deceit and cruelty.\textsuperscript{34} Thus, it can be deduced that the external pollution of the River Yamuna is only a manifestation of the internal pollution of the heart of those who interact with it. This implies that any solution that only addresses the temporary cleanliness of the river, but does not simultaneously revive the sanctity of modern thought and cure the culture of pollution, is incomplete and ultimately ineffective. Even if suitable technologies and policies, to maintain a clean river, are put in place and enforced, there is no guarantee that a new threat to river health, in the form of a new technology or social practice, will not arise and condemn the Yamuna once again. Thus, keeping Bhaktivinode’s insight in mind, of prime importance from a GaudiyaVaishnava viewpoint is the ecology of the human heart; one that needs to be purified of pride, deceit and cruelty.

In this section, some of the GaudiyaVaishnava theological stances toward the Yamuna issue were explored. In the following section, ISKCON’s actual initiative and involvement in the Save Yamuna Campaign will be discussed.

**The Save Yamuna Campaign and ISKCON**

The Save Yamuna Campaign has religious motivations, political repercussions and implications for riverine environmental engineering. Thus, in a unified effort to diagnose Yamuna’s plight, engineers, environmentalists, activists and Krishna devotees, including ISKCON members from six different countries, embarked on a journey to Yamunotri, Yamuna’s source in the Himalayas, in order to document its actual condition as of year 2011.\textsuperscript{35} A Save Yamuna March, that began on the 2$^{nd}$ of March, 2011, attracted around 3000 participants who walked about 20-30 kilometers every day, from Allahabad to New Delhi for about 45 days, to raise awareness about the Yamuna. RadhaJivan Das, a disciple of ISKCON guru Tamal Krishna Goswami, coordinated the event. The foot-march ended in a 20,000 strong demonstration at Delhi’s famous JantarMantar grounds. Here the participants and activists held peaceful demonstrations to attract the attention of the government to the plight of the Yamuna. Consequently, RadhaJivanhad an audience with Congress party leader Sonia Gandhi and ex-environment and forest minister Jairam Ramesh, who spoke of the obstacles they faced in getting anything done.\textsuperscript{36}

The protest at JantarMantar included a seven-day hunger strike, a weeklong SrimadBhagavatamscriptural recitation, a 24-hour kirtan (congregational chanting of God’s names) and distribution of prasadam (sanctified remnants of food offered to God). RadhaJivan Das was quoted saying that even though very few ISKCON devotees had participated in the protest until the 31$^{st}$ of April, after he spoke to ISKCON leader Gopal Krishna Goswami about its importance, a thousand devotees arrived from Delhi. He said they were “elite, well-dressed, educated people” and as they joined the procession in the streets along with the poor farmers and Sadhus of Vrindavana, it made a huge impact. The demonstrations were finally called off when the home minister of India created a committee of engineers, who were to meet the chief ministers of the five states sharing Yamuna’s water, in order to come to a practical solution. Unfortunately, but characteristic of past government efforts to clean the river, the meeting never took place.\textsuperscript{37}

Meanwhile, over 3000 devotees at the ISKCON temple in Chowpatty, Mumbai took to the streets with the message of the Save Yamuna Campaign. Thousands sang in unison, the Hare Krishna maha-mantra, whilst simultaneously raising banners and distributing flyers to raise awareness about the condition of the Yamuna and the need to take action. RadhaJivan Das also gave a presentation, on the condition of the Yamuna River, to a large audience at ISKCON Juhu, Mumbai. This was attended by various prominent personalities including Bollywood star actress HemaMalini, Indian classical vocalist Pandit Jasraj and popular television actor Ravi Kishan. In the months of October and November and specifically on Lord Krishna’s birthday, Janmashtami, ISKCON’s Krishna Balaram temple in Vrindavan served as the “nerve-
center” of the Save Yamuna campaign. Various other centers also informed visitors about the Yamuna issue and secured thousands of signatures on the Save Yamuna petition.

There is a perception in India that international attention often spurs and enables domestic politics. To this effect various ISKCON centers have been instrumental since 2011 in bringing the Save Yamuna Campaign to major cities around the world and in raising the issue at their respective Indian embassies. These include, but are not restricted to, centers in Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, Switzerland, Belgium and the United States of America. Their petition to the government is that the Yamuna is a holy river, indispensable to the Indian people and must therefore be revived from its dangerously polluted condition.

In early 2012, ISKCON’s Governing Body Commission (GBC) made a strong statement in support of the Save Yamuna Campaign. They requested all ISKCON temples and congregational members to include Yamuna in their daily prayers, explain the spiritual and environmental significance of Yamuna to others, organize kirtans and programs for the Yamuna cause or dedicate pre-existing ones to the same, create world-wide campaigns, encourage and assist petitions to accomplish the above and spread the word through various media. The justifications for this campaign, besides the environmental concerns over Yamuna’s condition, were that bringing the original Yamuna waters to Vrindavan would be direct service to the Divine couple Radha and Krishna and that ISKCON’s involvement in the movement would increase the public’s appreciation and perception of the organization.

On the first of March, 2013, began a 12-day march from Vrindavan to New Delhi led by the Yamuna Rakshak Dal (Save Yamuna Group) and attended by villagers, farmers and Krishna devotees, whose numbers fluctuated from 20,000 to 100,000. Meanwhile, ISKCON members in centers all over the world were participating in a Global Kirtan for the Yamuna River, with over 100 groups from different continents praying with devotion for Yamuna and her revival. Their demands were that 50 percent of Yamuna water be released at Tajewala/Hathnikund Barrage and that Delhi’s polluted water be diverted via canals away from the Yamuna water. After negotiating with the Yamuna Rakshak Dal, the government agreed to construct sewage interception drains along the Delhi stretch of the river and promised to release 250 cubic feet per second of fresh water beyond Delhi. Considering that the central government had spent over 13 billion rupees or $230 million since the 1990’s on reducing pollution in the Yamuna with little to show for it, Yamuna activists were not content to sit back and wait for the government to take action. Another protest was scheduled for March 2014. The most recent such agitation took place on the 15th of March 2015.

Another collaborative effort of activism has led to the formation of the Yamuna Network. The Yamuna Network is a non-profit coalition of organizations and individuals whose purpose is to restore the river to its past glory by preventing industrial and municipal waste from entering the river and also by attempting to stop the waters of Yamuna from being diverted at the various barrages along its length. The board of directors of the Yamuna Network consist of Swami Chidanand Saraswati, the leader of the ParmathNiketan Ashram (Rishikesh, India), Radhanath Swami and Sacinandana Swami both of whom are leaders and gurus within ISKCON, Raoul Goff, founder and publisher of Earth Aware Editions, Gauri Das, co-executive secretary of ISKCON and director of the Ahimsa Milk foundation and Manoj Kumar Misra, a forestry and wildlife expert who served in the Indian Forest Service (IFS) and is currently the executive director of the PEACE Institute Charitable Trust and Convener and the head of the Yamuna Forever Campaign. Headquartered in California, U.S.A., this organization and its eclectic group of supporters are trying to spread awareness about the Yamuna issue in India and abroad. RadhaJivan Das said, in an interview, that ISKCON’s role in the Save Yamuna Campaign, “as a worldwide Vaishnava organization, is in its capacity for campaigning internationally and putting pressure on the
government." While ISKCON has begun to fulfill this calling, the next important task that lies ahead of ISKCON is in inspiring a broader sense of environmental stewardship among its adherents. This can be achieved, as in the case of the Yamuna River, by delving deeply into Gaudiya Vaishnava theology that in itself is rich in instances and anecdotes of ecological significance.

CONCLUSION

The preceding analysis of the of river Yamuna, ISKCON’s philosophy, Yamuna theology and finally, ISKCON’s involvement in the Save Yamuna Campaign suggest that the Gaudiya Vaishnava ideological framework has allowed ISKCON to play an important role in the ongoing movement to revive the multifariously significant Yamuna River. ISKCON has been able to do so by not only leveraging its own theology but by simultaneously educating its adherents on the scientific aspects of Yamuna’s pollution problem. Interestingly, it could be inferred, that environmental science’s revelation of Yamuna’s toxicity appears to have spurred ISKCON devotees into performing devotional service for Krishna’s beloved river Yamuna. This is an example of RupaGoswami’s principle of YuktaVairagya which ultimately claims that everything can be used in the service of the Supreme and thus be rendered spiritual by its contact with the spiritual whole. This includes, by extension, the conclusions of modern science understood with the attitude of serving the Supreme Godhead and scientific study performed with the purpose of pleasing the same transcendent reality. This case study has thus seen an aligning of religious motivations and scientific urgency towards achieving a common goal, reflecting the principle of YuktaVairagya. Therefore, it can be concluded, that religious organizations have the power to mobilize people in bringing about practical and positive change in the arena of environment, which otherwise considered the domain of politics, science and engineering.45-55

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