

A Hero of the Planet

Dr. Veer Bhadra Mishra is a Hindu priest. He is the head of Sankat Mochan, Varanasi's second-largest temple. Every morning, he takes his ritual dip in the Ganges. But more than most Hindus, he knows better than to drink the water. Mishra is a scientist, a water engineer who was once a university professor. He has made it his life's work to clean up "Mother Ganga."

"All our rivers have stories," Mishra says. "All our rivers are important. But there is nothing anywhere like the Ganga."

Mishra was born a priest. The leadership of his temple has passed from father to eldest son since the 16th century. He inherited the job when he was 14. But his mother urged him to attend college, too. No one in his family had ever been to school. Mishra believes it happened because the Ganges needed his help.

Mishra's education led him to understand that the Ganges was in trouble. But it seemed to him that nobody in India's government was interested in doing anything about the dangerous pollution. Even other Hindu priests seemed not to care about the problem.

So, in 1982, Mishra started the Sankat Mochan Foundation to help people living along the Ganges. The foundation set up a program called "Campaign for a Clean Ganga." Its goal is to educate people about the causes of pollution. It maintains a Web site, posting articles about environmental issues. India's news media may use the information for free.

Donations came from the United States and other nations. Other foundations, governments, and people also contributed. In 1999, Dr. Mishra won a *Time* magazine "Hero of the Planet" award. Three years later, the United Nations honored him.

The Indian government began to pay attention, too. In 1986, it launched the Ganga Action Plan, or GAP. The plan was to use sewage treatment plants to clean up the Ganges. The GAP was an expensive failure. There were not enough plants to handle the amount of sewage. There was not enough power to run the

Mishra wanted to try out this plan in Varanasi. He believed it would be cheaper and more effective than the government's plan. The Varanasi city council accepted the idea. But the state and national governments turned it down.

Mishra knew that it would take time to gain acceptance for his plan. In the meantime, he began to educate the people of his city. He wanted to change their age-old habits that harmed the river. His foundation met with priests and pilgrims. It organized citizens and children. Young workers cleaned up litter from the banks of the Ganges. But the problem was so huge that these efforts had little effect.

Scientists from other countries heard about Mishra's project. Steve Hamner, a scientist from Montana State University, traveled to India in 2003. He met with Dr. Mishra and other Indian scientists. Hamner and an Indian government lab made detailed studies of Ganges water. The pollution was measured in a scientific way. The Indian lab brought the findings to India's Supreme Court.

This time the government listened. In 2007, India's prime minister met with Dr. Mishra. A year later, Mishra heard what he called "the best news in 20 years." The government was agreeing to support a pilot program of his plan in Varanasi. If it worked there, it could be put into effect all along the Ganges.

The Ganges' story is not over. Time will tell whether it is too late to restore India's sacred river. But Dr. Mishra seems to have no doubts. As he confidently puts it, "Mother Ganges will help me to save her."

Today, Dr. Mishra, other scientists, and the government of India are experimenting with new ways to return the Ganges to its former unpolluted state.



Dr. Mishra (right) is a priest and a water engineer who has been working to clean up the Ganges.

