How Nepali Women Are Forced To ‘Sell’ Their Skin To Make Rich Indians Beautiful

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Three years ago, when Sushila Thapa managed to flee from a brothel in Mumbai to her native village in Nepal, the big scar on her back did not matter. What mattered to her more was that she was home alive.

A year later, when she saw another woman with a similar scar, she realised that the skin from her back wasn’t scarred because of one of her clients’ fetish or any injury. She mustered up the courage to make inquiries without raising suspicion and found that the skin was “stolen” to “make rich men and women beautiful”.

The other woman had sold 20 inch square of skin tissue to an agent voluntarily for Rs 10,000 to fight poverty. The money was soon over because of the huge debt she had to clear. The same agent helped her get into sex work. “The agent told her that he supplies skin to another agent and it’s used in making some sort of stuff that helps in plastic surgery,” said Thapa.
Streets of Thamel in Kathmandu are dark after 11 pm but the dance bars situated here buzz with life. Agents offer a wide range of “services” in these bars to lure tourists inside.

Since Thapa had come back from a brothel, she was hounded out by the community in her native village in Sindhupalchowk, about 75 km away from Kathmandu.

The agent brought her to a massage parlour in the tourist area of Thamel in Kathmandu in exchange of first three months of “salary”. Thapa knew what she was getting into but had no choice. Her only grouse now is if she had not been disfigured, she could have earned more, and safely.

Thapa has to cater to men mainly from South Asian countries. If she insists on using a condom, the client would not even pay Rs 300-Rs 500 that they, despite her disfigurement, agree to shell out. Other women in the massage parlour earn as much as Rs 5,000 “per sitting”.

These parlours also have facilities for beauty massage, but it’s a no-go area for South Asian women. A few women who visit these parlours for body massage are trekkers from western countries. This is why I went to the parlour for a body massage, Thapa was sent to the cubicle because it gave her an opportunity to earn more than what she would have earned for sex work. I started talking to her during the massage, and after discussing several things, including latest Shahrukh Khan movie and various creams to remove acne marks, I started pitching the questions I had gone to the parlour for.
“I am not in demand,” was all she could say, adding that if she spoke further much worse could happen to her. On pestering her for more, she showed me her scar and told me what happened to her and how.

The conversation was cut short by an elderly woman who ran the establishment. Somebody had overheard the conversation and complained to her. The masseuse was changed promptly. Thankfully, Thapa had given me the tip-off that helped me dig deeper.

**Kathmandu or Indian Las Vegas?**

Almost everything is for sale after 9 pm on the streets of Thamel in Kathmandu when the night clubs open up. With the kind of sights and services the small bars offers, Thamel could be equalled to a mini Las Vegas or Amsterdam for Indian men on solo or all-men group trips. The behaviour that is exhibited by these Indian male tourists at these bars is nothing but shameful and far, far away from the ‘Sanskriti’ that they hanker after back in their homes.

Innumerable agents, often boys as young as 14-15 years old, pull sleeves of tourists and offer “services” that are available in these night clubs.

Some of my male friends in Kathmandu helped me get into these bars after 11 pm. Being a single woman with three non-locals didn’t raise suspicion simply because a lot of men go to these bars to ‘enjoy’ with a lady friend before they finally head to a hotel room.

I asked an agent whether skin would be available for a wealthy relative who is due to be married soon but suffered severe burns. The agent replied: “With a down payment of Rs 50,000, it can be

![An awareness booth at the Indo-Nepal Border Checkpost at Gauriphanta, Dhangadhi, Nepal. These booths aim to stop women from being trafficked to India. However, traffickers seldom use these check posts to cross the border. Just beside the check post are the expansive jungles of Pilibhit (Uttar Pradesh) which are porous enough.](image)
arranged.” The agent asked for a picture of the patient to ensure that the skin complexion matched. He also asked for blood type and a medical document to check if I was a genuine buyer. I handed him a forged paper in the name of the relative who does not exist. The agent called me two days later to ask for the advance payment. He told me that “sample” is available.

**Straight From The Horse’s Mouth**

“Skin is in huge demand. A 100-inch square piece of fair skin sells for Rs 50,000 to Rs 1,00,000 in Delhi and Mumbai. Agents take women till the Indo-Nepal border. From the border, another agent takes them to India and hands them over to another agent. The third agent arranges extraction of the skin. The women have to sign that they have donated the skin and not sold it,” says 40-year-old trafficker Prem Basgai in district jail of Kabrepanchowk district, just 50 km away from Kathmandu. Prem Basgai was nabbed by police a year ago for selling kidneys from the district that had become infamous as the ‘Kidney Bank of Nepal’.

Selling human organs is a crime under Nepali law. Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Rules, 2014 prohibits the sale of tissues and organs in India. The laws mandate that organs and tissues could only be accepted from registered donors. However, fake documents are easily made in both India and Nepal. “Some university students helped in forging documents needed for donation,” says Basgai.
Not just kidney, Basgai used to get Rs 30,000-50,000 for each skin sample he supplied to the agent next in line. He used to pay about Rs 5,000 to the person whose skin was being taken. The agents higher up in the ladder, sell it to various small pathological labs where the tissue is processed. The processed tissue is supplied to bigger labs (some of them are quite reputed) with a licence to export biological derivatives to the US. In the US, these derivatives are developed into Alloderm or similar product, used in various aesthetic surgical procedures such as penis enlargement, breast augmentation and lip augmentation for which India is a growing market.

The business of human tissues has become so lucrative that a large number of people are getting into it. According to Basgai, when the trend started, there were a handful of people who supplied organs to India, but now the network has increased. “Such networks have several layers. Even though it is known that about 300 kidneys were trafficked from Kabrepanchowk alone, only three cases have been registered so far. People need to made aware that their skin is being sold and it is illegal then only we can expect cases to be registered,” says Pooja Singh, Superintendent of Police of Kabrepanchowk, adding that till date not a single complaint has been lodged.

People in Kabrepanchowk do not want to speak to police or media. They try to save traffickers because these agents “help” them with money in exchange of body parts. Also, because if they dare to speak, the agents would come down to hound them out of the village.
Brothels In India Are The Skin Farms

“Who will complain? We have seen places where life has no value. I saw with my own eyes that women who consistently refused to entertain clients or tried to flee were killed and their bodies were shoved inside gutters. A client burnt my two-year-old son’s tongue with a cigarette. He is seven years old now and still cannot speak properly. When we are rescued back and brought to rehabilitation centres, we do not speak of the past. We try to forget it. We try to convince ourselves that such horrible things did not happen to us,” says Rekha, a woman in her 30s, whose kidney was sold and then she was trafficked to brothels of Mumbai and Kolkata.

“Women are often drugged or sedated before their skin extraction. And sedating women is normal. For example, if a client wants to try something adventurous and is ready to pay for that, a woman would be sedated and tied to the bed. Such is the horror that if a woman is sedated and her skin is removed, the first thing she would do, after coming back to her senses, is run for life and not check whether she misses a patch of skin on her body. Men have strange fetishes. She is likely to think that her client did this,” she adds.

Another woman in her 40s, Kusum Shrestha, sold her skin to an agent in Nuwakot, 62 kms away from Kathmandu where she lives now. She says the agents have such a strong network that if one dares to go to the police, their family is made to suffer.

Often families depend on these agents for small odd jobs to earn money. Often, victims turn into traffickers. This is exactly what happened in the case of Basgai. He and his wife sold their kidney, and when they realised body parts fetch good money, they started convincing people that one kidney is enough to survive; two kidneys is a luxury, says Satish Sarma of Kathmandu-based non-profit, Forum for Protection of People’s Rights.

“I saw women who refused to entertain clients or tried to flee were killed and their bodies were shoved inside gutters.”
Sreshtha and another woman had their skin sold to agents for a meagre amount of money.

He said that mainly women are being trafficked because their skin and organ are more often in better condition since they do not smoke or drink alcohol. Nepali women are mainly targeted for skin because they are fair and their skin is passed off as that of a person of Caucasian origin.

“I had first come across instances of skin trafficking in Sindhupalchowk. Some of the people in the local community said that skin is being trafficked for cosmetic surgery. Though we tried to do something about it, the cases could not be traced back since people were scared to speak up and so nothing could be done,” says Jeevanti, a field worker with the non-profit Shakti Samuha.

India’s Booming Cosmetic Surgery Industry

According to the most recent data available, between 2005 and 2007, the Indian aesthetic or cosmetic surgery industry that includes both invasive and non-invasive procedures had a Compounded Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 34 % in terms of...
revenue generation and the estimated size of the overall cosmetic surgery industry was worth $110 million. The sale of Alloderm or human graft worldwide has grown at 70 % CAGR since 2002.

“In comparison to the well-known trafficking in solid organs (such as kidneys), the poorest countries are the ones most likely to sell human cells and tissues to profiteers, who distribute them in high-income countries or in private clinics in emerging countries,” says Jean-Paul Pirnay in the paper, Human Cells And Tissues: The Need For A Global Ethical Framework, by the Well Being Department of the Queen Astrid Military Hospital in Brussels.

An employee of the company that distributes human tissue derived products used in India, on condition of anonymity, said that there is a lot of competition among large tissue processors in the US, and they procure tissues through different channels.

They get the tissues from cadavers, from various tissue banks and also from some pathological labs or biotechnology firms in countries that may not have a tissue bank. He says that only two three medical establishments in India have tissue banks but the tissues that these banks have are used for the treatment of serious ailments such as burns over 90%. “Raw material goes from India to the US, the product is manufactured in the US and resold to India. That’s how the market is running,” he says.
A Risky Business

Alloderm, one of the products manufactured by LifeCell, a company that patents tissue derivative products, has seen sales growth at an average of 41% per year and profits up to 72% annually. Rising sales of Alloderm contribute majorly to the company’s growth. According to LifeCell, their products are made from “human skin tissue supplied by US American Association of Tissue Banks-compliant tissue banks.”

Not just LifeCell, there are about 13 companies that are into the business of manufacturing skin and tissue derivative products. All of them are listed in “human-derived products regulated solely under 21 CFR 1271 (HCT/Ps)” by the FDA.

The company was named in a number of lawsuits in 2006 after it got involved in a case in which tissues were being harvested allegedly from dead people without consent from their family members. After an investigation by the Brooklyn District Attorney, four people were indicted. Although LifeCell helped in the investigation and called back its products, the company was a recipient of cadaver material from the guilty tissue banks.

This just shows how these companies that have patent on manufacturing tissue derivative products are not so clean. How are they related to Nepal and India? Reportedly, a lot of such companies, registered or unregistered, listed or unlisted, receive “raw material” from poorer countries like India which again sources these materials very dubiously from its brothels or from poorest of poor districts of Nepal.

Scott A Brubaker, Vice President (Policy), American Association of Tissue Banks, says: “While there is a system to track human-derived transfusable products (red
blood cells, platelets, cryoprecipitate and plasma for transfusion), it is not being used for human-derived transplantable tissue grafts.”

Villages like Kabrepalanchowk, Nuwakot, Sindhupalchowk in Nepal have become more like “Body Organ Farm” for traffickers.

The Alloderm or other skin draft formula that reputed medical establishments import are claimed to approved by Food and Drug Administration (FDA), US, but the FDA has time and again reiterated that they have no mechanism to check the source of these derivatives outside the US.

The Indian and Nepalese Administration are completely clueless about how these countries have become a cottage industry to produce and process raw material for skin grafts through a channel that is managed so efficiently that even FDA is of no help.

And between Nepal, India and US; and all the rich, including the celebrities, who pay for these aesthetic restructuring or the cosmetic surgery, hundreds of women in Nepal and brothels in India are exploited while the industry thrives.

(Names of victims changed)

All photographs by the author

57K SHARES
I Took A Journey Down Ganga’s Tributaries’, And What I Saw Was Horrifying

Cleaning the Ganga was a major election plank for the victorious Narendra Modi-led NDA. The same Ganga where 80% of untreated waste is dumped in from 138 open drains. So when I decided to take a journey down the river, I did what no traveller does. Instead of the ghats, I decided to travel down the *nalas* (drains) that have become the new-age tributaries to the holiest of the Indian holy rivers. I chose Kanpur and Varanasi, based on a 2013 report of the Central Pollution Control Board which called the stretch between these two cities as the most polluted part of Ganga’s course.

Kanpur has 400 leather units spouting cocktails of dangerous chemicals and heavy metals into the river. My first stop was Sisamau Nala, one of the largest open drains in Kanpur. The dense slummy settlements of Bakarmandi caps around the head of Sisamau. Every day 197 million litres of dark sewage water is flushed out of the city through this *nala* into the Ganga. The residents of Bakarmandi are horrified by some of the contents that pass down the drain. Rotting cadavers, complains one of the residents. Carcases of animals, complains another resident when we met the slum dwellers at seven o’clock in the morning.
Every monsoon, the *nala* overflows, flooding their homes with excreta and the filth that it carries. The safai *karmacharis* (cleaning staff) wade through this bemired drain to scoop out anything solid that may obstruct the flow of the black water. I saw 20 *karamcharis* who work for about half an hour and are paid daily wages by a contractor. They collect mounds of plastic, polyethene, cloth and other sundries right next to the drain which are pushed back into the drain in the afternoon again. This has become a daily cycle.

As I continue downstream, I come across a municipal dump yard in Khalasi Line. This is perhaps one the cleanest dump yards I had ever seen. “*The waste collected from our homes is seldom taken to the dump. The small hand carts that collect waste are emptied in the nala on its way to the dump,*” says Ram Kumar Maurya, a resident of Gualtolli. The locality has a thriving vegetable and meat market along
the *nala*, and all the waste from the market and the homes in the area is dumped right in, which ultimately reaches the Ganga.

**A Waterfall Of Filth**

The mouth of the Sisamau Nala can be easily confused for a natural waterfall, except there are two concrete bulwarks that guide the water into the river. There was also a nostril-numbing stench that gave away the drain’s dirty credentials. The bank of the river near the outfall was covered with plastic, decaying clothes and animal carcasses. On the banks, boatmen sit with fishing-lines trying to catch the hybrid Tilapia, an invasive species of fish which they sell in the local markets. This is the only fish that can survive in these heavily polluted waters.

The Sisamau Nala that looks nothing less than a waterfall drains untreated sewage into the river.

I wanted to go close to the mouth of the *nala* and approached the fishing boatmen, but none of them wanted to take me near. They were scared of their oars getting caught in the plastic and the clothes dumped down the drain. There was also a large
volume of water that was being deposited at this confluence, which created strong currents making it harder for boatmen to steer their boats. But after 15 minutes of cajoling and coaxing, Rajesh Kumar Kashyap decided to hazard the trip. He set a condition though: I would have to accompany the boatman to his farm, opposite the nala on the other side of the river.

“80% of water supplied to households return as wastewater.”

As I clicked the photographs, I could feel a mist originating from the waterfall leaving a dark oily film on my hair, skin and clothes that stayed with me for the rest of my working day.

I kept my promise and accompanied the boatman to his farm – a small patch of land on which they grow gourds and melons. Every season, that is, every six months, Rs 5,000 is all they profit from the melon plantation.

“If we use water from the river, all the plants die,” says Rajesh. Rajan, his uncle, also told me how he lost his reti or land that he used to cultivate on after the construction of a barrage nearby. He wasn’t alone. Just like him, about a 100 more people lost their reti.

Rotting River Banks

About 400 million litres of waste flows every day into the river in Kanpur. Waste water pipes from buildings jut out like turrets discharging kitchen and toilet slurry. I travel up the river, the sights around the various nalas look all the same. I wondered how people live here? Was it that the residents on the banks have lost their olfactory abilities, the stench may have cauterised their receptors.

“500 million litres of industrial discharge flows into Ganga from 764 industries every day.”

I saw the Parmat, Kalighatiya, Baba, Police line, and the Bhagwat Das Ghat nalas. And there was also the Peruniya Nala which releases 186 million litres a day of
sewage into the river. “More than ghats, it’s the nalas of Kanpur that are like landmarks to the people living near the banks of the Ganga,” says Rajesh, my boatman.

I decided to call it a day after our boatman refused to go beyond Golaghat Nala. The riverbed was shallow here because of heavy sedimentation and hard for boats to ply. The sun too was on its last lap, and the stench and muck had made our brains go a little dizzy.

Cauldron Of Chemicals

I started at 5 a.m. the next day. Today, I had planned to visit Jajmau, known for its tannery clusters that produce leather good for export. Jajmau is located close to the Lucknow-Kanpur highway about 30 minutes drive from the city. It has 400 units that make leather and industrial glue.

Once again, the stench welcomes us in Jajmau. I am warned that people working in these units do not like journalists clicking photographs, so I had to be cautious. My task at hand was to find the Wazidpore Nala that releases 54 million litres of industrial wastewater every day into the Ganga.

The Wajidpore Nalla drains untreated toxic wastewater into Ganga directly. The water looks bluish because of the presence of Chromium, a chemical that is used in leather industries.
The people living around the tannery cluster in Jajmau are of slight build. This is not because of hard manual labour but because eating a meal becomes difficult. People, most of them tannery workers and their families we talked to complained that they had lost appetite. A drive along Wajidpore Nala is enough to make one dizzy. Thirty-years-old Amina Bibi, the wife of a tannery worker, says her eight-year-old son Anwar, always complains of stomach ache. "The doctor keeps telling us to live in a clean and hygienic place. We have nowhere to go. Being sick is our fate which we have to accept," says Amina Bibi.

Ganga looks quite different at the outfall of the nala. The water is black and foamy. The chemicals in the effluents discharged by the nala flow down into the river. Ganga is turbid and thick here, oxygen bubbling out of it. For over a stretch of about 10 km of the river between Jajmau and Fatehpur, the Ganga stays this way.

**Cursed Village Of Jana**

Very close to the outfall is the Jana village. This village with about 120 families is said to be cursed. People seldom visit their relatives who stay in Jana. Those who do visit Jana, ensure that they do not eat or drink anything unless it is packaged.

Water and the soil of this village are poisoned, says Anil Kumar, a resident of the village. "Women give birth to sick children. Every child or man or woman in this village is sickly. The chemicals eat away the fingers and toes of those who work in the fields," says Kumar.

Kumar’s mother, 82-year-old Ishwari Devi, has no finger left. It looks as if she has leprosy, but her son insists that it was because of the water laden with poisonous chemicals that the tanneries released on their fields, which crippled her and others in the village. Ishwari Devi, who had lost her husband early, used to work in the fields to earn a living.
Shiv Charan Nishad, a resident of Jana village, lost his ability to work after the toxic chemical-laden wastewater deformed his fingers.

Shiv Charan Nishad, another elderly resident of the village, has a hearing problem. He too has deformed fingers and toes. Initially, he thought it was symptomatic of leprosy but the doctor he was consulting told him that it was the handiwork of the chemicals.

The animals in this village have also stopped giving milk. There is only one hand-pump in the village, which is free of contamination, so animals are given water from this hand-pump. None of the traders at the Ramadevi Vegetable Market a few kilometres away will buy the greens if they come to know that it has come from Jana village, says Kumar.

Tubewell water turns yellow once exposed to air. The iron poles and gates at people’s houses have started corroding. “Even the air has something in it. It eats away metals,” says 45-year-old Rama devi who shows her anklets and her silver rings which have turned black. And, I too got a tiny dose of this wretched place. While walking, I stepped into a ditch. My toes started to itch a feeling similar to touching diluted acid used to clean toilets in homes.

Gautam Kashyap, a resident of Jana, says that about 10 years ago, the villagers contributed money and approached a member of a non-profit organisation to help them to take the tanneries to court. The representative of the non-profit filed a case in Allahabad High Court but later fled with the money and documents that were entrusted to him. “He was being paid off by the industry owners,” Gautam said.
Is It A Drain Or A River?

I was confused. Dabka Nala, which came after Wajidpore Nala, is a drain. Why would anybody build a temple beside it? But there it was! On the banks of the nala was a worn down signboard with Dabkeswar Mahadev Mandir written on it. My driver had a very simple answer. “Even Assi and Varuna were rivers, but now they are known as nalas.” I called up a senior official of Jal Nigam to ask him whether Dabka was ever a small tributary of Ganga and urbanisation had turned it into a nala. But he said he did not have any information or records on it. The officials in Kanpur and Varanasi are truly ignorant of the resources present in the ministry. The urban planning of cities like Kanpur is so haphazard because of the lack of information and records.

The open drain, Dabka Nala, that carries untreated effluents right into the river. And with this, my journey across the nalas of Kanpur came to an end. It was extremely disheartening to see the criminal wastage of money on cleaning the river. The government keeps organising seminars and conferences and consultations. The court keeps ordering status checks and regulation of factories. But, the helplessness of the situation in Kanpur is appalling. While on one side, the municipal
corporation has failed miserably to control illegal encroachment of drainage channels and treatment of domestic wastewater, Samajwadi Party’s heavyweight Irfan Solanki has made sure that leather industries remain out of the purview of law. Caught between the administrative inefficiency and vote bank politics, Ganga dies a quiet death in Kanpur.

All photos by Soma Basu

A Walk Through PM Modi’s Constituency Will Tell You Why The Ganga Won’t Survive

It is around 40° Celsius in Varanasi. Just climbing a few weathered stairs of the ghats is enough to make one wonder whether the heart is beating or the head. The slow, monotonous drum beating inside one’s body drowns all the noise of the busy chaotic ghats. Even as the sun singes the skin, Uma Shankar, 40-year-old boatman, continues to row his boat against the flow of Ganga. Sweat rains down his body and his mouth is shut tight. Just slow steady breath and the sound of the water hitting his
rows say he is still there. Normally, Uma Shankar, a – Nishad (caste) – who according to various mythological stories are known to be children of water, would pause for a break; wash his face and mouth in the river and take tourists around, narrating them stories of Ganga and the 84 ghats. But now, things have changed.

The two gaudy pink pillars are sewage pumping stations at Dashashwamedh Ghat. These pumping stations operate for just three hours every day.

Union water resources minister, Uma Bharti, declared that people found spitting in Ganga could be fined Rs 10,000 or three days imprisonment. Uma Shankar steals glances at me carrying my camera and is scared that a single snap of him washing in Ganga may cost him his boat. So, he sits quietly trying not to spill the betel juice from his mouth and doesn’t take the risk of touching the water that, according to ancient scriptures, he was born in.
At the same time when Uma Shankar is trying hard to not pollute the river by spitting or washing in it, the cities along the river are dumping 7,322 million litres of untreated sewage into Ganga every day.

Ganga was declared National River on February 20, 2009. All of us have heard big names like Ganga Action Plan Phase I, Phase II, Phase infinity… Even after so many years of budgetary allocations and international tie-ups, domestic sewage remains the major cause of pollution in Ganga. Studies by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) indicate that 2,723 million litres a day (MLD) of sewage is generated by 50 cities located along the river, which adds up to over 85% of the river’s pollution load. In Varanasi, the sewage ends up in Ganga through the 31 open drains between Varuna and Assi river.

**A History Of Failures**

According to CPCB, the amount of domestic sewage generated is much more than the treatment capacity of the various Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs) installed in cities along Ganga. In 2013, CPCB estimated that generation of domestic sewage is to the tune of 2,723.30 MLD. However, the treatment capacity of various STPs was merely 1,208.80 MLD.
Assi, a holy river from which Varanasi derives its name, is named Nagwa Nala (drain) in official records.

In 2013, the CPCB ran a check on 51 of the 64 STPs and found that less than 60% of the installed capacity was being utilised, and 30% of the plants were not even in operation. A year later, CPCB collected data again, and it was found that the actual measured discharge of wastewater into Ganga is 6,087 MLD – which is 123% higher than the estimated discharge of wastewater.

A briefing paper on Ganga by Centre for Science and Environment breaks these numbers down and makes it simpler for us to understand – the gap between treated and untreated waste is not 55%, but 80%!

This is the gap that remained even after spending crores of rupees in various phases, under different names. Clearly, the Sewage Treatment Plants which the government perhaps sees as a magic-wand formula for cleaning the holy river is not so foolproof after all.
Think about it. First of all, several old cities in the country still rely on very, very old drainage pipelines which were built to dispose sewage into the river. When these channels were made, the population was not as much as it is now and so, nobody could even imagine that decades later, domestic sewage would be something of concern. Or maybe, they were short-sighted!

Varuna, another river from which Varanasi derives its name, used to be a very crucial recharge source for the river. But, is a toxic drain of sewage and chemicals now.

The modern pipelines built to supply sewage to the treatment plants are often made without any planning. On top of that, about 80-85% of Allahabad, Varanasi and Kanpur, does not have underground sewage channels. The ones that exist, require a good pumping system to carry sewage or wastewater to the STPs. Anybody who lives in Uttar Pradesh knows the how irregular electricity supply is. So, these pumping stations need diesel to operate. But, the diesel gets stolen! Yes, you read that right. Diesel theft is a matter of grave concern, especially in states like Uttar Pradesh. So half of the time, neither the pumping stations nor the STPs are working. The sewage keeps flowing into the Ganga through open drains and drainage channels. Every STP needs a certain amount of sewage to operate. When it doesn't
get enough sewage (in absence of drainage channels and pumping facility), it sits as pretty as an expensive, huge vase in your drawing room in which you can’t even keep flowers because you simply don’t have those many flowers.

“80-85% of Allahabad, Varanasi and Kanpur, does not have an underground sewage channel”

So, that pretty much sums up what the UPA government did for our holiest of holy rivers, Ganga. Wait a minute! NDA is not to be celebrated so soon.

The NDA government used an even fancier name – Namami Gange Project. Wow! What happened on the ground in the name of Ganga cleaning was the concretization of ghats, installation of fancy dustbins here and there, and surface cleaning drives. Concerned about the wastage of public funds, the National Green Tribunal has recently warned the government that the entire case would be handed over to the Central Bureau of Investigation.

To make matters worse, the government announced Jal Marg Vikas Project – a 1620-km inland waterway from Varanasi to Haldia – to ship industrial goods. The ₹4,200 crore project was flagged off by road transport and shipping minister Nitin Gadkari in August 2016. Our PM, former CM of Gujarat, evidently sees a business opportunity in everything (I am going to be trolled now).

**River Morphology vs Red Tapism**

“Funny but yes, waterways! So that whatever Gangetic dolphins are left in the river die because of the big ships and fuel leaks,” says BD Tripathi, a member of National Ganga River Basin Authority (NGRBA). Interestingly, NGRBA is a body made of reputed river scientists in the country, and three of its members were so sick of government inaction that they resigned. Rest of the members haven’t met in ages. Visibly peeved Tripathi says that every government ignores the real issues when it
comes to Ganga and the word pollution and penalising the poor become a tactic to divert people’s attention from what concerns the river today.

This is how Nagwa Nala (originally Assi River) looks when it flows through the city of Varanasi.

Prof. UK Choudhary, of Ganga Research Centre, Banaras Hindu University, says Ganga can never be rejuvenated if it does not have enough water. Rivers have a self-cleaning ability, which allows for assimilation and treatment of biological waste. But in the current context, where withdrawal from the river is much higher than the discharge of waste, pollution is inevitable, says both Choudhary and Tripathi.

Choudhary explains that Ganga’s originality is threatened. Of the 10,600 cubic ft/sec water at Narora and Bhimgoda barrage, 10,300 cubic feet/sec is diverted. This leaves Ganga starving at a large stretch downstream. The dynamics of the river is destroyed. With the decrease in velocity, its oxygen content is also reduced.
“By 2025-2030, the crescent shape of Varanasi would be lost”

This has increased the sedimentation process, and since the storage potential of the river is destroyed, it is an open invitation to floods, explains Choudhary. Because of change in meandering of the river, the erosion has also increased at the ghats of Panchganga, Ramganga, Manikarnika and Dashashwamedh in Varanasi. The velocity of the river has increased near the ghats with strong currents cutting into the base of the city. Depth of the river has risen from 15 ft to about 20 ft. “If this continues, by 2025-2030, the crescent shape of Varanasi would be lost. It is a great risk to the city, but hardly anybody is looking into the problem,” he says.

Travelling from nalla to nalla, I come across the water pumping station near Tulsi ghat. An activist told us that during floods, the pumps are submerged into the river. Since Assi River or Nagwa Nala is just upstream the water works, what the whole of Varanasi drinks that time could be water with much higher contamination. Well, let me spell it out for you, Varanasi drinks its own sewage!

**Ganga Dies A Painful Death**

Varanasi gets its name from two rivers Varuna and Assi. Both of them have now turned into drains.

On a Sunday morning, I decided to walk through the old part of the city, a labyrinth of tattered tenements, connected by narrow cobbled paths. Pilgrims come to Varanasi for spiritual reasons. But here, as I saw, there was nothing spiritual about the open garbage dumps and cobbled paths smeared with animal and human faeces. A large area of Varanasi, especially the banks of the river, is an open defecation ground. Just like the old and dilapidated building, this city of 3.7 million people and a huge floating population of tourists and pilgrims, the garbage and sewerage infrastructure is also on the verge of collapse.
Early morning, near Varuna, I spotted as many as three dead bodies floating in the water. Near Scindia Ghat, I see animal carcasses; and on the adjacent ghat, pilgrims taking a dip in the river.

More than 300 dead bodies are cremated at Manikarnika Ghat every day. The remains are washed into the river at the end of the ritual.

The Ramnagar Ghat is a new destination for bathers. Since the water near the prominent ghats is dirty, people cross the river to bathe at the Ramnagar Ghat which is the river’s sand bank just opposite Dashashwamedh Ghat. I saw a bunch of youths go wild pulling at each other’s clothes. Much of this (torn clothes, sarees, gamchhas) ends up on the ghat. A stretch of the ghat visible even from the other side of the wide river is a mini dump yard coming up with plastic waste, clothes and garbage left behind by the pilgrims.
This is exactly the reason why I was very surprised to learn that this very crowded, dirty ghat, had been declared a turtle sanctuary by the Uttar Pradesh government a couple of years ago. I came to know of it from a run-down board lying as far as Narad Ghat! At Narad Ghat, I asked a man sitting near the board about the turtle sanctuary. “Sarkar chhore the 400-500 kacchue. Kuchh kacchue to tairte hue doosre shahar pohoch gaye honge. Baaki ko logo ne pakar pakar ke kha liya…” (Government released 400-500 turtles in the sanctuary. Some swam to other cities while others were eaten by people)” No wonder, that turtles are nowhere to be seen in this sanctuary. However, since the area has been declared a turtle sanctuary, dredging of sand has been banned. And, since the level of sand is increasing with every passing day, river currents are pushed towards the ghats, eroding them eventually.

“It is only the poor who are always taxed in the name of pollution”

So, in Narendra Modi’s constituency, I find very little action on cleaning or preserving the river. What is seen on the ground is panic. When Uma Shankar finally spit the betel juice out into the river and managed to speak, he said: “But it is only the poor who are always taxed in the name of pollution. We cannot wash or bath or catch fish in Ganga. But, the large drains that are pouring the entire city’s filth into Ganga Maiyya are never plugged.”

All photos by Soma Basu