Rivers are among India's most important natural resources. They provide drinking water, support agriculture, sustain wildlife, generate livelihoods and hold immense cultural and religious significance.

However, industrial pollution, untreated sewage, plastic waste, encroachment and irresponsible human activities have threatened several Indian rivers.

The Supreme Court of India and the National Green Tribunal (NGT) have delivered important judgments and orders addressing these problems.

The following cases are categorised by the issue they address, with the background, court's decision and significance explained in simple language.

CATEGORY 1: PROTECTION OF RIVERS FROM INDUSTRIAL POLLUTION

1. M.C. Mehta v. Union of India (1987) – Ganga Pollution Case

Industrial pollution and river conservation

Background of the case

During the 1980s, the River Ganga was facing severe pollution, particularly around Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh.

Several tanneries and industries situated along the river were releasing untreated industrial waste directly into the water. This affected the quality of water used by millions of people.

Environmental lawyer M.C. Mehta approached the Supreme Court through a Public Interest Litigation (PIL), seeking action against industries responsible for polluting the Ganga.

What did the Supreme Court decide?

On 22 September 1987, the Supreme Court directed polluting tanneries to establish primary treatment facilities before discharging their industrial waste into the river.

The Court ordered the closure of tanneries that failed to comply with the requirements.

It made it clear that industries could not continue polluting the river simply because installing treatment facilities was expensive.

Why is this judgment important?

This was an important development in Indian environmental law. It established that industrial development cannot take place at the cost of public health and environmental protection.

It also demonstrated that an ordinary citizen can approach the Supreme Court to protect a natural resource, even without personally owning land beside the river.

Civic lesson: Rivers are not industrial dumping grounds. Businesses, government authorities and citizens all have responsibilities towards protecting them.

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2. M.C. Mehta v. Union of India (1988) – Responsibility of Kanpur Municipal Authorities

Sewage management and municipal accountability

Background of the case

After examining industrial pollution in the Ganga, the Supreme Court considered another major source of contamination: untreated sewage from Kanpur city.

Large quantities of domestic sewage were flowing into the river through open drains. Municipal authorities had failed to adequately manage sewage and sanitation despite

having legal responsibilities.

What did the Supreme Court decide?

On 12 January 1988, the Supreme Court issued directions to the Kanpur municipal authorities concerning drainage, sanitation and the prevention of sewage pollution.

It emphasised that municipalities have statutory responsibilities to maintain cleanliness and prevent water pollution.

The Court also made observations concerning the responsibility of municipal authorities in other towns and cities situated along the Ganga.
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Why is this judgment important?

It expanded the understanding of river pollution.

Cleaning a river does not simply mean controlling factories. Untreated sewage from households, cities and municipalities can also severely damage river ecosystems.

Civic lesson: River protection requires proper sewage treatment, effective municipal administration and responsible disposal of household waste.
CATEGORY 2: POLLUTION OF RIVERS THROUGH INDUSTRIAL WASTE AND CHEMICAL DISCHARGE
3. Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum v. Union of India (1996) – River Palar Pollution Case
Polluter Pays Principle and Precautionary Principle
Background of the case

The River Palar in Tamil Nadu was an important source of drinking water and irrigation for surrounding communities.

Several tanneries were releasing untreated chemical waste into agricultural fields, open land, groundwater and waterways. This eventually polluted the River Palar.

The pollution damaged agricultural land, contaminated wells and affected the availability of safe drinking water.

Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum approached the Supreme Court seeking action against the industries.

What did the Supreme Court decide?

On 28 August 1996, the Supreme Court recognised two important principles of environmental law:

- Polluter Pays Principle: Industries responsible for pollution must pay not only for the damage caused to people but also for restoring the damaged environment.
- Precautionary Principle: Authorities must take preventive action when there is a serious threat to the environment, even if complete scientific evidence of the damage is not yet available.

The Court directed the establishment of an authority to assess environmental damage and ordered action against polluting industries, including compensation and closure for non-compliance.

Why is this judgment important?

It established that industries cannot make profits while leaving ordinary citizens to suffer the consequences of environmental destruction.

It also strengthened the connection between environmental protection and the right to life under Article 21.

Civic lesson: Businesses must take responsibility for the environmental consequences of their activities. Clean water is essential to human dignity and public health.

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4. Indian Council for Enviro-Legal Action v. Union of India (1996) – Bichhri Village Pollution Case

Industrial chemical pollution and environmental restoration

Background of the case

In Bichhri village in Rajasthan, chemical industries were manufacturing hazardous substances and releasing untreated toxic waste.

The waste contaminated the surrounding soil and groundwater, affecting agriculture and the lives of local residents.

The Indian Council for Enviro-Legal Action approached the Supreme Court seeking action against the industries.

What did the Supreme Court decide?

The Supreme Court held the polluting industries responsible for the environmental damage.

It directed them to bear the cost of remedial measures required to restore the polluted environment.

The Court applied the Polluter Pays Principle and emphasised that the cost of environmental restoration must be borne by those responsible for the pollution.

Why is this judgment important?

It established that environmental responsibility does not end with stopping pollution. The damage already caused must also be addressed.

Although this case primarily concerned soil and groundwater contamination rather than pollution of a particular river, it is highly relevant to the protection of water resources.

Civic lesson: Preventing pollution is important, but restoring damaged ecosystems is equally necessary.
ielrc.org+1

CATEGORY 3: PROTECTION OF RIVERS FROM COMMERCIAL EXPLOITATION

5. M.C. Mehta v. Kamal Nath (1996; reported in 1997)

Public Trust Doctrine

Background of the case

A motel associated with the family of Kamal Nath had undertaken construction activities near the River Beas in Himachal Pradesh.

These activities interfered with the natural flow of the river and affected the surrounding ecological area.

The matter reached the Supreme Court because the government had permitted commercial activities on ecologically sensitive land.

What did the Supreme Court decide?

The Supreme Court applied the Public Trust Doctrine.

It held that natural resources such as rivers, forests, lakes and seashores are held by the government in trust for the public.

The Court ordered restoration of the affected area and imposed environmental compensation.

Why is this judgment important?

It established that the government is a trustee of natural resources, not their unrestricted owner.

A river cannot be diverted, damaged or exploited merely to benefit a private commercial establishment.

Civic lesson: Rivers are a shared national inheritance. Their protection must take priority over activities that damage public resources and ecological balance.
Patna High Court+1

CATEGORY 4: RIGHT TO CLEAN WATER AS A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT

6. Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar (1991)

Right to clean water under Article 21

Background of the case

A petition was filed alleging that industrial waste from coal washeries was polluting the River Bokaro in Bihar.

The petitioner argued that the pollution was affecting the quality of water and the surrounding environment.

The matter reached the Supreme Court under Article 32 of the Constitution.

What did the Supreme Court decide?

The Court recognised that the right to life under Article 21 includes the right to enjoy pollution-free water and air.

However, it dismissed the particular petition because it found that the case had not been brought genuinely in the public interest.

Why is this judgment important?

It strengthened the constitutional connection between environmental protection and the right to life.

Clean water is not merely a natural resource; it is essential to human health, dignity and survival.

Civic lesson: Every person has an interest in protecting clean water. Citizens can approach the courts through genuine Public Interest Litigation when environmental rights are threatened.

Indian Kanoon+1

CATEGORY 5: PROTECTION OF THE GANGA THROUGH CONTINUOUS JUDICIAL MONITORING

7. M.C. Mehta v. Union of India – Ganga Rejuvenation Proceedings (2014–2021)

Supreme Court and National Green Tribunal proceedings

Background of the case

The Ganga pollution case, which began in 1985, continued for several decades.

Despite earlier Supreme Court directions, untreated sewage, industrial waste, plastic waste and other pollutants continued entering the river.

The case eventually involved several stretches of the Ganga, from its origin in Uttarakhand to its journey through Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal.

What did the courts decide?

The Supreme Court transferred relevant proceedings to the National Green Tribunal (NGT) for further examination and monitoring.

The NGT passed important orders in 2015 and 2017, directing authorities to address sewage discharge, industrial pollution, waste disposal and the protection of river floodplains.

It also divided the Ganga into different geographical stretches so that pollution-control measures could be implemented systematically.

In subsequent proceedings, the NGT reviewed the progress made by government authorities and examined whether its directions were being followed.

Why is this judgment important?

It demonstrated that protecting a river requires continuous monitoring rather than simply passing one judgment.

It also highlighted the importance of coordination between different states and government departments because rivers flow across administrative boundaries.

Civic lesson: River conservation requires long-term commitment, cooperation between states and accountability from government authorities.

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CATEGORY 6: PROTECTION AND REJUVENATION OF THE YAMUNA

8. Manoj Mishra v. Union of India – Yamuna Pollution Case (2015 onwards)

Yamuna cleaning and floodplain protection

Background of the case

The River Yamuna is one of India's most important rivers and a major source of water for several cities, including Delhi.

However, the river has faced severe pollution due to untreated sewage, industrial discharge, dumping of solid waste and encroachment on its floodplains.

Environmental activist Manoj Mishra approached the National Green Tribunal seeking effective measures to restore the Yamuna.

What did the National Green Tribunal decide?

On 13 January 2015, the NGT delivered an important order concerning the rejuvenation of the Yamuna.

It directed authorities to:

- Prevent untreated sewage and industrial waste from entering the river.

- Improve sewage treatment infrastructure.
- Protect the river's floodplain areas.
- Maintain the natural flow of the river.
- Prevent dumping of construction waste and municipal garbage.

In subsequent proceedings, the Tribunal also established monitoring mechanisms to review the progress of the restoration work.

Why is this judgment important?

It recognised that cleaning the Yamuna requires more than removing visible garbage from its surface.

The river's natural flow, floodplains, sewage systems and surrounding ecosystems must also be protected.

Civic lesson: Citizens must avoid dumping garbage, plastic and construction waste into rivers or on their banks. Governments must ensure effective sewage treatment and protect floodplains.

Indian Kanoon+2

CATEGORY 7: RIVER CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

9. Narmada Bachao Andolan v. Union of India (2000)

River development, environmental protection and rehabilitation

Background of the case

The Narmada River flows through central India and supports millions of people.

The Sardar Sarovar Dam project on the river was intended to provide irrigation, drinking water and electricity to several regions.

However, the project also raised concerns about the displacement of communities, submergence of villages and forests, and environmental consequences.

The Narmada Bachao Andolan challenged the project before the Supreme Court.

What did the Supreme Court decide?

In October 2000, the Supreme Court, by a majority, permitted construction of the dam to proceed in stages, subject to compliance with environmental safeguards and rehabilitation requirements.

The Court emphasised that rehabilitation and resettlement of affected families had to proceed alongside the construction.

There was also a dissenting opinion by Justice S.P. Bharucha, who took a different view concerning the project's environmental and rehabilitation requirements.

Why is this judgment important?

It highlighted the difficult relationship between large development projects, environmental protection and the rights of communities affected by those projects.

It demonstrated that river development cannot be considered only in terms of electricity and irrigation; its social and environmental consequences must also be examined.

Civic lesson: Development should be planned responsibly, with due consideration for the environment, affected communities and future generations.

Indian Kanoon+1

CATEGORY 8: THE PRINCIPLES ESTABLISHED BY RIVER PROTECTION JUDGMENTS

The above cases have contributed to several important principles of Indian environmental law.

Legal principle Meaning in simple language Important case

Right to clean water Clean water is essential to the constitutional right to life. Subhash Kumar (1991)

Polluter Pays Principle The person or industry causing pollution must pay for the damage and restoration. Vellore Citizens (1996)

Precautionary Principle Prevent environmental damage before it becomes irreversible. Vellore Citizens (1996)

Public Trust Doctrine The government holds rivers and other natural resources in trust for the public. M.C. Mehta v. Kamal Nath

Sustainable Development Development must balance economic progress with environmental protection. Narmada Bachao Andolan (2000)

Public participation Citizens can approach courts to protect environmental interests. M.C. Mehta – Ganga case (1987)

The constitutional foundation of river protection

Three constitutional provisions are particularly important:

- Article 21 – Right to Life: The Supreme Court has interpreted the right to life to include the right to enjoy pollution-free water and air.

- Article 48A – Directive Principle: The State must protect and improve the environment and safeguard forests and wildlife.

- Article 51A(g) – Fundamental Duty: Every citizen has a duty to protect and improve the natural environment, including rivers, lakes and forests.

What do these judgments mean for ordinary citizens?

River protection is not limited to courtrooms or government projects. It begins with everyday actions.

1. Avoid throwing plastic, household waste and religious offerings into rivers.

2. Do not discharge untreated wastewater into drains and water bodies.

3. Support responsible waste segregation and disposal.

4. Report illegal dumping and industrial pollution to appropriate authorities.

5. Respect riverbanks, wetlands and floodplain ecosystems.

6. Participate in genuine community-led river conservation initiatives.

Conclusion: Rivers are a shared responsibility

The landmark judgments of the Supreme Court and the National Green Tribunal demonstrate that rivers are not simply channels through which water flows. They are living ecosystems that support human communities, agriculture, wildlife and biodiversity.

From the Ganga pollution case of 1987 to the Yamuna rejuvenation proceedings, the judiciary has repeatedly emphasised the importance of clean water, environmental accountability and the protection of natural resources.

However, judicial directions alone cannot restore a river. Effective implementation by governments, responsible industrial practices and public participation are equally important.

A river cannot protect itself from the consequences of human activity. Protecting it is our responsibility, not merely an obligation imposed on the government.