

Water, water everywhere...

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Rivers bind people together," says Parineeta Dandekar, associate coordinator, South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People (SANDRP). Dandekar, who will be awarded with the Kirloskar Vasundhara Mitra Award during the Kirloskar Vasundhara International Film Festival this evening, is involved with action research, writing and dissemination, advocacy and mobilisation on issues related to large infrastructure affecting rivers, communities and ecosystems at SANDRP. She also works towards highlighting the positive impacts of community-led water management, river management and river rejuvenation initiatives across the state and the country.

The ecosystem

Speaking of the water ecosystem of India, Dandekar says, "Rivers are now at the centre of elections and mired in constant tussles, change of ministries and misplaced policies. There is this hullabaloo about the Ganga and tackling water pollution. We as a country are obsessed with pollution. But there are so many aspects to a river. It is an ecosystem in itself. We need to understand this and act accordingly."

Dandekar, who is the member Trustee of River Research Centre, Kerala, adds, "At SANDRP, we think that having a healthy river ecosystem is not a luxury but a necessity. All these plans of interlinking rivers that are on in the Western Ghats, creating metro routes through the river beds are complicating matters. We fail to realise that it is not only the

rural population that depends on rivers, but the urban population too is very much dependent on it."

Working at policy level

The solution is sustained policy making. Currently, the three major interlinking projects underway in the country are Ken-Betwa River Project, Tapi-Narmada Water Transfer and the Damanganga-Pinjal link project. "The water from the Damanganga-Pinjal link project is to facilitate water supply to Mumbai. But when we have these surplus-deficit river basins discussions, it is hugely flawed. We cannot completely use up water from one river basin and then call it deficit. We are obsessed with mega schemes and in the process, are not looking at smaller and more sustainable options," says Dandekar, who was the recipient of the Joke Waller Hunter environment leadership fellowship award (2009-10).

The river activist also believes that Mumbai's water woes are because of its inability to tackle its loss at distribution. Says she, "Mumbai doesn't treat even 20 per cent of its sewage, which is a larger issue in my view.

The Damanganga project, which is supposed to help the city, is causing so much displacement and killing the forests, when they are in fact our insurance plans."

Dam it!

In the recent past, we saw an era of extensive dam building, only to later realise that it wasn't probably the best idea. That scenario exists even now, according to Dandekar.

"We are still building dams right, left and centre. The Ganga river ba-

Striving to achieve water policy-making in a just manner and ensuring constructive governance is crucial, says

Parineeta Dandekar, associate coordinator, South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People (SANDRP)



The way forward

Since rivers bind people together, a lot of campaigning is necessary to save the water bodies. "Our country's strength is our environment legislation, which is nuanced and quite logical. But we need to make sure that it's implemented correctly. Democratic processes must help governance and not hamper it. For instance, people are not able to visit sewage treatment plants in Pune; they have to face so many hurdles. This is ridiculous. People should be able to see how their sewage is being treated," Dandekar explains.

SANDRP and other organisations help by monitoring environmental clearances at every step. "The work we do and we all need to do is very non-glamorous," says Dandekar. The need, according to her, is to bring together all the stakeholders — scientists, communities, policy makers and activists. "To strive to achieve water policy making in a just manner and ensuring constructive governance is crucial. You need to get into the messy realm of things to bring about a constructive change. The water-river discourse in the country is otherwise very worrying and river restoration ways are very scary," she concludes.