




Sustainability Award
 The First in Class Sustainability award is conferred upon
THE YAMUNA RIVER INITIATIVE

 in the presence of
Shri Ashish Sood
 Minister of Education, Govt of NCT of Delhi
 at a ceremony at the Imperial Hotel, New Delhi

Sustainability in Education: Bringing the Yamuna into the Classroom



The Yamuna River Initiative (YaRI) sits squarely at the intersection of education, environment, and citizenship. It is a river-based, interdisciplinary school education program developed by the Modern Institute for Education. Its purpose is simple but urgent: to reconnect children with the river that sustains their city—and, in doing so, to build informed and responsible citizens.

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While developing this program, we spoke to students to understand what they knew about the Yamuna. What we heard was deeply unsettling. Shockingly, some children—born and raised in Delhi—told us they felt disappointed that their state had no river. They spoke fondly of visits to Banaras or other riverside towns, yet were unaware that they themselves live alongside one of India's great rivers.

This is the irony of our times. Many children in Delhi experience the Yamuna not as a living river, but as a polluted water body below a bridge, or a polluted drain, or a blue line on a map. This physical and emotional disconnect is not harmless. It creates water illiteracy.

And water illiteracy, in today's India, is dangerous. Why? Because with 18% of the world's population dependent on just 4% of global freshwater, & where 70% of surface water is polluted. India's water challenges are growing faster than our children are. Climate change is turning once-perennial Himalayan rivers into unpredictable, monsoon-dependent systems, while groundwater is extracted faster than it can recharge. This scale is unmatched anywhere in the world. If we don't act now, water scarcity will not be a future threat; it will consume the lives of today's children in their own lifetimes.

This is why water education cannot remain fragmented or optional. It must become a core pillar of school curricula. Students often study isolated concepts—evaporation, rainfall, pollution—but rarely understand the interconnectedness of how river systems connect ecology, economy and culture.

A meaningful water curriculum must help students see water as a shared, finite, and fragile resource. It must move beyond awareness to responsibility, empowering students to think critically and act locally.

National policies already point us in this direction. The NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023 emphasize experiential learning, local knowledge systems, and environmental consciousness. In Delhi, there is no better “water-classroom” than the Yamuna ... a river that embodies our city's history and culture and meets over 70% of its water needs.

Attitudes towards nature are shaped early in life. Children who learn to observe, question, and care for their environment grow into adults who make informed decisions. During our research, this truth became painfully clear through a conversation with a Jal Mitra under the Jal Jeevan Mission.

She spoke about water not just as a resource issue, but as a gender issue. As women typically run households, look after children and handle washing and cooking, water scarcity primarily affects them. As a young girl, she was denied education because her role was to fetch water. Her motivation to become a Jal Mitra was simple: to ensure her daughter would not lose her childhood to the same burden.

This is the human cost of water mismanagement—and the human promise of fixing it.

The YaRI Initiative places the Yamuna at the heart of learning—not as an abstract idea, but as a living system connecting science, history, culture, and citizenship. It asks students hard questions: Where does this river come from? Who depends on it? Why do we pollute it? What happens to my family, my city, my country if it remains polluted? And most importantly, what is my role in its future?

Early outcomes are encouraging. Through literature, nukkad nataks, digital prototypes, and research projects, students are discovering that they are not powerless. They are part of the solution.

Research supported by UNICEF shows that children exposed to environmental education are more likely to conserve water, influence family behaviour, and engage responsibly in civic life. A child who understands water scarcity will not waste water. A child who understands rivers will protect them.

Educating our children today is the most effective long-term investment India can make in water security. Without this shift in education, no amount of infrastructure will be enough. As the saying goes, “The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second-best time to do that is TODAY”

Ambika Pant