

# Workshop at St. Peters College, Agra January 13, 2010



Brij Khandelwal, writer for the Times of India, Yamuna River activist and representative of the Rivers of the World (ROW) Foundation in Agra, arranged workshops for the ROW team to train on water quality and the conditions of the Yamuna which required local attention and action. All was set for the workshops well before the team left for India. However, days before arrival, schools closed because of unusual cold temperatures and heavy fog and the workshops were cancelled. Brij needed to scramble to put a replacement program together because the student workshops were key to promote action in Agra and a justification for the team trip from the U.S..

With lightning speed and within days of notice Brij arranged an excellent substitute program: A morning workshop for all ninth grade students at St. Peter's College, a highly respected private Catholic school of grades 1 to 12; a press conference that afternoon to address Yamuna River problems and ROW planned solutions followed by meeting with elementary school administrators to consult on a specific water problem; followed the next morning with a workshop for graduate students and faculty at Agra University.

When the six speakers from ROW -- Subijoy Dutta, Brij Khandelwal, Dick Lahn, Ginny Harris, Sumit Dutta, and Ram Koduri -- entered the auditorium at St. Peter's College, the 200 ninth grade students stood, clapped, and gave the team an unexpected, loud enthusiastic welcome.

Though the student workshops were originally planned to be hands-on training with a walk around the neighborhood, maybe a stream, this presentation by each speaker was 10 to 15 minutes, several included powerpoint slides. Brij introduced Subijoy who spoke about what the quality of the Yamuna River water and what pollutants were present. He sounded an alarm about the rising level of garbage in the river, particularly the massive quantity of plastics which are being ingested now showing up in the stomachs of

wildlife. He also criticized polyethylene material dumped in the river related to the conduct of religious events. These plastics cause irreparable harm to the river ecosystem, he said. He called on the students to participate in the March 22 -- World Water Day -- event in Agra, also happening elsewhere on the Yamuna, to clean up trash from a portion of the river bank.

Ginny Harris, manager of the Alice Ferguson Foundation (AFF) campaign to cleanup trash from the Potomac River watershed in the Washington, D.C. region spoke about the 21-year effort her organization has waged to cleanup the river. ROW and AFF are partners in cleaning up both rivers through the capitals of two countries. She urged the students to take up the cause in Agra. Ginny recalled how AFF started the cleanup of the Potomac with a handful of people at one site. Now there are 13,000 volunteers cleaning trash in the watershed at 500 sites. Completion of the effort is expected in 2013. Ginny challenged the students to guess how long it takes various items thrown away as garbage to break down in the natural system. She said no one knows how long it takes styrofoam to decompose.

Dick Lahn spoke about the significance of trash as an indicator of more serious pollution problems. If trash can be tossed out on the streets without concern, psychologically one has "permission" to throw out anything. The culture condones disposing of waste publicly without care. Trash is something ubiquitous but no one sees it though its everywhere, Lahn said. Also, he asked the students to remember Barry Commoner's laws pertaining to the natural system: everything is attached to everything else; everything must go somewhere > there is no such thing as "away"; Nature knows best; there is no such thing as a "free lunch"; everything has limits.

Ram Koduri gave the students a call to action. I'm not the one to clean up the river for ... my time is short. This is all about your kids and your grand children. What kind of a world do you want them to have?

The final speaker was Sumit Dutta, son of Subijoy Dutta, who is a third year electrical engineering student at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Sumit gave a presentation about data collecting and analysis with GIS, relating to work he and a classmate did in 10th grade working as interns for the Smithsonian Institution Environmental Research Center. The data they worked with was collected to show the correlation between land use and water quality in the South River and Rhode River watersheds near Annapolis, Maryland. Different types of land uses produce different water quality outcomes. The presentation was comprehensive and technical showing analytically and graphically the results of the data collected. Sumit's presentation was well received not only because the presentation was of high quality but because he was close enough in age to be considered a peer of the students in the room and one who is accomplished and a good role model for the students to emulate.

Sumit's good reception could be seen easily when at the end of the program, after the presenters received another ovation, thirty to forty students gathered around Sumit to ask questions ( See picture below). The



other speakers drew only a handful of students. Sumit collected contact information from these students so he could keep in touch with them and encourage them in their work to clean up the Yamuna. The list of participants, including students and faculty who signed up are compiled and placed on the internet in a password protected spreadsheet file <http://rowfoundation.org/content/yamuna/Yamuna-Secured-Field-workshop-participant-list.xls>. The security code will be e-mailed to the participants on this list.

The Press Conference in the afternoon covered many of the same issues and points raised in the morning at St. Peters College. Brij Khandelwal said, "Students attending the workshop were inquisitive and rather concerned seeing the present status of the Yamuna in Agra. They are prepared to contribute in their own way and it depends on us to capitalize on the sentiments of these youngsters who want the world to be a better place to live in." Principal of the school Father John Ferreira encouraged the students and extended support for the movement. The next day articles appeared in both English and Hindi language newspapers as well as on a television story reporting on the event at the school.