

Let Yamuna tell her story as you walk beside her

It's a journey in which 30 strangers from different parts of the world will learn about the Yamuna, not by reading articles or seeing images, but by tracing the course of the river - from its pure and virgin state in the Himalayas to the murky mess it becomes at Agra.

The seventh Yamuna Yatra, which begins March 19, is a journey of a different kind. During the course of 12 days, participants will trek along the river, camp by the riverside, conduct sessions on nature, see the vibrant seats of culture and religion en route. And amid all of this, rediscover their inner selves.

Supriya Singh of the city-based NGO Swecha, which works on issues affecting the Yamuna and has been conducting the journey since 2004, said: 'We have already received nearly 40 applications, most of them from school and college students who are very eager to take the journey. We have also received applications from people from the US, Romania and Britain.'

'The aim of the journey is to make people aware of the changing Yamuna and see all of that themselves rather than simply read about it and sympathise,' she said. The 1,370 km-long river is little more than a drain in Delhi where thousands of tonnes of household waste and industrial effluents are dumped into it.

The journey can accommodate only 30 people. The last date for receipt of applications for taking part in the initiative is Feb 23.

'There are artists, social activists and professionals from all walks of life who want to take the journey, which is a good sign,' Supriya said, adding that a large number of applicants were from Delhi.

The target group over the years has been changing, with youth being the primary focus every time. This time they are looking for a more cosmopolitan crowd, she emphasised.

'The aim of the Yamuna Yatra remains the same, although the kind of people we target keeps on changing. In our earlier yatras (journeys), we have associated with schoolchildren, with mentally and physically challenged students, and others. But this time we are targeting people from all walks of life,' Singh told IANS.

The journey starts from Delhi and passes through Mussoorie, Lakhamandal and Jankichatti to reach Yamunotri where the Yamuna originates. From there, the journey traces the river back to Jankichatti, Gangnani, Dakpathar, Yamunanagar, Mathura, Vrindavan and Agra.

En route, the trekkers will camp by the river side, hold talks on topics such as environment, the conflict between nature and man, interplay between religion and ecology, implications of policies and government programmes, besides interacting with the communities which depend on the river for their livelihood.

'An interesting feature of this year's yatra is that a San Francisco-based circus, the Dreamtime Circus, is going to travel with us. They are here in India for six months, collaborating with various NGOs in different states and working to spread awareness on various issues. There will also be

performance artists to both entertain as well as sensitise the communities dependant on the river,' Singh said.

'Since the river flows through Mathura and Vrindavan, where the dominating religion is Hinduism, through Agra where Islam is dominant, through Poanta Sahib where Sikhism is dominant and through Kalsi Rock where Buddhism is dominant, the journey along the river also gives one an insight into the cultural and the religious framework of India,' she added.

There will also be music concerts, film screenings and yoga meditation camps on the riverbank, and folklore narration by the locals.

But besides all of this, one factor that attracts a lot of people to the journey is that they believe the journey is the path towards self-discovery.

Anupama Raman, a student from Delhi who is eager to be part of the journey, said, 'I am looking forward to spending some time with myself on this trip. In the city one is so busy that you hardly get any time to think and contemplate things.'

After last year's yatra, which was funded by the European Union, the participants carried forward what they learnt by delivering 100 workshops in four countries - Finland, Britain, India and Sri Lanka. They also organised 10 major events and wrote extensively on the issue, something that is expected this year too.

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