

Day 15 & 16:

Today we had to move to Varanasi. Varanasi, also known as Banaras or Kaashi, has been a cultural centre of northern India for several thousand years and is closely associated with Maa Ganga. Hindus believe that dying here and getting cremated along the banks of the holy Ganga river allows one to break the cycle of rebirth and attain salvation, making it a major centre for pilgrimage. The city is known worldwide for its many Ghats, embankments made in steps of stone slabs along the river bank where pilgrims perform ritual ablutions. Of particular note are the Dashashwamedh Ghat, the Panchganga Ghat, the Manikarnika Ghat and the Harishchandra Ghat, the last two being where Hindus cremate their dead and the Hindu genealogy registers at Varanasi are kept here. It is the holiest of the seven sacred cities (Sapta Puri) in Hinduism and Jainism, and played an important role in the development of Buddhism and Ravidassia.

We reached the ghat around 6 AM and locals from Mirzapur along with the officials were waiting at the ghat for us. People from different walks of life surrounded us as soon as we reached the ghat. They were clicking pictures, congratulating us on the expedition and praying for our safe journey ahead. As it was getting late, we decided to bid farewell to Mirzapur and move toward our next destination- Varanasi. We were flagged off by Shri Anurag Patel (I.A.S.), District Magistrate, Mirzapur.

We moved forward, saying goodbye to the people of Mirzapur. The beatitude of Ganga was breathtaking as always. Moving ahead in our rafts, we enjoyed the scenic beauty of Maa Ganga. Many devotees were taking a dip in Ganga and what we experienced can only be defined as divine. As we entered Varanasi, the city of Ghats, we could see a lot of temples and devotees on the banks of Ganga. As soon as they recognized us, they started cheering for us, wishing us luck. People recognizing us as the Ganga Amantran Rafting Expedition Team is still the best part of our day. After all the entire idea was to raise awareness and people are coming together to make Ganga the cleanest river in the entire world. As we approached the Assi Ghat of Banaras, we could see thousands of people gathered at the ghat just to welcome us. As soon as we were sighted, the crowd got excited. They started cheering “ Har Har Gange, Namami Gange,, Har Har Gange, Namami Gange.” We were welcome with dhols and students from different schools singing folk songs. The crowd was overwhelming. They were clicking pictures, congratulating us on the journey so far and wishing us success. We moved to the event location and the cultural event started with a street play by Rangbhoomi Group of arts, educating us about river Ganga and how our life depends on Maa Ganga. Following the street play, there was a cultural dance presented by the students of Malviya Shiksha Niketan- One of the oldest dancing school in Varanasi that specializes in Classical form of dance. Shri Rajiv Ranjan Mishra, Director General, NMCG also interacted with the

crowd and took an oath to do anything in his power to make Ganga cleaner. As it was getting late, we decided to call it a day but as Varanasi holds importance because of the rich history, we decided to take a day's halt here and interact with the local public. The next day, we got up early and reached the historic Townhall of Varanasi. We had planned a march to raise awareness with the help of students of Varanasi. We started the march from Townhall along with students from different schools and colleges of Varanasi. NCC, Scouts & Guides also joined the march and helped us in raising awareness. Students hold an important place in this expedition as they are the future of this country and if they get involved, Ganga will be the cleanest river in no time. Speaking at the event, Sh Rajiv Ranjan Mishra asked the students to be a part of Ganga Aamantran Expedition and help in raising awareness as well as cleaning Ganga. We started the march from Harishchand Inter College. We were joined by the students of many schools, volunteers from various NGOs, government officials and locals. We walked through the streets of Varanasi, interacting with people from all walks of life. At the Rajghat, We started a cleaning drive. Shri Rajiv Ranjan Mishra along with the NMCG team and volunteers from various organizations and schools joined us in the cleaning drive. We also interacted with the shopkeepers at the ghat and discussed the ill effects of single-use plastics. They told us how they have been using different substitutes rather than plastic long before the government led by our Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi imposed a ban on plastics. After this, we visited the JALAJ- a boat maintained by Ganga Praharis- a community level volunteers trained by Wildlife Institute of India under a Namami Gange for biodiversity conservation and Ganga Rejuvenation. We then visited Queens College where we interacted with the students. They organized a local fair in support of our expedition. At the fair, we participated in a plantation drive organized by the students of Queens College.

Speaking at the event, Shri Rajiv Ranjan Mishra discussed the issues faced by Maa Ganga on a daily basis and how everyone can contribute to a cleaner Ganga. After the amazing event at Queens College, we went to Dashashwamedh Ghat to attend the Ganga Aarti. People from around the globe were present at the Ghat to attend the Ganga Aarti. Seeing how Ganga connects people from different walks of life, geographical background, financial status was beautiful. The evening ended with Auspicious Ganga Aarti. As the sun sets for the day, the team for the rafting expedition prepares for an early start tomorrow, where they set out towards their next destination in the 'Ganga Aamantran Abhiyan'.