

URGENT CALL FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

Air pollution has emerged as one of the gravest environmental challenges of the 21st century, posing severe threats to human health, the economy, and the climate. Rapid urbanization, industrialization, and unplanned growth in cities have intensified the problem, particularly in developing nations, where regulatory frameworks often struggle to keep pace with the pace of development. From smog-choked metropolitan skylines to hazardous particulate matter in rural areas, air pollution affects everyone, making it a public health crisis that cannot be ignored.

The health consequences of air pollution are alarming. Fine particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10), nitrogen oxides, sulphur dioxide, and ozone are major pollutants that penetrate deep into the lungs and bloodstream. According to the World Health Organization, air pollution is responsible for millions of premature deaths annually, contributing to respiratory diseases, cardiovascular disorders, and even neurological complications. Children, the elderly, and individuals with pre-existing health conditions are particularly vulnerable. In addition to personal health, polluted air also puts immense pressure on healthcare systems, increasing medical costs and reducing overall productivity. The economic costs of air pollution are equally staggering. Loss of workdays, increased healthcare expenditure, and reduced labor efficiency all translate into substantial financial burdens for families and governments alike. Cities known for high pollution levels often witness declining property values, lower tourism potential, and challenges in attracting business investments. Moreover, environmental degradation due to air pollution impacts agriculture, as crop yields diminish under the influence of smog, acid rain, and ozone damage, threatening food security in affected regions. Despite the seriousness of the issue, public awareness and proactive action often remain insufficient. Many urban residents underestimate the cumulative impact of everyday activities such as vehicular emissions, industrial discharges, construction dust, and open burning of waste. Vehicular pollution is a significant contributor in cities, where old vehicles, congested roads, and weak enforcement of emission standards exacerbate air quality issues. Similarly, industries lacking modern filtration systems continue to release harmful gases into the atmosphere, while construction and demolition generate dust and particulate matter that further degrade urban air quality. Seasonal agricultural practices, including stubble burning, intensify pollution in many regions, creating a recurring crisis during winter months. Addressing air pollution requires a multi-pronged approach that combines government policy, technological innovation, and community engagement. Governments must enforce stricter emission standards, promote cleaner fuels, and incentivize green technologies. Investments in public transport, electric vehicles, and sustainable urban planning can significantly reduce vehicular emissions, while stricter monitoring and penalties for industrial polluters are necessary to ensure compliance. On the domestic front, promoting cleaner cooking fuels and reducing biomass burning can prevent significant indoor and outdoor air pollution. Public participation is equally critical.

■ MOHAMMAD HANIEF



Across India's rapidly changing social and economic landscape, the lives of nearly three crore specially-abled citizens continue to unfold in quiet struggle. Their stories rarely make headlines, yet they reflect some of the country's most persistent inequalities. Despite progressive legislation and visible expressions of inclusion, the lived experience of people with disabilities remains marked by systemic barriers, uneven access to essential services, and deeply rooted social attitudes that restrict opportunity long before any formal obstacle appears.

The challenge begins early. For children with disabilities, education is often the first frontier where exclusion becomes visible. Many schools, especially in rural and semi-urban regions, lack the physical infrastructure required to support mobility, visual, or hearing impairments. Ramps, accessible toilets, sensory-friendly classrooms, tactile paths, and Braille materials remain absent in a vast proportion of institutions. Even where the structures exist, they often reflect token compliance rather than meaningful usability. Classrooms designed for homogeneous learning leave little space for children who require additional pedagogical support, and trained special educators remain in short supply across states.

Parents often travel long distances seeking schools capable of accommodating their children's needs. In poor households, this frequently results in children staying at home, not because they lack the desire to learn but because the system lacks the capacity to teach them. The national push for inclusive education under the Right to Education Act and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act has improved awareness, yet enforcement remains inconsistent. The dropout rate for disabled children continues to be significantly higher than that of the general population, limiting their future prospects and reinforcing cycles of dependence.

As specially-abled individuals move into adulthood, the barriers evolve but rarely diminish. Employment represents one of the most formidable challenges. While government rules mandate reservations for persons with disabilities, the proportion of disabled individuals in the workforce remains small. In the private sector, the gap is even more pronounced. Limited workplace accessibility, unfamiliarity with assistive technologies, and misconceptions about productivity contribute to discriminatory hiring practices. Even when employed, many individuals struggle with inadequate accommodations, inaccessible buildings, and the absence of transport options that allow them to reach the workplace with dignity.

Healthcare systems add another layer of complexity. Early intervention, essential for children with developmental or sensory impairments, is unavailable in large parts of the country.

Invisible Challenges: The Unspoken Fight



District hospitals in many states lack pediatric neurologists, therapists, and counselors equipped to support families. Where services exist, they are often located in major cities and remain prohibitively expensive for low-income households. Disabilities requiring regular therapy—such as autism spectrum disorders, cerebral palsy, or hearing impairments—place enormous financial strain on families, many of whom must navigate a maze of hospitals, private clinics, and unregulated treatment centers. Inconsistent quality of care and poorly monitored rehabilitation services frequently result in confusion and misdiagnosis, leaving families uncertain about the right path to follow.

Public spaces and transportation networks mirror these challenges. Metro systems in a few major cities have made notable progress, offering elevators, tactile paving, and designated seating. However, the majority of railway stations, bus stands, and government buildings remain far from barrier-free. Uneven footpaths, broken ramps, overcrowded platforms, and inaccessible toilets make travel difficult. Something as simple as boarding a bus or entering a public office often becomes a test of endurance. For many specially-abled people, the struggle lies not only in reaching their destination but in negotiating an environment that has rarely been designed with them in mind.

Beneath these visible barriers lies a more insidious challenge: social stigma. Disability continues to carry a weight of misunderstanding in many parts of India. Families often hesitate to seek formal diagnosis, fearing judgment from their communities. In some households, disabled children are kept indoors to avoid attracting attention; in others, they are denied opportunities for education or employment because of assumptions about their limitations. The persistence of such attitudes means that even where infrastructure and laws are in place, acceptance remains fragile. Women with disabilities face a particularly harsh reality, confronting gendered expectations

alongside disability-related discrimination, resulting in greater vulnerability, limited access to healthcare, and fewer opportunities for independence.

Despite these difficulties, the picture is not without progress. The RPWD Act of 2016 significantly broadened the definition of disability, strengthened protections, and underscored the role of the state in ensuring equal opportunities. Assistive technology has ushered in new possibilities, enabling mobility, communication, and learning in ways previously unimaginable. Screen readers, advanced prosthetics, hearing aids, and mobile-based learning apps have become more accessible, allowing individuals to participate more fully in education and work. Several sectors—particularly information technology, e-commerce, and hospitality—have taken proactive steps toward inclusive hiring, recognizing that specially-abled employees bring diverse perspectives and strong problem-solving abilities. Civil society organisations across India have launched training programmes, therapy centers, and community outreach initiatives that fill gaps left by public systems. The achievements of India's para-athletes, artists, and entrepreneurs with disabilities have gradually reshaped popular narratives, shifting the focus from sympathy to capability.

Yet these promising developments highlight an uncomfortable truth: pockets of excellence cannot compensate for widespread gaps. A nation of India's size and diversity requires systemic solutions that reach every district, every classroom, and every household. The path forward demands a coordinated response—strengthening inclusive education, expanding district-level rehabilitation services, enforcing accessibility norms, sensitising workplaces, and creating support networks for caregivers who shoulder lifelong responsibilities. Technologies that promote independence must become mainstream rather than niche, and public spaces must be designed with universal accessibility rather than afterthought adaptations.

Above all, the country must confront the need for cultural change. Disability cannot remain a matter of charity or symbolic inclusion. It must be recognized as an essential dimension of human diversity. Inclusion, to be meaningful, must be embedded into daily practices—how children interact in schools, how employers evaluate talent, how cities are designed, and how families understand the capabilities of their members.

The real fight of specially-abled people in India is not only about overcoming physical or sensory impairments. It is a struggle for recognition, dignity, and equal participation. It is a fight against outdated mindsets, fractured systems, and environments that exclude by default. As India aspires to greater economic growth and global leadership, the measure of its progress will increasingly depend on how it supports its most vulnerable citizens. Inclusion cannot be an accessory to development; it must be at its core. Only then will the millions who battle quietly each day find a nation ready to stand with them, not out of sympathy, but out of a shared commitment to equality and justice.

(The author is a senior analyst)

Yoga Leading the Way in Preventive Healthcare

■ BY PRATAPRAO JADHAV

Over the past decade, Yoga has evolved from being widely appreciated as a traditional wellness practice to being increasingly recognized as an evidence-based approach to health and well-being. Scientific research, digital innovation, and global collaboration are now helping us understand Yoga not only as India's cultural heritage but also as a powerful public health intervention.

The Morarji Desai National Institute of Yoga (MDNIY) has been designated as a WHO Collaborating Centre for Traditional Medicine (Yoga) and re-designated for the period 2025-2029, further reinforcing India's leadership in Yoga research. This recognition reflects the Institute's growing role in promoting evidence-based Yoga interventions for Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs). Key partners in this endeavour include the Ministry of Ayush, AIIMS Delhi, Lady Hardinge Medical College, Central Council for Research in Unani Medicine, and Institute of Nuclear Medicine & Allied Sciences, Delhi.

Through these collaborations, the Centre is developing technical guidelines and advancing research on Yoga-based interventions for non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, obesity, and stress-related disorders. International organisations are also partnering

in these efforts, further strengthening the scientific foundations of Yoga and demonstrating its potential as a scalable, cost-effective, and evidence-backed tool for preventive healthcare. At the institutional level, MDNIY continues to strengthen the scientific foundations of Yoga. Through research laboratories in physiology, biochemistry, biomechanics, and psychology, the Institute examines the psycho-physiological and biochemical effects of Yoga, its role in ageing, and its impact on lifestyle-related disorders. This work reflects India's commitment to integrating traditional knowledge with modern scientific validation. Digital platforms have further expanded Yoga's reach, bringing evidence-based practices directly into people's daily lives. Initiatives such as the m-Yoga mobile application and the Y-Break protocol demonstrate how Yoga can be delivered at scale while maintaining its authenticity and therapeutic value. The m-Yoga platform, developed in collaboration with the World Health Organization, has recorded over 1.1 lakh downloads, reflecting a growing interest in accessible digital wellness tools while the Workplace Yoga program Y-Break - a simple 5-10 minute Yoga Break during work hours - has already benefited over 33 lakh government officials.

Research findings and engagement analytics from these initia-

tives are highly encouraging. Regular Y Break practices have been shown to reduce perceived stress by up to 40 percent within a few weeks. Studies also indicate improvements in mental alertness, emotional resilience, and decision-making, along with positive changes in physiological indicators such as cortisol levels.

Physical benefits include reduced neck, shoulder, and lower back discomfort, improved respiratory efficiency through breathing practices, and enhanced overall vitality-outcomes that are especially relevant in today's sedentary, screen-driven workplaces. Y-Break have also contributed to lower absenteeism, improved employee morale, and healthier work-life balance, underlining Yoga's potential to strengthen both individual and organisational well-being.

The importance of scientific validation was also emphasized during the National Conference on Naturopathy-2026, jointly organized by MDNIY and the Central Council for Research in Yoga & Naturopathy. Experts highlighted that rigorous research, interdisciplinary collaboration, and robust digital engagement are essential to integrating Yoga into modern healthcare systems and ensuring measurable health outcomes.

These developments reflect a significant shift in the global perception of Yoga. It is no longer viewed merely as a personal wellness prac-

tice but increasingly as a pathway for public health, skill development, and wellness-based employment opportunities. By combining tradition with science and technology, Yoga is emerging as a driving force behind the Global Yoga Kranti and strengthening India's leadership in the international wellness sector.

As we approach 13 March, which marks the 100-day countdown to the upcoming International Day of Yoga on 21 June, it provides an opportunity to reflect on how Yoga continues to evolve—from an ancient practice to a globally recognized, evidence-based pathway to health and well-being. Let these hundred days serve as a gentle reminder to begin or renew daily Yoga practice and inspire our families, friends, and communities to embrace Yoga as a way of life.

By integrating Yoga into daily living, we not only strengthen individual health but also foster collective well-being, organisational efficiency, and societal harmony. Today, through research, technology, and international collaboration, India is taking the next decisive step—transforming the timeless wisdom of Yoga into a scientifically validated and universally accessible pathway for global health, balance, and well-being.

(The author is Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Ayush and Union Minister of State for Health & Family Welfare)

Losing a Generation in Silence

■ KHURSHID AHMAD AKHOON



For the past two years, my official duties required extensive travel across District Kishtwar in Jammu & Kashmir. From the remotest villages of the Chenab Valley to its towns and habitations, I interacted with people from every section of society. Across geography and class, one disturbing reality emerged with consistency: widespread unemployment and the gradual destruction of youth through drug addiction. Parents across the district have invested their entire lives in the education of their children. Many sold ancestral land, many borrowed heavily, and many sacrificed even their basic needs, believing education would ensure dignity and stability for the next generation. Today, that belief stands severely shaken. Highly educated young men and women hold degrees, yet remain unemployed. Years of effort have yielded frustration instead of opportunity.

I witnessed young people withdrawing into silence, avoiding conversations at home, and distancing themselves from society. Parents, equally affected, suffer quietly - helpless spectators to the emotional decline of their children.

This isolation often pushes youth towards peer groups facing similar rejection and despair. Initially, these gatherings provide emotional support - a space to share pain and disappointment. Over time, however, they become gateways to harmful coping mechanisms. Smoking appears first, followed by alcohol, and eventually drugs - wrongly perceived as relief from suffering.

During my visits, particularly in the Chenab Valley, I encountered highly educated youth so desperate for employment that they were willing to offer land or anything they owned in exchange for a job. Even when such measures failed, the resulting psychological collapse created fertile ground for addiction. Drug addiction does not

remain confined to the unemployed or economically weaker sections. Youth are socially interconnected. Through association and companionship, even children from well-off and respected families come into contact with those already trapped in addiction. What begins as sympathy and support soon turns into shared habits. Like cancer cells, addiction spreads silently - crossing boundaries of class, education, and status. The greatest victims of this crisis are parents. Militancy once devastated families by taking young lives suddenly. Drug addiction is causing similar destruction - but slowly and invisibly. Just as militancy has an inevitable end in death, drug addiction too leads towards physical, mental, and often fatal collapse. Many parents today are not burying their children immediately; instead, they are forced to watch them fade away over time - physically present, yet emotionally and spiritually lost. This prolonged suffering is, in many ways, more painful than sudden loss. A critical factor aggravating this crisis is the widening communication gap between parents and children. Parents focus on material provision, while emotional struggles go unnoticed. Young people, fearing judgment or disappointment, choose silence. When dialogue within families breaks down, destructive external influences gain space. Drug addiction cannot be treated solely as a law-and-order problem. It is a social and human crisis. Enforcement may curb supply, but it cannot heal broken minds. What is urgently required is meaningful employment generation, open communication within families, early psychological intervention, and rehabilitation free from stigma. Having witnessed these realities firsthand during my duty across District Kishtwar, I am convinced that continued silence will cost us an entire generation.

Militancy destroyed youth with bullets. Drugs are destroying them with silence. The choice before society is stark - act now, or grieve later.

Rivers in Distress: Pollution, Mining & Disappearing Streams Threaten Their Existence

■ YOGESH KUMAR GOYAL

The importance of rivers in India is extremely deep and far-reaching. Rivers here are not merely flowing water bodies; they are the foundation of civilization, culture and spirituality. Since ancient times, rivers have been revered in Indian society. Rivers such as the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati are not just geographical entities but are regarded as "mother" in Indian culture. This reverence is not limited to religious belief alone; practically too, rivers have always been a vital source of life. If the Earth is considered our mother, then rivers are like her veins, carrying water across the land and giving it life. Life without water is unimaginable, which is why river conservation has become an important issue not only in India but across the world.

Keeping in view the deteriorating condition of rivers, the International Day of Action for Rivers is observed every year on March 14. The main aim of this day is to raise awareness about river conservation and strengthen policy efforts to protect them. This year marks the 29th International Day of Action for Rivers, being observed under the theme "Protect Rivers, Protect People". The theme highlights the urgent need to safeguard global river systems from climate impacts and, in turn, protect the communities and biodiversity that depend on them. Rivers are not just

water sources; they are an integral part of our culture, livelihoods and future. If rivers remain healthy, only then can our future be secure.

For thousands of years, civilizations have developed along riverbanks in India. Whether it was the Indus Valley Civilization or the Ganga-Yamuna Doab region, these areas played a central role in shaping economic, social and cultural life in ancient and medieval India. Even today, more than 4,000 small and large rivers flow across the country. Some originate in the Himalayas and are nourished by glaciers, while peninsular rivers mainly depend on rainfall. Major Himalayan rivers such as the Ganga, Yamuna, Brahmaputra, Sutlej, Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi and Beas play a crucial role in agriculture and water supply across northern India. Similarly, rivers flowing in southern India - including the Narmada, Godavari, Krishna, Kaveri, Tapi, Sabarmati, Mahi, Subarnarekha and Luni - fulfill the water needs of various states. Rivers are not just sources of water; they also help conserve rainwater and maintain soil moisture. This makes them extremely important for agriculture, livestock and other livelihoods.

In modern times, however, rivers are facing a serious crisis. Climate change, pollution, illegal mining and industrial waste are disturbing the ecological balance of rivers. In



recent years, abnormal declines in river water levels have been observed. According to a report published in 2023, more than 50 percent of the world's river basins had below-normal water levels, deepening the global water crisis. It was also the third consecutive year when river levels showed abnormal decline, clearly reflecting the combined impact of climate change and human activities. India's most sacred and significant river, the Ganga, is also facing severe pollution threats. This river, approximately 2,510 kilometres long, receives waste from numerous cities and industries along its course, affecting the quality of its water. The Brahmaputra River, about 2,900 kilometres

long and considered the lifeline of Assam, is also being affected by pollution sources. Sewage waste, oil and other contaminants entering the river are adversely affecting its ecosystem. This not only harms aquatic life but also impacts the livelihoods of local communities.

There are several major causes of river pollution, including industrial waste, plastic waste and illegal mining. Chemical and toxic substances released from industries enter rivers and pollute them. Although strict laws exist for the disposal of such waste, the lack of effective implementation continues to aggravate the problem. Plastic pollution has also emerged as a serious threat to rivers. According to a study, 20 of the world's most polluted rivers carry the majority of plastic waste into the oceans. China's Yangtze River alone transports around 333,000 tonnes of plastic into the oceans every year, while India's Ganga River contributes nearly 115,000 tonnes annually. Illegal mining further disrupts the natural structure and flow of rivers, negatively impacting biodiversity. Sand mining and other illegal activities damage river ecosystems and disturb their natural balance.

At present, several initiatives are being undertaken at both global and national levels to conserve rivers. The River Basin Atlas published by the Indian Space Research

Organisation (ISRO) provides detailed information about river catchment areas, which helps in better river management and conservation. Apart from this, community participation, strict enforcement of laws and the implementation of sustainable development policies are essential for protecting rivers. Governments and non-governmental organizations are also running various river-cleaning campaigns. For instance, the Namami Gange Mission is a major government initiative aimed at restoring the cleanliness and ecological health of the Ganga.

Ultimately, the importance of rivers is not only environmental but also social and economic. They form the backbone of agriculture, industry, transportation and water supply. If rivers are not protected, the risks of water scarcity, food crisis and ecological imbalance will increase significantly. Therefore, conserving rivers is essential for securing our future. We must take concrete measures to keep rivers free from pollution and raise public awareness so that we can ensure a healthy and prosperous environment for future generations. Protecting rivers is not only the responsibility of governments; it is also the duty of every citizen. If collective efforts are made, our rivers can once again become clean, vibrant and life-giving.

(The author is a senior journalist)