

# Reimagining Environmental Responsibility: A Commentary on the Youth Mission for Clean River's Efforts in Arunachal Pradesh

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## Abstract

*The escalating plastic pollution crisis in India's Himalayan region, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh, poses a severe threat to its rivers and ecosystems. The Youth Mission for Clean River (YMCR), founded in 2016 by SD Loda, has emerged as a grassroots movement addressing this challenge through clean-up drives, policy advocacy, and educational initiatives. This commentary examines YMCR's dynamic approach, including its clean-up campaigns, the Yagamso River Arts & Expression Competitions (YAREC), and door-to-door Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) campaigns. Drawing on primary data from YMCR's activities and secondary sources, the article highlights the organization's role in mobilizing youth, engaging policymakers, and promoting sustainable practices. It argues that YMCR's efforts offer a model for youth-driven environmental action, emphasizing a shift in mindset toward collective responsibility and meaningful contributions to conservation. The commentary concludes with a positive outlook, advocating for expanded youth engagement and government support to amplify YMCR's impact.*

**Keywords:** Plastic pollution, Himalayan rivers, Youth Mission for Clean River (YMCR), Clean-up campaigns, Policy advocacy, Sustainable practices

## Introduction

India's Himalayan region, renowned for its ecological and cultural richness, faces a growing environmental crisis driven by plastic pollution. Arunachal Pradesh, a state nestled in the eastern Himalayas, is particularly vulnerable, with its rivers—lifelines for communities—bearing the brunt of waste mismanagement. A 2025 report revealed that 84.6% of waste in the Indian Himalayas consists of single-use plastics, predominantly from food and beverage packaging (The Hindu, 2025). In Itanagar, the state capital, plastic bags have been identified as a primary pollutant, clogging rivers like the Yagamso, Senki and Dikrong (Arunachal Times, 2025). Against this backdrop, the Youth Mission for Clean River (YMCR), established in 2016 by Advocate SD Loda, has emerged as a vital force in combating river pollution through grassroots action and youth engagement.

YMCR's work transcends traditional clean-up drives, encompassing advocacy, education, and cultural initiatives to address systemic issues. Its campaigns, such as the Himalayan Cleanup, door-to-door IEC efforts, and the Yagamso River Arts & Expression Competitions (YAREC), reflect a holistic approach to environmental conservation. This commentary explores YMCR's contributions, analyzing its strategies, impact, and potential to inspire a generational shift in environmental responsibility. By situating YMCR's efforts within the broader context of India's plastic pollution crisis, the article advocates for a positive trajectory, urging youth to embrace purposeful action and policymakers to support grassroots initiatives.

### **The Plastic Pollution Crisis in Arunachal Pradesh**

India generates approximately 26,000 tonnes of plastic waste daily, with single-use plastics (SUPs) constituting 43% of this volume (Down to Earth, 2025). In Arunachal Pradesh, a state characterized by its rich biodiversity and pristine Himalayan rivers, this national crisis manifests acutely, threatening ecological and cultural heritage. Urban centers like Itanagar, Pasighat, and Seppa face mounting challenges due to inadequate waste management infrastructure, leading to widespread pollution of rivers such as the Yagamso, Dikrong, Kameng, and Siang. The Himalayan Cleanup, conducted on June 2, 2025, at IG Park in Itanagar by the Youth Mission for Clean River (YMCR) in collaboration with Zero Waste Himalaya, provided stark evidence of this crisis. During the event, 53 volunteers collected 4,860 waste items, with SUPs—predominantly plastic bags, food wrappers, and beverage bottles—emerging as the most significant pollutant, reflecting national trends where SUPs dominate waste streams (Arunachal Times, 2025a). This audit revealed that plastic bags alone were a primary contributor to Itanagar's river pollution, clogging waterways and exacerbating environmental degradation.

A comprehensive study under the Urban Local Bodies (ULB) department further illuminated systemic deficiencies, identifying a lack of waste segregation facilities, functional Materials Recovery Facilities (MRFs), and sanitary landfills in towns like Seppa and Chimpu (Taba, 2024). In Seppa, for instance, illegal dumping of medical and domestic waste into the Kameng River persists, despite regulatory efforts, due to absent treatment infrastructure (Taba, 2024). Similarly, in Chimpu, local water bodies receive untreated waste, underscoring the urgent need for improved disposal systems. These gaps contribute to the accumulation of plastics in rivers, where they fragment into microplastics, posing severe risks to aquatic ecosystems and human health. Research indicates that microplastics have infiltrated India's inland aquatic systems, disrupting biodiversity and entering food chains, with long-term implications for communities dependent on rivers for fishing and agriculture (ScienceDirect, 2024).

Arunachal's rivers are not merely ecological assets but also cultural and economic lifelines for its tribal populations. The pollution of waterways like the Siang and Subansiri undermines traditional practices, such as fishing and ritual ceremonies, and threatens livelihoods reliant on clean water (Newsfy, 2025). The Himalayan Cleanup's findings align with broader regional concerns, as the event was part of a coordinated effort across Himalayan states to address plastic pollution, highlighting the interconnectedness of Arunachal's rivers with the larger

Himalayan ecosystem (Arunachal Times, 2025a). The dominance of SUPs in waste audits underscores the need for targeted interventions, such as stricter enforcement of plastic bans and promotion of alternatives like cloth bags. Without immediate action, the ecological and socio-cultural consequences of plastic pollution risk becoming irreversible, necessitating grassroots efforts like those of YMCR to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

## **YMCR's Genesis and Evolution**

Founded in 2016 by Advocate SD Loda, YMCR began as a small group of volunteers dedicated to cleaning Itanagar's rivers. Loda's vision was rooted in the belief that individual responsibility is central to environmental conservation. As he stated, "Waste is a cancerous issue here, left untreated in our environment. We must be our own scavengers, taking charge of our waste" (Arunachal Times, 2025). Over the years, YMCR has grown into a movement, mobilizing thousands of volunteers and forging partnerships with local institutions, government bodies, and regional networks like Zero Waste Himalaya.

YMCR's mission is twofold: to physically clean rivers and to transform public attitudes toward waste management. Its adoption of the Yagamso stream near Itanagar's IG Park in 2024 marked a significant milestone, with monthly clean-ups and advocacy efforts yielding tangible results (Arunachal Times, 2025). By 2025, YMCR had expanded its reach to towns like Pasighat, Doimukh, and Seppa, demonstrating its scalability and commitment to state-wide impact.

## **Key Activities of YMCR**

YMCR's activities are diverse, addressing both immediate and systemic aspects of river pollution. The following sections outline its core initiatives, drawing on real-time data from YMCR's records and media reports.

1. **Clean-Up Drive:** YMCR's clean-up campaigns are its most visible contribution, mobilizing communities to remove waste from riverbanks. In Pasighat, on July 13, 2024, YMCR collaborated with the Rengging Baane Yameng Kebang (RBYK) and 150 volunteers to extract 25,000 kilograms of garbage from the Pane Korong River (Newsfy, 2025). Similarly, in Doimukh, a partnership with Rajiv Gandhi University's NSS and NCC units on October 1, 2024, resulted in the collection of 6,500 kilograms of trash from the Dikrong River in two hours (Newsfy, 2025). These efforts highlight the power of collective action, with local stakeholders amplifying YMCR's impact. The Himalayan Cleanup, conducted annually in collaboration with Zero Waste Himalaya, is a flagship initiative. On June 2, 2025, YMCR organized a clean-up at IG Park in Itanagar, where over 53 volunteers collected and audited 4,860 waste items, identifying single-use plastics as the primary pollutant (Arunachal Times, 2025). Such audits provide data to advocate for policy changes, such as stricter enforcement of single-use plastic bans.

2. **Door-to-Door IEC Campaigns:** YMCR's Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) campaigns aim to change public behavior through direct engagement. Monthly door-to-door outreach along the Yagamso stream educates riverside dwellers about waste segregation and sustainable practices (Arunachal Times, 2025). These campaigns are tailored to Arunachal's tribal context, incorporating local languages and cultural references to ensure resonance. By promoting alternatives like cloth bags, YMCR seeks to reduce reliance on single-use plastics, as emphasized by vice chairman Keyom Doni: "Simple actions like carrying cloth bags to markets can reduce plastic use" (Arunachal Times, 2025).
3. **Yagamso River Arts & Expression Competitions (YAREC):** YAREC, launched by YMCR, is an inter-school environmental summit that engages youth through creative expression. Held annually in Itanagar's capital complex, YAREC includes competitions in poetry, painting, quizzes, extempore speeches, and essay writing, all centered on environmental themes (Arunachal Times, 2024). The initiative aims to cultivate eco-conscious citizens by providing a platform for students to explore environmental issues. YAREC's emphasis on art and dialogue aligns with YMCR's broader goal of fostering a cultural shift toward sustainability, inspiring young minds to view conservation as a meaningful pursuit.
4. **Policy Advocacy:** YMCR's engagement with policymakers addresses systemic issues like inadequate waste infrastructure. In 2022, the organization filed a complaint with the Arunachal Pradesh State Pollution Control Board (APSPCB) regarding illegal waste dumping in the Kameng River, prompting directives to enforce Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016 (Taba, 2024). YMCR's contributions to a municipal solid waste study under the ULB department revealed gaps in segregation and treatment facilities, informing advocacy for composting units and MRFs (Taba, 2024). The organization's recognition with the Best Suggestion Award during the 2024 Budget Session underscores its influence, with proposals focusing on water security and river rejuvenation (Newsfy, 2025).

## Impact and Challenges

YMCR's initiatives have produced measurable outcomes, significantly advancing environmental conservation in Arunachal Pradesh. Since its inception in 2016, the organization has removed thousands of tonnes of waste from rivers, with notable efforts in 2024 including the extraction of 25,000 kilograms from the Pane Korong River in Pasighat and 6,500 kilograms from the Dikrong River in Doimukh (Newsfy, 2025). In early 2025, a cleanup drive along the Yagamso River in Itanagar, in collaboration with the Capital Police, resulted in the removal of 12.96 tonnes of garbage, demonstrating the scale of YMCR's operations (Arunachal24, 2025a). The Himalayan Cleanup on June 2, 2025, at IG Park in Itanagar saw 53 volunteers collect and audit 4,860 waste items, identifying single-use plastics as a dominant pollutant, providing critical data for policy advocacy (Arunachal Times, 2025a). The Yagamso

River Arts & Expression Competitions (YAREC) have engaged thousands of students, fostering environmental consciousness through creative platforms (Arunachal Times, 2024). Door-to-door IEC campaigns have reached hundreds of households, promoting waste segregation and sustainable practices (Arunachal24, 2025b). Policy advocacy efforts have also borne fruit, with YMCR's 2022 complaint to the Arunachal Pradesh State Pollution Control Board (APSPCB) prompting directives to enforce Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016, in Seppa (Taba, 2024). The organization's recognition with the Best Suggestion Award during the 2024 Budget Session and the Excellence in Environment Conservation Award at the 2024 Achiever Awards underscores its growing influence (Northeast Today, 2024; Newsfy, 2025).

Despite these achievements, YMCR faces substantial challenges that impede its ability to sustain and expand its impact. Dr. Prem Taba, in a Newsfy report, highlighted the critical issue of insufficient government funding, noting that YMCR has received limited financial support, which restricts its capacity to train volunteers, procure equipment, and implement advanced technologies like GPS-enabled waste tracking (Newsfy, 2025). This lack of funding is particularly acute for scaling operations to all 27 urban notified towns, as envisioned by YMCR, and for sustaining long-term initiatives like the Yagamso River Rejuvenation Project (Taba, 2024; Arunachal24, 2024a). The absence of robust waste management infrastructure in towns like Itanagar and Naharlagun exacerbates the problem, as waste removed during clean-ups often re-enters rivers due to inadequate disposal systems and the lack of functional Materials Recovery Facilities (MRFs) (Taba, 2024). For instance, in Seppa, YMCR reported ongoing indiscriminate dumping of medical and domestic waste into the Kameng River by the District Urban Development Agency (DUDA), despite a 2019 ban, highlighting enforcement failures (Arunachal Times, 2022). Cultural and social practices, such as direct waste disposal into rivers due to a lack of awareness or alternatives, further complicate efforts, as noted in a 2019 MyGov report on Arunachal's rivers (MyGov.in, 2019). Changing these deeply ingrained behaviors requires sustained, resource-intensive awareness campaigns, which YMCR struggles to maintain without consistent funding. Additionally, logistical challenges, such as unfavorable weather conditions and limited access to remote river stretches, hinder clean-up drives, as seen in YMCR's commitment to support cleaning the Kameng, Kuchi, and Macha rivers only if logistics are provided by the district administration (Nenow.in, 2021). The organization also faces challenges in coordinating with multiple stakeholders, including government bodies and local communities, to ensure consistent participation and policy implementation, as evidenced by the slow progress in establishing waste treatment plants in East Kameng (Arunachal24, 2021). These obstacles underscore the need for increased financial, logistical, and institutional support to amplify YMCR's efforts and address systemic issues effectively.

### **A Positive Outlook: Youth as Agents of Change**

YMCR's work provides a compelling model for youth-driven environmental action, demonstrating how young people can lead efforts to address the plastic pollution crisis in Arunachal Pradesh. The organization's success lies in its ability to inspire volunteers, particularly students, to view conservation as a meaningful pursuit that aligns with personal and collective growth. Dr. Prem Taba's reflection encapsulates this ethos: "Cleaning rivers...

feels like a religion for me. Every time I'm out there, it feels like therapy and healing for my soul" (Arunachal Times, 2025a). This sentiment highlights the intrinsic value of environmental work, offering youth a sense of purpose and connection to their natural surroundings. Initiatives like YAREC, which engage students through creative competitions, cultivate a mindset of responsibility, encouraging young people to see themselves as active contributors to ecological preservation (Arunachal Times, 2024). By participating in clean-up drives, such as the 2025 Yagamso River cleanup that removed 12.96 tonnes of waste, or door-to-door IEC campaigns, volunteers develop practical skills and a deeper understanding of sustainable practices (Arunachal24, 2025).

To build on these efforts, youth must adopt a proactive stance, recognizing their role in both generating and mitigating waste. Simple actions—using reusable bags, segregating waste at source, or advocating for plastic-free alternatives in schools—can drive incremental change, as emphasized by YMCR's vice chairman Keyom Doni (Arunachal Times, 2025a). Educational institutions, as demonstrated by Rajiv Gandhi University's collaboration in the Dikrong River cleanup, play a crucial role in this shift (Newsfy, 2025). Integrating environmental education into curricula and extracurricular activities, such as YAREC, can amplify awareness and inspire lifelong commitment to conservation. For instance, YMCR's vision to reach 100,000 residents by 2030 through awareness campaigns offers a clear pathway for scaling youth engagement (Taba, 2024).

Government support is essential to overcome the challenges outlined earlier, particularly the lack of funding and infrastructure. Increased financial backing could enable YMCR to expand its clean-up drives to rivers like the Lohit and Siang, train more volunteers, and implement technologies to enhance waste management efficiency (Newsfy, 2025; Taba, 2024). Policies prioritizing the establishment of MRFs and composting units, as advocated by YMCR's policy submissions, would address systemic gaps, such as those in Seppa and Naharlagun (Arunachaltimes, 2022). Nationally, aligning with initiatives like the Swachh Bharat Mission could provide a platform to advocate for Arunachal-specific solutions, ensuring policies reflect the state's tribal and hilly context. By combining youth enthusiasm with institutional support, YMCR can transform its challenges into opportunities, creating a sustainable framework for river conservation. This collaborative approach, rooted in youth empowerment and policy reform, positions YMCR as a catalyst for broader environmental change in the region.

## **Conclusion**

The Youth Mission for Clean River stands as an example of the potential of youth-led initiatives to address environmental challenges. Through clean-up drives, IEC campaigns, YAREC, and policy engagement, YMCR has made significant strides in combating river pollution in Arunachal Pradesh, removing thousands of tonnes of waste and inspiring a generation to rethink waste management. By fostering a culture of accountability among youth and advocating for systemic reforms, YMCR not only cleans rivers but also builds a foundation for sustainable environmental practices. Despite challenges, its holistic approach and commitment to collaboration provide a scalable model for conservation. The organization's

vision of reaching all 27 urban notified towns by 2030, coupled with its emphasis on engaging 100,000 residents through awareness campaigns, charts a hopeful path forward (Taba, 2024). The path ahead requires collective effort—youth adopting sustainable habits, institutions amplifying educational platforms, and policymakers prioritizing funding and infrastructure. With such synergy, YMCR's efforts can transform Arunachal's rivers into symbols of ecological resilience, ensuring their vitality for future generations and setting a precedent for grassroots environmental movements across India.

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