



Reinterpreting Traditions to protect natural environment—*Manisha SG*

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The ritual of the immersion of religious idols is observed in various parts of India – from the Ganesh idols in Maharashtra to the Durga idols in West Bengal. The origin of this ritual is not specifically identified but scholars believe that it may have started as an offering of gratitude to the soil by agrarian communities. Worshipping the fertility of the soil on river banks, which nourished them, it is speculated that communities would bring home a handful of this soil, mould it into a form of a diety, worship it for a few days, offer prayers to it and then return it to the river. It was believed that the water carried these prayers and blessings of well being to the larger ecosystem and to communities down stream. Today however, the immersion of idols is causing a far reaching impact on the environmental health of water bodies all over the country. This is not due to the ritual itself, but rather because what was a natural material

earlier, which simply merged into the ecosystem, is now replaced with man made materials like Plaster of Paris and toxic chemical paints that do not biodegrade. Environmental activists have been highlighting this problem for several years now and public interest litigations have been filed with courts in Gujarat, Allahabad, Hyderabad and West Bengal since as early as 2001. Although well intentioned, the challenge posed by these litigations has the potential to hurt religious sentiment, create resistance to change and there has been an impasse on the issue for some time now, with state governments reluctant to pass more stringent laws around the matter.

This article attempts to summarise and study the main points on both sides of the debate by looking at the various PILs filed and compare their approaches. The main questions to consider are as follows:

1. Are the materials used in the making of the idols truly 'environmental pollutants'?
2. What are the alternatives to these materials?
3. What is the solution to handle religious items after their ritual use is over?

Is there a way to respect religious sentiment whilst protecting our dwindling natural resources?

Are Plaster of Paris and chemical paints harmful to the environment?

In, *Sureshbhai Keshavbhai ... vs State Of Gujarat* Ors on 9 May, 2013, filed under [Section 14](#) and [16](#) of the National Green Tribunal Act, 2010, a group of idol manufacturers and artisans challenged a government guideline prohibiting the making of idols with Plaster of Paris and chemical paints. The first two guidelines mentioned in communication dated 23.01.2012 issued by the Forest and Environment Department of Gujarat vide communication dated 23.01.2012 are as follows:-

1. " Idols should be made from natural materials as described in the holy scripts. Idols should be made of traditional clay and not from use of baked clay, plaster of paris.
2. Painting of idols may only be done from water soluble and nontoxic natural dyes. Use of toxic and non-biodegradable chemical dyes for painting idols is strictly prohibited."

According to the research done by Srishti Eco Research Institute (SERI) based in Pune, while PoP does not dissolve in water it does not harm it either. However no detailed study seems to have been undertaken by the CPCB itself to determine to what extent PoP pollutes the water. As per the applicants, from prima facie studies, they observe that PoP increase the alkalinity of the water and may cause an impact when idols are immersed in large numbers. This lack of in depth and reliable scientific research makes it difficult to say conclusively whether PoP can be considered a pollutant, according to the petitioners. Studies taken up by Prof Asolekar, at IIT Mumbai do clearly show however, that chemical paints that contain mercury and lead are dangerous for aquatic life and should not be immersed into natural water bodies. He has also cautioned against the impact of large scale immersion of Plaster of Paris in natural water bodies and the build up of these at the bottom of the water bodies

protect our water. Sri BalGangadhar Tilak, who used the Ganesh festival as a means to strengthen our national and cultural identity, unified our society through it. Many nature loving Ganesh devotees are now taking ownership for the social and environmental health of our community and natural resources through the festival and this augurs well for the future. Ultimately, if Nature, the rivers and the earth are seen to be as sacred as the idols we worship, we would all protect them as our own.



Reinterpreting Traditions to protect natural environment Contd....

Alternatives to Plaster of Paris and chemical paints

Traditionally, natural clay was used by artisans to mould religious idols from. In some parts of South India even today families make their own idols with a little bit of earth and choose not to paint them.

The commercial use of unbaked clay for religious idols poses several problems for artisans as it is bulky, very fragile and absorbs moisture. The losses borne by those who continue this traditional art are high and therefore make the idols costlier than Plaster of Paris. Natural clay itself is a non renewable resource and extensive mining of this clay (called Shaadu in Marathi) from Gujarat and West Bengal is also bound to have an effect on those eco systems where it is sourced from.

The large community of sculptors and artisans that depend on the manufacture of religious idols has been resistant to the move to natural clay or materials like papier-mache because these are difficult to make and take a longer time to dry. Plaster of Paris on the contrary is easy to mould and quick to dry. As artisans find it more and more difficult to find labour, they are reluctant to give up the use of Plaster of Paris.

Smaller changes in materials, that are easier to implement, are coming about gradually. The High court in Hyderabad stipulated that only natural pigments should be used in the painting of the idols. Some Hindu communities have replaced the immersion of the idol with a symbolic idol – usually a betel nut along with a supari leaf. This substantially reduces both the volume of the object being immersed as well as ensures that it is made of a natural material.



Solutions for handling religious items after due ritual use is over

In the direction by the High Court of Allahabad, in response to a PIL filed to prevent pollution of the river Ganga the court instructed 'that no immersion of idols shall take place in river Ganga or Yamuna. It is for the administration to identify the suitable places for immersion of idols other than the rivers.'

They also go on to identify a pond near the river Ganga that could be used instead. The effort here is to contain and therefore minimise the pollution caused. Lakes and ponds that don't have flowing waters, are bound to experience a high rise in toxicity in the days after the immersion and often fish can be seen floating dead in these.

Authorities in the city of Pune have built special immersion tanks on the banks of the rivers and have been encouraging devotees to immerse their idols in these instead of the river. Over the years more and more people have accepted this change in tradition, although certain Hindu groups believe that unless the immersion is done in flowing waters, the ritual will not be complete.

Even if devotees completely shifted the immersion to the tanks, the government still does not have a solution to what can be done to them after they are immersed. The tanks have a limited capacity and as the festivities last for ten days the tanks have to be emptied. With no systematic plan of disposal, authorities pick up the idols and simply throw them away in areas outside the cities, leading to the ire of the community.

Often the waters of the tanks are then drained out into the river itself without treatment, negating the point of using the immersion tank in the first place. Certain youth groups proposed the idea of recycling the PoP idols, donating them after the ritual was over, so they may be reused once again the following year. This was not acceptable to some religious groups and the effort had to be discontinued. Prof Asolekar suggested that the PoP idols be converted into powders that can be used in construction of tiles etc. In 2016 the NCL laboratory suggested a process whereby the PoP may be dissolved using sodium bicarbonate to convert the sludge later into chalks and fertilizer. However the systematic collection of sludge has yet to be put into place, for this process to be effective.

The religious value of idols after immersion

In the city of Mumbai, for decades Ganesh idols are immersed in the sea. The day after the immersion is done broken pieces of these idols wash up on the shores of the ocean and are walked over and trampled upon by people. Hindu groups have taken offense at this and some believe that even after the immersion, the idol is still sacred. In principle, once an idol has been immersed and returned to the earth it is to be left to merge with the elements again. However the use of non biodegradable materials such as PoP creates a problem as the idols do not dissolve immediately and float back to the shore the next day. Materials like clay and paper immediately dissolve into water and therefore would avoid such a predicament.



Respecting Religious sentiment

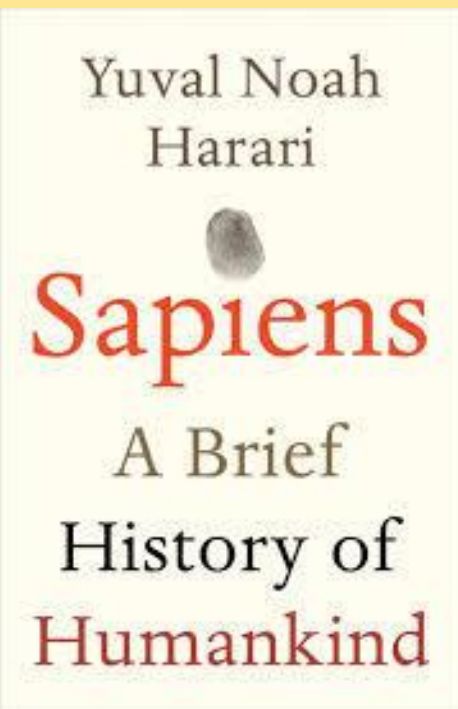
In the High court order in West Bengal the issue was a cutoff timeline set by the government on immersion of idols – this debate was focussed on the fact that the next day was Muharram and therefore the immersion of idols should be completed before the next festival began. It was more about religious sentiment than environmental impact. Any kind of regulation imposed by the government or the courts is going to have to delicately handle the religious belief system in which the ritual of immersion originates. Many groups have also pointed out that relatively speaking the pollution caused to the rivers and lakes due to domestic sewage and industrial effluent is much higher in proportion than that caused by the immersion of idols. They feel targeted by any regulation and as the matter is so sensitive, governments routinely delay its resolution.

Coming together to conserve our natural resources

The water situation is finally the core issue that both sides of the debate have to seriously consider. To what degree are we willing to jeopardise our water resources, by any kind of pollution, industrial or religious? In Pune city, although immersion tanks are becoming more and more acceptable, their management poses a concern. In years when water is plentiful, often the tanks which are very close to the banks of the rivers, get submerged by flowing waters. In one case, the government issued a directive to devotees to go ahead and immerse their idols in the river as there was enough water available. They cited the building of tanks merely as a convenience for devotees and were not too concerned about the impact on the river. In recent years, as water gets rationed during summer months, it becomes evident to all parties that it is important to protect our water.

Sri BalGangadhar Tilak, who used the Ganesh festival as a means to strengthen our national and cultural identity, unified our society through it. Many nature loving Ganesh devotees are now taking ownership for the social and environmental health of our community and natural resources through the festival and this augurs well for the future. Ultimately, if Nature, the rivers and the earth are seen to be as sacred as the idols we worship, we would all protect them as our own.

BOOK REVIEW: Sapiens A Brief History of Humankind- *Suhas Sapatnekar*



Yuval Noah Harari is a professor at Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His focus of research is the 'relation between history and biology'. His book focuses on the cognitive revolution, agricultural revolution, unification of humankind and the scientific revolution. Harari talks about Cognitive revolution being the cause for information exchange between humans. This revolution added new abilities to Homo sapiens. The human commitment to social life is the result of this cognitive revolution. This revolution has changed its dimension as the number of humans increased. How we behave in society today is a reflection of this change.

Next question he poses is whether the agricultural revolution was a miscalculation. He argues that agricultural revolution was history's biggest fraud. He holds some plant species as culprit for this. Wheat, rice and potato being on that list. His interpretation about Money, non-human systems is also interesting. He purports that gossip/imagination and fiction has changed history. Harari interprets technology as science, thus concluding that technological revolution has given human beings superhuman like powers.

Like other thinkers in this domain, he predicts that the ecological turmoil might endanger the survival of Homo sapiens itself, and warns that changes in nature will make survival of Homo sapiens difficult.

Its an interesting read and shows a close knit relation between different revolutions in human history.

MUTHAI RIVER FESTIVAL 2016– *Manjusha Oak*

Muthai River Festival' is an important part of the Jeevitnadi awareness mission towards dying rivers and negligent human activity. No river revival program would be successful and sustainable without **People Participation**. This - the second year of the festival (23rd to 28th November 2016) - was celebrated on the occasion of the '**Indian Rivers Day**' which falls on the 28th of November.

The theme was '**Awareness and Action**'

Exhibition on River Mutha : Past, Present , Future

(23rd to 25th November at Raja Ravi Verma Art Gallery)

The exhibition showcased the river Mutha of the past, present and future through a series of paintings/sketches and conceptual designs. The objective of the exhibition was to build perspective among citizen and bring about the desire to bring about a change.

Riverfront Conceptual Design Competition A Futuristic View of Mutha

Increasing population, infrastructure development, land use changes, resource extraction, destruction of upstream areas and riparian habitats continue to degrade the condition of rivers. To overcome these pressures, an integrated approach is required which focuses on the ecological parameters of river ecosystems and the socio-economic needs of the growing population.

JNLRF had held a Riverfront Conceptual Design Competition for students of architecture colleges - 23 colleges from Jaipur, Mumbai, Nagpur, Kolhapur and Pune registered. The participants were asked to keep this very integrated approach in mind and create a conceptual riverfront design. The exhibition also showcased important awareness posters on current state-of-affairs like

– Water security back then and now

- 'Respect the Code Red' - a beautifully rendered self-explanatory large-scale Google map showing the Blue and Red flood lines on a stretch of the Mutha river bed from Bombay-Bangalore highway to Yerawada bridge and their significance and impending danger if not heeded,



- Hazards of toxins used daily and adoption of a Toxin-free Lifestyle based on Ecological principles

26th November 2016 – Morning Events: Kirtan (6.30am to 8am)

It started with a one-of-its-kind 'Kirtan' by Shri Vishwas Kulkarni with the River as its theme. The venue was the 'Patanga' Ghat

Left : Display of conceptual design competition

near Z Bridge. What ensued was an enthralling experience as Shri Kulkarni adeptly wove into the Kirtan, all aspects of river ecology, river pollution, socio-economic as well as other issues while keeping the sanctity of a characteristic Kirtan intact!

Respect the Code Red (8.30am to 9.30pm)

Architect Sarang Yadwadkar and Advocate Asim Sarode- the duo along with activists were successful (after a long struggle) in persuading the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) to follow orders of the National Green Tribunal and stop construction of a road on the bank of Mutha River which would have choked the river bed. The duo actively worked against constructions within the flood lines.

There was a talk about the Red and Blue flood lines and their significance, with the help of the Google map displaying the Red and Blue flood lines. Two human chains in 'Red' and 'Blue'

dresses symbolic of the Red and Blue flood lines were formed on the banks with school children also holding the Google map. Development of a software application by city college students under the guidance of JNLRF team is underway. This will help the common man in knowing whether there is an encroachment/construction within the flood lines. One could refuse to buy a flat if the housing complex lies within the flood lines!

Cleanup Drive (9.30am to 10am) :A cleanup drive followed on the opposite bank, in collaboration with Janwani and PMC officials. Clean up drive usually attracts more crowd as all commonest of common people can participate in it and contribute to keeping the river clean.

26th November 2016 (4 to 8pm) - A Date with Rajendra Singhji, the Waterman of India

26th evening saw an interactive session with Shri Rajendra Singhji and Shri Kalanand Maniji of India River Network (two true River Warriors).



Above: Kirtan by Shri. Vishwas Kulkarni

MUTHAI RIVER FESTIVAL 2016 ... contd....

Declaration: Announcement of a 'Declaration' to save River Mutha (facilitated by JNLRF and drafted jointly with experts from various NGOs and organizations and individuals like - Ecological Society, Jalbiradari, Sagarmitra Abhiyan, Bhavtaal, Area Sabha, Janawani, etc) was also made on this day. It was then read out to the audience and presented to Shri Rajendra Singhji and Shri Kalanand Maniji to endorse it with their signatures. The Declaration is being shared with one and all with a target of one lakh signature endorsements in 100 days. It will be owned by the common populace.



Above: Code red and code green activity

Once the target is achieved, it will be followed by preparing a 'People's Action Plan' for the River. JNLRF will once again act as facilitator and bring together experts from the field as well as the common people to create this action plan. It will then be presented to the Environment Minister with the aid of Shri Rajendra Singhji. Implementation of the same will actively involve People Participation.

27th November 2016 Morning Events

A Flora Trail, Bird Walk and Bird Count along different stretches of the river bank were conducted by field experts on 27th morning. To get common people acquainted with these aspects, a flora trail from Malegaon, Temghar to the upstream area of Mutha was organised. The experts that conducted the trail were Dr. Vinaya Ghate and Ms. Ketaki Ghate.

Bird Walk (7 to 9am): A large number of migratory birds visit the city from November to February each year. Many water birds make Mutha River their home during this period. Bird walk was conducted at the Mula-Mutha Bird Sanctuary near Bund Garden by bird expert Dharmaraj Patil. This sanctuary was identified by Shri Prakash Gole and inaugurated by Dr. Salim Ali. However, it has been forgotten over time. JNLRF has started conducting Bird Walks here in a bid to once again popularise this birding site right here in the city. The sanctuary is a stopover for migratory birds and previously hordes of birds could be seen taking respite here. The response to the walk was overwhelming. The participants were eager to know about our feathered friends making way for a very good interaction.



Above: Bird walk informative session in full swing

28th November 2016 : Special River Walk (7 to 8.30am) : The festival concluded on the 28th - 'Indian Rivers Day' with a special River walk to mark the occasion. The River walk was launched during Muthai River Festival 2015 and has been conducted every Sunday from 7am to 8.30 am since then. The venue is Siddheshwar Ghat near Balgandharva Bridge.

It is conducted by JNLRF in association with Janawani that works in the field of Heritage conservation. Rivers are our Natural Heritage & an integral part. A lot of interesting information on the river is shared with the participants, right from the time it was born, till its transformation today. It covers the geological, historical, geographical and ecological aspects of the river with the help of on-site interesting facts, stories and incidents making the walk delightful as well as insightful.



Above: Dignitaries Rajendra Singh and Kalanand Mani

Pledge during Assembly : Several schools also marked 'Indian Rivers Day' by taking a pledge to keep our rivers clean during assembly time. It was shared with Private and other schools, Municipality schools in areas of PCMC, PMC, Aundh, Baner, Pashan, Mumbai, Baramati etc



Above: Pledge during assembly n school



Ecological Society

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