



Sacredly Polluting Rivers

(An effect of religion in pollution of the rivers)

Research Paper—Geography

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Our Dying Rivers— Indias 14 major and 55 minor rivers and several hundred small rivers are the main sources of water for drinking, irrigation and industrialisation. This is terrifying considering all our rivers are choked with millions of litres of sewage, industrial and agricultural waste along with religious emotions. In India, since ages, there has been a strong interrelationship between religion, customs, rituals and divine rivers. These pious rivers are worshiped right from the time any person takes birth to it's death, the entire rituals and ceremonies are associated with these rivers, or in other words, can we say that man starts polluting these rivers right from the 'Mundan' ceremony when the Tonsured (first) hair is embedded in a ball of atta and thrown into the river as a part of cultural ritual. Till its death when the half-burnt or burnt human bodies are given away into these rivers to attain 'Moksha' or 'Mukti'? Are we busy killing these rivers sacredly?

Immersion of Idols— Every year after Durga Puja and Ganesha Visarjan anxious concerns are expressed about polluting Hooghly River, yet every year thousands of images continue to be dumped in the river. The effigies of the idols are left to rot as are tones of flowers, green coconuts, bael and banana leaves. The mud that shapes the images is loosened into sediment. The toxic pigments and varnishes used to paint the images dissolve to contaminate the water. However this brutak annual assault ins't the only cause of the Hooghly's decay, but it certainly is the most visible. This is no respect we have for our holy rivers. While immersion of these images there is an unusual spread of white, frothy substance covering the entire water surface along the shore depicting the suffocating death of a river being reduced to-a stinking drain. Using these rivers during the festivals, devotees and puja organisers in such a manner raises series concern. The main source of worry is the effect of immersion

visible. In the rivers and ponds and these left overs sharply increase the metal content in water. This deadly particle creates various diseases among human beings and aqua creatures. Durga visarjan, Ganesh Visarjan and the Diwali idols immersion all over the country is observed since time immemorial but now is the "time to be aware of it's results.

Religious Gatherines— Religious gathering as Chhat Puja or Kumbh and Ardh Kumbh are still the mater of great concern. Taking into consideration about the event of Ardh Kumbh held at Allahabad in 2007 at the confluence of Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati in order to improve the content and quality of clean water the Allahabad High Court ordered a three pronged strategy to reduce the problem release of water from upstream sources (2,500 cusecs of water from Narora Barrage (U.P.) was released into Ganga to dilute the concentration of pollutants in the river and improve water level), stopping effluent discharge from tanneries located at Kanpur, tappin drains and redirecting domestic sewage within Allahabad itself. (See Graph - 1)

Data Source: Anon 2007, Water quality of River Ganga and Yamuna at Allahabad (UP) during Maghmela (Ardh Kumbh) 2007. Central Pollution Control Board, New Delhi. January mimo downloaded from www.cpcb.nic.in on January 25, 2007. But inspite of improved appearance, the rivers water quality was not good enough for bathing. According to Central pollution control board (CPCB) the biochemical oxygen demand (BOD) was higher than the maximum permissible bathing levels of 3 mg/l At 'Sangam' the recorded BOD was 5.2–5.3 mg/l on Jan/ 14th and 15th 2007, respectively. While the total coliform counts—an indicator of microbial contamination—was at the level of 13000 to 15000 mpn/ 100 ml respectively during the 'shahisnan' on 14th and 15th January which was only 8,000 mpn/100 ml under normal conditions before the

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'snan' and 26 to 22 times more against 500 mpn/100ml the CPCB's which is the standard for bathing waters.

Who Pollutes ???... Fifty lakh pilgrims compared for Ardh Kumbh in the total 'mela' area of 16 sq. km divided into 11 sectors. The mela itself had a significant impact upon the river quality. Toilet arrangements included 25090 glazed lavatories and 50,000 deep trench lavatories and 4000 urinals.

What was lacking, was the treatment and disposal of sewage collected in these toilets flowing unchecked into the river. Experts say that the pollutants remain in the river even after the water dries up in the summer. According to the standards set by the biologists, the presence of Cauliform bacteria should not be more than 500 bacterial 100 ml water. But the reality is quite different. Samples of water collected before the monsoon at different sites of Ganga revealed that the presence of Cauliform bacteria was 7500 to 10,500/ 100 ml water. The untreated water and biological garbage dumped into the river are the main reasons for the growth of Cauliform bacteria in the Ganga and reduction in aquatic life. The water at these Ghats are highly contaminated. Bacillus bacteria Cauliform is common there. Other types of bacteria include Salmonella, Protozoon and Giardia which are all harmful.

They cause diarrhea, dysentery, jaundice and skin diseases. Therefore it is not advisable to drink water of Ganga or use it to prepare the 'prasada'.

Commercialised Religion— From ancient times the saints truly devoted to religion used to give up their luxurious life and live in isolated places involved in worship throughout the life. However, nowadays the picture is changed, so many groups of saints are now busy proving their superiority setting new trends of customs and enjoying life full of comforts but lacking religious depth.

Proving to this statement recently from last two years a group of saints and their followers have started immersing thousands of 'parthiv shivlings' made of mud into the river at 'Sangam' and this goes on for forty days at a stretch. Basically it is a tradition of 'Kalpvas Mela' being held for 40 days from the first day of 'Magh Mahina' which extends right upto Shivratri during these, forty days the devotees give up their homes and live in small huts besides Sangam and worship the whole day offering coal, milk and coconut to the

pious river (which are basically the water purifiers) as mentioned in the 'Shastras'. However now this religious drama is highly commercialized highlighted by media and badly polluting these rivers.

The involvement of media and some Film personalities further make such activities more popular among the general public following the same without considering the seriousness of this problem.

Is the River Fit for Bathing ? The sacred, serene, romantic and mythical river Ganga, the soul of India traverse 29 cities, 70 towns and thousands of villages before pouring itself into the Bay of Bengal. The banks of Benaras and Haridwar and alight by the flames of a thousand days will vouch for its capacity to move even the most stubborn atheist into grudging submission of Ganga. A dip in this holy river is not for the faint hearted. There is a strong chance that your efforts of cleaning your sins will be interrupted by a dead body popping next to you or you may be in contact with a half burnt, corpse.

Continued cremations at its banks, waste from nearby industries, untreated sewage and the rising population have all contributed to make Ganga a spot amongst the world's top rivers at risk. In a report published by the world wild life fund. Nearly 750 villages existing between Agra and Allahabad on the banks of Ganga are without livelihood, as the fishes have died forcing the villagers to move to towns and become casual labours, forced to migrate in urban areas and work as labourers.

Choking rivers with religious 'Samagri'— Already choked with high pollution levels, the indiscriminate throwing of religious 'Samagri' is further deteriorating the health of rivers. Though there are rules regulating throwing of religious 'samagri' and immersion of idols, they are almost always flouted, which leaves the rivers more polluted each festive season. Rules and efforts made by the government are not enough to save the river: from this seasonal onslaught.

There are identified areas where immersion and religious samagri can be thrown into the river but everything is unable to prevent people, from dumping, things into the river where ever they want; unless it is made a social responsibility. However, compared with the sewage that flows into the river each year, this onslaught is not significant but, however, in no way means

that things can be allowed to go unregulated and unchecked.

‘Create awareness, remembering and revival’—It is what we can do to preserve our water bodies : • Read, share information, ideas and efforts to protect rivers. • Know where your local river, lake or sea stands-get a pollution check done by the pollution control board or an environment NGO in the city. • Avoid following superstitions that harm water bodies. • Follow an initiate local efforts. • Go for environmental friendly Durga and Ganesh visarjan next year. Try that your idol is made of paper mache or earth given natural colours and organise it to be immersed in an authorised area. • See differently the river as something which could be nurtured be an asset or cultural heritage not that can be exploited used, harnessed and over powered. • Find a balance between heart and mind and bravely re-inter preting culture, religion or superstitions so that they don’t add to the burden on our rivers.

By using biodegradable earth to make idols immersing them symbolically in community tanks and

by using paints free from mercury and cadmium. • Finally reviving our rivers by reviving our sense of collective ownership towards own water bodies. So that a multinational doesn’t get to dump in it with-no questions asked, or bottle it and sell it at a premium.

A forgotten relationship—The reality of river pollution does not prevent millions of pilgrims from taking a dip. Neither, does the knowledge of environmental damage stop people from immersing idols in the sea and rivers. Our head might tell us otherwise, but our hearts listen to centuries of cultural memory.

Many traditional rituals revolve around water. Yet in our everyday actions, there is little evidence that we really care for our water bodies. Despite total dependence on rivers the relationship between city dwellers and rivers is invisible. Not many of us feel emotional ties to the river today. Only when we leave town for a weakened jaunt do we actually notice a stream or attune our ears to its gurgle. This is un fortunate because city dwellers are not only part of the problem of dying rivers, but also an integral part of the solutions.

