

Jal Dindi, the Water Pilgrimage

How Tradition and Culture can be used to Promote ILBM

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Water is the most basic natural resource essential for survival of life on the earth. It is also the powerful agent for socio-economic and cultural development of human society. With symptoms of stress already visible, future of man on the planet is closely linked with the way water will be managed in time to come. Fortunately, water is a renewable resource, however, its seasonal availability and wide spatial and temporal variability calls for implementation of conservation and management strategies to meet challenges emerging out of rising water demands in developed, developing and under-developed countries.

In the recent past, the problem of sustained water supply was globally addressed through construction of small, medium and major reservoirs (also referred to as man-made lakes) across rivers, their tributaries and streams. Such storage reservoirs impound large volumes water for meeting year-round demand of the same for competing uses. Although often criticized for their adverse environmental impacts, the lakes and reservoirs have transformed societies all over the world.

Management of natural lakes and man-made reservoirs is a very complex issue the solution to which essentially requires an integrating approach articulated in the Integrated Lake Basin Management (ILBM) and the World Lake Vision (WLV), by the International Lake Environment Committee (ILEC), Japan. Among the major problems, increased upstream water use, together with fast rate of siltation due to changes in land use pattern and deforestation, often leads to quantitative reduction and qualitative degradation of water in the lakes and reservoirs. Further, release of untreated or partly-treated effluents from domestic & industrial sectors and pollutant load from chemical intensive agriculture, has over all negative environmental impact on the water resources. Unfortunately, there is lack of awareness about the long-term impacts of such degradative processes and their inherent potential to trigger social conflicts and economic losses. Further, it needs to be emphasized that tangible solutions to environmental problems are not possible simply by making enabling laws, acts and rules but what is needed is faithful implementation of the same in the face of vested interests, expediencies and lack of political will.

Ujjani lake, Maharashtra, India, is a classical case where all the concepts of ILBM can be put to test and in the following pages these issues will be analyzed for understanding different dimensions of ILBM and finding possible solutions for short and long term sustainability of the lake ecosystem. In particular, the focus will be on a local pilgrimage known as *Jal Dindi* and how this pilgrimage has been successfully used to bring local citizens and the water resources together, thereby promoting ILBM.

Introduction

The Upper Bhima Basin (UBB) near Pune, India is cradle of a great civilization that gave birth to *Bhakti* movement roots of which go back thousands of years. *Bhakti* is a spiritual term that can be translated as - single minded and total devotion to the Godhead with a form. In Indian philosophy it is considered as the easier path for self realization and communion with the God. The UBB has a number of cities/towns/villages where foot prints of this great spiritual movement are visible and alive in the form of thousands and thousands simple urban as well as rural people seeking salvation through this path of selfless devotion and service.

One of the interesting traditions of *Bhakti* movement in this part is annual pilgrimage to *Pandharpur* - the abode of lord *Vitthal* also named *Pandurang*, undertaken twice a year in *Ashadha* (July) and *Kartik* (November) months of Indian calendar. The pilgrimage (*Wari*) involves journey on foot from one's place of residence to *Pandharpur*, the pilgrimage destination situated downstream of the Ujjani reservoir. The pilgrimage has a great socio-religious significance for self discovery, social awareness and spiritual fulfillment.

The birth of Jal Dindi

On the lines of the foresaid tradition of journey on foot, a group of citizens from Pune city aggrieved by the highly degraded state of rivers in the region, had started a great movement of *Jal dindi* (pilgrimage on water). The annual event taking place since 2002 in the month of October involves voyage along the course of the river *Bhima* from *Alandi* (the small town on the river Indrayani that downstream is called Bhima where Dnyaneswar attained samadhi) to *Pandharpur* (the abode of Lord Vitthala).

Key organization: The Jal Dindi Pratisthan (Foundation)

The key organization behind Jal Dindi movement is the *Jala Dindi Pratishthan* (Foundation). The organizations objectives are as follows:

1. Propagation of water literacy among the masses.
2. Study impacts of urbanization and modern agriculture on river, lake and groundwater quality considering river basin as a unit
3. Monitoring regularly the streams, rivers and lakes to access the ecological health. The assessment includes the physical surveys, sampling and testing samples for water quality parameters.
4. Execution of target oriented research programs related to the riverine ecosystems, pollution, economics and culture
5. Designing and promotion of participatory program to involve the society at large in preserving, conserving, developing and protecting the freshwater resources in Ujjani lake basin
6. To imbibe the environmental education with ethics with well designed courses and capacity building programs at school and college levels.
7. To publish books, research papers, abstracts, manuals, newsletters related to rivers, lakes and human interactions with aquatic ecosystems.

Organizations associating with the Jal Dindi include some of the prominent religious, social, environmental and Governmental organizations include the *Vishwasanskriti* (Global culture) Educational Initiatives (VEI), the *Kasba Ganpati Mandal*, *Alandi Devasthaan*, *Vitthal-Rakhumai Devasthaan*, *Srushti* Eco-Research Institute, Clean River Committee, University of Pune, COEP, and civic bodies like Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) and Maharashtra Pollution Control Board (MPCB).

Route of Jal Dindi

The annual pilgrimage on water (Jal Dindi) covers a distance of 450 km up to the Ujjani reservoir in about 12 days. Enroute the Dindi touches 70 villages on the bank of the river and in the last 7 years has transformed the lives of thousands of villagers. This great silent transformation has taken place through a number of activities undertaken to fulfill three basic objectives of the Jal Dindi foundation viz. health, environment and spiritual development.

Highlights of the symbolic and action program during Jal Dindi

Kalash puja (Worship of a sacred pot)

In Indian culture *Kalash* - the sacred pot - has a special significance as it represents material prosperity and social well being and its worship is undertaken before beginning any socio-economic, religious or culture endeavor. The jal dindi begins from Alandi after representatives of major religions chant lines from sacred religious scriptures and perform Kalash puja (pot worship). Water brought from different resources from surrounding areas is poured in the river as a symbol of commitment to keep water resources clean and with this the Jal Dindi is flagged off. It is a great event and thousands and thousands of pilgrims and people lining on the bank of the river witness it with indelible impression on their minds about their responsibility towards nature and its resources.

Jal - Maitri Yatra (Voyage water friends)

It involves the journey from the origin of any river to the nearer village/town/city during which the participants spread awareness among the people about the importance of clean river. Mainly youth undertake kayaking, rowing, rafting and other water related sports during the journey. The Jal Mitra has caught imagination of younger generation and has become an adventure sporting event with socio-environmental context.

Establishment of Jal Mitra Mandals (River Eco-Clubs)

To sustain conservation momentum Eco-clubs are established in the villages along the course of the river. The members of these clubs undertake social service for maintaining the river clean and free from pollution. The members are also trained and encouraged to undertake water quality monitoring, awareness campaigns and related activities. Some of such activities include:

- An awareness on water borne diseases and development of low cost water filters.
- Tree plantation along the river for flood control and enrichment of the bio-diversity.
- Demonstration/training to local youth on rescue operations during floods and natural calamities as a part of disaster management.
- Promote water sports

Jala Dindi Sanskar Shibir (Camp)

Moral values are crucial for order and peace in any society and this program essentially addresses these issues. Youth in the age group of 6-14 yrs are trained in the role of values for leading materially prosperous, socially responsible and spiritually fulfilled life. The training is imparted by religious/spiritual teachers employing traditional techniques of mass communication through Bhajan (singing lyrics in

praise of God), Kirtan (Communicating virtues through song and narrations), Pravchan (discourses involving intellectual analysis in the quest of supreme reality), Bharud and Gowlan etc (Singing songs that relate material realities with spiritual dimension embedded in every living being).

Health check-up, advice and distribution of medicines

A group of expert physicians participating in the Jal Dindi organize such camps free of cost and thousands of villagers with out access to even primary health care are benefited by these camps. Dr. Viswas Yeole who is a gynecologist by training and brain behind the idea of Jal Dindi himself is a key doctor in this process.

Water quality studies/assessment and guidance for avoiding water related health issues

The Shrishti Eco-Research Institute SERI, a Pune based environmental organization undertakes studies on the health of riverine ecosystem and surrounding land environment. These surveys have brought out startling observations on impact of river pollution on every aspect of down stream population.

Some of these observations include (i) high microbial contamination of the river, high levels of nutrients - nitrates and phosphates and consequent high BOD of water make it unfit for consumption, (ii) the growth of the algae and aquatic plants is found along the course of the river, (iii) the river has self purification capacity with low nutrients and no coliforms, the indicator organisms of organic pollution, (iv) the rivers get extremely polluted down stream of major urban locations (Pune, Pimpri-Chinchwad, Dound) mostly due to direct discharge of untreated domestic sewage. Thus sewage linked pollution is single largest factor in environmental degradation of the river and terminal Ujjani reservoir.

The way ahead

Today, the Jal Dindi has emerged as an unprecedented environmental movement touching the lives of thousands of impoverished rural people who are victims of water pollution from up-stream urban centers like historic Pune, one of the fasted growing cities in Maharashtra and its twin, the Pimpri-Chchwad often described as Detroit of India. Perhaps in the environmental history of India, it is for the first time Jal Dindi has brought together thousands of environmental activists, professionals and institutions for a common cause of protection of rivers and lakes.

It is also an example of how sound cultural traditions of a region could be sensibly interwoven in to a common cause of environmental protection. It could be compared with Dandi march, the famous Salt march (Satyagraha) undertaken by Mahatma Gandhi, the apostle of Non-Violence and Father of Nation, that kindled urge for freedom in the minds of thousands and thousands of Indians and shook the mighty British empire.

The movement has potential to be global as basic issues of river pollution are crying for solution in all countries of the world. The mass movement is highly replicable and many such events are already happening all over the country. Indeed, in this lies the secret of its success.