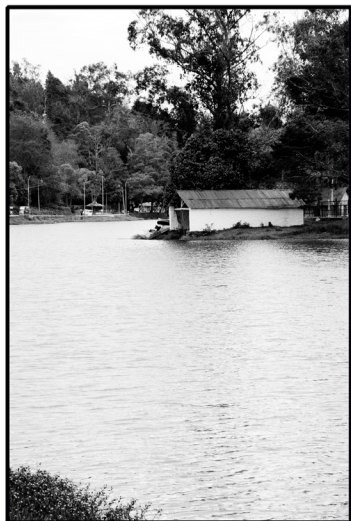


V A I G A I

A RIVER OF LOST DREAMS



River Vaigai
protection
cultural Yatra

SEPTEMBER 2ND TO 5TH 2011

PRESENTED BY

PEACEFUL SOCIETY, GOA



IRN
Indian River Network

VAIGAI CULTURAL YATRA

In order to enlighten and explore the holistic link of nature and the importance of integration, VAIGAI trust along with Indian River Network and Peaceful society conducted a 4 day cultural Yatra on Vaigai river conservation. The yatra aimed to bring to the grass root society on the importance of River Vaigai, its historic significance in cultural and socio economic development of the catchment area its sub streams and plain flood areas.

Vaigai is historically significant to the Tamil culture. The Great temple city of Madurai lies on the banks of this river. This 250 kilometre long river plays a vital role in the livelihood of millions of people directly and indirectly. Over 2,36,000 Acres of land is dependent on the water from Vaigai for its irrigation needs. Vaigai is the major source of drinking water to the 6 districts that it covers. Over 20 lakh people are dependent on the Vaigai for their drinking water needs.



Covering over 6 districts this 250 km long yatra met with the stakeholders of the river Vaigai, and interacted with them. In the following we share with you, a brief of the programs and activities of the Cultural yatra.

Day one



Children watching the cultural folklore performed by *SCIENCE* cultural group

The yatra started at the source of Vaigai River. A small hamlet called Varasanadu. Varasanadu hills are part of the Western Ghats. VASANTHAM and VAIGAI WOMEN FEDERATION collaborated with us in the day one programs.

The cultural team from Thirunelveli SCIENCE cultural group performed folklore, traditional drums called THAPPA, and spread social awareness messages through their songs and drama.

The Yatra started with us reaching the upper Vaigai, collected the water from the source and pledged

The pledge

We will prevent deforestation,
We will stop encroachment in the catchment areas,
Will prevent illegal sand mining,
And to protect forest from forest fire,
Prevent catchment area degradation,
Take holistic water conservation measures,
Demand people river policy draft,
Demand a single ministry for water and water resources.
Demand a special program to protect tribal rights and the rights of farmers and fishermen.



Over 260 women and farmers participated in the oath taking ceremony. In a symbolic ceremony the water from the source of Vaigai River was collected in a traditional urn. This water will be delivered to the fishing community at the end of the yatra to be mixed in the ocean.



With the cultural team performing the song and dance through the streets, We reached the Varusanadu Panchayath office. The members of the panchayath participated in the program. VASANTHAM's **Mr Gunashekar** chaired the opening ceremony and spoke about the destruction of the forest in the past 3 decades. He explained the status of traditional irrigation system under sever encroachment and destruction. He observed his grief on the tendency of destruction of the people in cutting down the forests, and added that such activities of destruction and abuse of the VAIGAI will affect the livelihood of the people down streams. Mr Gunashekeran asked the people and the panchayath to live up to the oath and to take effective measures on the protection and conservation of VAIGAI for our benefit and the generations to come



Mr Bose- Director, GREEN

Vaigai River once used to be an independent river, but subsequently it was linked to Mullai Periyar river. As a result, Vaigai is now dependent on Mullai Periyar. As there is a water dispute with Mullai Periyar among the state governments, it is important to maximize the available water sources. And protect the forests from further deforestations. By doing so we can protect our river from drying up. We appreciate the initiative by VAIGAI trust and Peaceful society through IRN and request to further the demonstration to the catchment areas of VAIGAI River

Mr Sivakumar – MAHATHMA NGO

Green revolution initiated the destruction of forests, and the water ways of our country. Preference of single crop cultivation resulted in the disappearance of traditional form of multi crop cultivation. This however depleted the soil nutrition and people were forced to depend on chemical fertilizers. The concept of conservation is very important. We should take initiative to protect and preserve our natural resources.

Khuoobulal- National Coordinator SWARAJ.

River is like a mother to us. She plays a very important role in the sustainability of livelihood of its people. In Bihar, Kosi and Kundak rivers are the 2 most important rivers. Kosi is often called as India's sorrow. She is cursed with Flooding and drought. People die of both the flood and drought. It is important to save lives and utilize the natural resource in a very efficient manner. From Bihar, I request you to join hands for the drafting of People River Policy. And urge the importance of protect our natural resources.

Thangam- VAIGAI women federation

We are grass root people who had little knowledge on the importance of conservation. Your Yatra has enlightened us with knowledge and responsibility. We take great pride on your efforts to conserve our area, together with your support we will take efficient measures to protect and preserve. And we pledge to stand hand in hand with all the efforts of IRN, VAIGAI and PEACEFUL SOCIETY in its endeavours.

Annadurai- IRN, State Convener

Vaigai is not seen as an integrated river. It is often seen as a forest area, plain fed area and coastal area. Concerned Departments are isolated in their approach. A river has its origin, flow and drainage. And so should it be treated as river in its entirety. All the resources of a river should be treated as the part of the river. In integration, the beneficiaries of the river should be considered as an important role players and custodians of the rivers. When you introduce the benefit of the waterways and the need to protect it, it would become the role of the people to protect the natural wealth. Our Vaigai is facing severe threats from selfish and ignorant people. The sand is been mined without any regard for the balance of nature. Vaigai is fast becoming a sand miner's gold mine.

The depletion of groundwater by bore wells and the dangers of encroachments are severe. Unless actions are taken now, it would become too late and our fertile lands will turn into dry desert. Our cultural Yatra aims to bring the people at all levels together and unite us to protect the river Vaigai, which we all love.



Mr Annadurai with Mr Joseph Karoor, Co-ordinator INR, south and Mr Gunasekaran-VASANTHAM Society.

Mr Joseph J Karoor- Co-ordinator IRN South

Rivers are not restricted to regional and national boundaries. Unlike humans, a river doesn't identify itself with cast, creed, and region. Rivers flow through national and international boundaries. A river feeds everyone and quench everyone's thirst. It is important to take a lesson in the integration that the river teach us. We need to understand that a river is not under any personal ownership. Everyone who uses the river becomes the stakeholder of the River, and also becomes responsible for the protection of the river. We should understand that industrial pollution, encroachments and sand mining are dangerous to the existence of the river and its waters. As stakeholders, and protectors of the rivers we need to take measures to protect and prevent the rivers from destruction.



Mr Annadurai speaking to the residents of Varasanadu, Mr Gunasekarand and Mr Khuboolal stand by

Sit by a river.
Find peace and meaning
In the rhythm
Of the lifeblood of the Earth



The Grand old ladies of Varusanadu listening keenly to the members of the yatra



Rajesh Mani- Green Earth Trust- Kodaikanal

Nature is often misunderstood and taken for granted. We abuse our resources because they have no voice and they don't react instantly for the abuse they face by us. But be assured there is an equal and opposite reaction for every action that we do today. If we allow our rivers to be mined for sand excessively, allow illegal encroachments, industrial waste to be mixed in our rivers, one day soon not in 100 years, not in 50 years very soon, in our lifetime nature will react, and as you know it has already reacting to the abuse that we have been throwing at it. Everywhere in the world, people are beginning to face the wrath of environmental problems. And, people are realizing the cost of their actions. We must realize that nature is not dependent on nature; it is we who are dependent on nature. Nature is a mother and a gift that we need to cherish and celebrate. Our rivers are the lifeline of our well being. When we remove the river from the equation, all that will be left is dryness, and lifelessness. What we have is ours to enjoy not destroy. The streams, rivers and forest were gifted to us, only to be protected for our children. If we understand the importance of our natural wealth, and use it wisely, the rivers will give us wealth in many folds. If we turn selfish and kill the golden goose, well... We all know the story of the golden goose. I thank for the opportunity here, and as each and everyone of us to realize the wealth that we have and the importance to conserve and protect our natural wealth before it is too late.



After the conclusions of the opening ceremony, the yatra started to proceed to meet the women and men of NREGA(National Rural Employment Guarantee Ajona) we met over 385 NREGA workers and Science Cultural Group preformed traditional folklore, and drama. Importance of river, its catchment area and its ecosystem was shared with the members of NREGA. Opinions were sought and shared among the group. Joseph Karoor, South convener of IRN headed the program. And shared his insights on Destruction in the name of Development. His Opinions were well received and the members of NREGA vowed to protect the River Vaigai and use its resource efficiently.

The yatra headed to KADAMALAIKUNDU. LAW, a local organisation assisted in the programs. We visited Government Higher secondary school, Kadamalaikundu. Over 864 children and faculties participated in the cultural programs. The folklore, drama and dance were well received among the students. Kuboohlal, from Bihar headed the program. Various speakers spoke about Nature, Its importance. History and importance of Vaigai was shared among the students. The students were requested to share their learning's to the members of their family and take effort to create a peaceful and nature loving society.



A Pledge to protect River Vaigai and the natural Resources

The Headmaster of the government High school conveyed his deep satisfaction on the efforts by the Yatra team, and blessed us with success in our efforts to protect River Vaigai.

After the warm welcome by the students of Govt High School Kadamalaikundu, we headed to Andipatti. A rustic town near Vaigai Dam. We conducted a street cultural program near the bus station. The street cultural program here created curiosity among the locals and travellers. Bit notices were distributed to the general public. Pounraj from SRED welcomed the Yatra team and helped us organise the street show. Public expressed their happiness to the yatra team and shared their drinking water problem with us. They added that the ground water level has gone down to alarming levels.

The yatra headed to Anaipatti village. Overnight stay was at Government Kallar higher secondary school. The first day yatra covered over 65 kilometres visiting over 2000 peoples, with 6 instances of cultural programs.

On our first day of the cultural yatra we received a warm welcome by the locals, who were eager to support and participate in the efforts of VAIGAI trust, Peaceful society and Indian River Network. The children we met enjoyed the cultural shows and were keen to learn ways to protect the river Vaigai and pledged to protect nature.



DAY - 2

On the day 2 the team visited a Hanuman Temple, in Mettupatti. A sacred center on the banks of river Vaigai attracts large amount of tourist. Illegal sand mining has caused severe damage to the area. The river basin is polluted cause of several religious and superstitious practices and ceremonies conducted on the banks of the river. Our team conducted a Dance and Drama for a wide group of audience.

From Mettupatti the yatra headed back to Anaipatti bus stand. This town used to be frequented by floods. The severity of sand mining is such as the geography of the town and the river is changed. What used to be a high flowing river is now a dry bed. The agriculture has taken a severe beating because of lack of irrigation. What once was a fertile paddy cultivation region 2 decades ago where people harvest 3 crops a season is now a single crop per season, entirely dependent on the water from vaigai.

We conducted a street performance in Anaipatti bus stand. And the interaction with the local people and farmers ensured their support to the yatra.

Vilampatti

Vilampatti is a farming village. The team met up with members from Environmental Protection Society. the yatra team received a warm welcome by the farming community and members of Environmental Protection society. They shared their grievances caused by a paper mill in their location. Aquatic life has been severely depleted cause of wastage from the paper mill dumped in the water bodies. The predominantly farm based village is witnessing large scale migration of its residents because of polluted and poisoned fields and waterways.

Mr Rajendran, President- Environmental Protection Farmer's Society

The paper mill single handed has converted a flourishing village to a grave yard. The mill which started in 1978 with 28 acers of land is swelled into 938 acers large industry to date. over the years the mill waste had poisoned the lands of the farmers making it unsuitable for agriculture, forcing the farmer to sell the land to the mills.

The government has paid no heed to our problems. Ignoring the fact that the paper recycling process has large amount of lead based wastage, which pollute our land and water causing severe health effects such as throat cancer, respiratory problems and other skin diseases. We have lost the wealth of our lands, health of our bodies and living a dead mans life. We request IRN, Peaceful society and VAIGAI trust to take note of our problems, and help us find positive solutions. We also condemn the ignorance of the government bodies and the selfish greed of the Paper Mills.



Maanadimangalam

MaandiMangalan is a heaven for illegal sand mining. It was not possible for our team to conduct our cultural program in the village due to threats by the sand mafia. We however distributed bit notices and spoke to few locals.

Solavandan

Solavandan is about 16 kilometers from Madurai. Another center for illegal sand mining and encroachment. There are plantations even in the river bed areas. POWER project, CIRUD helped us in the cultural programs in Solavandan. Folk Dance, Drama and songs were performed in the town.

Mr Manikamoorthy, Director POWER Project and Mr Sivan, Director- CIRUD gave a special speech

Solavandan is a traditional village with historic and mythological importance. Because of the water been taken for Madurai from Vaigai Dam (45mcmt per day), Vaigai Basin in Solavandan is a dry river bed. This has caused the depletion of ground water; there is a severe scarcity for drinking water. Severe Encroachment has changed Vaigai from a river into a canal.



Madurai

We visited Saktihvidiyal, an orphanage in Jaihindpuram, over 180 children enjoyed the performance by our cultural team. From there we headed to Sellur, Bose Colony 5th street. EXIST organisation coordinated with over 400 women for the cultural program. Dance, drama and awareness programs were well received among the women.

We interacted with the woman's group of EXIST. They shared the problems faced by them because of mosquito infestation in their region. We learned that municipality has failed to maintain the drainage system in the region, turning the river into a sewage cesspool. Invasion of (seemakaruvelai) an exotic species has caused severe environmental damage to the region.

After winding up the days cultural program we were welcomed by SAND org in Thirupuvanam .

Day 2 we witnessed the abuse of river vaigai by industries, sand mining and domestic waste been dumped into the river way. It was noticed that the authorities consider the river ways as a canal for sewage disposal. Over 1800 people took part and witnessed the cultural programs conducted by our team.

DAY-3

Day 3 started with a review of the past 2 days activities.

We then met up with Vaigai Kiruthumal Irrigation and Farmers Association. Mr Karupanan, the association representative welcomed us and led us to their village. The Kaurvakudi village has been severely disrupted been denied their rights to the vaigai water. Their once fertile farmland is now a field of exotic species. Several families have migrated to the garment factories in Tirupur, leaving behind an almost ghost town. Those left behind have shifted from farming to charcoal making due to lack of irrigation.

Mr Ganeshapandiyan- (Water Users Farmers Association)

We feel that the water from vaigai has come to our village, when the cultural team visited us. We feel grateful and privileged by your arrival. Your cultural Yatra has taught us our responsibilities in conserving water and protecting our river. We had been denied our water rights for over 30 years. We request the Yatra team to carry our crying voices to the authorities to let us have what is rightfully ours. Carrying the message from the people of Karuvakudi. We headed to Melarangiam

Mr Veeranan, Ex Panchayath President welcomed our yatra team and showed us the dried up water beds in his village. He voiced the peoples anger in been denied their water rights. The ground water has gone down severely, and the illegal mining is rampant by powerful people. Our team promised to let their grievance been told. And conducted folksongs and dance to the people of melarangiam. We further headed to S Nangoor,

Mr K. Varatharajan, the village president gave us a warm welcome, and invited us to his village. The same problem faced by the previous villages is been faced by the residents of S Nangoor. Due to poverty, and lack of agriculture opportunities large scale migration is evident in the village. Mr Varatharajan stated that child labour and Child Trafficking is a problem faced by his village. The only solution to the several problems faced by the village and its people is to provide water from Vaigai Kirudumal sub division.

The entire village appreciated the cultural programs conducted by our Yatra team and shared their happiness and promised to take note on conservation and protection of River Vaigai.

The people extended their warm hospitality by providing lunch to the entire Yatra team and blessed us to a successful completion of the yatra.



We headed to tirupachi, parthibanoor and parmakudi conducting our cultural folklore and distributed bit notice. We reached Lanthai village in Ramanad district.

We were welcome by a team of over 500 people organised by TRRM and Women Federation. We conducted nonstop cultural folklore for over 90 minutes. The team was requested to repeat several programs due to popular demand. During the interaction, the people said 2 decades ago they farming independent on irrigation. And the main economic source of the region. Now however they don't remember the last time they have seen the water from river Vaigai. The blame the blockage of traditional waterways, and deforestation for their lost heritage. Ramanad district is severely drought affected district in Tamil Nadu. Several families have migrated. Abandoning village's altogether.

The third day program we witnessed severe problems faced by several villages and farming community due to the denial of their water rights. Several questions were raised by the villagers about the second had treatment of the government towards these villages. This region covering sivangangai, viruthunagar and ramanad district are the worst affected.

Mr Karupuswami- Director TRRM

Ramanathapuram is a drought prone region. Since we are at the lower end of Vaigai, we seldom get any water from Vaigai. Drinking water has become an expensive commodity. Our organisations support wholeheartedly in the protection of rivers and its waterways. And are willing to participate in any programs conducted by the team. TRRM instuition provided us with accommodation.

Over 3000 people witnessed and took part in our yatra.



DAY - 4

We were received by PMD and REED organisations. Our last day of yatra started at Panaikuzlam Government boys higher secondary school and girls higher secondary school . 3 hour cultural program was conducted. We expressed the importance of Vaigai river conservation, and the relationship between the river and sea. Together both schools had over 1500 students participating in the program. The students were enthusiastic about the programs by IRN and Peaceful society. and pledged their support to the organisations.

PMD extended their hospitality by providing lunch to the yatra team.

In the evening towards the sunset we went to a village called Attangarai. The village residents blame the drying up of river for the depletion of their aquatic life. The once famous Attangarai prawns have ceased to breed because of lack of water from Vaigai River. Artificial plans by the government at huge expenses failed miserably.

We gifted the water collected from the source of Vaigai to the villagers of Attangarai. In an emotional moment the whole village gathered and worshiped the urn containing vaigai water. With pompus fun and celebration the village, and our yatra team marched to the sea and the leaders of the fishing community, Mr Balu and Mr Viakulam koplan ceremoniously mixed the vaigai water from the urn into the sea.







The water collected from the source of Vaigai in Varusanadu



Being handed over to the elders of the elders of the fisher folk village at the mouth of the river



The Yatra concluded by the team and the villagers mixing the Vaigai water collected from the source of the river. a pledge was made to protect and preserve our rivers and waterways.

MEMBERS OF SCIENCE CULTURAL GROUP

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11. S.Thambithurai
12. A.Ganeshan
13. S.Madasamy



SPONSORS AND COLLABORATORS

1. Vasantham –Varusanadu
2. LAW-Kadamalai kundu
3. SRED-Andipatty
4. Tamilnadu water user's formers association- Nilakkottai
5. Environmental Protection and Awareness Farmers society –Vilampatty
6. Govt kallar Hr.Sec.School- Anaipatty
7. Power project-Sholavanthan
8. Cirud- Sholavanthan
9. Sakthi Vidiyal-Madurai
10. EXIST-Madurai
11. SAND-Thiruppuvanam
12. Vaigai Kiruthumal farmers association –Karuvakudi
13. Local panchayat-Melarankiam
14. TRRM-Ramnadu
15. PMD-Ramnadu
16. READ-Ramnadu
17. Fisherman federation –Athankarai
18. Vaigai women federation -VARUSANADU
19. Women federation- Ramnadu
20. IDEA Trust-Madurai
21. Green Earth Trust –Kodaikanal
22. GREEN- chinnamanur
23. Mahathma-Theni
24. Drops-Karaikkudi
25. Rise India –Paramkkudu
26. Environmental Farmers association – Namakkal
27. Govt. Girls &boys Hr.Sec.School- Panaikulam

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A video presentation can be viewed online at

<http://www.youtube.com/user/getkodai#p/u/3/j4pKOQG4NJA>