

Riverfront Development

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Ujjain enjoys with Varanasi the distinction of being one of the two oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. Varanasi has the Ganga but Ujjain has the Kshipra. When the Sagar manthan took place and drops of amrit fell on earth none fell in the Ganga at Varanasi, but with Prayag, Hardwar and Trambakeshwar (Nasik), Ujjain and the Kshipra had the distinction of having drops of amrit falling into the Kshipra River. To celebrate this turn by turn after every twelve years the Kumbh is held in these four places and in Ujjain the Kumbh is called Simhasth. The next Simhasth is due in 2016. Ujjain also has the distinction of having the Mahakal Temple, which is one of the twelve Jyotirlings, but it is unique in that it is the only Dakshinmukhi or south facing Jyotirling. With amrit in the river, the only Dakshinmukhi Jyotirling and one of the four Kumbh Melas would it be wrong to state that in the hierarchy of sacredness Ujjain stands a little above Varanasi?

The Kshipra River was called by Kalidas, “pavitra, salila Sipra”, which means the holy, pure Sipra. Unfortunately this river has as its main feeders the Khan and Chandrabhaga Rivers which pass through Indore and in the process have lost their pristine nature and have become the main sewers of the city of Indore. Whatever water the Kshipra has consists largely of the effluent flowing from Indore and the river is so polluted that when I was Collector in Ujjain for three years from 1965 I, in a parody of Kalidas called Kshipra “apavitra, malila Sipra”, or the unholy, impure Sipra. In order that the river should have sufficient water during the Simhasth government has built a dam on the Gambhir River a few miles from Ujjain and it is this water which is released into the Kshipra. All the Simhasth baths, including the Shahi Snan are in the waters of Gambhir and not the Kshipra. The baths in the waters of the Kshipra which contain amrit are an illusion because in reality the pilgrims to the Simhasth are actually bathing in the transferred waters of the Gambhir.

The present situation is that the Madhya Pradesh Government laid a pipeline from the Narmada by which the Kshipra River receives Narmada water. I am told that now the Kshipra contains water all the time and hopefully before the next Simhasth it will once again be a running river filled from bank to bank with Narmada water. At least this will restore both purity to the river and also sanctity because after all the Narmada is the river in which the Ganga comes every year to wash away its sins and, therefore, the waters of the Narmada are holy. Narendra Modi, as Chief Minister of Gujarat, filled the dry watercourse known as the Sabarmati River in Ahmedabad with water brought from the Narmada by canal and today the river runs filled with water from brim to brim. What is more, the Gujarat Government undertook an ambitious Sabarmati waterfront project aimed at beautifying the river in its entire passage through Ahmedabad city. On both banks pedestrian walkways have been built and there are open plazas, gardens and places to sit and watch the river. However, in order to pay for this programme government has also very largely commercialised the banks of the Sabarmati, with the result that development of the river resembles more the Hudson and East Rivers in New York or the Thames in its passage through metropolitan London. It certainly does not resemble the Thames between Henley and Reading, or the Cam in its passage through Cambridge, starting at Grantchester, where the look is bucolic and landscaping as close to nature as possible.

Now the Kshipra will have adequate water throughout the year. We have to think of treating the river so that it becomes the main attraction in Ujjain. However, before starting on the Kshipra one has to ensure that the Khan and Chandrabhaga Rivers in Indore are restored to health so that what flows into the Kshipra is the good water of the monsoon rather than the filthy sewage of Indore. Reverting to the Kshipra one has to start from Triveni where there is an old Shani Mandir. From this point the river flows past Jantar Mantar, which is an observatory based on the Jaipur model. Then it flows along past the seat of judgement of Vikramaditya, the Mahakal Temple and the Harsiddhi Temple before coming to Ram Ghat. Ram Ghat and the opposite bank where there is the Datt-ka-Akhara is the stretch of river where all the baths of the Simhasth takes place and this portion consists of heavily built up ghats. For the next Simhasth we have to make these ghats even better but this is the only stretch of the river where construction should occur, because leaving Ram Ghat the river runs through Ankpath contains the Sandipani Ashram where Krishna received his education. Ankpath ends at Mangalnath which I consider the most beautiful and peaceful temple in the whole of Ujjain. The Tropic of Cancer passes through the Shivling of Mangalnath. On the bank opposite Sandipani Ashrama is one of the few Ram temples in India, the Ram-Janki Mandir and further inland we have the Kalbhairav Temple, Gadh-ki-Kalika, Bhartruhari Gufa and other holy sites. This stretch of river ends at Sidhwat, a Shiv Temple where there is a magnificent banyan tree. Between Mangalnath and Sidhwat Allauddin Khilji, at Kaliadeh Palace, built a diversion weir and a canal up to the palace. He also built fifty-two ponds, one for each week of the year and the ponds were filled in sequence every week so that by year end all fifty-two ponds were full of water. The system is now neglected and unserviceable. From Triveni to Mahakal the river banks have to be landscaped, keeping in mind the fact that much of the land consists of privately tilled fields. Sensitive landscaping can make this stretch very beautiful. But the real challenge would be to prepare a detailed landscaping plan for the river running through Ankpath and ending at Sidhwat and in the process reviving Allauddin Khilji's system of filling the ponds. In Ahmedabad commercialisation was needed to pay for the project, but in Ujjain plenty of funds are available for the Simhasth and if there is detailed planning for the Kshipra only a very small portion of these funds will be needed. Unfortunately in the Madhya Pradesh Government, despite a first rate Directorate of Town and Country Planning, the Environmental Planning and Coordination Organisation and the School of Planning and Architecture no one is applying his mind to the river. The Chief Minister is inaccessible and his officers are insensitive. Who, then, will speak out for the Kshipra?
