



VAIGAI RIVER IN MADURAI DISTRICT

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Introduction

Madurai, situated on the banks of the Vaigai River, in Tamil Nadu, Southern India is known as the Temple City of India. Marco Polo called Madurai the most splendid province on Earth. The magnificence of Madurai as a cultural center since the Tamil Era 2,500 years ago, as well as the beauty of the Vaigai River that runs through it, has been celebrated for thousands of years in Indian literature and sacred texts. Here the ancient past exists alongside the modern world, with its people still practicing sacred and ancient traditions rooted in its legendary history. The city centers around the Meenakshi Temple known for its magnificent Dravidian architecture with *gopurams* completely covered and embellished with intricate colorful sculptural images of gods, animals, and mythical creatures. Madurai's significance as a center for textiles dates back to its ancient past, as well as the place where in 1921 Mahatma Gandhi's relinquished his clothing to wear a loincloth made of *khadi* (homespun cloth) as an act to align himself with the people, and as an act of social change.

The Vaigai River Restoration Pageant Project is produced by Earth Celebrations, a non-profit environmental and arts organization based in New York City, in partnership with the DAHN Foundation, an NGO and non-profit organization working to restore the Vaigai River in Madurai, South India, and Asia Initiatives, based in New York City and active throughout Asia applying their SoCC (Social Capital Credits) a model community incentive program. The partners have made a commitment of at least five years to this project and effort.

The Vaigai River Restoration Pageant Project raises awareness to mitigate the severe environmental crisis of pollution and contamination of a major natural water resource and to counter the effects of climate change including:

- Household waste and sewage dumping.
- Industrial and chemical pollutants flowing into the river.
- Sand mining the riverbed.
- Issues of dam control and water releases.
- Lack of drainage and sanitation infrastructure.
- Restoration and expansion of water storage tanks for agricultural irrigation and drinking water.
- Improvement of the water quality from contaminants for healthy drinking water which the community depends on for survival.
- Building environmental awareness and community engagement in river restoration efforts.

Goals

- Raise awareness among local population for health of the water quality of Vaigai River, honoring the river, water, and natural world within the urban environment.
- Raise awareness to keep the river clean and not dump waste.
- Highlight and mobilize community engagement and support for river clean-up efforts including: trash removal, alternatives for waste disposal, clean public toilets, functioning drainage systems, water flow, storage, and irrigation.
- Increase public awareness for DHAN Foundation's projects such as Vayalagam Tankfed Agriculture Development Program (VTADP), restoration of water quality, and efforts to provide safe drinking water.
- Build partnerships and engage, city officials, corporations, environmental organizations, activists, farming groups, schools and universities active on the river.
- Engage community participation in creative ecological art project and pageant performance to bring attention to the river, its history, and efforts to restore the health of the river for drinking water, agriculture, recreation, and peaceful open space within the city.
- Highlight and initiate proposals for visions for the future of the river such as a river park along the banks of the Vaigai and other recreational uses that promote the care and appreciation of the river, its historical legacy, and future as an ecological oasis within the city.

Theatrical Pageants

Creative Strategy to Engage Community Participation, Raise Awareness, and Effect Change

The theatrical pageant is an innovative and creative strategy to engage community participation, raise public environmental awareness, and mobilize direct action and support for the efforts addressing crucial issues of the Vaigai River that impact the lives of the local community.



The Pageant Includes

- A colorful procession along the banks of the Vaigai River featuring giant mobile sculptures/puppets, costumes, and visual processional artwork.
- Site-specific performances of dance, theater, music, poetry, and ceremony at significant sites along the route.
- Local artists, performing groups, schools, environmental organizations, community and cultural centers that are invited to participate in the collaborative creative process and culminating performance.

The Site-Specific Performances Highlight Various Aspects of the River

- Historic legacy of the Vaigai River honored for thousands of years in Indian literature.
- Native species and habitats that thrived throughout its history.
- Current environmental awareness issues of pollution and climate change, and efforts to clean and restore the river from waste dumping, as well as improve water quality, flow, and irrigation for local farming.

The Vaigai River Restoration Pageant: April 2015

- Builds partnerships with local schools, environmental organizations, farming groups, and community and cultural centers throughout the Madurai area, inviting groups to create performances and visual art for participation in the pageant.
- Engages participants and the public in culminating Vaigai River Pageant as a collaborative community performance, featuring a procession with site-specific performances along the banks of the Vaigai River from Villangudi to Albert Victor Bridge and the Maiya Mandapam, in Madurai.

Visual Art and Performances for the Pageant

- **Giant Mobile Sculptures on Traditional Processional Carts and Puppets** utilize local folk traditions to represent native species, habitat, history, issues, and efforts to restore the river.
 - **Costumes Will Utilize Folk Traditions and Incorporate Hand Loom Textiles** and Sungudi fabrics, a traditional craft of Madurai. Craftsmen will be incentivized to use traditional vegetable dyes rather than chemical pigments that pollute the river.
 - **Educational Performances by Local Performing and Community Groups Address:** legacy of Vaigai River in mythological and historic texts; native river species and habitats; issues of waste and sewage dumping; industrial and chemical pollution; and restoration efforts to improve water quality, water flow, and health of the river.
 - **Organic Planting Performance** celebrating the river as a life source for agriculture and sustainable organic farming and importance of water storage tank restoration for irrigation.
 - **River Cleansing Ceremony** will engage community participants in a choreographed movement and clean-up along the river bank.
 - **Live Fish Release:** ceremonial action – children offer fish back to the river.
- Pageant Date: April 2015: Prior to Chithirai Festival in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, South India.

Procession Route

Vaigai River Restoration Pageant features a procession of giant mobile sculptures, spectacular costumes, and musical bands with site-specific performances along the banks of the Vaigai River from Villangudi to Albert Victor Bridge and the Maiya Mandapam, in Madurai.

Future of the Vaigai River

The Vaigai River will be renewed with creative inspiration and collaborative efforts of the community as well as the support of the many individuals and organizations in Madurai and beyond who care about the future of the rivers, natural resources, ecological sustainability, and water on which we all depend for our future survival. Madurai, situated on the banks of the Vaigai River, in Tamil Nadu, Southern India is known as the Temple City of India. Marco Polo called Madurai the most splendid province on Earth. The magnificence of Madurai as a cultural center since the Tamil Era 2,500 years ago, as well as the beauty of the Vaigai River that runs through it, has been celebrated for thousands of years in Indian literature and sacred texts. Here the ancient past exists alongside the modern world, with its people still practicing sacred and ancient traditions rooted in its legendary history. The city centers around the Meenakshi Temple known for its magnificent Dravidian architecture with *gopurams* completely covered and embellished with intricate colorful sculptural images of gods, animals, and mythical creatures. Madurai's significance as a center for textiles dates back to its ancient past, as well as the place where in 1921 Mahatma Gandhi's relinquished his clothing to wear a loincloth made of *khadi* (homespun cloth) as an act to align himself with the people, and as an act of social change.



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Conclusion

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