

ATULYA GANGA ABHIYAAN: VETERAN GANGA YODDHAS



In a fascinating initiative, a group of veterans undertake a massive journey, walking along the entire stretch of the Ganga River, in a mission to involve the public in keeping the River clean. **Maj Gen Brajesh Kumar**, AVSM, VSM, one of the mentors of this great initiative, and a veteran who participated in this mission, takes the reader through this engrossing account, where a group of veterans, defying age, accomplish a Herculean task. An alumnus of the NDA, Khadakvasla and the NDC, New Delhi, the General was commissioned into the Madras Sappers in November 1971. After a distinguished career, he superannuated in November 2010 as the DG Works, where he was responsible for Military Infrastructure Projects for the Armed Forces. He was also the Colonel Commandant of Madras Sappers. He is Convener INTACH Noida Chapter in an honorary capacity and writes and speaks on defence and security related issues. He tweets @bkum2000)

Atulya Ganga Abhiyaan (AGA) is the captivating story of few army veterans, who after superannuation couldn't resist the thrill of embarking on a purposeful mission of cleaning the holy river Ganga and its ecosystem. They took upon the challenges of creating a peoples movement for rejuvenation of Ganga river basin. The veterans, all of whom were in their 60s and 70s, geared up with great enthusiasm and embarked upon the challenging assignment of creating awareness about keeping the Ganga ecosystem clean. Home to about 50 crore people, the basin gives an indication of the magnitude of the work.

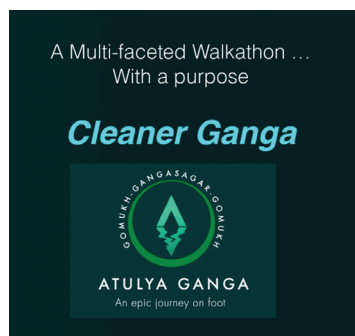
Vision

Idea of sustainable development in the thickly populated Ganga basin is an imperative which cannot be ignored. The mighty Ganga conjures up as the very basics of faith for very vast majority of population. Ganga ji forming the epicentre of most religious festivals with a large number of holy cities situated on its banks. AGA envisioned cleaning the Ganga eco-

system for future generations by involving all stakeholders.

The core team comprised of a few veterans, who incidentally were all mountaineers who had scaled the majestic Nanda Devi. Thereafter, they were joined by others. Full credit for fructifying the idea must go Gopal Sharma, a Technical Officer from the MES, and Lt Col Hem Lohumi—the founding fathers—both of whom were together in the Corps of Engineers Expedition of 1987. Others joined in to form a critical mass after the idea germinated and gained momentum. Incidentally, Hem Lohumi was also a part of first winter “Dakshin Gangotri” team at Antarctica.

In Gurugram based Mike Keshwar another sapper, who quit **aftercommand** his Regiment, the AGA found a perfect logistics partner, who became the face of AGA in the social media as well; he runs



a start-up, Viktorianz.com, a bespoke Adventure Travel Company for Automobile Adventure around the world.

Methodical preparation, endurance and physical fitness was done under the guidance of Lt Gen SA Cruze, (R) VSM**, a medico mountaineer

and a leading expert on sports medicine of olympics fame. He put the team through a seven months training schedule with diet chart et al, which proved beneficial. Maj Gen Vinod Bhat (R) another mountaineer and an international rower, from the same engineer regiment joined in to guide the team and I too, became one of the mentors. Many others were inducted for their skills and competencies in diverse fields. Besides the above, the Atulya Ganga Abhiyaan had several services veterans, social workers, philanthropists, environmentalist and educationists supporting them as members and volunteers.

VETERANS AS ACHIEVERS



Mundamal Ganga Parikrama

AGA launched, “Mundamal Ganga Parikrama” (MGP), a revival of an ancient Vedic tradition, in which a padyatra is undertaken to circumnavigate the Ganga in a clockwise direction, covering both its banks from its origin in Himalayas to Gangasagar, where it flows into the Bay of Bengal. It was a maiden attempt at the MGP by a bunch of hard-nosed veterans and adventure enthusiasts. The rules to be followed during the MGP were:

- The walk commences and terminates at the same point along River Ganga.
- Crossing of Ganga river is permitted only at Gomukh glacier, its origin, and at Gangasagar, where it discharges into the Bay of Bengal.
- During the Yatra, a walker on Parikrama must be within 12 km from the river bank and should see the holy Ganga, at least once during each day.
- Mental and physical fitness are of the greatest importance, as MGP is one of the most challenging adventures.



Finances

Initiative of such magnitude required tremendous financial resources, which unfortunately were not forthcoming. The AGA was nascent and for want of three years minimum qualifying period, no government funds were available. The Covid pandemic denuded any chances of receiving CSR funds, with 100% earmarked for fighting the pandemic by all. Generating finances thus became a major challenge and the project ran on shoe string budget, with support from friends, relatives and other enthusiasts. Plenty of funds came from individual veterans/groups; in addition the personal contribution from the walkers and organisers alike helped. Peoples' hospitality en-route helped us overcome major challenge of night stay.

Key Features of MGP

The AGA team embarked on an audacious 190 days long walkathon and covered 5530 km to spread awareness of keeping the river clean while ensuring its “aviralta” and “nirmalta”. The team was flagged off by the Governor of UP, HE

Analysis of Task

Cleaning of river Ganga and its ecosystem has been going on for decades, through various government agencies, departments, NGOs and a few individuals. However, the present government gave it a fillip by setting up ‘Ministry of Jal Shakti’ with “Namami Gange” as its flag ship initiative. The analysis pointed to the fact that a task of such magnitude was beyond the capability of any single agency. Its success hinged on “Jan-Bhagidari” and creation of a mass movement with peoples' participation. Keeping this in view, three specific initiatives were finalised:

- First was through ‘Mundmal-Parikra-

ma’,—a padyatra along the river banks, to sensitise the people, especially the youth, about the importance of clean Ganga.

- Second, was pollution mapping of the Ganga, by sampling and testing river water and geotagging the locations of pollutants, with the intent of developing a Water Quality Index (WQI).

- Third, was ‘Vriksha-Maal’—planting of trees along the route, while keeping the flood plains, river basin and survivability in view.

We aim to carry this initiative for the next 10 years, which we hope will prove beneficial to provide the impetus for attitudinal changes.

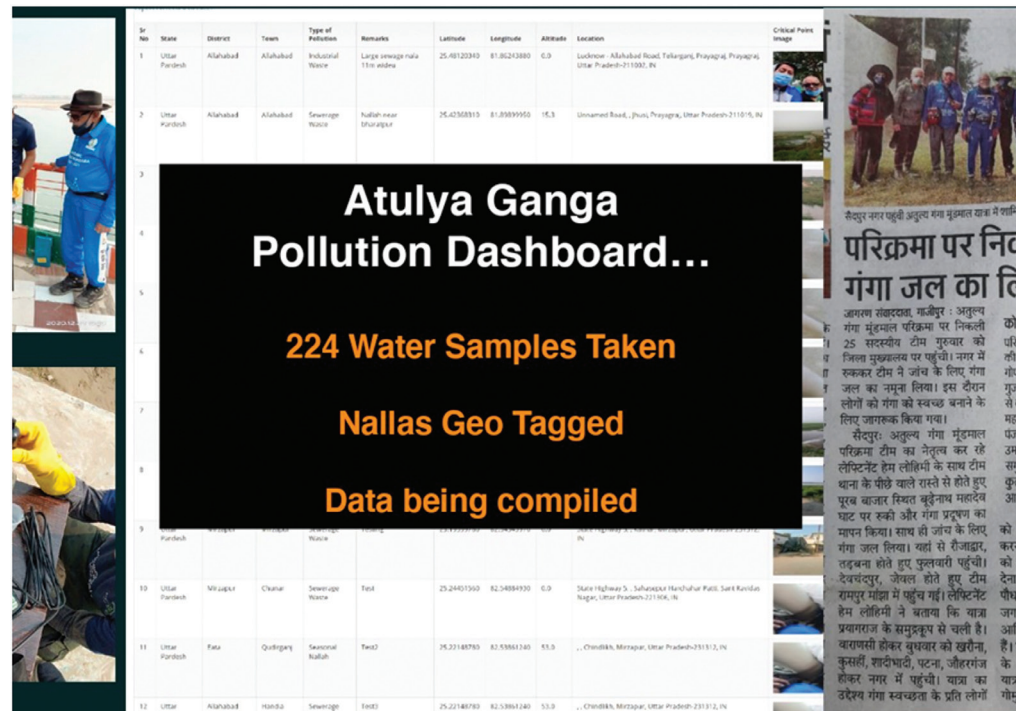
VETERANS AS ACHIEVERS

Smt Anandiben Patel, from Prayagraj on 16 December 2020.

The MGP succeeded in synergizing all efforts of the Government, NGOs, corporates, volunteers and common public for rejuvenating the Ganga River. After 35 days and travelling 1000 km through the densely populated state of Uttar Pradesh and the fertile ecosystem of Bihar and West Bengal, it reached Gangasagar on 31 January 2020. Thereafter, it crossed Hooghly and proceeded upstream towards Haridwar- Gangotri/ Gomukh walking through the states of Bengal, Bihar, UP and Uttarakhand. The return journey via Rishikesh culminated at Prayagraj on 23 Jun 2021. The padyatra successfully covered 5350 km in 190 days. Some of the key features of the MGP were:

- First ever full Ganga Parikrama, attempted for revival of Vedic Tradition.
- 5530 km long 190 days walkathon - covering both banks of Ganga from Gomukh to Gangasagar. Route taken was Prayagraj - Varanasi - Begusarai - Gangasagar along the northern bank, cross over and walk upstream to Patna - Kanpur - Haridwar - Gangotri and return to Prayagraj via Rishikesh
- Started with a team of six permanent walkers, 150+ relay walkers, and 20,000+ day walkers. It was very satisfying to see 2 walkers completing the padyatra,
- Vriksh-Maal activities: Planting of thousands of Bargad, Peepal and Neem saplings
- Sample collection (ground water & soil), Pollution Mapping & Source Geo-tagging.
- A Multifaceted walk—environment, adventure, nature, culture, spiritual, historical and mythical, to promote #Swatchch-Bharat, #SwasthaBharat.
- The slogan adopted was “Sabka Saath Ho, Ganga Saaf Ho”.

Undertaking the MGP during the pandemic caused by the Chinese virus was a major challenge. Nevertheless its completion gave us a great sense of satisfaction. It was during the 2nd phase of Covid 19, while we were in Uttarakhand that permission to go up to Gomukh was not



granted by the State Government. The Yatra thus had to return from Gangotri and bypass the glacier portion due to restriction on employment of porters.

Involving the NCC

Partnering with the NCC came as a boon as it facilitated key connect with young local populace. The boys and girls were extremely enthusiastic participants and were key drivers in all our activities. They walked with us for days, carried our message to people at large, and helped in all the activities of spreading the message of youth participation, pollution mapping and tree plantation. It is to the credit of their leadership i.e. the DG NCC and the ADGs NCC of UP, Bihar, Bengal & UK to have given us whole hearted support. Contributions of Maj Gen Indra Balan, ADG NCC, Bihar and Jharkhand, (an adventure sportsman, who has circumvented the globe in sail boat, Samudrika), is significant and needs a special mention. He was able to galvanise his resources and extend whole-hearted support. The reception at the iconic Gandhi Ghat at Patna, organised by the NCC & Bihar Govt was outstanding.

Pollution Mapping and Plantation

In addition to walk and creating awareness among the masses along the way, the AGA team was able to map the pollution

levels every 5-10 km of Ganga and geo-tag every entry point of sewage, industrial waste, and any other sources of pollution flowing into the sacred River. A separate team accompanied the walkers, which planted sustainable trees all along the Ganga River, to help in soil conservation and recharge of the ground water levels. More importantly, the team has endeavoured to document different landscapes, the unexpected sights of river life, cultures and rituals along the banks of the Ganga. It also mapped numerous temples and tombs they came across during their incredible journey.

Peoples' Response to AGA

AGA received very positive response from the local populace, state/district administration, student community, common men/women, vernacular press and variety of cross section in rural/urban India. The social media of **twitter and face book** had a huge fan following of AGA. The tag 'veteran' enhanced its credibility, as no benefits or motives were attached to its members. **May be** some fellow veterans and the like may take a cue and take up any initiative to add value in any chosen field.

Achievements

On a personal level, getting associated with this initiative has been very fulfilling. It started with a request from a course-

mate and a dear friend, Col Lohumi, to consider joining, which I did without any hesitation. My association with River Gangagoes back to my growing up years on the banks of the river at Ballia and Patna. The benefits of long walks is indeed tremendous and the support we got from the veteran community was stupendous. Some of the key achievements, which deserve highlighting are:

- Two members, Rohit Jat and Shagun Tyagi completed the 'padyatra' in full. Two had to drop out after partially completing the padyatra on medical grounds.
- There were more than 150 Relay Walkers who participated, for part of the distance and more than 1 lakh people were the day walkers.
- 30,000 trees were planted and their locations geo-tagged, with the ownership fixed.
- 224 water samples were taken, tested and locations geotagged.
- AGA was able to join hands with a large No of institutions like Namami - Gange,

Incredible India, INTACH, NCC, Green Foundation, Prayagraj Foundation, NIM Uttarkashi, Daily Hunt and IIT Delhi

Vast data collected by the team would need to be sifted, compiled and shared with stake holders for follow-up action. A comprehensive report is under serious consideration.

Some Thoughts

The following thoughts emerged from our journey:

- Need to enhance Peoples' Participation manifold. Jan-Bhagidari is the key to accomplishment of our vision.
- Demarcation of Ganga land and the food plains is an imperative.
- Natural flow (Aviralta) is the key to clean Ganga (Nirmalta).
- Re-think and review the policy of construction of larger dams and barrages.
- Bigger population centres in cities have huge propensity to pollute.
- Serious silting issue plaguing the state of Bihar post Farakka barrage construction

• "Gangatva" (self-cleaning of Ganga) exists along the river length, but needs extensive research.

• Comprehensive solution to the Ganga basin is the call of the day, where 40% of India's population resides.

In conclusion, I would say that the Atulya Ganga Abhiyaan was a phenomenal journey from the concept stage to culmination of the padyatra, both as a personal landmark and in some measures, a sense of achievement towards community service or pay back to the society. We hope to continue for the next 10 years, to be able to bring in attitudinal changes in the people towards keeping Ganga clean and sustainable. For 2022, the AGA hopes to undertake 'Yamuna Padyatra' and 'Ganga Manthan', a deliberate discussion on all the dimensions of our initiative with relevant experts in the field. We hope to motivate our fellow veterans across the country, to join hands with us or with any other organisation, in some initiative which can be beneficial to society.



Vrikshmaal Abhiyan by Green India Foundation
30,000+ Trees Planted
Ownership Fixed
Locations Geo-tagged