

*Transforming
Pilgrim Centres
of the world into
Knowledge Centres*



A groundbreaking environmental project by MAEER's MIT, Pune, India





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Prof. Dr. Vishwanath D. Karad

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Not many years ago, the pilgrim towns of **Alandi** and **Dehu** near Pune in Maharashtra represented the typical temple towns of India.... filth and squalor everywhere, the water of the river infested with the town's sewage, consuming which was a sure-shot invitation to disease and sickness... .

And yet, millions of devotees continued to visit these towns daily, as it was here that their deities lived. With profound devotion and love in their hearts, these pilgrims suffered in these squalid surroundings, chanting the name of the Lord.

One man, **Prof. Dr. Vishwanath D. Karad**, took the initiative to change all this. This book is the story of how Dr. Vishwanath D. Karad, the Founder of **MAEER's MIT Group of Institutions, Pune, India**, employed a blend of Science and Spirituality to achieve what even the government agencies could not, in these temple towns.

With the twin aim of '**Pollution Control & Environmental Protection**' and '**Transforming Pilgrim Centres into Knowledge Centres of India**', Dr. Karad changed the face of these towns and brought smiles on the faces of the pilgrims... .

Book Title:

Transforming Pilgrim Centres of the World into Knowledge Centres

A groundbreaking environmental project by MAEER's MIT, Pune, India

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The Importance of River Indrayani

The river Indrayani in Pune district of Maharashtra is considered as one of the most sacred rivers by millions of devotees of the Warkari sect. Two of the most revered saints of Maharashtra, **Philosopher Saint Shri Dnyaneshwar** and **Jagadguru Saint Shri Tukaram** led their saintly lives on the banks of this river in two different eras.

Philosopher Saint Shri Dnyaneshwar was born in the 13th century in Alandi on the banks of Indrayani. The devotees of the Warkari sect consider him to be the pioneer of the annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur (Wari). Saint Dnyaneshwar attained '*Sanjeevan Samadhi*' (renounced his life) at a very young age of 22 years in Alandi. He laid the foundation of the '*Bhakti*' sect in Maharashtra. One of his greatest works, '*Bhavarth Deepika*' or '*Dnyaneshwari*' is a commentary on the *Bhagwad Geeta* and consists of

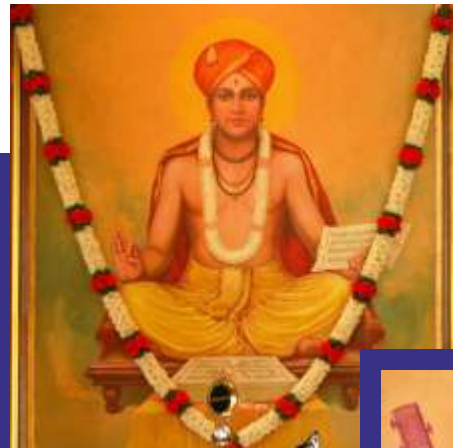
9033 verses, which he wrote for the benefit of the masses who did not have access to the original Sanskrit version of the *Geeta*.

Jagadguru Saint Shri Tukaram was born in Dehu, a few kilometers upstream from Alandi, in the 17th century. He was an ardent devotee of *Lord Vitthal*, and led a very simple and pious life. He wrote a number of verses in an easy-to-understand language, enunciating the philosophy of life. His verses are quoted very extensively even today nearly 350 years later. He too carried forward the Bhakti tradition laid down by Saint Shri Dnyaneshwar.

The river Indrayani thus has achieved a very sacred status in the minds of the devotees. Each year, millions of devotees throng the banks of Indrayani in the months of *Ashadh* and *Kartik* to perform their religious pilgrimage.



The Indrayani river bank before ghats were built.



Philosopher Saint Shri Dnyaneshwar



Jagadguru Saint Shri Tukaram

Squalid Conditions at Alandi & Dehu

As is the practice, pilgrims visiting a holy place normally tend to take a dip in the river and consume its water as '*teertha*' before visiting the shrine. So also at Alandi and Dehu, pilgrims perform the same rituals. Not many years ago, the condition in these towns represented any typical temple town in India, with filth and garbage lying around the town including the river bank, sewage of the town spilling into the river, the river water infested with worms and other living beings, no proper approach to the river bed, people dirtying the banks with excrement, leftovers, etc.

It was in these conditions that the devotees cleansed themselves in Indrayani, consumed the water as holy '*teertha*' and then proceeded to visit the '*Samadhi*' temple of Saint Shri Dnyaneshwar and other temples in the complex. There were many who were disturbed by the scene and many who thought that some measures should be taken to bring about a change in the conditions. The local administration and the state government also did not do much to alleviate the situation.





Actual photographs of conditions at Alandi before the transformation work began...





Tyagmurty Smt. Prayagakka Karad
- an epitome of sacrifice



Initiating the Change...

A young engineer and educationist did not just stop and think. He decided to act. Belonging to a Warkari family, young professor Vishwanath D. Karad was on an annual pilgrimage to Alandi with his beloved elder sister **Smt. Prayagakka Karad**, who is like a mother to him. He saw her perform the same ablutions, the same rituals as other pilgrims. In spite of his stopping her from sipping the polluted water, she brushed him aside and told him that she had enough faith in her Lord that he won't let anything happen to her even if she drank the dirty water. For her, it was well and truly holy, a blessing from the **Lord Pandurang**.

Deeply disturbed by this, Dr. Karad made a firm resolution to himself that if not with the help of anyone else, he will, on his own, build a small platform on the bank of Indrayani from where devotees will be able to enter the water without having through to wade through the filth and garbage. He also started thinking on the lines of how to purify the water and make it safe for drinking.



Like Minds Meet

After having made this resolution, it was a great coincidence that **Dr. Karad** met likeminded people like **Shri. Kisan Maharaj Sakhare**, a great scholar of Dnyaneshwari, **late Shri. Shankarbapu Apegaonkar**, a renowned *pakhwaj* player and a devotee of Lord Vitthal and some other people who shared the same thought and who decided to chip in their little bit and take up this mammoth task.

And then, on 28th November 1986, during the Kartik pilgrimage at Alandi, in the wee hours of morning, an informal meeting was held in the holy precincts of the Saint Dnyaneshwar Samadhi temple. This meeting, which was attended by some very eminent persons including the Commissioner of Maharashtra's Co-operative

Department Mr. Shrivastav, noted Gandhian Mr. Balasaheb Bharade, some important office bearers of the Alandi temple trust, Shri. Kisan Maharaj Sakhare, Shri. Shankarbapu Apegaonkar, Yogamaharshi Shri. R. G. Shelar alias Shelarmama, Dr. Vishwanath D. Karad and others, resolved that they will contribute and work towards making this temple town a better place and will not wait for any government aid for the same. Within minutes, an amount of Rs. 1,11,000/- was contributed by those present and all of them took a pledge and formed the **Shri Kshetra Alandi Dehu Parisar Vikas Samiti** under the Chairmanship of Shri. Kisan Maharaj Sakhare. Dr. Vishwanath D. Karad was elected as the Executive Chairman.

Thus began a very significant, a very unique and socially relevant project of the beautification & restoration of Alandi.



Late Shri. Shankarbapu Apegaonkar



Shri. Kisan Maharaj Sakhare

The Scope of Work

The work involved was indeed of a gigantic nature! The scope of work included the following: laying large drainage lines that would carry the effluent of Alandi town away from the river to the fields situated at some distance, construction of *ghats* or stone steps on both banks of the river which would enable the pilgrims to have an easy and safe access to the river, construction of covered archways as a shelter to devotees who had to stand for long hours in queues for darshan, installing filtration units which would filter the river water and providing outlet for the filtered

water, which could then be consumed as holy water by the devotees, and relocating the stone memorials built in the name of eminent scholars of the Bhagwat sect to a higher and cleaner ground, away from the filth of the river banks.

Dr. Vishwanath Karad personally drew out the plans for this huge project with the help of the **Civil Engineering Department of MAEER's MIT, Pune** under the guidance of **Prof. Dr. D. M. Kondap** and his senior colleagues.



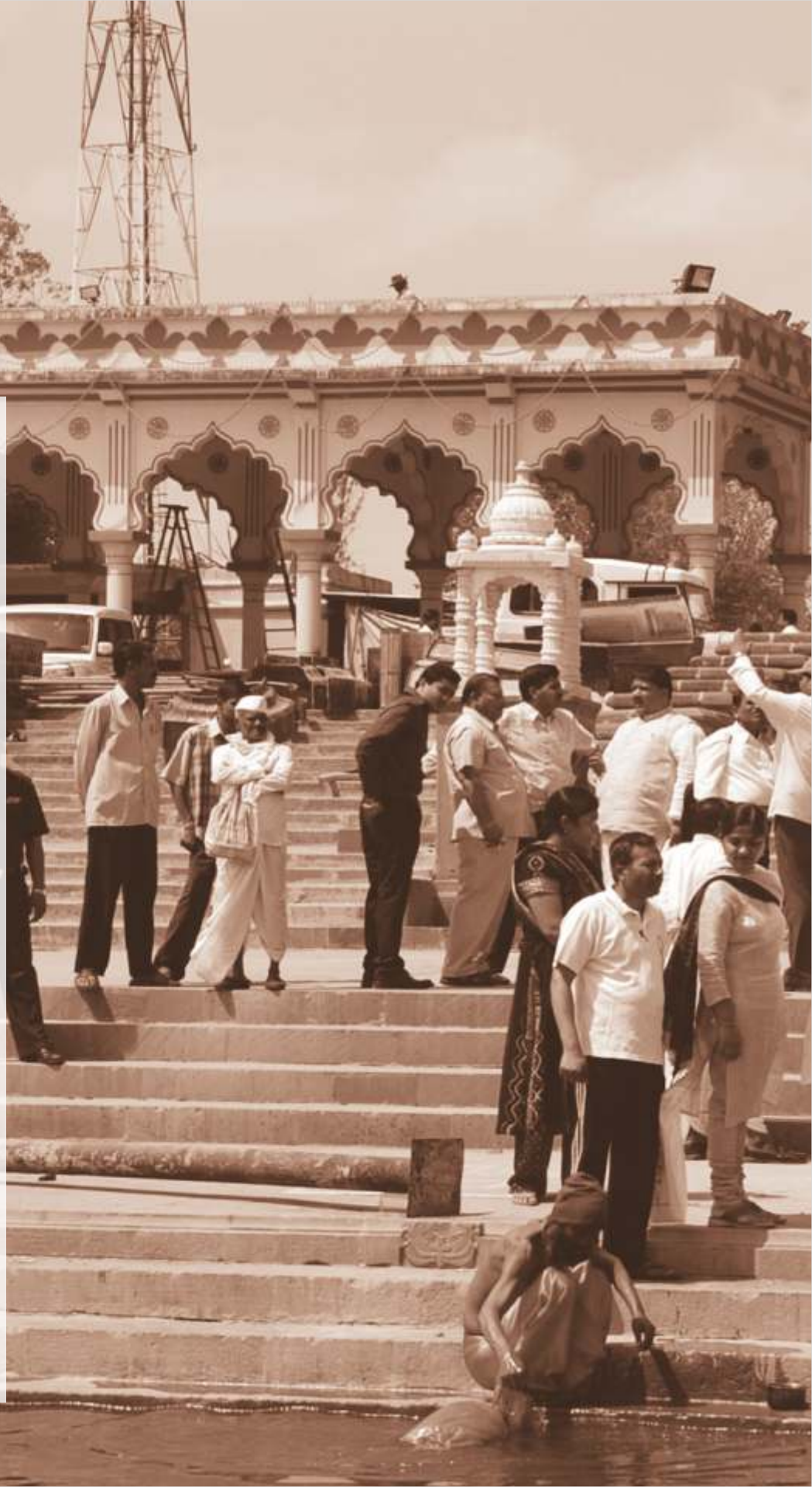


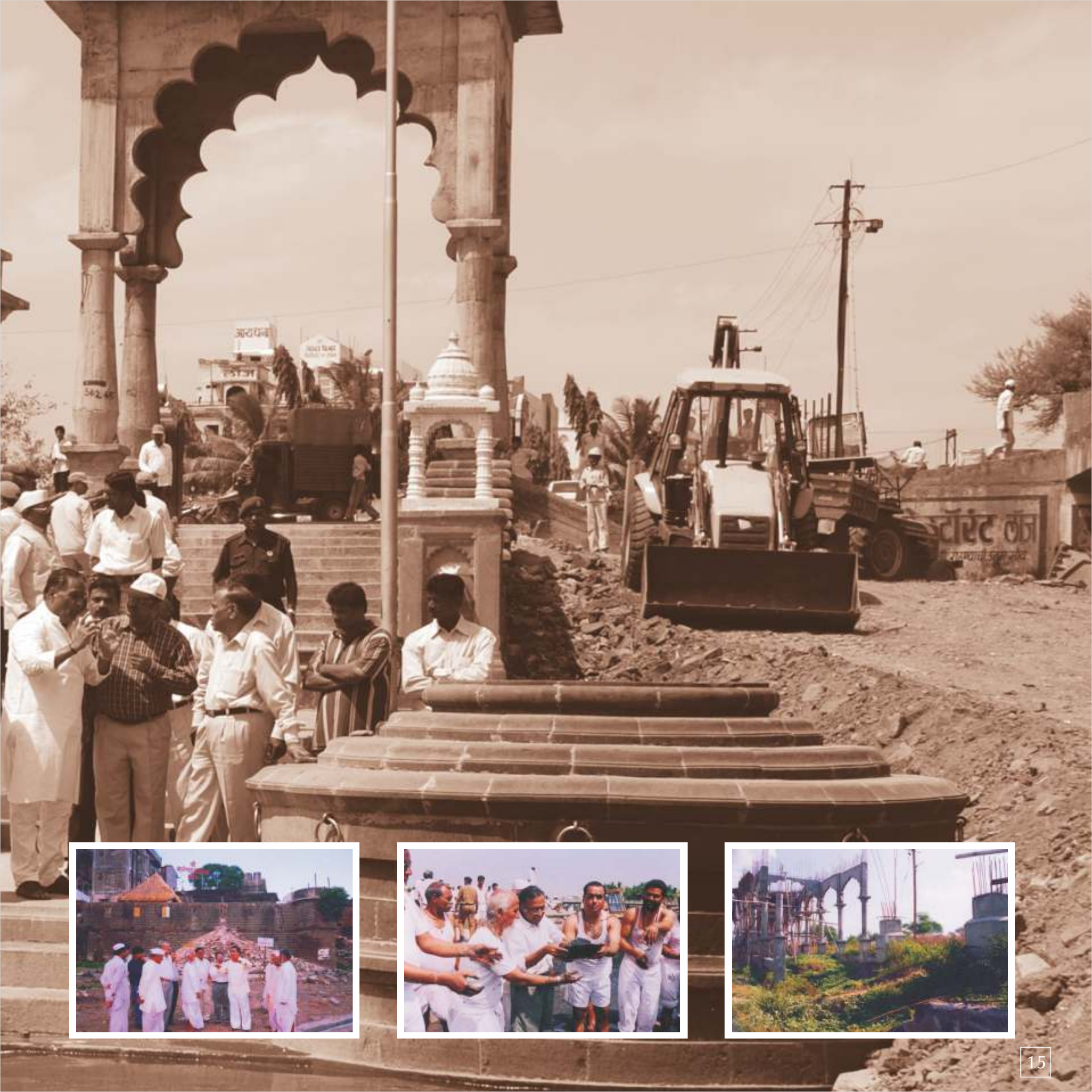
Ghats on both banks of the river and pillared archway being constructed at Alandi

The Work Begins...

On 2nd October 1987, the ambitious project took off with the traditional groundbreaking ceremony. Eight imposing and strong ghats were planned to be constructed on both the north and south banks of river Indrayani. But before that, the important work of diverting Alandi town's drainage was to be undertaken.

The silt, filth, rubble and other debris lining the banks of the river were removed to make way for the huge drainage system that was to be laid there. Dr. Vishwanath Karad actively participated in this work and under his able supervision, the drainage lines were marked. Concrete beams of **200-250** ft length were laid out along the banks. The concrete used was **M-200** grade, one that is normally used for constructing huge dams across rivers. The aim was to build drainage systems that would last for hundreds of years and hence no compromise was made in the quality of material as well as construction. Two sets of drainage were constructed, one large drainage at the top of the ghats, which would carry the actual sewerage of the town and a smaller one at the bottom, which would carry the effluent generated on the ghats.



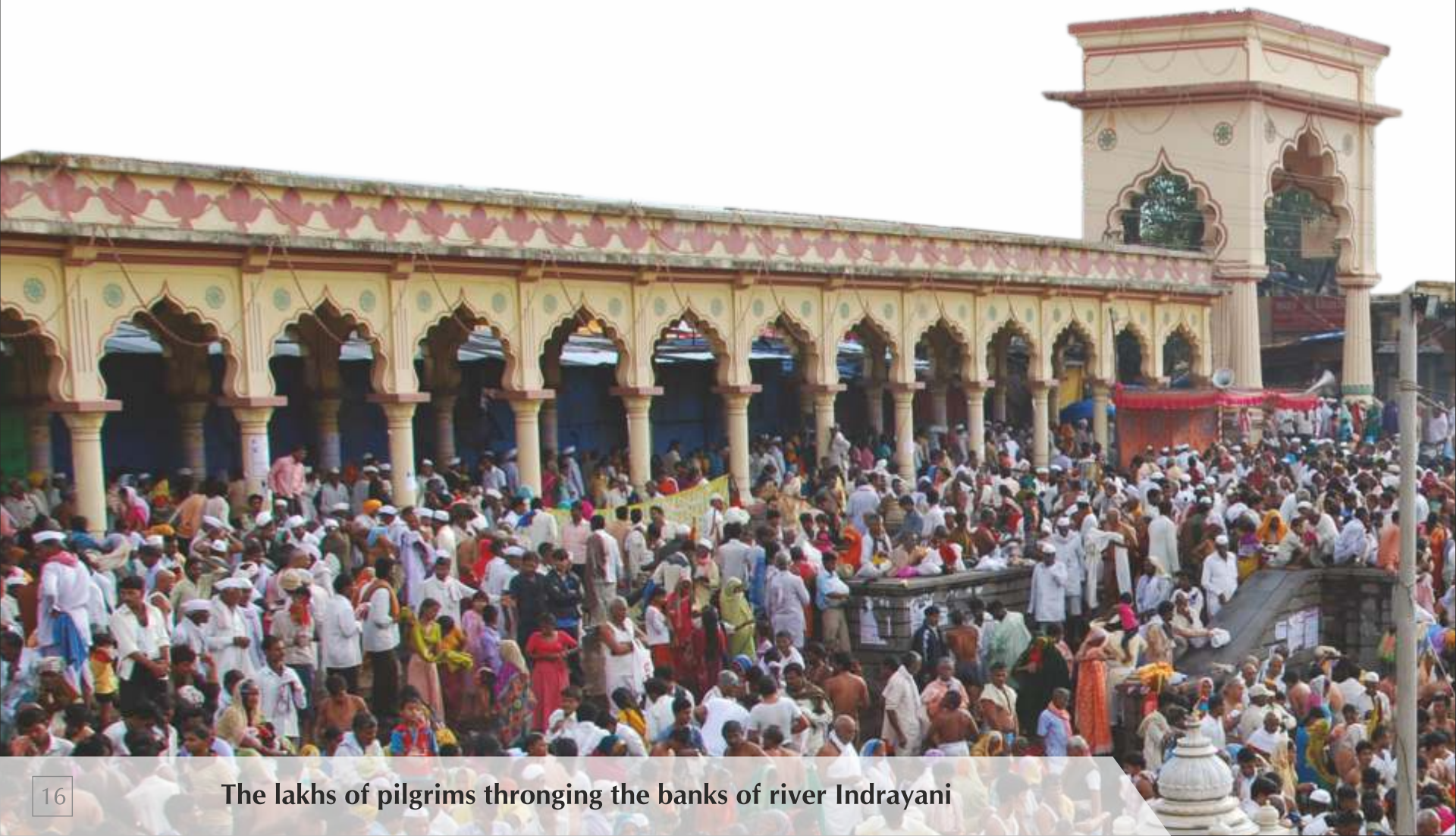


The Importance of *Ghats*...

In the Indian water culture, *ghats* have played a very important role throughout the centuries. Religious rituals dictate that in any temple town, bathing in the river is mandatory before visiting the deity. For this, it is important that there be a firm and safe way leading into the river. From ancient times, one can see stone steps or *ghats* lining the banks of rivers flowing through temple towns. These were usually constructed by the local rulers or kings. However, some rulers like *Punyashlok*

Ahilyadevi Holkar also constructed ghats in towns away from where she ruled, like *Ayodhya*, *Haridwar*, *Ujjain*, *Varanasi* and many others.

Considering this spiritual aspect and since Alandi was without any ghats though being an important pilgrim centre since the 13th century, the *Vikas Samiti* decided that ghats to be constructed on river Indrayani should be really long lasting, wide enough to accommodate the large number of pilgrims and provide a safe passageway to the river. With this



in mind, the search was on for the right type of stone to build them, stone that would be strong, resilient, and yet look elegant. The best quality stone was located at Nevasa in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra. Incidentally, Nevasa is also the place where Saint Dnyaneshwar wrote the 'Dnyaneshwari'. It is therefore a kind of divine coincidence that the ghats at Alandi are constructed from the Nevasa stone! However, stones from other places like *Kolhapur*, *Shegaon* etc. were also used in different areas of the construction.





तत्त्वज्ञ जगद्गुरु संत श्री त्काराममहाराज ज्ञानकर्मभक्तियोग महाप्रवेशद्वार

The massive arched 'Dnyan-Karma-Bhaktiyog Mahadwar' (gate) at Dehu

Social and Spiritual Aspects of Alandi & Dehu Project



Alandi is the spiritual centre for millions of pilgrims of the Warkari sect and therefore they congregate in large numbers in Alandi in the months of *Ashadh* and *Kartik*. However, on a daily basis too, the number of devotees visiting Alandi is very high. Most of the devotees are quite satisfied with even the meagre facilities that are available to them, as their basic need is to have a *darshan* of their deity. However, it cannot be denied that any improvement in the facilities provided would not only facilitate their pilgrimage, but also help in maintaining the health, hygiene, cleanliness and general ambience of the pilgrim centre.

The Construction of a massive 105 feet high arched gate in Dehu is another milestone achieved in the 'Transformation' Project. this imposing gateway has been named as 'Dnyan-Karma-Bhaktiyog Mahadwar' signifying the three tenets of Spirituality in India.

The project of environmental improvement and pollution control at Alandi & Dehu has thus served the social needs of the devotees so as to help them fulfill their spiritual duties.

Transforming Pilgrim Centres into Knowledge Centres



Prof. Dr. Vishwanath D. Karad



Dr. Vijay P. Bhatkar



Dr. Raghunath A. Mashelkar

One of the highlights of the Alandi transformation is the construction of the huge **multimedia coliseum** on the south bank of river Indrayani. This coliseum, named '**Vishwaroop Darshan Manch**', is a mammoth concrete screen, **63' X 45'** in dimension, **24'** above the ground behind a **72' X 30'** permanently erected stage. This screen is a part of the unique program titled '**Transforming Pilgrim Centres of India into Knowledge Centres**'. This screen is used throughout the year for educating and training peasants, farmers, workers and villagers in the surrounding areas in subjects like health, hygiene, spirituality, agriculture etc.

This project was conceptualized by three very unique personalities. **Dr. Raghunath A. Mashelkar, FRS** and a world renowned scientist, **Dr. Vijay P. Bhatkar**, eminent

computer scientist and **Father of PARAM 10000 Supercomputer**, and **Prof. Dr. Vishwanath D. Karad**, Founder, MAEER's MIT, Pune came together in 1999 for the Indian Science Congress. The idea was mooted to create a knowledge centre for the benefit of the lakhs of pilgrims that visit different pilgrim centres of India by making use of the multimedia technique. Dr. Karad offered to create the first such centre at Alandi, **and within a matter of 52 days, the multimedia coliseum in the form of Vishwaroop Darshan Manch was erected.**

The screen has an ultramodern projection facility on the opposite bank which is used to project audiovisual presentations and films on various subjects of mass education. This very unique and significant project is the first step in what is soon to become the Networking of Pilgrim Centres around the World.



विष्णु मंदिर
वृंदावन



Canopied *Gomukh* from where purified water is available as *teerth*

Networking of Pilgrim Centres of the World

The concept of promoting the Culture of Peace in the world by networking different places of worship including Vatican, Mecca-Medina, Jerusalem, Varanasi, Amritsar, Bodhgaya, etc. is truly path-breaking. On different days each year, millions of devotees throng these places to pay obeisance to their deities and perform religious rituals. This provides the right opportunity to initiate inter-faith and inter-religious dialogue and educate the people on the necessity of establishing the culture of peace throughout the world.

That the first step for this very important project has been taken at Alandi is a matter of pride for World Peace Centre (Alandi), MAEER's MIT, Pune, India.

World Peace Centre (Alandi) has the unique honour of having been bestowed with the UNESCO Chair for Human Rights, Democracy, Peace and Tolerance in 1998 for the yeoman service performed by it in promoting the Culture of Peace in the society.

One of the stated goals of UNESCO, Paris is Mass Education, and the networking of pilgrim centres of the world is also an activity of mass education, albeit on a very grand scale, and being executed in a very unique manner.

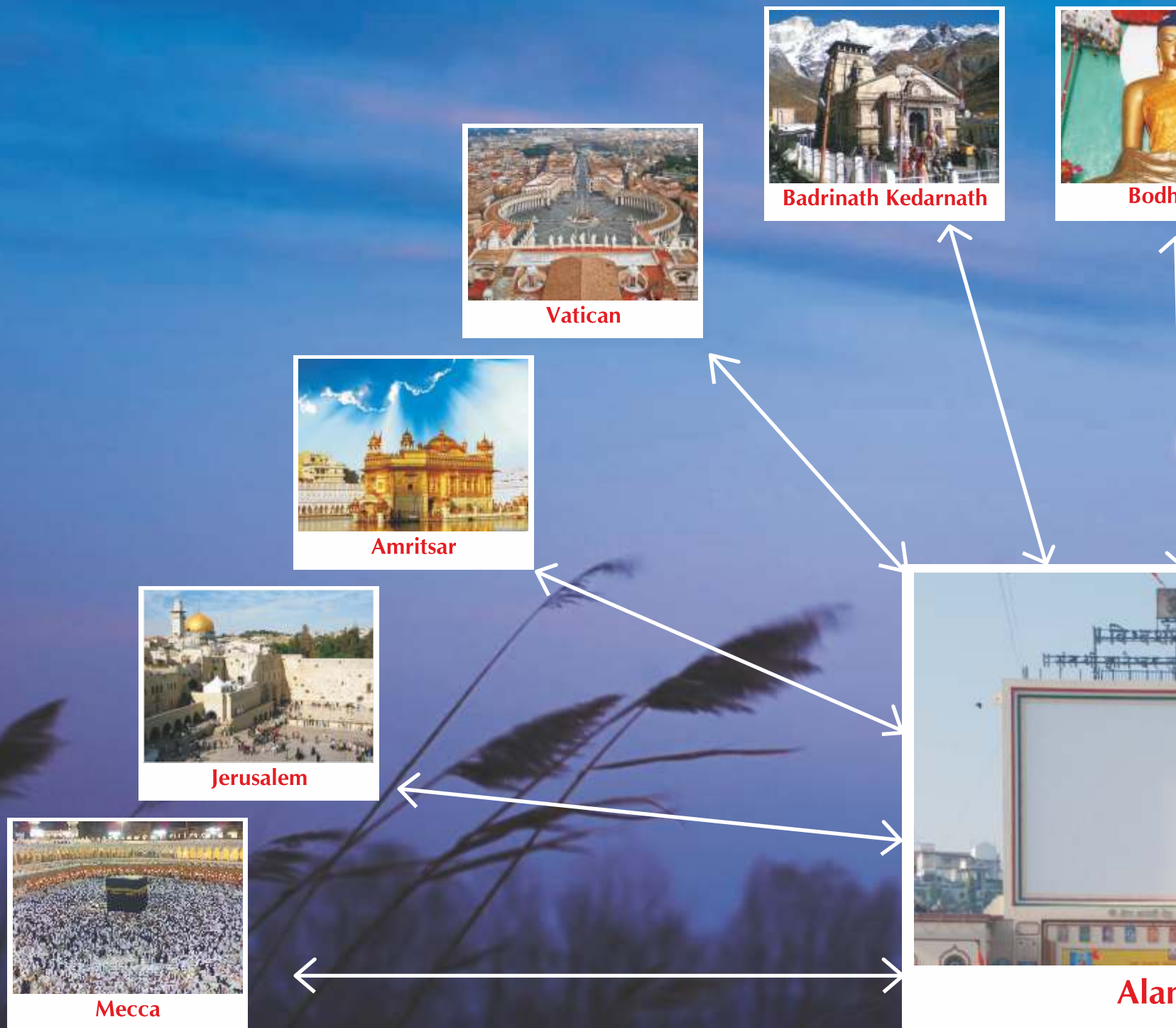
Under the UNESCO Chair, WPC has organized several national and international conferences, debates, peace marches and many other programs even at the very grassroots levels for the promotion of human rights, democracy, peace and tolerance.



UNESCO Chair for
Human Rights, Democracy, Peace & Tolerance
World Peace Centre (Alandi) Pune, India



NETWORKING OF PILGRIM



The Networking of Pilgrim Centres of the world involves the use of multimedia and information technology to connect all the major pilgrim centres of all religions, with Alandi being the nucleus of the network. These pilgrim centres include Varanasi, Badrinath-Kedarnath, Vatican, Mecca-Medina, Bodhgaya, Amritsar, Jerusalem, Rameshwaram, Shirdi, Tirupati, Jagannathpuri and many more. The idea behind this networking is to establish a direct link between these pilgrim centres so

CENTRES OF THE WORLD



that value-based educational, religious and spiritual programmes can be directly available to the millions of pilgrims that visit these pilgrim centres each day, which can be viewed on similar multimedia coliseums erected at these places. This would be one of the best ways to impart mass education to millions from a single platform. The work for the same has already begun.

Alandi Today...

The scene in Alandi today is vastly different from what it was around 25 years ago. Eight magnificent ghats stand proudly lining the north and south banks of river Indrayani. These ghats have been named after eight highly revered saints of Maharashtra namely, *Saint Dnyaneshwar*, *Saint Nivruttinath*, *Saint Sopandev*, *Saint Muktabai*, *Saint Tukaram*, *Saint Namdeo*, *Saint Eknath* and *Saint Janabai*. Beautifully crafted stone steps provide a gentle and spacious approach to the river. There is a beautifully arched covered walkway at the top of the steps that allows the devotees to stand in long lines properly sheltered. Purified water is available from *gomukhs* (cow's mouth) at the riverside, which can be consumed as *teerth* or holy water.



The entire sewerage of Alandi town is now diverted away from the river to faraway fields, so that the river water is free of filth. The work is underway to build toilets and bathing facilities for ladies. There is a lot of cleanliness and orderliness in the temple town. Devotees are happy that wide and spacious ghats are providing them a proper resting space.

The work done in Alandi is perhaps a very unique instance where an educational institution has taken a social initiative on such a large scale for environment improvement and pollution control. Abundant use of technology has been made to provide the hundreds of thousands of devotees with shelter, sanitation and cleanliness, thus achieving a unique blend of science and spirituality, the tenet on which MAEER's MIT Group of Institutions has been founded.



The massive Vishwaroop Darshan Manch multimedia coliseum at Alandi



The Beacon of World Peace and Knowledge

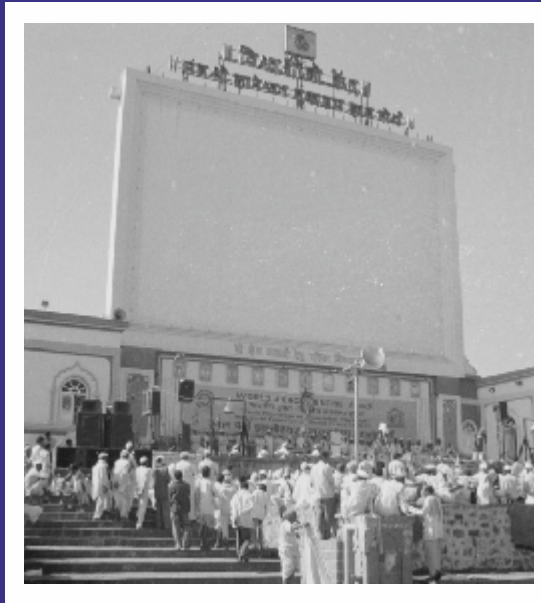
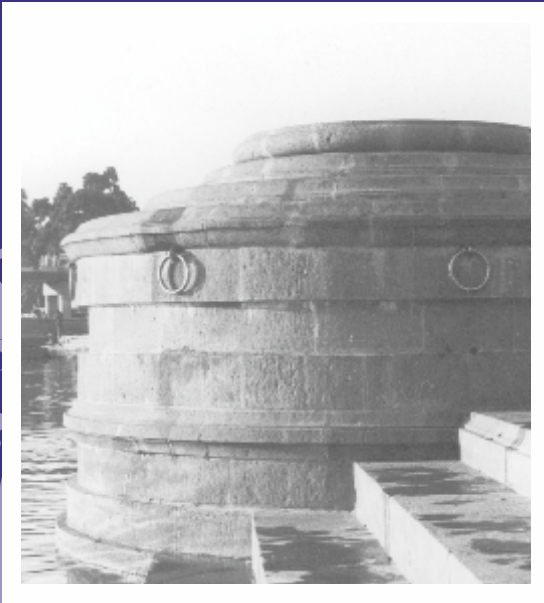
As a culmination of the tireless efforts of over two decades at Alandi and Dehu, a towering Garud Stambh or Eagle Column has been erected in the river Indrayani under the benevolent guidance and stewardship of Prof. Dr. Vishwanath D. Karad. This Vishwashanti Garud Stambh is a 148-foot tall edifice, bearing the pataka(flag) of the Warkari sect. The lower 120 feet of the column are made of concrete, on which rests a 28-foot gold column with the gold pataka. On this, stands a 7-foot tall flame, symbolizing the light of knowledge being spread all across the globe. This column is adorned by four lions at the base, followed by four eagles with their wings spread, four peacocks with their majestic wingspread and then four doves symbolizing world peace. This towering column is like a beacon of knowledge and world peace, a true indicator of what sincerity of purpose combined with purity of thought can achieve.







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