

Managing religious textile waste in the pilgrimages: Case study of Koppala, Karnataka

Textile waste is an often-overlooked challenge at pilgrimage destinations across India. Generated as unintended consequences of religious tourism and devotional offerings, discarded textiles frequently enter rivers and other water bodies, where they contribute to pollution and threaten fragile aquatic ecosystems.

Case of Anjanadri

Close to Hampi, a UNESCO World Heritage site, lies the Anjanadri Hill in the Koppala district of Karnataka. Anjanadri Hill is believed to be the birthplace of the Hindu deity Lord Hanuman and caters to around 3 lakhs pilgrims who visit the Anjanadri temple and the Tungabhadra River in December for the Hanuman Mala Visarjan after a month-long period of religious austerity. The Hanuman mala visarjan is traditionally performed in the Tungabhadra River due to its historical and spiritual significance. The river is believed to have played a crucial role in the rise and fall of ancient South Indian civilisations, including the Vijayanagara Empire, and is deeply intertwined with the spiritual legacy of Saint Raghavendra Swami and his association with Mantralayam. The Tungabhadra River Ghat at Mantralayam is a sacred site for religious rituals, and taking a holy dip in the river is believed to cleanse sins and purify the soul.

The textile waste problem in Anjanadri

Due to the beliefs associated with the Hanuman Mala Visarjan, for 2 days in December, devotees take a holy dip to mark the completion of their austerity and dispose of their saffron clothes (worn during the period of austerity) in the Tungabhadra River. The textile waste accumulates in the riverbed and, during peak flows, is flushed downstream into the watershed (Kurnool), which extends to the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh. A 2022 clean-up drive done by NCC cadets as part of a nationwide flagship campaign 'Puneet Sagar Abhiyan' report collecting 1 MT of solid waste from the banks of Kummari Veedhi ghat of Tungabhadra river in Kurnool.¹

After the holy dip, the pilgrims visit the Anjanadri temple, uphill to the river to complete the ritual. The sacred mala (a chain of wooden beads) worn as part of austerity is disposed of near trees and in vacant areas in the Anjanadri Temple and downhill. Additionally, single-use plastic (SUP) bottles (water & soft drinks) are also littered both downhill and surrounding the Anjanadri temple. Nirmal Thunga Abhiyan, a

¹ <https://www.thehansindia.com/andhra-pradesh/kurnool-ncc-cadets-cleanse-tungabhadra-river-746861cleared>

volunteer group, cleans up the riverbank once a year after the Visarjan festival. However, this one-time clean-up is not sufficient to reduce the ingress of textile waste to downstream rivers.



Low-cost interventions to intercept textile waste

The waste disposal issue at the Anjanadri temple and the Thungabadra river was brought to the attention of the Koppala District Collector (DC). To address this and brainstorm on possible solutions, the DC called for a meeting 10 days before the Visarjan (Dec, 2025) with participation from the Gangawati taluk, the Gram Panchayats (GPs) surrounding the Anjanadri Hill, and Saahas. Saahas has been working in the district since 2024 through the Beyond the Broom project, funded by the JSW Foundation, to support Anegundi and Sanapura GPs in establishing an end-to-end solid waste management system.

During the meeting, it was decided that there needs to be a cleanup of legacy waste in the riverbed and interventions to prevent the future disposal of textiles and other waste into the river. During the meeting, pre- and post-event plans were made to curb littering/waste dumping and to properly manage collected waste. The plan included the placement of drums (~330 L) to collect textile waste, sacred chain,

and SUPs; IEC campaigns; and clearly laid-out duties for GP officials, sanitation staff, and the Saahas team. The collected textile waste was planned to be upcycled into cloth bags and sold to the devotees in Anjanadri temple.



Textile waste collected and accumulated during the Hanuman Mala Visarjan, 2025

Intervention activities

1. Clean-up drive: As a first step, a clean-up drive was organised along a 1-km stretch of the Tungabhadra Riverbank, with active participation by the GPs. 25 Kg of PET bottles and MLP sachets were collected.
2. Waste interception: To curb littering and the disposal of textile waste into the river, drums were placed at 50 m intervals or near the bathing ghats/gathering spots for textile waste disposal. Separate drums were also placed at the entrance, near the trees and at the temple to collect sacred bead chains and SUP waste.
3. IEC & awareness: Two days before the Visarjan, rigorous awareness and IEC campaigns were conducted in the locality to inform tourists and pilgrims about anti-littering rules and the

waste-disposal drums. Volunteer groups and local auto drivers were also engaged for the IEC campaign and mic announcements. This information was also conveyed during the event through mic announcements and IEC displays.

4. Waste management: Approximately 1 MT of religious textile waste was collected through the intervention, preventing it from entering the river. As part of the plan, a few tailors were engaged in upcycling textile waste into cloth bags after collection. Revenue could not be generated from the bags due to low demand for paid bags among devotees. Hence, these were sold free of cost, and the stitching cost for 1000 bags was covered by Saahas through CSR support. The remaining textile waste is stored in the GP DWCC until the GP secures funding for upcycling.

Similarly, 20 drums filled with sacred bead chains were collected and stored on the temple premises. The team is exploring upcycling possibilities for these.

25 bags of SUP waste, including PET bottles and flexible plastic, were collected and sent to the Anegundi DWCC for sorting and sale.

Over 90% reductions in textile waste disposal into the river and in other littering were observed after this intervention.

Way forward

After the success of the intervention, the DC of Koppala district took accountability for sustaining and monitoring it in subsequent seasons/years, with the support of the Gangawati taluk Executive Officer (EO). The use and sale of SUPs in Anjanadri were banned following the intervention.

Other Departments, including Hampi Pradhikara (Hampi World Heritage Site Management Agency), Darmika Daati Illake (Religious Endowment Department) and Department of Tourism, were also key stakeholders in this intervention. Their proactive coordination, timely approvals, and expedited decision-making helped eliminate administrative bottlenecks and ensured the smooth implementation of the initiative.

The cost of the intervention includes IEC materials (Rs 3600 for 8 cloth banners), collection drums (Rs 8000 for 20 drums), and stitching cost for upcycling (Rs 20,000 for 1000 bags). Volunteers and ASHA/Anganwadi workers can be engaged for awareness. The DC and EO decided to reserve funds for SHG engagement and to promote textile waste upcycling from next year. Meanwhile, the taluk is exploring ways to upcycle the sacred beads and generate revenue.

Based on the field data from a previous event, without such interventions, 5 days of 50 workers, paid Rs 300/day (Rs 75,000), would have been needed to clean up a 2 km stretch of the riverbank, the bathing ghat, and the temple surroundings during and after the event.

Every year, centrally sponsored schemes like the [National River Conservation Plan](#) and the [Namami Gange Programme \(NGP\)](#) allocate hundreds of crores for cleaning major rivers and their tributaries. Simple interventions like this can divert waste away from the river and manage it upstream, significantly minimising the quantum of textile and other waste entering the water bodies during religious events. This supports the broader objectives of clean rivers and can help reduce cleanup costs. It can be replicated in pilgrimage sites and tourist destinations where textiles and other religious items are discarded.

The success of such interventions depends on the support and accountability of stakeholders, especially local bodies and religious institutions. Resource recovery or revenue from textile waste depends on local demand, and the market for post-consumer textile waste varies by region. Nevertheless, such interventions are crucial to ensure that religious practices are in harmony with nature and don't contribute to additional pollution and waste in rivers.



Women selling upcycled cloth bags made from the textile waste collected during the event