

A Filmmaker's Journey Inside the World Water Crisis

Shalini Kantayya gives a first-person account of the making of her documentary — *A Drop of Life*, drawing attention to the importance of water conservation.

My passion for water rights did not begin with an intellectual study, but as all great adventures of my life begin — from the heart. The journey to make *A Drop Of Life* started in January 2001. I was in India on a Fulbright Fellowship, making a documentary on political street theatre. On a whim, I accepted a friend's request to help him document the largest gathering of people in human history, at the Maha Kumbh Mela. The mela is a religious gathering in which people come to take a bath in the holy confluence of three rivers at an auspicious time because doing so is believed to wash away sins and take the soul closer to liberation. I found myself living in a tent at the bank of the Ganga with my crew for 40 days — the duration of the festival. In the process, I spent many hours talking to pilgrims, watching prayer rituals, and immersing myself, day after day, in the sacred water. In the course of many cold-water baths, I fell wildly in love with this river.

All ancient civilisations flourished at the banks of life-giving rivers, and India was no exception — even the word India derives from the name of the River Indus. Water was traditionally revered as a life-giving mother goddess, infused with the power to sustain life and purify the soul, and the practice of *jal jaap*, of laying out clay cups of water for the thirsty, was widespread. Many indigenous cultures believe that water cannot be owned and is instead the common

property of all people — and in India, before British colonisation led to waters being administered by the state, communities were responsible for being caretakers of their own talab (the collective source of water).

I was moved by this faith in water as a sacred and common responsibility for the preservation of all life. And my love for the river inspired me to question the cultural practices of offerings made with paper and plastic. I thought to myself, "We call this river mother and then dump all the junk into it in the name of reverence? Hmmm". I began to read fervently on river systems and the global story of water. And so I attended the Peoples' World Water Forum in New Delhi, the World Social Forum in Mumbai, and the World Water Forum in Mexico City. Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke's riveting 2002 book *Blue Gold: The Fight to Stop the Corporate Theft of the World's Water* shook me out of my seat. I found the statistics alarming: between one-half and two-thirds of the world's population, over four billion people, will not have adequate access to clean drinking water by the year 2027.

The more I researched and read about water, the more I became convinced of the veracity of World Bank vice-president Ismail Serageldin's prediction that, "if the wars of the 20th century were fought over oil, the wars of the next century will be fought over water". Water scarcity is already a reality for a billion world citizens. And in a post-information, post-iPhone, post-reality television world, every time a

child dies because of water-related illness, I feel that we have failed as a world community to manage our most vital shared human right. Less than one percent of the world's water is fresh and drinkable. And individuals and corporations are over-consuming at such a rate that every species on the planet is in danger. Besides, as demand rapidly exceeds supply, corporations are vying to buy water resources and sell them, like any other commodity, to the highest bidder.

And we can no longer draw borders on the crisis and relegate the problem to sub-Saharan Africa or the interior villages of India. In the US we have seen the dramatic effects of the water crisis throughout the South and the Midwest, accompanied by a nationwide decrease in the water levels of many rivers and lakes. In Atlanta, as of early 2008, there are only an estimated three months of clean drinking water left, and a mandatory outdoor watering ban makes it illegal to water lawns and wash cars. Arizona is suffering a continuing drought that over the years has hit its agricultural industry with an estimated \$2.8 billion in overall economic losses.

As I became aware of the mounting global water crisis, I realised that it represented a clash of cultures — between a culture that values water as a shared sacred resource and a corporate culture that regards water as a commodity to be bought and sold. According to the World Bank and the United Nations, water is a human need and not a human right. This distinction clarifies that water can be sold

for money, while no one can sell a human right. After living many years between India and America, I wondered how water conflicts in the future will affect the already vast disparities between the 'First World' and the 'Third World'.

I made *A Drop Of Life* in order to convey the widening life-threatening divide between people who can afford this vital resource and those who cannot. As an artist, I want to harness the viral energy of youth culture and the popular form of dramatic fiction to inspire new audiences to awareness about water. I wanted to make a film that would reach beyond the traditional environmental movement and social issue documentary audiences. I wanted to create a tool to engage my peers, mostly urban kids of colour, to transform water culture.

The water meter in *A Drop Of Life* was originally conceived to depict a frightening future we are headed towards unless we change our ways. But then I learned, in an interview with Maude Barlow, that this frightening future, a world in which water is reserved for only those who can afford it, exists today. In the case of the Orange Farm township in South Africa, a development scheme was implemented earlier this decade that offered each family 6,000 litres per month of free water, after which point they would have to pre-pay for water. About 6,000 litres split by an average 10-person family in 30 days is about 20 litres per day. The World Health Organisation claims that an individual needs 25 litres of water per day to meet his basic needs and another 100 litres per day to remain healthy. As a result of the installation of the pre-paid water meter, residents of the township were forced to drink water from an unclean source. Over 5,000 people died of cholera. Actually, they died because of the pre-paid water meter.

The science fiction water meters I had imagined already exist today in over 10 countries, including South Africa, Brazil, Nigeria, the Philippines, Sudan, and US.



My documentary emerged from a desire to bring attention to this crisis on which all life depends, and a belief that media can create the spark that ignites social change. African Water Network, a water advocacy organisation that works with communities targeted by pre-paid water-meter programmes, has screened the film in over 40 villages across Africa, using it as a tool to inspire dialogue about local water issues. We spend a billion dollars a year on bottled water. What if we put that money into our public systems? In partnership with 7th Empire Media (a movie production company), *A Drop Of Life* educational tour will raise awareness through screenings and workshops that challenge students to imagine themselves in new situations and develop critical think-

ing skills around this issue.

At present, I am in the process of launching the short version of *A Drop of Life* in order to develop a feature-length science fiction drama on the subject of the world water crisis. A feature-length release would be accompanied by a musical soundtrack, video games, mobile phone content, and a vast online presence, as well as a social impact plan designed to create a global culture of respect for water as a universal human right and a collective responsibility.

To attempt is to tell ourselves that the challenges are too insurmountable, or that ultimately water is "someone else's problem", is simply unthinkable. *A Drop of Life* is a step towards the conversations that create vital social change.