

## My Journey Leading the Dal Lake Cleaning Drive After the 2014 Kashmir Floods

### Setting the Stage: September 2014—The Floods That Changed Everything

I still remember the days following the devastating floods that ripped through Kashmir in September 2014. The memories are vivid—street after street submerged, families huddled together on rooftops, the air thick with a mixture of fear and resilience. As a son of Kashmir, I felt an acute sense of responsibility and urgency to help my people.

It was in this atmosphere that I joined Goonj, one of India's most respected grassroots organizations, as the Head for Jammu & Kashmir. Later, I became a key member of the Goonj team in New Delhi and eventually led operations in Maharashtra until the fall of 2018. But my earliest and perhaps closest challenge was rehabilitating the neighborhoods around Dal Lake, Kashmir's shimmering heart and a vital source of livelihood and identity for its people.

### Understanding Dal Lake: Beauty and Crisis

Dal Lake is more than just a water body—it is woven into our identity as Kashmiris. Tourists marvel at its beauty, but locals know its importance in the rhythms of daily life: it provides water, fish, irrigation, transport, and a tranquil backdrop to generations of stories.

After the floods, Dal Lake was choking. The waters were heavy with silt, wild weeds like Azolla, algae, garbage, and debris. The sickly appearance of the lake was not just ecological, but symbolic of the shock the region had endured. What the floods had not destroyed, neglect threatened to erase. The community was yearning for hope, for work with purpose—and above all, for restoration.

### The First Steps: Listening to the Community

With Goonj, our approach was always simple: listen first. We began with surveys and group meetings in the Moti Mahalla and Asthawol areas around Dal Lake. We asked locals—what troubled them the most? Their answer was unanimous: “Clean the Dal, let it breathe!”

This was the birth of our collective mission. Not just a staff-driven campaign, but a movement led by the people themselves. Goonj's “Cloth for Work” initiative gave us the perfect platform: villagers would tackle pressing local problems using their resources and wisdom, with Goonj providing kits of clothing, household articles, and necessities for those participating.

### Building a Team: Harnessing Tradition, Skills, and Will

I mobilized our team—trained project officers, volunteers from New Delhi, local elders, boatmen, teachers, and students. The weeks leading up to our first phase were spent mapping the lake, arranging logistics, and sourcing tools—boats, paddles, extracting sticks, baskets. Goonj's model insisted on self-reliance; we insisted on manual extraction of weeds, knowing that uprooting, not chopping, was key to ecological renewal.

There was skepticism. Would villagers come together after a disaster, when many still lacked certainty about their own homes and food? My conviction never wavered. We discussed not only ecological gains but practical benefits—the extracted weeds would become fodder for cattle, and decayed matter would make excellent manure.

#### The First Phase: 145 People, Seventy Boats, Two Days of Hope

Dense mist hung over the lake as dawn broke on our first day. 145 villagers assembled at the banks, bundled against the chill. Seventy boats moved out, their paddles dipping in rhythm, cutting through fog and the thick mats of Azolla and lilies. The energy was infectious—men, women, and even children took to the water, working in pairs and small teams.

As project head, I coordinated movement, safety, and extraction zones, but the ownership was entirely local. Over two days, the team braved winter cold, working tirelessly to manually uproot weeds. The sight of more than 250 boatloads of weeds being brought to shore filled me with pride and awe.

At Goonj, we valued not just the work, but its dignity. For their efforts, villagers received comprehensive kits of clothing and essentials from Goonj, vital to survive the biting Valley cold.

#### Second Phase: Sustaining Momentum

A month later, phase two began, this time with 167 participants and seventy-eight boats. The word had spread; more villagers joined, buoyed by the success and visible results of the first phase—the water was clearer, avenues for navigation reopened, and stories of reduced waterborne diseases emerged.

Participants again worked with courage, extracting more than 250 boatloads. By the end, more than 500 boatloads were removed, covering over 1 lakh sq. meters of Dal Lake—a feat unmatched in the history of community-driven lake cleaning in Kashmir.

#### Key Lessons in Leadership and Collaboration

##### Empathy and Inclusion

From the start, I made sure every stakeholder was given a voice—elders, women, youth, and children. We organized evening meetings to share progress and concerns, ensuring transparency and trust.

##### Tradition Meets Innovation

Our tools were simple, but our approach was innovative: blending local fishing and farming knowledge with Goonj's work-for-dignity model.

##### Ecological Wisdom

Extracting weeds from the roots, rather than chopping, restored the lake's natural circulation and ensured long-term health. We turned what would have been waste into fodder and manure, closing the ecological loop.

### Resilience in Adversity

The drive took place in winter, often in dense fog, but the participants showed incredible resilience. Their determination reminded me that hardship need not breed victimhood—it can foster communal strength.

### Lasting Impact

Cleaner waters meant less waterborne disease. Better water circulation revitalized flora and fauna. Enhanced mobility allowed boatmen to resume their trade and children to reach school safely. The cleaning efforts reinvigorated community pride and set a precedent for ecological stewardship in the region.

I saw firsthand how people united can heal what nature and disaster have battered. The days spent guiding boats, sharing stories, and steering the lake back to life are among my proudest achievements.

### The Legacy: Lessons That Travel Beyond Dal

As I transitioned from Head J&K to Goonj team member in New Delhi, and then Lead Maharashtra, I carried the lessons of Dal Lake. In urban slums, rural hamlets, and distant cities, I invoked the spirit of what we accomplished—a community's capacity to decide, unite, and act meaningfully is the most powerful lever for change.

The Dal Lake cleaning campaign has been cited as a model—by journalists, scientists, and policymakers. It showed that lasting change is possible only when locals drive and own the solution, and when dignity is valued above charity.

### Reflections: Leading With Hope

Leading the Dal Lake cleaning effort was more than restoring a waterbody—it was restoring hope to a community battered by disaster. It reinforced my belief that leadership is not about command—it is about service, empathy, and amplifying the collective will.

I am grateful to Goonj, to every villager who braved the cold, and to my team members who saw potential where others saw despair.

The old beauty of Dal Lake still beckons, but more than that, its story of revival will inspire generations of Kashmiris—and all who believe in the power of humanity to heal, restore, and build anew.

*(This is a first-person account by Ajaz Rashid, drawing upon leadership experience from the Dal Lake cleaning drive by Goonj after the 2014 Kashmir floods, as documented in the referenced case study. Link: <https://thebetterindia.com/44560/kashmir-community-deweeding-dal-lake/> )*