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No magic wand in Vembanad

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Chemical run-off from paddy fields. Wastes from houseboats. Over-fishing. Sand-mining. Lack of drinking water. Is there a way to save these beautiful backwaters? KEYA ACHARYA



Fishermen work longer and harder in catching fish in Lake Vembanad. Photo: Shaji Cherthala

On what is now a narrow pathway, due to a newly-constructed resort on the lake's shores, children and women walk to the lakeside in the approaching dusk. Straddling babies on their hips, the women watch their menfolk, all fishermen, light candles and place them carefully on plantain leaves and push them out into the water. There is chatter and excitement as they pass sweets along the line, as World Wetlands Day (February 2) provides a change from their daily struggle.

Vembanad, which supports an entire ecosystem of lake and drainage area spanning three central districts in Kerala, is 96 km long with 200 sqkm of surface area and is the focal point of Kerala's beautiful 'backwaters', termed thus because of sea-water ingress.

Designated for protection under the inter-governmental Ramsar Convention, the lake still supports very rich biodiversity, recharges coastal aquifers, flushes out pollutants and helps contain flood waters, evolving a whole wetlands-centred cultural lifestyle with a population of 1.6 million on its banks.

Kerala's backwaters, with their seductively lush green fields, gleaming fish and swaying coconut palms, are a complex network of inland-flowing seawater, lagoons, marshes, lakes, rivers and canals running parallel to the Arabian Sea. Its waterways have hosted trade from ancient times but are now in disuse, except for tourism houseboats plying on waters partly choked heavy with water hyacinth, that biggest symptom of pollution.

Vembanad itself looks deceptively quiet; at least on the eastern banks near Muhamma, where houseboat operator Dilip Kumar, waiting for custom on the bank, says, "No problems here; we're still getting prawns as big as this," pointing from his fingertips to his elbow.

"Not true," says T.D. Jojo, co-ordinator of Bangalore-based ATREE's (Ashoka Trust for Ecology and Environment) programme on saving Vembanad. "Rules on bio-toilets and waste disposal in houseboats are both flouted and not monitored."

The problems probably began around 1834 when lake-bed reclamation was encouraged for planting paddy. This continued in independent India in a bid to grow more food. From 1834 till 1984, 23,000 ha were reclaimed, causing the lagoon's depth to shrink by almost 50 per cent, resulting in drainage capacity shrinking from 2.4 cubic km to just 0.6 cubic km.

"Around eight years ago, I could collect this many clams in just two to three hours," laments Ashokan, pointing to a mound of black clams filling a quarter of his canoe-like fishing boat. "Now I work the whole day to get just this much. I can't manage." Fishermen now dredge the lake bed for clams; earlier they would dive in and scoop up enough.

The dwindling catch is partly due to the Thanneermukkom barrage, built in 1975 and shut annually from mid-December to end-March to allow a second crop of paddy to be grown on the lake's reclaimed lands in Kuttanad. The fishermen want the barrage gates opened earlier to let seawater in for fish-breeding.

"Prawns, for example, spawn at the mouth of the estuary and the baby shrimps are carried inwards into the lake with tidal sea waters. But now they are trapped, unable to flow inwards because of the barrage," explains scientist Jojo.

ATREE has helped the villages form 13 lake protection forums so far, training them to check the water quality. Thirteen fish sanctuaries — also set up with ATREE's help and made of bamboo poles planted in a circle with local tree branches in between — have helped both fish and fishermen. The lake protection forums now directly check pH (acidity) level,

temperature and salinity and use ATREE's help in checking the ratios of dissolved oxygen and total dissolved solids in the lake.

The fishermen, whose complaints about the lake's health were not taken seriously earlier, now feel empowered with data that shows low salinity and high acidity to correspond exactly with the shutting of the barrage gates. "We now have knowledge; we need to make use of this," says K.M. Poovu, president of the Kuttanad Samyukta Samiti, a joint forum of farmers and fishermen, another group that ATREE has helped set up to find a middle path for both fisherman and farmer. "We want both (barrage and seawater)," says farmer Muralidharan of the KSS, while the fishermen say it would help if breeding were given some more time.

Protesting fishermen got the barrage gates opened in end-March instead of end-April some years ago, but it still is not enough to ensure breeding. "It's not possible," says N. Padmakumar, Alappuzha District Collector, when asked if the gates could be opened a little earlier to allow the lake to regenerate. "Our primary concern is paddy," he adds. "The ratio of farmers to fishermen is 10:1. You tell me, whose interest should I protect?"

Vembanad, meanwhile, continues to be beset by chemical run-off from paddy fields, wastes from tourism houseboats, over-fishing and sand-mining, though all players deny culpability. The houseboats, hundreds of them on Vembanad alone (over 930 officially recorded in Alappuzha district), deny dumping wastes into the lake and blame the resorts on Vembanad's shores. The bigger resorts say they have their own waste treatment systems, and blame the smaller ones, while the government's machinery is uncoordinated in its attempt to tackle the problem.

Some 30-odd km away in Kainakary village in Kuttanadu, Kerala's below-sea-level 'rice bowl' formed on land taken from Vembanad, panchayat president Sudhimotu talks of the lack of drinking water. Incongruously the Pamba flows silently behind him. The rivers feeding the backwaters are now so polluted that access to drinking water is a huge issue in the district.

The DC sounds harassed. "I don't have a magic wand," he says shortly. "Vembanad's ecological degradation happened historically. There should be political will on the government part's to do something."