

LOKTAK LAKE OF MANIPUR

From Owners to 'Occupiers'

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[While 12% of Manipur's population depend on Loktak Lake for their sustenance, some 10,000 people actually live and fish on tiny islands of vegetation called 'phumdis' that float on Loktak, the largest freshwater lake in the northeast. Now, claiming that the phumdi-dwellers are polluting the lake where they have lived for generations, the Manipur government is evicting them. Where will they go?]

FORTY-YEAR-OLD SALAM TAMU finds it difficult to sleep at her home in Arong Nongmaikhong, in Manipur's Thoubal district, around 52 km from the state capital Imphal. On moonlit nights, she spends hours gazing across the glistening sheet of Loktak Lake wishing she were back in her one-room lake hut built on the floating vegetation island, locally known as 'phumids'.

At 236.21 sq km, Loktak Lake is the largest freshwater lake in northeast India. According to official data, around 12% of Manipur's total population—mostly living in 53 settlements in and around Loktak in Bishnupur, Imphal East and Thoubal districts—depend on the lake's resources for their sustenance.

The projected population of Manipur, as of March 2009, is estimated at 26.91 lakh, according to the Economic Survey of Manipur 2009-2010.

While water from the lake is used for irrigation, domestic purposes and power-generation, the vegetation is harvested for use as food, fodder, fibre, fuel, handicrafts and medicinal purposes.

Ten years ago, Tamu was on the other side, standing on the phumdis gazing homewards at the distant lights on the mainland. "I would cry, missing my family and neighbours there. Now whenever I go to Arong Nongmaikhong, I am unable to stay there long. This hut in the middle of the water is more than a source of income, it is my home now," she says.

According to reports by the government implementing agency Loktak Development Authority (LDA), a census conducted among phum hut-dwellers in 2001 recorded a population of 1,977 fisher folk living in a total of 733 phum huts. Among them, 84% are permanent dwellers who do not have a house on the mainland. Around 8%, like Tamu, are temporary dwellers who have a house on the mainland where their families live. The rest are migrant fishermen who visit the phums only during the fishing season.

Tamu and her husband Sobha cook, eat, sleep and dry fish on the roughly 250-300 sq ft of floating biomass. In the evenings, Tamu cooks some of the smaller fish she has caught during the day using her dip net. Her husband goes out fishing most of the day, starting with the first harvest from the trap cages at dawn. Tamu rows out early in the morning in their canoe with the first harvest and the smoked fish to sell in the nearest market.

"This is how we have survived for so many years," she says. Her only son, Chaoba, stayed behind with her in-laws in Arong Nongmaikhong to study at the nearby school. About a month ago, he got a job with a security agency.

Tamu's neighbor on the lake, 39-year-old Ayingbi, also left three of her children behind at her in-laws in Thongam Mondum when she moved with her husband Herachandra and youngest child, four-year-old Thoibi, to eke out a living on Loktak Lake.

As Ayingbi and her husband had earlier fished at Pumlun Pat, another lake located in the Thoubal-Bishnupur district border area, they were used to the hard work. However, staying in a hut built on a floating island of vegetation in the middle of the lake was a new experience. "When we were working at Pumlun we could return home in the evening and be with our children. But when our expenses rose with the children's education and rising price of essential commodities, whatever we earned was not enough. We heard that earnings were good on Loktak, so we came here last winter," she says.

Life in the floating huts is not idyllic, even if the setting is. Dwindling fish stocks and increasing competition mean that profits depend on how much one can invest. "For us poor people, even Rs 10,000 is a huge sum. But for those investing Rs 30,000-40,000 on nets alone, earning Rs 1,000 a day is no big deal. We have to make do with Rs 100-200," says Tamu.

Added to that is having to buy all the essential commodities from the mainland. "Fish and water are the only freely available items," says Ayingbi, adding, "but now we have to be careful about the water too." The water in the lake is becoming increasingly polluted due to the inflow of water from rivers like the Nambul and Nambol that flow through urbanized sectors of the state. Also, the phumdis have no sanitation or drainage system - everything goes straight into the lake.

Medical facilities and schools too are on the mainland.

Small children staying with their parents on the lake are confined to the 10 ft X 40 ft one-room huts where they sleep, cook, eat and process their fish. "When we are at the market selling fish, our hearts are always unsettled thinking about our children back at the lake. Water surrounds them; there have been so many cases of young children drowning in the lake," says Ayingbi.

Despite all the shortcomings, however, the lake is their guardian. "Loktak is our mother. We are able to feed our children and run our family only because of her grace. Where else will we go," asks 27-year-old Salam Pramo of Nongmaikhong, in Thoubal district, who has been living in a phum hut for three years.

But insecurity dogs them here too. Recent legislation passed by the state government, the Manipur Loktak Lake (Protection) Bill 2006, defines "a person who dwells in huts or houses on the phumdis or uses the phumdis" as "occupiers".

The Act aims "to provide for administration, control, protection, improvement, conservation and development of the natural environment of Loktak Lake, and for matters connected with as incidental thereto". It prohibits the building of huts or houses on phumdis inside a core zone of the lake. Also, engaging in athapum fishing on the lake. The 70.30 sq km core zone demarcated under the Act includes the area where Tamu, Pramo and Ayingbi's phum huts are located.

Fifty-six-year-old Ningthoujam Rakhon, general secretary of the All Loktak Lake Floating Hut-Dwellers Progressive Committee, maintains that the Act is a death knell for the nearly 10,000 people living in phumdi huts. "We have no agricultural landholdings or homestead on the mainland. For generations we have been staying here. We do not know another way of life. Evicting us in this manner is the same as asking us to commit mass suicide," he says.

Scoffing at the government's view that phumdis and phum hut-dwellers are polluting the lake, Rakhon insists that the pollution is due to the inflow of polluted water from the rivers, as well as the Ithai barrage. "We have been living here and fishing here for generations. Loktak didn't have a pollution problem before. It is due to the urban waste -rotten, stinking and highly polluted - that rivers like the Nambul, Ningthoukhong and Thongjaorok bring to Loktak. Earlier, this polluted water and sewage would be flushed out through the Manipur river. But after the Ithai barrage was built, Loktak became a standing pool and the pollutants stayed," he points out.

The Ithai barrage, built at the confluence of the Manipur river, the Khuga river and the Ungamel channel as part of the 105 MW Loktak Hydropower Project has not only inundated a large area of agricultural land on the periphery of the lake, it has also obstructed the river's traditional flow. This has led to the depletion of migratory fish from the Chindwin-Irrawady river system as well as stopped the natural flushing of the phumdis down the Khordak channel, encouraging the process of eutrophication in the lake and the unchecked proliferation of phumdi.

Phumdi management has been an important part of the Loktak Development Authority's activities. It recently commissioned New Delhi-based K Pro Infra Works Private Ltd to clean up around 132.94 lakh cubic metres of phumdis from the lake, in a joint venture with Progressive Construction Ltd (PCL) based in Hyderabad. The Rs 224 crore contract is scheduled to be completed in two years and the State Planning Commission has also sanctioned an amount of Rs 400 crore to clear the lake of phumdis.

The move threatens the existence of around 10,000 phumdi hut-dwellers living on Loktak Lake who recently joined forces under the banner of the All Loktak Lake Floating Hut-Dwellers Progressive Committee to oppose their displacement.

The state government is adamant about having its way. As evident from Chief Minister Ibobi's Khongjom Day speech last year, there will be no tolerance from the government's side on the eviction issue "as necessary compensation has been given to the athaphum owners and the LDA has set in motion (the task) of removing the phumdis from the lake". □□□