

NOTE

## 'God's Own Country'

A Malekar writes :

The unbridled growth of tourism in 'God's Own Country' has wrought an ecological disaster along the Kerala coast and famed backwaters. Some 2,000 houseboats spew sewage and kerosene into the backwaters that locals use for cooking and cleaning, the mangroves have shrunk to 1% of their original size of 70,000 hectare, beaches are being privatized and local communities are being displaced and dispossessed of their livelihoods.

Valiathura, near Thiruvananthapuram, was declared a 'dead port' in the early-'80s after it lost prominence as the only port along the south Kerala to Kochi. The only sign of its past glory, a 703-foot pier that is more than 50 years old, lies in a considerably weakened state and is used by the local fisherfolk to launch their traditional *kattumarans* or catamarans during the monsoons when the rough sea renders the neighbouring beaches inaccessible.

"The fishers from Valiathura are manual shark hunters, skilled in all kinds of traditional as well as modern gear and crafts. They dare the sea in all seasons in all regions and their traditional skills in determining the course of the currents and the winds, even in the most adverse situations, is legendary," claims local journalist-activist Ajith Lawrence. Over the centuries, theirs has been a story of extreme marginalization in virtually every sense. The dark, muscular men with bare torsos, and the frail women with prematurely wrinkled faces, have lived on the margins of society—on the sea front—in tiny huts thatched with the dry plaited leaves of the coconut palm that are so ubiquitous in Kerala but now seem out-of-sync with the modern architecture of homes fuelled by Gulf money and the luxury hotels catering to foreign tourists.

Kerala's coast stretches 580 km in length and varies between 35 and 120 km in width. The state has 44 rivers, of which 41 flow westward towards the sea. That's roughly one river every 14 km. This plentiful fresh water from the eastern tropical forests is a substantial contributor to Kerala's bountiful marine fishery resources. The rivers crisscross the western coastal belt dotted with a network of interconnected brackish canals, lakes, and estuaries known collectively as the 'Kerala Backwaters'. These plentiful inland water resources amidst the lush green vegetation dominated by tall swaying coconut palms are also the hallmarks of the state. Tourism flyers proclaim Kerala to be 'God's Own Country'. The state was selected by National Geographic Traveler as "one of the 50 destinations of a lifetime, and one of the 13 paradises in the world".

A major casualty of the damage done to Kerala's unique backwater region is Vembanad lake, the largest in the Alappuzha-Kottayam area and the setting for Arundhati Roy's Booker prizewinner *The God of Small Things*. According to local fishers Rajen Palikkalayil and Josy Gabriel, about 70% of the lake had fallen victim to reclamation projects. Their observation is corroborated by the Kerala Council for

Science, Technology and the Environment, which reports that the state has managed to retain only 23% of its backwaters.

The major tourist destinations across the state suffer a host of serious problems : piling of waste and garbage, water and air pollution, loss of biodiversity, lack of land use and infrastructure planning, encroachments, unauthorized constructions, drinking water shortages. According to the State Pollution Control Board, 1 million cubic metres of sewage is generated in the state's coastal areas, of which 30,000 cubic metres reaches the surface of water-bodies. The backwaters in Kochi alone receive 60 tonnes of sewage from the city. Streets in major tourist destinations like Alappuzha and Kochi now resemble garbage dumps, leading to the outbreak of epidemic diseases like chikungunya in the post-monsoon months over the last few years.

Kerala is a typical case of overexploitation and mismanagement of its resources, whether it is marine fish reserves or coasts and backwaters, Vijayan says : "The origin of this can be attributed to the state playing host to the Indo-Norwegian Project (INP) in the '50s. The project was intended to upgrade the existing fisheries sector and improve the standard of living of the fishing community, but it became an unintended catalyst for launching the whole of Kerala's fisheries into a new western-oriented export drive."

Vijayan also observes that in the past few decades, harbour-based mechanised trawlers with a single-species orientation (shrimp) were actively promoted at the cost of beach-based artisanal fishery, falsely dubbing the latter as too traditional, unscientific and resistant to change. Shoaling pelagic species like oil sardine and mackerel, and demersal species like prawn have made Kerala a major fish consuming and fish exporting state.

Despite the vast resources offered by the bountiful sea and an apparently thriving export market, why are the local fishers poor? "The only real wealth we possess is our knowledge of the sea and a modest collection of fishing equipment. There is nothing else we have in this world."

The local fishers of Vizhinjam are urging the authorities to halt these projects and are demanding a careful assessment of potential sea erosion. Fishermen's access to local beaches has already been curtailed by tourism activity. They fear that the new projects will further restrict their fishing space, threatening the livelihoods of up to 2,000 fishermen and their families and forcing some to relocate. □□□