

# THE FISHING VILLAGES OF PUMLEN, IKOP AND KHOIDUM: A STATUS REPORT

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## **The fishing villages of Pumlén, Ikop and Khoikum : A status report**

*The largest freshwater lake is the Loktak lake and the second is Pumlén Lake.*

*The largest source of fish is the Loktak Lake. And the second comes the Pumlén Lake*

As you meander your drive along the Manipur River beyond the Ithai Barrage, which has consumed Loktak Lake, you reach Nongmaikhong located at Pumlén Pat which has always been second to Loktak Lake. Even when the debacle of Ithai Barrage and its impact on Loktak had been discussed and deliberated, the story of the impact of this barrage on Pumlén, Ikop and Khoikum lake remains to be told and heard still.

Wetlands are essential to human wellbeing, inclusive economic growth and climate mitigation and adaptation. They provide water for human consumption and agriculture. They protect our shores and help make cities and settlements safe and resilient. They are the Earth's greatest natural carbon stores. They support biodiversity and abundant and unique nature. They are vital to mitigate and adapt to climate change. They provide sustainable livelihoods and are essential to human health and wellbeing. Wetlands provide myriad benefits and services.<sup>1</sup>

The Pumlén pat is a conjoined lake formed by Khoikum-pat in the north, Lamjaopat in the north-east and Pumlén main basin in the south. The deep water area lies in the main basin, whereas, Khoikum-pat and Lamjaopat are the marshy areas. During the rainy season, it becomes a huge lake along with the adjoining lakes but in the dry season, it is used for cultivating rice.

Fishing is an important part of the economic activities in the surrounding area and is a vital source of protein for the local diet. It is a shallow weed-infested lake with two-third of its water surface covered with heterogeneous vegetation locally known as Phoom or Phumdi. A drastic change in the ecosystem of Pumlén Lake as well as IKop and Khoikum from its earlier state is said to have occurred since the commissioning of Loktak Hydel Project which uses the Lake Pumlén as a secondary reservoir.

Significantly, in these villages, there are no proper shops and only some kiosks are there for small items. The villagers depend on Kumbi or Kakching or Moirang market for household essentials and for trading their fishes or rice or other cultivated vegetables.

There are three government schools standing with the stark absence of teachers. There are no privately run schools in abundance. The decision of the government to develop a Model school at Langmeidong which already has many private schools was a hasty decision as lamented by the villagers and they would appreciate a higher secondary school in any of these three villages.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/wetlands\\_sdgs\\_e.pdf](https://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/wetlands_sdgs_e.pdf)

There are ASHAs in the villages but the Primary Health centre does not have any doctors attending. Kakching or Kumbi is where they have to go for emergencies and both are almost one hour drive with no public transport plying.

There is a proposed construction of at least four motorised gates on main roads surrounding Ithai barrage which would restrict free movement of people thereby denying them their right to life. The resistance to this gate has stalled the completion of the construction of the gates.



**Figure 1 view of Manipur River from Yangbi Leikai, Nongmaikhong**

### **Impact of Ithai Barrage**

Management of water is an important and foremost activity one needs to perform everyday for survival. The village of Nongmaikhong gets their water from the Manipur River. The river is the main lifeline of the villages that settles in close proximity. Developmental works has not helped the age long management of water but made the situation in this upstream village hard. The Meitei had a separate text called "TUTENGLON" (Science of water management) and the villagers of these area paid taxes to the king of the erstwhile kingdom. Villagers narrated of the selungba riding a white majestic pony to the village and collecting the tax. The Manipur river was a narrow river but after the construction of the barrage the banks have broaden significantly. The banks were fine sand but flash flooding broke the sands and thus the banks became broader. The ever-flowing river has now stagnated and seasonal villagers get infections and rashes when the use the water for taking bath. Earlier this didn't happen. The river has also lost its colour due to the barrage, now its brown-muddy in colour throughout the year. The water which had a distinction between the summers and winters doesn't have any seasonal differences. Fish from the Chindwin-Irawaddy basin would swim up the

Manipur river and breed in the connecting nearby catchment areas. *Sareng, Pengba, Ngaton, Khabak, Ngara, Ngatin*, etc were abundant during the breeding season. Villagers used to catch the fishes and sell it. These provided an easy backup to their poor financial backgrounds. While demands at the larger markets grew the barrage has blocked the fish from swimming up and for breeding. These means that the barrage took away breeding grounds of the fish. Pumlen-pat the large wetland is fed with 5 major streams from different directions. Villagers used to grow different types of rice like the *Tao-thabi, Anganphou, tumai, moirangphou, kakchengphou*, etc and gather a good harvest. But since the water outlet of the wetland is blocked the water level has stagnated and is not feasible anymore for cultivations so instead they now dig fish ponds as a means of survival.



**Figure 2 fish pond conversion from rice fields**

Women used to gather different varieties of aquatic vegetables that grew naturally in Pumlen Pat like heikak, kambong, loklei, pulei, thangjing, yelang which is for domestic use as well as for the market. However, there is a drastic reduction possibly due to the changed ecosystem. Water is scarce for household use, but there is plenty of it which are also damaging to their normal conduct of life and livelihood for women. Any impact on water has direct consequences on the quality of life of women. This is particularly true in a male dominated society. While fishing is a male dominated activity, but selling fresh fishes, smoking and drying the fishes for further sale remains in the domain of women.

The structure of the river and the adjacent catchment area has changed. And which was once suitable for cultivation is forever submerged. Breeding grounds doesn't get any fish as before. Aesthetic looks of the lake has changed. Buffaloes farming is good as non-existing, cattle population of the village has declined as grazing grounds are submerged. Now with everything that provide the lifeline of the villagers snatched away, they've resorted to fish farming by digging up ponds. But this is again a very risky job, once the rainy season starts and if the dam gates are not opened than the

water level rises and the pond gets submerged and fishes escapes in open grounds. Projected income is taken away again if it happens.

### **SDGs and emerging Challenges**

Things do not end here. There are newer and greater challenges ahead for the people of Pumlun. From early 1980s when the Ithai barrage was built there has been no effort to even understand the suffering of the people of Arong Nongmaikhong for more then 3 decades. Its all about water. Water for reservoir, water for turbines and that is the way logic has been. Nothing else matters.

The UN's 2030 Agenda for sustainable development is underpinned by 17 SDGs and 169 targets and directs national policy makers to achieve progress across the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development world-wide.

Most of the proposed SDGs are relevant in some way or another to wetlands, but the following are of particular importance:

**Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture**

Rice grown in wetland paddies is the staple diet of the people of Manipur. However, the people of Pumlun, Ikop and Khoidum has been reeling from the aftermath of the Ithai Barrage and hasn't been able to grow paddy and shifting to fish rearing in the paddy fields.

**Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all**

Wetlands ensure fresh water, help replenish ground aquifers, and purify and filter harmful waste from water .

**Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable**

Wetlands act as natural sponges absorbing rainfall, providing protection against coastal and river flooding to (partially) offset the need for man-made infrastructure. Degeneration of the wetlands systems had let to flash flooding in recent times.

**Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts**

Wetlands act as carbon sinks.

**Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development**

Without wetlands, the water cycle, carbon cycle and nutrient cycles would be significantly altered.

**Goal 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss**

Target 15 of the SDGs, indicates to ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems and their services, in particular forests, wetlands, mountains and drylands, in line with obligations under international agreements. But in order to achieve SDG 15 there is a challenge and opportunity and a need to consider and utilize Ramsar

national reports and accompanying reporting mechanisms to provide information for inventories and monitoring related to SDG 6.6.1 and 15.1.<sup>2</sup>

To reach the full potential of SDGs, it is important to change the ways in which policies and management plans are made. The focus should be on policies and plans for solving different challenges that apply to and affect many actors that share the same area of interest. From recent years there has been an attempt to 'conserve' the rare Sangai deer at Pumlun and also an effort to 'conserve' Pumlun as a wetland system (as part of Loktak system) under the Loktak Development Authority. The Manipur State Wetlands Authority also have included Pumlun as part of their conservation list. This means that there is a tussle for conservation by different agencies of the government. The question remains on the kind of conservation model which will dominate Pumlun. The first model of converting Pumlun into the second home of the Sangai deer or what is known as the second home of Sangai Deer is a more rigid and harsh western model of wildlife conservation where no human beings are allowed to enter at least in the core zone. This is already in practice at Keibul Lamjao National Park on the other side of the river. The people of Nongmaikhong have been keeping vigil on any entry of surveyors from the Wild Life Institute of India or that of any national park authorities in the area. The LDA model under the controversial Loktak Protection Act of 2006 is also shaped under the same model as that of the national park where local fishers are treated as a problem and we have witnessed constant conflict between LDA and the fishing community. A more 'softer' conservation model is that of the National Wetlands Rules 2017 with greater roles of local communities under the wise use principle. Even this rules will not acknowledge the 'guardianship' of locals but just treat them as mere partners in the effort to conserve the wetland.

### **Future Trajectories**

Hearing that their land and water is now considered for 'conservation' several meetings took place since 2018. This led to the formation of ***Pumlun Pat Khoidum Lamjao Kanba Apunba Lup*** in 2019. It is a conglomeration of representatives of all the villages who will be affected by the national park conversion or the incursion of LDA. As this report is written, there has been several meetings on how to deal with conservation or will it be like the Ithai Dam where people who have been there for generations will again be thrown out. The people are of the firm resolve that the rejuvenation of Pumlun and Khoidum wetlands through short, mid and long term strategic action plans for protection and conservation of the wetlands can lead to meaningful and successful conservation of these two wetlands which are integral to each other, being located in proximity to one another and sharing a common defined boundary as of today

They have also appealed to the State Government to formulate action plans for conservation of Pumlun and Khoidum wetlands in the long measure so that the earning capability of the locals and their role as a stakeholder in biodiversity conservation can be successfully met.

Its important to ensure that wetland conservation, wise use and restoration are integrated into SDG planning and implementation with particular reference to the 4<sup>th</sup> Ramsar Strategic Plan(2016-2024) as Loktak is already under the Ramsar Convention.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/wetlands\\_sdgs\\_e.pdf](https://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/wetlands_sdgs_e.pdf)

The long standing apathy and needs of the people needs to be addressed systematically and they have no idea of the SDGs and what the concerned authorities are doing for their own good. Free, prior and informed consent must be the key factor in any planning or implementation of any policies and for any decision that will be made for their so-called betterment or upliftment.