

Death of a river

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EVEN though Manipur's Nambul is a small river, it is a very important one in the context of the valley — historically, geographically and sociologically, that the river empties itself into the Loktak Lake, the largest fresh water lake in Northeast India that plays an important role in maintaining ecological balance in the state.

Originating from Litan Waiphei at the Kangchup hill range at the confluence of the Imphal West, Senapati and Tamenglong districts, the Nambul River passes through Imphal West and Bishnupur districts before winding up its 54-km journey in Loktak Lake. The journey includes the thickly populated Imphal city covering an area of over 10 kilometres. This tiny river serves as the main floodwater channel for Imphal and its adjoining areas and flows down from west to east with fresh water till Iroishemba village near the Manipur Zoological Garden, 2.5 km west of the main city.

However, the urbanization race that has just about begun in Imphal has started showing its fangs — the most palpable being the pollution of the Nambul River. It has now become not only the most polluted river in the state but also a model river of pollution in the region. Even the National Rivers Conservation Plant under Union Ministry of Environment and Forest has listed it among the country's polluted rivers.

But surprisingly, residents on either

side of the river still continue fishing till the district court complex at Uripok few metres ahead of joining point with Naga river, popularly known as Naga *nullah*, at Thong-Nambonbi (Hump Bridge). The river becomes polluted from this point as it starts entering main market area. Thus most polluted part of the river in its 10-km stretch in Imphal city begins from Hump Bridge till it reaches Keishamthong bridge — a distance of hardly 1.5 km.

During the wet season, solid wastes in terms of tons of toxic materials are being carried down by the current of

the river water from the Imphal city. Besides, every year in the beginning of rainy season, lumps of water hyacinth — *Kabaw kang* in Manipuri because it was brought by a prince of Manipur in appreciation of its flower from the then Kabaw valley (now in Myanmar) — are carried down to the Loktak Lake by the river. And this has threatened the very life of the lake. So one has to save Nambul River to save Loktak Lake.

It is high time something is done to save Nambul from becoming a nullah for dumping solid waste and garbage. Till the 1960s, this river served as a



transported to Imphal via the Nambul waterway.

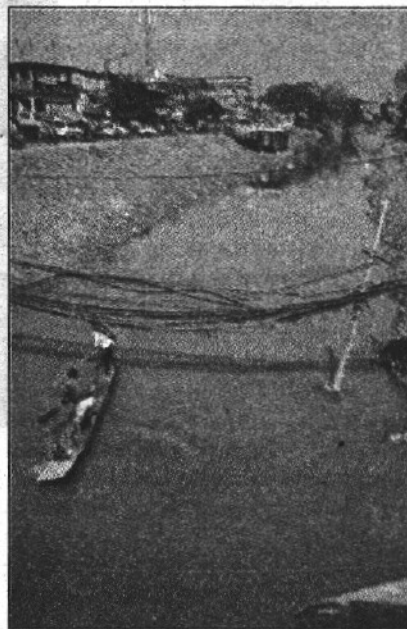
Similarly, the requirement of the weed has also declined slowly as the people hardly use it for construction purposes. They even replaced their roofs with zinc plates or the likes in order to suit the urban life.

However, 68-year-old Mahendra Kumar Patni, grandson of pioneer Marwari trader Kaluram Patni who came to Manipur in 1894, feels that bullock carts and boats were the only means of transportation in old-time Manipur.

In May 1991, Manipur's legendary painter late Rajkumar Chirajitsana, popularly known as RKCS, had reconstructed the business activities that took place along the Nambul waterway in one of his paintings which is presently kept at the RKCS Art Gallery in Imphal.

In the past, arrival of the loaded boats in Imphal was like arrival of modern day outstation vehicles. "It was so exciting to see the arrival of boats loaded with pots near our home," recalls a 60-year-old lady who owns a small shop in Imphal's Kakhulong, a small village inhabited by Kabui community on the eastern side of the river.

During those days, the Nambul water was so clear that people used it for various purposes — for drinking as also washing clothes. Till the late 1970s, young Kabui damsels fetching Nambul water in earthen pots was a common scene, as vividly recalled by 48-year-old RK Budhi, a resident of Keishamthong Top Leikai, a village on the western side of the river. But now this seems like fairy tales.



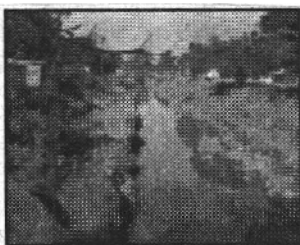
Today, the population of Imphal city has increased manifold (2.5 lakh in Imphal municipal area as per 2001 census) and the homestead area has become congested, the size of individual holding becoming smaller by the day. One even cannot afford space to dump their wastes. In such a situation every family has started dumping the household waste wrapped in plastic bags into the river. Subsequently, the charm of the river has gone as the people have started avoiding use of Nambul water for any purpose. The rise of the population as well as urbanization in Imphal city and its adjoining areas has relegated the river to a drain for dumping solid waste and garbage.

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good waterway from various towns including Sugnu to Imphal. Sugnu, around 70 km south of Imphal, is a small town in Thoubal district. It was navigable by boats for commercial purposes.

Ningthoukhongjam Tombiraj, son of Padmashree Khelchandra, who wrote Manipur's Royal Chronicle, says local traders brought in items like reed, weed, earthen pots, etc at Khwairamband Keithel, the main market site in Imphal, by using their traditional boats along the Nambul waterway. The demand of earthen pots was very high in the past. It was only recently that the demand has come down after large scale import of aluminium, brass and steel utensils.

Fifty-five-year-old Loitam Shanti, who sells earthen pots in Imphal market, however says, "we're still selling it as usual though the demand is comparatively low." Regarding the use of Nambul waterway in transporting the earthen pots, Shanti, who is now following her mother Noyon's footsteps in the pottery trade along with twenty other retailers, further says though places like Thongjao, a pottery village in Thoubal district, have better road and communication facilities, villages like Chairen, another popular pottery village, is yet to have better transport facilities. In the past, the earthen pots of Chairen were



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But there's no synchronization at all. The government should made an alternative arrangement for garbage disposal, feels N Amarjeet, a resident of Uripok, a village on the northern bank of the river.

Till the late 1960s and early 1970s, traditionally every household in Imphal area had their own garbage dumping place (*lukhak-kom* in local tongue) within their respective courtyard as they had enough land in their possession. They kept shifting their garbage dumping place from one site to another when it was full, while the decomposed garbage was latter used as manure.

Similarly, every household also used their backyards for sanitary purposes. During those days, no one was aware of plastic bags, not to speak of using them. Most of the people used naturally available degradable materials like banana leaf, lotus leaf, etc.

Khomeiton Golmei, a resident of Keishamthong Kabui village still remembers those olden days wherein the traders unloaded their goods at their doorstep. "I think it was in the 1960s, traders came in their boats to our village through a canal to deliver their trade items at a very cheap rate," says the 56-year-old businessman who presently sells firewood. But with the population explosion and urbanization, everything has changed. Even the canal which was once used as an important jetty connecting the Nambul river has become a small drain in the village.