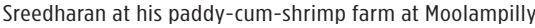


RAPID RECLAMATION IS EATING INTO POKKALI, A LONG-STANDING RICE FARMING TRADITION ON THE VEMBANAD WETLANDS

THE opening of the Thaneermukkam barrage as announced by Finance Minister Thomas Isaac in his budget speech, will make a new variety of salt-tolerant rice Vyttila-6, and the cultivation practice of 'one-paddy-one-fish,' popular in the Kuttanad area of the Vembanad wetland. But the ancestors of Vyttila-6 as well as the one-paddy-one-fish concept - the Pokkali rice cultivation - is rapidly falling prey to the developmental pressures on the Vembanad wetland.



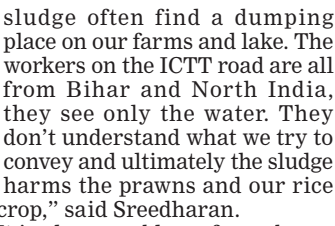
JIPSON SIKHERA

had acres of Pokkali cultivation, has just a handful of Pokkali farmers now. The rest had to be evicted for the construction of a four-lane highway connecting the upcoming Vallarpadom Container Terminal to Kalamassery through five islands on this wetland of international importance, a Ramsar site.

"After you grow shrimp, the land becomes organically rich for a good crop of paddy. And the leftover after the harvest is just the right breeding place for shrimps," he explained.

The farmers spend the night at the tiny sheds on the bunds near the paddyfields, watching out for tidal changes. Tidal changes, they can manage. But they are unable to come to terms with the development forces just a stone's throw away on the upcoming road.

Sreedharan, from a family of Pokkali farmers, lost his 85 cents of land to development, yet has taken farms on lease to grow pokkali and shrimp on rotation.



It is also a problem of numbers. "Earlier, we used to cultivate rice on a continuous stretch of 32 acres here. Looking after the crops was a collective effort. Now, with the dwindling of the cultivated area, we are a minority. Also earlier on, birds like 'attakilli' and pests attacked all fields, but now they concentrate on just the few cultivated fields and therefore the crop loss suffered by one field is huge," said Sukumaran, who gave up growing pokkali this year.

Vyttila-6, developed by Dr Shaila Raj and team at the Vyttila Rice Research Station, is a triple cross between IR-5, Jaya and the Pokkali variety 'cheruvirippu.' It is not a very tall variety as the Pokkali and will not lodge. The re-calizable yield is between 4.5 to 6.3 tonnes a hectare and the average yield is 4 to 4.5 tonnes a hectare, without any chemical fertilizer input.

Sreedharan and Sukumaran could be the last few proponents of this eco-friendly cultivation model and by the time vehicles start zooming past across the highway, these pokkali farms could become history. "I have grains that will last me for another two years at home. But after that, may be I will have to

start eating rice, without the red line -that's how my grandchild describes pokkali," said Sreedharan, looking pensively into the distant horizon.

(The study was conducted with a fellowship from the Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi)



The new variety Vyttila-6, after harvest

THE preamble of the third Major Bishops' and Bishops' Conference of the Malabar Church was released by the Archbishop Varkey Cardinal George Alencherry at Vithayathil in Kochi on Tuesday. The Archbishop of Thalassery Mar George Alencherry received the copy of the guidelines from the cardinal.

The assembly, under the title 'In Service of Life,' will be held

August 20 to 22 at Mount St Thomas,
Kakkanad, Kochi.

The preamble in 42 paragraphs discusses various issues being faced by the society. The previous assemblies were held in 1998 and 2004.

Organised every five years, the Major Archiepiscopal Assembly is the canonical conference of the the Syro-Malabar Church in which 450 persons representing the 36-lakh members of the Church spread across the world will take part.

AN attempt to export approximately 11 metric tonnes of red sanders was foiled when the sleuths of the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) on Tuesday seized the consignment just before its shipment at the Kochi port here.

DRI officials said the container, which was seized based on an intelligence input, was lying at the berth to be loaded on to a cargo ship.

“The container arrived at the port from Madurai in a lorry two days ago. As per the records available, the container was booked by a private shipping agent to Dubai,”

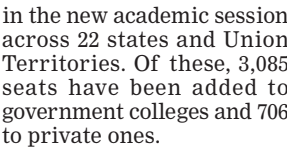
DRI officials said. Officials said that the seized container was later taken to a freight station at Kala-

massery for destuffing. It has been estimated that the seized red sander logs are valued around Rs one crore in the international market.

They added that a thorough investigation was on to trace the shipping agent. "We have been trying to trace the driver of the lorry which brought the consignment to Kochi. As per the booking details, the container was supposed to carry tiles and marbles," the officials said and added that the consignment was taken into custody.

The DRI team, which carried out the seizure, was led by Deputy Director P Ananthakrishnan and consisted of Superintendents Sayeed Muhammed and N S Dev.

THE state will get an additional 172 PG medical seats in which the Medical Council of India (MCI) has given the nod for admitting students from the 2010-11 academic year.



However, the biggest beneficiary of the Centre's decision is Andhra Pradesh. The state has bagged the most number of seats with 611, followed by Maharashtra with 476. Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, New Delhi, Punjab and Gujarat also bagged more than 200 seats each.

In Kerala, the biggest beneficiary is Thiruvananthapuram Medical College which got 84 more PG seats. Kozhikode Medical College got 27 more seats, Alappuzha eight, Kottayam 27 and Thrissur 25 more seats. The Academy of Medical Sciences, Pariyaram, Kannur, had also been sanctioned a lone PG seat in MD General Medicine.

Meanwhile, the MCI has refused to increase the num-

ber of seats to the courses in MCh Plastic Surgery, MCh Surgical Gastroenterology and MCh Thoracic Surgery in Thiruvananthapuram Medical College owing to shortage of faculties.

In Kozhikode Medical College also there has been no increase in seats for the MCh courses in Neurosurgery, Plastic Surgery and Thoracic Surgery, MD courses in General Medicine, Paediatrics, Physical Medicine and Psychiatry and DM courses in Neurology and Nephrology due to shortage of faculties.

For the MS course in Surgery also the MCI has refused any increase in the seats as there are no sufficient beds as per the norms.

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LDF nominees for the Rajya Sabha, K N Balagopal and T N Seema, filed nomination papers for the elections to the Rajya Sabha here on Tuesday, the last day for filing nominations. Defence Minister A K Antony filed this nomination on March 15 for the Rajya Sabha seat that had become vacant.

Both the CPM leaders arrived at the Assembly complex accompanied by almost the entire LDF Cabinet led by Chief Minister V S Achuthanandan and LDF Legislators, including RSP leaders Water Resources Minister N K Premachandran, A A Aziz and Kovoor Kunjumon. The CPM picked its nominees after rejecting the claims made by the RSP. Balagopal and Seema filed two nominations each and submitted the deposit amount of Rs 10,000 with Legislature Secretary P D Rajan. ■ ENS

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