

How 700 Kerala Villagers Waded Through A Dead River, Cleansed It And Brought It Back To Life In 70 Days

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The villagers first removed weeds and then plastic that was lodged solidly in the river bed. The next step was to dredge the water of pollutants and other debris dumped over the years.



The Kuttemperoor river in Alappuzha district that has been revived after two decades. (Vivek Nair/HT Photo)

Rajeevan spent most of his life watching his favourite river die.

For two decades, the Kuttemperoor river in south Kerala's Alappuzha district slowly choked under the weight of rampant illegal sand mining and construction sites that dumped tons of sewage on its once-pristine banks. Fish and aquatic life were wiped out, and the once-gurgling river of Rajeevan's childhood was reduced to a narrow cesspool of festering diseases.

Not anymore. A 700-strong local group of villagers, mostly women, have spent weeks wading through toxic waste, algae and risking deadly water-borne diseases to physically de-silt and clean the river.

After 70 days of back-breaking effort, the results began to show. The 12-kilometre long river now brims with water, the stench is gone and children are playing on its green banks once more.

“I never thought Kuttemperoor will come to life again,” said Rajeevan, a 55-year-old driver.



Kuttemperoor river was reduced to a narrow cesspool of festering diseases before de-silting began. (Vivek Nair / HT Photo)

It wasn't easy. The women workers of Budhanoor recall how many of them were taken ill but a recurring drought and chronic shortage of water steeled their resolve. “I was down with dengue for two weeks but I returned to digging the day I was out of my bed,” said P Geetha, a woman worker.

Kuttemperoor is a small tributary that connects the Pambha and Achankoil rivers but is crucial for the villagers in this region where water sources are increasingly polluted.

“When water scarcity turned unbearable, we decided to revive the river. Initially many discouraged us saying it was a mere waste of money and energy. But we proved them all wrong,” said Budhanoor panchayat president P Viswambhara Panicker.

Local residents recall how the breakneck urbanisation in the 90s and 2000s reduced the 120-foot-wide river to a 20-foot narrow, black stream. Illegal sand mining further eroded and polluted the river bed. Frustrated with slow government response and a scorching drought, the villagers organised themselves in February and started work under the national rural jobs scheme.

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“Once we removed all waste river started recharging on its own and on 45th day flow started. For women folk, it was not just a work for money but it was gargantuan task to revive a lifeline,”

said Sanal Kumar, a volunteer with the National Rural Jobs Guarantee Scheme. Full flow was restored on the 70th day.

For committed panchayat and its people their task is far from over -- they have to evict a large number of people who encroached upon the riverbed and ensure that re-born water body will not turn a super sewer again.



State PWD minister G Sudhakaran (in Centre) and others taking a boat ride on the Kuttemperoor river after it was revived. (Vivek Nair / HT Photo)

Now, people residing near the banks of the river swear their wells are flush with water. But a bigger challenge awaits: To fight off the sand mafia and encroachers and ensure the river doesn't turn into a sewer again. But for now, their herculean effort has catapulted the sleepy village to the headlines.

“If there is a will there is a way, it shows. Cutting across political leanings people's representatives, officials and local residents all came on single common platform to realise this dream. They need a bigger salute,” said state PWD minister G Sudhakaran, who undertook a boat ride on the resurrected river.
