

# **Loktak Floating Elementary School**

## **A Beacon of Hope for School Dropouts of the Champu Khangpok Floating Village**

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### **Abstract**

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*Right to Education is for every individual, regardless of caste, creed, age or gender. An individual must be empowered by education irrespective of circumstances. When a child picks up a pencil, it exemplifies as one more responsible person in the making. Pursuing an education is not only practically gaining knowledge, but also earning dignity to live as a free person in the society. Without the value of education, a civilisation is near to be doomed, hence, getting a formal education encourages a culture to the very peak of development and prosperity. This is a study of Loktak Floating Elementary School, a community initiative school for dropout children in Langolsabi Leikai of Champu Khangpok floating village in the northern part of Loktak Lake, which elucidates a belief of enlightenment among many underprivileged children and others. The school was formally inaugurated on the occasion of World Wetlands Day, 2 February 2017, though it had already started functioning since December 2016. Presently, the school accommodates 25 students (Classes I-III) and two teachers from the community. It is envisaged to cater to the needs of illiterate adults as well. The idea was to establish the school surface considering the high dropout rate of children living in the floating villages when the Loktak Development Authority removed more than 770 floating huts as per the Loktak Lake (Protection) Act 2006, five years ago, resulting in extensive displacement of the fishing community. Subsequently, children belonging to Langolsabi and Komjao floating localities under Champu*

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*Khangpok comprising 204 families and a population of 460 fishermen were forced to discontinue their education. The study conducted is an attempt to highlight the overall basic process of imparting education on Phum/Phumdi in the middle of the conflict-torn lake.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Loktak Lake is nature's gift to Manipur; the lake is ancestrally interwoven with the history and the rich culture of Manipur. Besides being an environmental marvel, the lake can be profoundly described as the face of Manipur. Many families survived with resources reaped from the lake, be it from aquatic resources or a place of habitation on *Phum/Phumdi* (floating accumulated plant mass). It is a classic example of a symbiotic relationship between man and nature. When the Loktak Lake (Protection) Act 2006 was implemented, authorities destroyed many huts built on the *Phum/Phumdi* that rendered many families homeless. Fishermen who thrived in the lake for daily livelihood

were evicted consequently leading to the loss of income and accessibility to formal education. As a response to bringing such children back to education, the collective efforts of the village community and concerned NGOs together established a primary school in the vicinity, on the *Phum/Phumdi* itself. Thus, the Loktak Floating Elementary School was established in December 2016 and formally inaugurated on World Wetlands Day on 2 February 2017. The school is built on *Phum/Phumdi* to cater to the needs of the affected children and illiterate adults of the community. Previously, it was man and nature bonding at the lake and now it is the conflict of man and law; a law that is devised to protect the environment.



Figure 1. Loktak Floating Elementary School in the Middle of the Lake  
Source: [www.mateng.com](http://www.mateng.com)

The rhetoric of education as being the ‘great equaliser’ that will bring people out of poverty is nothing short of familiar. With the rise in globalisation and internationalisation of services, the idea of the knowledge-based society has never been as relevant as it is now. However, the modern association with the knowledge-based economy, like that of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT), has aggravated the movement of poor communities farther beyond the periphery. Despite the overall advancement that can be seen in the societies, and the connectivity through virtual worlds that ICT has introduced, greater divergence endures, as a considerable number of individuals who lack essential and basic services continue to exist. Dropout rates also remain high, especially in developing countries, where students often stop schooling due to lack of financial resources to continue or to help the family earn a living by working when their parents deem the children fit. While economic growth has been at the forefront of development policies, poverty alleviation, now more than ever, emerges as its fundamental objective.

### **Education**

Education has its origin in the Latin word ‘educatum’ composed of two terms—‘E’ and ‘Duco’. ‘E’ implies progressing from inward to outward while ‘Duco’ means developing or progressing. In its most literal sense, therefore, education means becoming

developed or to progress from inside to outside. Education, thus, is the process of developing the inner abilities and powers of an individual. The term is also often connected with the Latin word ‘educere’, which means propulsion from the internal to the external. This Latin term means to educate through a change brought about by practice or usage. In this manner, education implies some kind of change for the better in a person.

Plato, an ancient Greek philosopher, defined education as a life-long process starting, “*from the first years of childhood and lasting to the very end of the life*”. He used the term education in a very wide sense, “*which makes a man eagerly pursue the ideal perfection of citizenship and teaches him how rightly to rule and how to obey*”. Education not only provides knowledge and skills but also inculcates values, training of instincts, fostering right attitudes and habits. In Republic, Plato points out that “*true education, whatever that may be, will have the greatest tendency to civilise and humanise them in their relation to one another and to those who are under their protection*”. This humanist definition of education propounded by Plato is still the most widely accepted meaning of education.

### **Defining Dropouts**

There is no consensus on how to define a school dropout. Although a school dropout may be defined as

someone who leaves school before completion, such a definition masks the complexity of the phenomenon, particularly in a highly differentiated and open-schooling system, where leaving school does not preclude a return at some later date. Moreover, different administrative agencies and jurisdiction may use different definitions used by social scientists in large-scale social surveys and other forms of research.

School dropouts have different social background; they are more likely grown up in poverty or a household with low socio-economic status. Poverty is one of the root causes of correlation between social background and dropping out.

Some of the main reasons of school dropouts are:

1. Cost of Education
2. Distance to School
3. Poverty

### **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The study is carried out to highlight the overall basic process of imparting education for school dropouts and illiterate adults at Loktak Floating Elementary School built on a *Phum/Phumdi* in the middle of the conflict-torn lake.

### **METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY**

The study is descriptive research in nature which describes social situations or social events. The method of research used is case study, to study the phenomena

through intensive analysis of the case. One case study is undertaken of the Loktak Floating Elementary School. Both primary and secondary data were utilised for the study.

Primary data were collected from two groups of respondent—one was an office bearer of the People Resources Development Association (PRDA) and other was a female member of Langolsabi Champu Self Help Group (LCSHG).

Secondary data/ sources comprise descriptive literature, including related books, local newspaper articles and online sources, both print and graphic.

Unstructured interview was carried out. The in-depth personal telephone interview was used as the tool for collecting the necessary data.

### **Aggravation of Crisis**

The Government of Manipur had started burning down floating huts built over *Phum/Phumdi* by the fishermen living in Loktak Lake from 15 November 2011 onwards. The Loktak Development Authority (LDA) officials and State Police carried out the deliberate burning of the huts. The LDA had issued an eviction notice to the residents on 11 November 2011. Nearly 200 floating huts were already burnt by 17 November 2011, and the remaining 1,132 floating huts were to meet a similar fate. There were about 5,000 persons living in the floating huts located in Khuman Yangbi, Nambul Machin and Karang Sabal within the Loktak Lake.

The burning down of the floating huts was in accordance with the provisions of Sections 19 and 20 of the Loktak Lake (Protection) Act, 2006 which divides the 236.21 sq. km lake into two zones — a core zone comprising 70.30 sq. km, which is a ‘no development zone’, or ‘totally protected zone’, and a buffer zone of other areas of the lake excluding the core zone. A vital aspect of the division is the prohibition on building huts on *Phum/Phumdi* inside the lake, or *Athaphum*, a form of fishing using vegetation enclosures (man-made) in the core area. This, however, adversely affects many fisherman living in huts built on *Phum/Phumdi*, as well as others dependent on the lake.

The removal of nearly 770 floating huts led to the displacement of many community members who had

been living in the floating huts for generations. The number of affected families was expected to increase as the burning down of huts continued. The victims, including women, children and the aged sought refuge at the Ningthoukhong Makha Leikai community hall in Bishnupur district, Manipur. The fishing gears and nets of the communities were also burned and this had left the community with no means to earn an income forcing a deplorable state. Having lost their belongings, including books, uniforms and school bags, many children could no longer go to school and ultimately became school dropouts and started helping their parents in fishing and allied activities to support the family. Each household was offered ₹ 40,000 as compensation before their huts were burned. However, most of the villagers rejected the amount and



Figure 2. Loktak Floating Elementary School

Source: [www.NElive.com](http://www.NElive.com)

received only ₹ 17,000 in hand which was not enough to compensate their livelihood and survival needs.

Geographically, the school is on *Phum/Phumdi*, in the middle of the Loktak Lake. To reach the school from the nearest comfortable land area which is Ningthoukhong Project Gate, a travel time of 1½ hours is needed by wooden boat. Other than the Project Gate, there are two spots, one is Nachou that takes 15 minutes and is not a popular point due to difficult and uncomfortable travelling and another is near IIIT Ningthoukhong which requires 1 hour 20 minutes travelling time by the same means of transport. Although three different spots are available for the floating village of Champu Khangpok, the choice spot for their embarkation and debarkation is Ningthoukhong Project Gate due to adequate availability of surface transport to another part of the town and Imphal city.

There are government as well as private schools in the nearby land area in Thanga, Ningthoukhong, but the children have to travel a long distance on the boat themselves, which takes away a lot of time in the journey, therefore the parents decided not to send the children to the school. Another reason is the lack of income. After the Loktak Lake (Protection) Act 2006 was implemented, the income of fishermen drastically reduced owing to eviction. Due to this, they could not send their children to school, hence the children started helping their parents in the daily

chores and fishing activities to earn extra income. While the income was good, some children were even sent to private schools, but due to shortage of income later on, parents faced a situation of non-payment of fees for the school resulting in dropping out of their wards.

The Zonal Education Officer (ZEO) of Zone IV of Bishnupur district inaugurated the school formally as other government officials were present at the occasion of the World Wetland Day, 2 February 2017. The school aims to admit 40 students ranging from Classes I to V, though, presently only 25 students are admitted including nine girls in a hut divided into two parts; one meant for Class III and the other meant for students of other classes. Some of the students are able to reach up to Class V at the school. The school has no proper infrastructure, such as desk, table, etc., but efforts are being made to make the floor of the school using wood to equip the required furniture. At present, bamboos are been used to make the flooring and carpet topping. In the classroom, two blackboards have been used as a basic teaching mode. In spite of improper facilities, the school is a boon for the kids from floating villages as it inculcates an environment of learning process and provides education to them. Imparting education to the dropouts and providing a beacon of hope for education is the very purpose of establishing the school. For effective transportation of the children from

their village to the school, a wooden boat costing ₹ 1,20,000 having a capacity of 20–22 persons has been purchased, but due to crunch of the funds, 40 life-jackets costing ₹ 3,000 per piece have not been purchased yet. For the life-jackets, PRDA is looking for donors and contributors.

The school runs from 11 am to 2 pm for children, and from 5:30 pm to 8 pm for educating the adults. An interesting aspect of the Loktak Floating Elementary School is that besides providing primary education to the dropouts, it also provides education to 40 illiterate adults of the floating village; mostly women and a few men from nearby Khomjao. Currently started, the women belong to two self-help groups of the villages, namely Champu Self-Help Group, Langolsabi and Langolsabi Ngamee Lup. The main reason behind the enrolment is that adults want to eradicate their illiterate state and upgrade themselves to write their name or be able to sign properly instead of using thumb signature. The teaching process is also in a mixed form as both basic Manipuri and English are taught. The adult education programme usually starts at 5:30 pm and ends at 8 pm for all learning days, except Sunday and general holidays. The age of participating women ranges from 25 to 60 years and some men are about 70 years old. The zeal of the women is highly encouraged as they have the urge to learn and the school is providing the opportunity. For the adult education

programme, an amount of ₹ 1,00,000 was donated by Manipur Rural Bank (Nambol Branch). This helped to prepare for necessary requirement of education in addition to fishing material and solar lamps for the night school. Still, there is a regret of inadequate lighting at the night schooling since many of the learners are aged and have weak eyesight. There is a demand of good lighting system for the night schooling. After the school, the learners pursue their fishing activities at the lake. It is a classic example of learning and earning together.

Even the Governor of Manipur, Dr. Najma Heptulla donated 40 school bags, textbooks and notebooks required for students up to Class V. The Governor's gesture to contribute study material to the Loktak Floating Elementary School children is a noble effort to spearhead the cause of education in Manipur.

The education at the school is completely free for the students and the two Teaching Volunteers receive an honorarium of ₹ 3,000 per month from the PRDA under a project titled "*Empowering Local Vulnerable Community for Sustainable Development*" funded by Action Aid India.

During a talk with the ZEO, the assimilation of provisions of Right to Education (RTE) to the floating school has been discussed. Although any formal order is not established yet, discussion is going on and as soon as any related scheme gets

available, the School can be covered under the preview of India's Right to Education Act giving full benefits to the students. Before the eviction, the fishermen had enough income to send their children to school situated in the nearby land village. It is the aim of the floating school to provide basic schooling to the dropouts for a couple of years till their parents' income gets better, after which the students can be transferred to the school of their choice. For the time being, the dropouts are given schooling at the floating school.

The PRDA in addition to the school, desires to have a small floating playground, suitable enough for kids' play and recognition from the Manipur Government. If such a floating playground comes up near the school, it will be like a trophy for the school and the villagers. This recognition will develop the school further. The dreams are high for the school and the dedication to conquer them is exemplary. RTE is planning to install more solar lamps at the school and if the resources are enough to buy a solar powering system, even computer facility will be provided at the school. The school is used for multiple purposes—educating young school dropouts, as a learning centre for adults and a space for conducting community meetings. For the floating villages which are incapable to build a public hall on *Phum/Phumdi*, the school acts as a multi-purpose venue. What the villagers want to have in their village is an Anganwadi facility

or a Day Care Centre to cater to their young ones, when both the parents go for fishing.

Near the school, PRDA is building a floating hut to be named as Loktak Resource Centre (LRC) costing ₹ 50,000 which will serve as a centre for showcasing old literature books, material related to Loktak fishermen, to preserve aquatic animals found in the lake, etc. The Centre will be utilised as a tourist spot to earn some income for the evicted fishermen as an alternative arrangement.

Since the school as well as the village fall under the core zone area under the LLP Act 2006, no human settlement is permitted in the lake within the core zone. But after due consideration for the time being, the school is formally running with success and the Governor's interest in the school further strengthens the foundation of the school in the core zone. There is a wide belief that concerning the unique nature of the school, the concerned authorities might have a soft hand in the establishment.

On the other hand, the fishermen have every responsibility to protect the fragile ecosystem of the Loktak Lake and minimise pollution of the lake. Loktak Lake is the face of Manipur and the home of many aquatic animals as well as many foreign migratory birds. So, the fishermen in particular need to safeguard the ecosystem and act as first line of defence against the man-made pollution. People living



near and within the lake drain their waste into the lake, causing a great concern for the authorities.

### **FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

1. Loktak Floating Elementary School is a community-based floating school, one-of-its-kind at the Loktak Lake for the dropouts who appeared after the eviction of the fishermen of Langolsabi and Komjao floating localities of Champu Khangpok village.
2. In addition to imparting formal education to the children, as many as 40 adults mainly women and few men have joined the school for adult literacy programme after the usual school hour.
3. Much school infrastructure is highly needed, such as school desks, benches, and proper lighting system. Books, school bags had been donated by the Governor of Manipur.
4. The school aims at providing basic schooling to the dropouts till their parents' income regains good posture, after which the students can be transferred to a better school for higher studies. Another objective is to erase the gap for the sibling of the fisherman who discontinues studies due to eviction.
5. Many of the students help their parents in fishing activities to earn some money and then come to school for education. Almost all the material of the school are either donated or come from the PRDA's Action Aid India project.
6. There are pending issues of facilities that can be extended to the school under the RTE Act and other facilities provided by the Government of India. The facilities of the Midday Meal Scheme, SSA can be extended to the school if the Government of Manipur recognises the school and takes further steps to improve it.
7. For effective transportation of the children from the village to the school, a wooden boat costing ₹ 1,20,000 having a capacity of 20–22 persons has been purchased, but due to crunch of funds, 40 life-jackets costing ₹ 3,000 per piece have not been purchased yet. For the adult education programme, an amount of ₹ 1,00,000 was donated by Manipur Rural Bank (Nambol Branch), with this amount necessary requirements of the education were met in addition to solar lamps for night schooling. After school, the learners pursue their fishing activities, balancing learning and earning together.
8. The school as well as the village fall under the core zone area as prescribed under the Loktak Lake (Protection) Act 2006; no human settlement is permitted in the lake within the core zone. But the school is running successfully and the Governor's interest in the

school further strengthens the foundation of the school.

### **SUGGESTIONS**

1. The Government of Manipur must recognise the school as a state asset valuing its unique nature. The necessary infrastructure must be provided and upgraded for better learning. It will be a great advantage for the students if the RTE provisions get extended at the School and the Government of India provides benefits like Mid-day Meal Scheme, *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*, etc.
2. The Government of Manipur, along with the concerned NGOs should work together with the villagers of the floating community for an alternative arrangement to earn extra income besides fishing and environment protection. After the eviction, fishermen's income reduced drastically leaving their wards to leave schooling.
3. Loktak Floating Elementary School should be developed as a tourist spot besides imparting education to the dropouts owing to its singular nature of existence on a *Phum/Phumdi* in the middle of the lake. By doing this, extra income can be generated and utilised.
4. One good aspect of the school is the night schooling or adult education of women members of the self-help groups. The school can be a beacon of hope not only

for the dropouts, but also for the illiterate men and women.

5. Providing better lighting facilities for night schooling since many of the learners are aged and have weak eyesight. Life-jackets and computers are essential for the school. The locality as well as the concerned NGOs should look for sponsorship and donations for this purpose. The concerned government authorities should extend adequate help.

### **CONCLUSION**

Loktak Lake is the mirror and an important part of Manipuri culture. It is a culmination of history, literature, resources and source of pride for people of Manipur. Environmentally, the lake is a unique ecosystem where humans live in huts built on floating biomass and it is also home to many aquatic flora and fauna. Many migratory birds visit Loktak Lake during migratory season, adding another feather to its cap. To this very lake, a unique floating school is in the making to emphasise India's Right to Education. India started its domestic *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* programme, first announced in 2000, to eradicate all obstacles to primary school access. In 2010, the RTE Act came into force after several years of discussion and debate, shifting education from a non-binding 'directive principle' to an enforceable 'fundamental right' in Indian constitutional law, providing all children aged between 6 and 14

years the right to free and compulsory education in a school within one to three kilometres of their home. But somewhere, in a corner of India, some village children who reside in floating huts in Langolsabi Leikai of Champu Khangpok were losing the essence of education due to poverty.

After the enactment of the Loktak Lake Protection Act, authorities removed floating huts leaving many homeless. The eviction led to income reduction due to restrictions on fishing activities. Such restrictions

indirectly impacted the schooling kids whose education had to stop due to non-payment of fees. In order to educate these dropouts, a unique floating school was built on a *Phum* in the lake, i.e., Loktak Floating Elementary School. The functioning of the school is proudly described as 'Floating RTE' on a conflict-torn lake which defines a rare combination of children and parents schooling in the same classroom, aiming to spread education for societal development and prosperity.

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