

Loktak's Floating School

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Achieving the Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE) has been an avowed aim of the Indian government. But assured schooling for children still remains a dream for most parents, especially, those belonging to disadvantaged communities or living in remote areas of the country. Manipur's famous Loktak Lake is one such area, where families, including children, face social and physical constraints in their everyday life. But these constraints have not been able to dampen their spirit, and they have devised innovative ways to overcome their difficulties, including ensuring regular school education for their children on the lake itself.

The Loktak Lake, located at Bishnupur district in south Manipur, is the largest

freshwater lake in the north-eastern region of the country. Known as the lifeline of the people of the State, the lake is full of floating masses of water hyacinth, locally known as *phum-di*. The wetland is swampy and home to a number of bird and animal species, including *sangai*, the brow-antlered deer.



Figure 1: Loktak Lake at Bishnupur in Manipur is the largest freshwater lake in the north-eastern region of the country.

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The lake also serves as a source of livelihood for numerous fishing families, who live in huts built on these floating *phum-dis*. Ensuring their children's regular education and easy accessibility to a school in such trying circumstances had been a herculean task for these families until some local social groups in the area came forward with an innovative idea to construct the first-of-its-kind 'lake school'. They decided to start an elementary school on one such floating island so that children did not have to travel far to study.

Earlier, children of many families in the area were deprived of education, as there was no school within a walking distance from their homes. Those, who managed to get enrolled in some school, had to travel long distances to study. Lack of basic

facilities like transportation, day care, food and security made gaining education an even more difficult task for children.

The Loktak Floating Elementary School is the country's first-ever floating school, which could open due to the sustained efforts of the All Loktak Lake Fishermen's Union and an NGO. Situated about 50 kms from the State capital, Imphal, it started functioning with 25 children in the year 2017 at Langolsabi Leikai of Champu Khangpok village in Manipur. At present, the co-ed school runs classes up to Class V. However, the classes are planned to be extended up to Class VIII soon. Besides, efforts are underway to increase the number of enrolments in each class.

The school caters to the needs of children living in *phum-dis* on the lake and in nearby areas. Teacher volunteers teach the students at the school. The students, usually, have to travel 1.5–2 kms to attend the school. They are ferried to the school from nearby *phum-dis* by boats. Books are provided to the students for free under the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (Figure 2).

The school caters to the educational needs of illiterate adults as well.

The floating school runs from a hut shaped structure,



Figure 2: Children are provided with free books at the Loktak Floating Elementary School.



Figure 3: The Loktak Floating Elementary School in Manipur is built with material like bamboo and thatch.

which has been constructed using local building material like thatch and bamboo (Figure 3). The school is equipped with amenities like solar power and computers with Internet connection to name a few.

However, the school needs repairs from time-to-time as it is built with

material like bamboo and thatch. Parents, too, help in the maintenance and upkeep of the school building by way of providing physical labour. Besides, the existing school infrastructure, including teaching aids, needs to be upgraded from time-to-time in order to run the facility seamlessly and make it sustainable.

Thus, with education being provided to children living in the lake with the help of community and teacher volunteers, the school presents itself as a unique example. It symbolises the commendable social efforts being made to educate children living in such difficult circumstances, and hence, deserves to be acknowledged. Such efforts, if highlighted, will motivate people and communities to come forward and make similar endeavours in their respective regions.