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A floating haven

Loktak Lake: Where The Ground Refuses To Stay Still

Anushka Mittal
AIS Vasundhara 6, VII A

You may have felt the ground beneath your feet tremble when a teacher announced a surprise test, but have you ever stood on a land that actually bounces back? Such magic exists at Loktak Lake, India's largest freshwater lake, located in Manipur's Bishnupur district, about 45 km south of Imphal.

Floating islands

This shimmering wetland is dotted with phumdis, floating masses of vegetation, soil, and organic matter that drift gently across waters. Their core consists of a spongy, peat-like material rich in organic carbon, plant residues, and minerals, which lowers density and allows them to float freely. Some phumdis are so thick that they can support huts, fishing platforms, and even forests. The most remarkable of them forms the Keibul Lamjao National Park, world's only floating national park.

Anatomy & ecology

Phumdis are living systems with a three-layered structure: a green vegetative top, a middle mat of intertwined roots and stems, and a lower peat layer where slow decomposition occurs. Together, they support around 200 species of aquatic plants and nearly 400 animal species, including reptiles like the Indian python. Its most notable feature is its ability to provide habitat to the endangered Sangai, or brow-antlered deer, often called the 'dancing deer' for its delicate gait on floating ground. These also act as biological filters, absorbing nutrients and pollutants, which helps reduce sudden algal blooms, but excessive organic buildup can sometimes reduce oxygen levels in the water.

Floating life

Communities living around Loktak have long depended on phumdis for fishing, vegetable cultivation, and collecting biomass for fuel and housing. In recent decades, artificial phumdis, known as 'athapums', have been created for fish farming. While economically beneficial, their unchecked spread has greatly disrupted water circulation and affected the lake's ecological balance.

The ups and downs

Traditionally, phumdis followed a natural cycle: floating during the monsoon and sinking in the dry season to absorb nutrients from the lakebed. This cycle maintained their thickness, buoyancy, and strength, crucial for supporting large animals like the Sangai.

A changed rhythm

In 1983, the construction of Ithai Barrage altered Loktak's water regime by keeping water levels permanently high. Deprived of contact with the lakebed, many phumdis began thinning and weakening. Farms submerged, human pressure increased, and equilibrium of this Ramsar-designated wetland was thrown off balance, putting one of India's most unusual ecosystems at risk. GT

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