

A FIELD TRIP TO HAJO : A REPORT

MS. LABANYA DEKA
MS. PREETILATA MAHANTA
MS. KANKANA HAZARIKA
MS. CHITRANJALI DEKA

INTRODUCTION

To know about the environment in its holistic aspect and also about the laws that govern the ecosystem and the interdependence of different elements in the environment are of utmost necessity to understand, protect and improve environment. This knowledge may be provided through formal and nonformal education to decision makers, politicians, students, teachers and general public.

The universe is endowed with abundant natural resources. But with the rapid rise in population and haphazard planning, the natural resources have depleted as well has become polluted with times.

Every human being should be aware, conscious and knowledgeable about his or her role in the environment. Few students of the department of Philosophy went to Hajo on 20-11-2009, in the form of a field trip to analyse the present condition of the pond situated in the vicinity of Haya-griba Madhava temple there. Our teachers of the department accompanied us. They helped us to prepare the questionnaire and also taught about how to interact with local residents there.

Hajo is an important centre of pilgrimage of lower Assam. It is also famous as a tourist spot. Throughout the year the town remains crowded by pilgrims and tourists. The present study is to assess the impact of the ever-increasing crowd on the pond near the temple. This study is simply academic in nature. Though suggestions may be offered, no attempt will be made to impose them on any one.

There are many legends regarding the existence of the pond. In Hindu Mythology we find that there is a close association between a temple and any water body, be it a pond, lake,

stream, river or waterfalls. According to Dr. Pradip Sarma, co-ordinator of Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture, Guwahati, who has authored a book on Temple architecture of Assam, the Haya-griba Madhava temple at Hajo may be as old as the the Kailashnatha temple at the Ellora caves, Maharashtra. During the course of his research, Dr. Sarma found similarities between the rock inscriptions and carvings of the Kailashnath temple with those at the Temple at Hajo. Krishna I of the Rashtrakuta dynasty of South India built the Kailashnatha temple around 756-774 A.D. Hence he concluded that most probably, the temple at Hajo was also constructed around that time. And by the same analogy, we can infer that the pond near the temple was also dug around that same time.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the field trip is to find out the general awareness with regard to the environment, especially about the pond near the famous Haya-griba Madhava Mandir at Hajo, Kamrup district, Assam.

Therefore, an attempt has been made to assess the environment scenario with regard to the pond by way of simply collecting information. The Questionnaire Method prepared solely for the purpose has initiated this process. Answers to the questions were sought from the following sources. —

- (i) Interaction with the residents around the pond.
- (ii) Information collected from the petty shopkeepers of the area.
- (iii) Information collected from senior persons associated with the temple.
- (iv) General public.

A sample of the questionnaire is attached as annexure with this report of the field trip.

OBSERVATIONS

1. The history regarding the existence of the pond could be collected from books, reference materials on Hajo. Dr. Pradip Sarma of VKIC, Guwahti, gave some important inputs regarding the pond at Hajo. The people of that area, in the vicinity of the pond are not sure with regard to the origin of the pond. There are many legends circulating amongst the locals with regard to the existence of the pond and the famous Hayagriba-Madhava temple at Hajo.

2. Previously, water from the pond was being used for different purposes, like for drinking, washing, bathing, washing vehicles, bathing of domestic animals, etc. Now, the area has been provided with a separate water-supply. Individual households in the Hajo area draw water from private wells and tube-wells.
3. No aquatic plants are found in the water of the tank. Since there are no aquatic plants in the pond, the question as to how frequently plant like hyacinth and moss grow does not arise. However, the field study revealed some traces of moss on the banks of the pond and on the steps leading to the pond.
4. The prasada offered to the deity at the temple, and food items used to prepare the bhojana at the temple, are no longer washed by the water from the pond. These food items and the different utensils used at the temple are cleaned and washed by the water from the water supply provided by the government.
5. Fish and tortoises are found in the pond. Some tortoises are believed to be about 600 hundred years old. Though the tortoises live long, few have died in course of time.
6. Few birds like cranes and the Greater Adjutant Stork are seen to visit the area around Spring.
7. The colour of the pond never changes.
8. The water level of the pond changes, that is, it rises during the rainy season.
9. The depth of the pond is about 60ft. The pond occupies about 5 to 8 bighas of land.
10. The famous Bell-metal industry of Hajo does not use water from this pond, nor do they dump the residue, discarded materials/ impurities of this industry in the pond.
11. When the pond becomes dirty, there is a provision of it being cleaned by the Public Works Department (PWD).of the Government of Assam. Lime and Bleaching powder are used for this purpose.
12. The pond is never used to breed fish for commercial purpose. The pond has religious significance. A popular belief, prevalent amongst the local inhabitants with regard to the pond say that if fish from the pond is sold elsewhere or cooked to be taken as a food item, a bad omen befalls on the family or on the person whoever dares to do such a thing. They also say that they have adequate proof with regard to this popular belief.

13. The inhabitants of the temple town believe that Bishnu-kund as the pond is generally known as, has given an aesthetic significance and enhanced the beauty of the area. A few years back, the district administration, under the leadership of the then Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup Rural, Shri Ramesh Jain, has constructed a permanent fence around the pond. For the comfort and convenience of the visitors, Assam Tourism has also built a rest house, or 'Jironi Kotha' on the bank of the pond.
14. The people of the area have shown awareness and a positive attitude with regard to preserving the sanctity of the pond. They try their utmost level to keep the pond clean and never allow it to be polluted. Infact, while interacting with people, we have come to learn that people from nearby villages form groups on their own initiative and offer their services in the form of 'Shram daan' to clean the pond as well as the area around the mandir.
15. New trees have been planted in the area around the pond. Seasonal flowers are planted during seasons.
16. Along with the general increase of the environment awareness among common people, the general public here too, have come to realise the tremendous religious significance of Hajo, with its Madhava temple, Bishnu-kund, mosque, Satra. Infact, Muslim pilgrims never hesitate to visit the area of Hay-griba Madhaba temple, though they are not allowed to enter in to the inner precincts of the temple. This place is not only to be historically preserved; its environment too must be conserved. Since people from different religious faiths visit Hajo, people have also come to realise the fact that Hajo has enormous potentiality as a tourist destination. It has urged the government to take immediate and urgent steps in this regard.
17. The pilgrims and the tourists are always welcome. But, without violating the religious sentiments of people with regard to the area, the locals feel that the environmental sanctity of the area should not be compromised. It should be preserved at all costs.
18. About 10-15 thousand pilgrims and tourists visit the area in a day during holidays and religious festivals, during 'Kati mash' (October- November) and 'Magh mash' (January- February). From this, we can infer that the average visit by pilgrims and tourists in a day throughout the year is about 1000.

CONCLUSION

Man is making a big rush to bring about development and progress. He has sidetracked the issue of maintaining the balance in the natural ecosystem.

At Hajo, small shops have sprung up in the vicinity of the pond. No doubt, they have served as a means of livelihood to some people of the area. But in the process, it has resulted in the degradation of the environment. Very people however accept this fact. This may be due to factors like reverence for the place, sheer ignorance, or due to the feeling that if they accept this fact, they may be usurped from the area, which would lead to loss of a means of livelihood. The people residing at Hajo revere the pond and believe it to be naturally created.

A devotee who visits the temple washes his hands and feet at the pond before he enters the mandir. This is a religious ritual, which every devotee performs here at Hajo. Some people are aware of environmental issues. But they refuse to assert them on paper. One gentleman of the area, who refused to divulge his name, said that he opposes the fact of pilgrims washing their hands and feet on the steps of the pond. His suggestion is that a separate water tank/reservoir should be built in which water can be pumped in from the pond. The pilgrims can use water from this tank to wash their hands and feet. This would facilitate to keep the area around the tank, especially near the steps, clean. He also opposed the fact of feeding the tortoises and fish by the pilgrims. These habits do not have any religious sanction and should be avoided to preserve the sanctity of the pond. More dustbins should be placed at strategic points so that these may be used to throw waste papers, wrappers of sweets and toffees and other rubbish. A volunteer force, consisting of local youths should be formed to man the area around the pond.

A sample of the questionnaire used for the purpose of the field trip :

1. How old is this pond, known as Bishu-kund or Madhav pukhuri ?
2. What is the circumference of the pond? What is the depth of the pond?
3. Water from the pond is utilised for daily domestic-use, like, drinking/ washing clothes/ bathing domestic animals/ cleaning of cars, buses etc
4. If the water from the pond is used for the above purpose, why it is used? Is there no alternate arrangement for the above activities?
5. Are there any aquatic plants found in the pond? If so, what are they?
6. Are there any aquatic animals found in the pond? If so, what are they?
7. Is there any change in the colour of the water of the pond? If so, what is the reason for this change?

8. Do the water levels remain the same? Does it rise sometimes?
9. If any moss, or water hyacinths grow on the pond, then what is the duration of such growth?
10. Do the residents dump house-hold rubbish onto the pond?
11. Does the famous Bell-metal industry of Hajo use water from this pond for their use?
12. Does this industry dump their rubbish/ impurities/ residue onto this pond?
13. Is the water from the tank used for the purpose of washing food-items and utensils of the mandir? If yes, is there no alternate arrangement for the purpose?
14. Is the pond ever being used for commercial purpose, Breeding and Sale of fish?
15. If the pond ever becomes dirty, what steps are initiated to clean it?
16. Has the responsibility of looking after the pond been given to any person or organisation? If yes, how is this responsibility being performed?
17. Do you believe that the pond has enhanced the beauty/ help in preserving the sanctity of the environment? Yes/ No. If no, have you/government about it in this regard?
18. Are residents of Hajo aware regarding the fact of preserving and conserving the area around the pond? If yes, what is the role played by them?
19. Trees and plants around the area have increased/decreased. If it has decreased, has steps been taken to plant new trees?
20. Do migratory birds visit the area around the pond?
21. Does the pond attract tourists visiting the masjid, mandir and other religious shrines of the Hajo town? If yes, what steps haven taken to make the area eco-friendly?
22. Do you believe that the rush of pilgrims and tourists to the area has polluted the water of the pond?

REFERENCES

1. Prakritik Sampad (in Assamese) : Dr. Abani Kumar Bhagabati,
ASSAM SCIENCE SOCIETY, 2005.
2. Samanya Tirtha, HAJO (in Assamese) : Dr. Dayananda Pathak, Lawers
Book Stall, 1999.
3. Environmental Science : S.C. Santra, New Central Book Agency (P) Ltd., 2004
4. Dushita Paanir Katha (in Assamese) : Sri Nagendranath Das,
ASSAM SCIENCE SOCIETY, 1985.
5. Vigyan Abhidhan, Pratham Khanda (in Assamese) : ASSAM SCIENCE
SOCIETY, 1992. □