

## ENVIRONMENT

## A ‘wicked weed’ that’s spoiling India’s rivers is making women independent in a Kerala village

The water hyacinth is considered among the most invasive plant species in the world, but in Kottapuram it is saving lives.

by *Anubha George*

Published Oct 02, 2017 · 03:30 pm



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Its leaves are thick and glossy, its flowers a shade of violet, sometimes lavender or pink. But while the water hyacinth, or jal kumbhi as it is known in Hindi, is pretty to look at, it is also choking up India’s springs, lakes, rivers and backwaters.

“Water hyacinth is one of the fastest growing plants on the planet,” said Father Paul Thomas Kalathil, director of the Kottapuram Integrated Development Society. KIDS is the social and non-profit arm of the Kottapuram diocese that trains women to become financially independent. “Each plant emits thousands of seeds a year and an infestation can double in size in just two weeks,” Kalathil added.

In Kottapuram, a village in Kerala’s Thrissur district, residents have found an innovative way to use the water weed to create jobs for poor underprivileged women.

Kottapuram is a coastal village, surrounded on the Arabian Sea and the Periyar River. This area is known for its seafood, offering both fresh and salt water fish. Most of its population is either engaged in fishing or daily wage work. “When the men have no work, there’s no food for the family,” Kalathil said. “It’s with that in mind that around 20 years ago, we started to train women so they could earn themselves.”

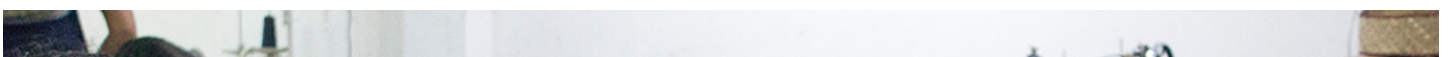


Water Hyacinth. Photo credit: Max Pixel contributors

## Water hyacinth

Baby Chechi (chechi is Malayalam for sister) sat by a loom, weaving jute with water hyacinth for table mats. “The stem of the African payal (as the plant is known in Malayalam, since it’s believed to have come from Africa) has to be of a certain length,” she said. “About 20 inches or thereabouts. It is then dried in the sun, dyed in different colours, divided into thin strings and woven.” The result is mats in striking green and blue, spongy to the touch because of the water hyacinth woven into them. Women trained by KIDS are also experimenting with bio-degradable yoga mats made of the plant.

“The variety of stem that can be used to make bags, mats and baskets is only available around here,” said Sister Mercy Thomas. Businesses from outside Kerala that use water hyacinth stems to make products, also place their orders at KIDS. “We’re using a wicked plant to generate income,” Sister Thomas said. “We pluck it out, use the stem and set fire to the root so it doesn’t come up again. We’re also doing our bit for the environment.”







A woman working with water hyacinth stem. Photo credit: Meenakshi Soman

Water hyacinth is known to cause all sorts of problems in the waters where it grows. It can completely take over a water body, denying oxygen needed for fish to survive. Its roots are large and bulbous, so it gets entangled in the Chinese nets used in Kerala to fish. It also disrupts the passage of boats, causing accidents. Last year, the European Union put it on the “alien plant species” list, which means it cannot be bought or sold in the EU – this was because of the problems it caused in Spain and Portugal’s waters.

In Kottapuram though, institutions like the National Institute of Design have also come on board since 2016 to help with weaving and designing bags. For 13 women in the village, the water hyacinth offered them a chance to leave Kerala for the first time, get on the train and travel to Ahmedabad, to NID, to teach students about the plant.







Mats handwoven from dyed water hyacinth stems. Photo credit: Meenakshi Soman

Elsy Arackal, 47, suffers from polio and can only walk on her hands. A life-long disability in her legs has strengthened the use of her hands to a great degree, as has her occupation. “I used to roll beedis in a factory,” she said. “But when I realised it causes cancer, I left that job.” Arackal then came to KIDS. Three years on, she earns between Rs 6,000 and Rs 10,000 a month. “I’m one of nine children and I now support my brother and sister, while the others have all settled,” she said. Last year, Arackal bought a three-wheeled scooter modified to her needs so that she can travel more conveniently.

Women are trained and employed as KIDS artisans, which means that the organisation pays them for the work they do. Shobha, who is from a remote village near Kottapuram, said she had been working at KIDS for the last decade. She is unmarried and lives with her brother’s family. “I learnt to use water hyacinth as a natural fibre,” she said. “And now I’ve bought some gold with my own money. That’s my biggest achievement.”





Group of women working on various products. Photo credit: Meenakshi Soman

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