Fresh alarm over ecological damage

JHINUK MAZUMDAR

Calcutta: A years-long battle to protect Rabindra Sarobar and preserve its biodiversity could be undone if the government allows Chhath Puja at the lake, environmentalists and regular visitors to the green haven said on Wednesday.

The dumping of flowers and other offerings, pollutants such as ghee and oil entering its stagnant waters, and the congregation of thousands of people in a limited space could severely damage the biodiversity of the 192-acre complex, they said.

"If there is an existing court order, can that be reversed after discussions? Chhath has not been allowed at Rabindra Sarobar since 2019, but for eight years, people have offered their puja and will continue to do so. You don't need Rabindra Sarobar to perform the rituals," said lake conservation activist Sumita Banerjee.

"Is no one bothered about the environment and pollution? Is there nothing to care for other than votes?" she asked.

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has prohibited religious rituals and festivals within the lake premises to protect its fragile ecosystem, bird populations and water quality from pollution.

"It will be a blunder if the ban is reversed to allow puja at the Sarobar," said Naba Dutta, general secretary of the environmental organisation Sabuj Mancha.

"Rabindra Sarobar is not an ordinary pond. It is a national lake, and the central government provides funds for its conservation. This ecosystem cannot be damaged. The court's ban was not imposed to keep the puja out but to protect the ecosystem and biodiversity," Dutta said.

The Trinamool government had also favoured allowing Chhath at Rabindra Sarobar.

"The government's priority should be to conserve the Sarobar. If it uses its powers to change the existing restrictions, nature will be at the receiving end, and ultimately so will the people of Calcutta," Dutta said.

A naturalist warned that the consequences would extend beyond the water body to the habitat it provides to resident and migratory birds.

"If people are allowed to offer prayers again, it will be detrimental to migratory birds. We usually think of migratory birds as water birds, but terrestrial birds also migrate to urban green spaces. The blaring music accompanying religious rituals and the noise generated by thousands gathering at the Sarobar will disturb their habitat," said Arjan Basu Roy.

"I respect the sentiments of worshippers. They should be provided with isolated water bodies, but not habitats such as this. That would also give the government an opportunity to rejuvenate other water bodies in the city and treat their water later," he said.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 13 ▶

Lake worry

▶ FROM PAGE 10

Several environmentalists said they had no objection to Chhath Puja itself, but opposed holding the rituals at Rabindra Sarobar.

Calcutta has always celebrated its festivals with joy and pride, but many residents object to celebrations that come at the cost of the city's natural heritage.

"I fully respect Chhath Puja, but Rabindra Sarobar is not the right place for it. It is an enclosed lake with little natural flushing. Oil from lamps, flowers, fruit and other offerings add organic matter and nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus to the water. As bacteria break down this material, they consume dissolved oxygen, while excess nutrients can trigger algal blooms. Oil films on the surface can also hinder oxygen exchange. Fish are among the first to suffer, with consequences for the entire food chain," said a maxillofacial surgeon who visits the lake every morning and photographs its birds.