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Sethu Das / June 21, 2010

### A River Runs Through Him

In a world where high-profile activists strip themselves to bring fame and funds to their cause, one activist dons the uniform of an ordinary guard to continue his activities from the little earnings. Design & People Co-founder Sethu Das in conversation with VJ Jose, popularly known as **Periyar Riverkeeper**, who has been protecting the River Periyar for the last three decades.



**His** mother was his inspiration in life. But VJ Jose, popularly known as the Periyar Riverkeeper, is more thankful to his stepmother for teaching him the basic lessons in activism. Bitten by a dog once, Jose rushed to his stepmother for help. Of course she did tend to him, but only after she had thrown a few stones at the dog. From his very childhood, Jose learned how to react to issues and how not to remain silent.

Jose grew up on the banks of Periyar River at Eloor Island, one of the longest rivers in Kerala originating from the Shivagiri Hills of Western Ghats. Known as the 'Lifeline of Kerala', this 244 kms-long river is the fresh water source for more than three million people in the state. But few inhabitants of Kochi, the commercial capital of Kerala, are aware that the water they use everyday comes from the River Periyar.

When Jose realised that the river in which his father taught him his childhood lessons in swimming was getting contaminated with toxic waste day by day, he decided to react, remembering his mother's first advise — "If you have any grievance, go, take a paper and complain to the authorities." Ever since Right to Information (RTI) Act came into existence in India, Jose has filed 254 applications seeking information on various issues related to pollution and human rights. Today the local community of Eloor and nearby places have come to depend on Jose for his advice, and to share their concerns about activities by industries situated near the river, that result in large scale pollution of the river.



**Periyar Riverkeeper:** Jose with his outdated Water Testing Kit at the back side of his house where he was taught swimming by his father. The fiber-boat that was once used for patrolling in the River Periyar is now tied to a palm tree and resembled a floating garden. "There are many big organisations doing meaningful work. But they lack direct relationship with the issue and the community. My strength is my community I live with," says VJ Jose. (Photos: Sethu Das)

**When Greenpeace India recognised the relentless work of this ordinary individual in Kerala, they approached him in 1997 to discuss the possibilities of working together. And in November 2002, Jose became the second Riverkeeper in the world to be appointed by Greenpeace after the Riverkeeper of Hudson River. Though Greenpeace abandoned the Periyar campaign in 2005, Jose continued the work for the dying river with little resources and few hands. Not even hesitating to take up the job of an ordinary guard at an ATM centre at Vallappadu for a meager salary of Rs 3,000 to support his family and his organisation.**

**While our governments and NGOs knowingly waste millions of tax payer's money on mega fund-raising events, activists like Jose make a more effective use of their own hard-earned money. He has not only continued his Periyar activities for the last three decades, in addition he does an average of 25 'Interact with the Riverkeeper' awareness programmes a month, plus a road patrolling twice daily to gather information and to report on illegal dumping of medical and toxic waste by the industries in barren lands. He is the first individual in the state to file a case under the 1955 Essential Commodity Act against a gas agency to create awareness among people about the Act.**

**We live at a time when high-profile activists strip themselves to bring fame and funds to their cause and paid fat salaries to dish out condoms and shampoo sachets to villagers. And we belong to a generation that has more faith in the scientific community than the community that they live with. This interview with VJ Jose is not to say that India has only one such activist. In fact India is fortunate to have many such committed people doing their prescribed duty honestly to make our societies richer and safer for future generations to live.**



A Day Begins: The Eloor house of Jose is also the office of Periyar Riverkeeper. Students and journalists from different parts of the world visit him regularly for training, information and inspiration. The work of Periyar Riverkeeper has been documented by National Geographic Magazine, BBC, Times of India, Doordarshan, CNN-IBN, The Hindu, NDTV, Toronto Star, NDTV, Swiss Radio, Discovery Channel and many others.

Excerpts from the interview:

**Sethu Das:** *When you first started your activities to protect a river dying due to pollution, did you ever feel that you would still be at it for more than 30 years? Don't you think it is the society that has failed, not the individual activist?*

**VJ Jose:** Yes. I feel that it is the failure of the society too. I started as an individual activist fighting for my community, with a sense of pride that I was doing something for my community. My relationship with the river began when I was only five. I was introduced to the river by my father who was a school teacher. He would teach in a distant place and could come home only on Fridays. I would wait for him to return from school and give me swimming lessons in the Periyar. As a child I loved to play and swim in the river for hours... I grew up seeing the Chinese fishing nets behind our house lower into the river and come up with nets full of fish. Later with the help of my friends and my father I learnt to catch fish using the Chinese nets after school hours. There was a time when I could identify more than 140 types of fish in the river. I even remember days when we would catch 500-600 kilos of fish a day. We had no freezing system in those days. Instead we used 'Panampu' (a mat made of bamboo) to dry fish to sell in the market next day morning. This trend slowly disappeared.

By the end of 1970, the river started changing its colour. We started witnessing the death of thousands of fish in the river. Slowly almost all the fish from the river disappeared. The situation became so bad that people could no longer drink the water or wash their clothes in it. Swimming in the river water caused severe itching. Upset by what I saw happening, I approached my mother with curiosity of a young boy. I asked her what was happening to our river. She replied: "All due to the industrial pollution." So I asked if there is no solution to this, and she replied: "If you have any grievance, go, take a paper and complain to the authorities." And thus I lodged my first complaint against a polluting factory on March 27, 1981.

In the beginning, the biggest obstacle to my activities against pollution was my own society. After my first complaint against the polluting factory, many people in my community looked at me with suspicion. They thought I was either an American spy or the representative of a foreign media, or someone who stood to personally benefit from a rival factory in the locality. I do not blame them as 60 per cent of people in Eloor were directly or indirectly connected with those factories. It took several years for me to prove my good intentions. If I was a spy or an agent, there was no need for me to go through all these difficulties in life. Though it took several years, I am now glad that people have finally accepted me and my work.

A majority of today's generation is plagued by a laid-back attitude. They think that even if there is a Tsunami or an earthquake it will not reach their backyard. But I have tremendous faith in our students. Ever since I started my awareness programmes in 1997, I have conducted more than 3,000 interactions on issues like global warming, death of a river, health issues among Eloor residents and now the issue of e-waste. I believe that if we talk about solutions and remedies to an issue instead of just being alarmist and talking about the dangers, students take a special interest. They want to know what they can do to change the situation. Once a young student asked me: "What do we do with all the plastic we have around us?" I

replied with a smile: "Let us pack all the plastic and send to moon or let us pack them and keep for the next generation to decide as they will have the wisdom to find a solution to the plastic menace. Or let us take a decision not to use plastic from today." An issue followed by a remedy is understood by all.

**Sethu Das:** *Do you think the intervention of Supreme Court Monitoring Committee (SCMC) has helped to highlight the ongoing agitation and also to bring about a drastic change in reducing the level of toxic contamination in the River Periyar? What is the current situation with the river?*

**VJ Jose:** The first study on the Periyar pollution was done in 1992 by the Alwaye Union Christian College. And from 1999 till 2005 Greenpeace, International Pops Elimination Network (IPEN) and Cochin University did five more studies. Based on the facts brought out by these studies, the Supreme Court Monitoring Committee (SCMC) came to Kerala. After the studies, SCMC ordered the closure of 197 of factories in Eloor. I am not in favour of closure of these factories, as we need them for our development. I am not against development. The good outcome was that committee ordered free supply of drinking water to 2,143 households under the expense of polluting factories and free health insurance to people. But SCMC's order to collect Rs 2.5 crores from polluting industries as penalty for the revival of the river is something they have not been able to do till date.

As children we used to see vehicles emitting thick black smoke, but not anymore. Because the manufactures themselves adopted better technologies. Our industries can do the same by shifting to zero degree pollution with little investment. Though it might take 3-5 years to give results, you would still increase your productivity, give employment to more people and create no pollution. But they do not want to do that. They do not even have recycling facilities to purify the polluted water and reuse instead of dumping it into the river. When FACT, the first factory of Eloor was built in 1944 with a bridge that connects the island to Kalamassry, there were no regulations on pollution. It was only in 1971 that Kerala State Pollution Control Board (KSPCB) came into existence, though it is not effective till date. The Board works under political pressure and is not in a position to work freely. As per the records, an average of 17 crore litres of effluent water is dumped into river every day! Why are all these polluting industries situated near the river? Because they need our water. But who has given them the right to pollute the river using illegal outlets?

Imagine this scenario: An enthusiastic student who does social work during his school and college days through NSS or other social institutions, and later getting employed in a factory like FACT! He will soon realise that there is no provision or even an atmosphere conducive for him to do any good work as an employee of the firm. Even if he has the consciousness and realisation, he would take the wrong side with the polluting industrial lobby. Unless factory workers themselves understand that the water they dump into the river is being used by their family members and others, this tendency will not change.



**Testing the Blue Gold:** Jose has no formal education. But he is able to identify more than 140 types of fish that used to be in Periyar before their extinction and able to test the quality of water; level of oxygen; chemical contamination and the toxic materials buried in water.

**Sethu Das:** *Recently the city of Barcelona in Spain decided to 'Go Green' by dumping their medical and e-waste in poor countries. 103 metric tonnes of waste dumped at Tutricorin Port were sent back to Barcelona by our alert customs officials. Do you think third world countries like India is becoming a global dumping ground? What are your views on such dumping practices?*

**VJ Jose:** For the last 8 years I have been investigating the dumping of waste materials from developed countries. Once they dumped tonnes of used clothes in India, mostly uniforms from hospitals and some funds to distribute the clothes. But the clever charity organisations in India accepted the money, not the used clothes. Two years ago, about 250 tonnes of plastic waste materials were sent to India from Virginia in the US. When it was inspected, we could see rotten food, used condoms and even broken closets in the waste materials. But the alert District Collector confirmed waste dumping and ordered to send the waste container back to Virginia. Electronic waste is the new menace. There is a private firm at Wellington Island near Cochin Port which sells Pentium II & III desktops and used laptops. They have offices in Bangalore, Orissa and Kolkata. The used computers are sent to India free of cost and later repaired and sold by this local firm. Once I went to this firm on the pretext of buying a system and they were even willing to sell computers for Rs 100/- per kilo but for a minimum commitment of 6 containers. This shows we are already dumped with 6 containers full of e-waste.

To investigate the network of their operation, I travelled to almost all sea ports in South India. At Kulachall and Tutricorin Port, I could see tonnes of unclaimed waste materials. I have received death threats while visiting Tutricorin Port but at the same time received support from our honest guards to enter places and to get information. They do help me because of their loyalty to the nation. I have tried my best to prevent waste being dumped at Cochin Port with the help of customs officials. Once some fishermen informed me of having seen about twenty 'TV monitor-like' materials floating in the lake. I found just one. The situation is such that people have no hesitation in dumping e-waste even in our oceans.

Recycling is an issue even for developed countries. And for them the simplest thing to do is to dump their waste in third world countries. I do my duty as a concerned citizen, but don't you think our government, our customs, police and port authorities also have a responsibility to prevent dumping?

**Sethu Das:** *I still remember our childhood when people used to prevent children from throwing even a stone at the river. Today everything from sewage to toxic waste materials is being dumped into our sacred rivers. Do you think that a change in our approach towards the river will bring a change in the ongoing pollution of rivers?*

**VJ Jose:** I have done some studies on most rivers in India while doing work on them. But I had my own financial limitations to study and travel. When it comes to Periyar, the issue is not only about the industrial waste. From Sundaragiri hills, the river crosses 44 panchayats and six municipalities that discreetly dump human waste. From 2002 till today, in all the water testing I have done, other than nitrate, chloride, chlorine etc, the presence of Fecal Coliform Bacteria is always found in the water. The waste is dumped into the river by those people who do take bath under the shower and do not care of the waste they produce.

Water is something we care for like it was a child. It is the duty of our citizens and authorities to ensure that the purity of the water from where it originated is preserved throughout its journey to the sea. Because it is a God given gift to our population. It is a cruelty not to recognise the purity of the river. Realisation is the need of the hour. Attitude and approach should change, and for that we need a new generation of people who are concerned about their environment. Why do we pollute a river which is so beautiful?

No nation is saved by its factories. Our survival as human beings is not dependent on factories. I do not understand why this beautiful space was chosen for building polluting industries instead of using it for better purposes like tourism development, for example. Selecting Eloor for industrialisation was one of the biggest mistakes. It is time for us to look back and see if there is anything at all that can be done at this stage. From my own experience I can tell you that if we protect mother river, she will definitely give back, like a mother who cares for and protects her child. I feel too much, perhaps because I am too attached to the river!

Implementation is the key. And implementation is the responsibility of our government. If we implement things today, the coming generations will definitely benefit. My father was able to give me 20 cents of land with a well in it, clean air and water. But I am not in a position to give my children two of their birthrights — clean air and water. This is what is happening all over the world. Unless we realise this reality and work towards solutions, we will have no hope.

The river has lost its soul. Today it is only a soul-less river that flows gently and silently.

**Sethu Das:** *At 54, an age when people usually retire to a comfortable and relaxed life, you devote your time and energy to meaningful activities and continue to inspire people around. But what inspires you to continue your activities for a society that does reciprocate?*

**VJ Jose:** As a social worker, my inspiration comes from my community. I try to understand their mind though it takes time and requires a lot of hard work. We need to become one of them to understand them. But it is only now, in the last stages of my life, that the people in my community have started accepting me and my work for the river. Now people come home, they sit with me to work and discuss issues. They treat me like their leader.

My only concern at this stage in life is what more could I do for my people. I have very little time left and I

want to contribute some more. I hope I have touched the minds and hearts of some people and done something for the community. I hope to hand over the baton I have been carrying for so many years, to a new team. My belief is that some of my students who work with me now will one day take over the responsibilities. I have faith in them and after my death, someone will continue my work. Its only when I have passed over the reign of my work into a new set of able hands, will my life amount to something.

I get lot of satisfaction when I interact with children. I am getting old I do not know how long I can continue to do this. But I continue my work by speaking to the maximum people a day. They are my inspiration.



"How to protect our water reserves and lakes is my only concern. I fear by the time people realise the facts and decide to react, not a drop of water will be left in our rivers. I used to tell my students this Native American proverb: "When we have cut down the last tree, when we have poisoned our last river, when we have killed the last fish, then we will find that we cannot eat money," says Jose while looking at the fibre-boat tied to a palm tree since 2006. (The activities of Periyar Riverkeeper are supported by Design & People to show its solidarity with the organisation and its activities. More about Periyar Riverkeeper: [www.periyarriverkeeper.org](http://www.periyarriverkeeper.org))

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