

A group of people in traditional wooden boats on a lake with lily pads. The scene is set in a large body of water, likely a lake or a wide river, under a clear blue sky. Several people are visible in the boats, some using long wooden poles to navigate. The water is dark, and the foreground is filled with lily pads and other aquatic plants. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and suggests a community activity or a traditional way of life.

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*A community came together
to clean its lake, its lifeline.*

Water has been a constant in our work across India; whether it is cleaning water bodies, digging wells or making irrigation canals. This elixir of life has been and is an urgent but unaddressed basic need of the masses we work with.

In the last couple of decades, although *Jammu & Kashmir* (J&K) has tragically become synonymous with strife and conflict for the rest

of the world, the beauty of the valley remains unmatched. The story of this heaven on earth is certainly incomplete without the mention of the *Dal* lake in the heart of *Srinagar*.

As the world faces a bigger danger of pollution every passing day, this is a heartwarming story for the hope it brings. The *Dal* is the soul of *Kashmir*, known worldwide for its serene beauty. What's not so well

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known is that the lake has progressively been getting choked with the increasing web of weeds - azolla, algae, lily pads and other wild weeds. This naturally is a matter of grave concern, especially for the people for whom the lake is home.

As per India Water Portal, *Srinagar's Dal* lake shrunk by 36% in the last 37 years.¹ According to an eminent scientist, *Dr. Abdul Majid Kak*, studying the *Dal* lake, "The thick mats of azolla block the sunlight to the lake's flora and fauna and ultimately cause their decay. Azolla is hampering *Dal's* water circulation, which is a must, for it carries away the lake's nutrients and prevents the growth of harmful water ferns."

When the 2014 floods devastated Srinagar and submerged *Dal* as well, *Goonj* worked closely with the people of *Moti Mohalla*, *Asthawol* area in *Dal* lake.

When the idea of '***Cloth for Work***' (***CFW***) was introduced to them, their response on what they would like to work on, was unanimous - Let's clean the *Dal*, let it breathe!

In the first round of the cleaning work, 145 people participated with 70 boats, to extract the weeds. Facing dense fog and the winter chill, they worked tirelessly for two days. "*The Government spends crores of rupees in cleaning this lake using machines every year, but all in vain. Goonj took up a participatory approach involving us-locals. We have been doing it for centuries, we know how to clean the Dal,*" said *Wahid Hussain*, a local participant.

One month later, in the second phase, 167 participants cleaned a part of the *Dal* using 78 boats again for two days. In total, more than 500 boatloads of weed and other waste were extracted and over 100,000 sq. metres area of the *Dal* were cleaned in the process.



Cleaner water also means fewer water-borne diseases for the inhabitants of this lake. It also translates into enhanced mobility and tremendous ecological benefits. True to the dictum that in nature nothing is a waste, some of the extracted weeds became fodder for the cattle. Rest decayed and was used as manure.

Well, the story does not end here...more recently, in December 2017, we came across a news story on yourstory.com with the title '1,300 *Shikarawallas* (boatsmen), one mission, cleaning up the jewel of *Kashmir*' indicating that the authorities have realised the failure of machines to clean the lake. In September 2017, LAWDA had reverted back to the traditional way of cleaning the *Dal* by hiring around 1,300 to clean more than 10 lakh (1 Million) cubic metres of weeds.²



This is heart warming news! It gives us hope that this lifeline for the people of *Kashmir* will get its due. We know that the boatmen of *Dal* lake will take ownership of cleaning their lake but the government's support will make the entire work more sustainable. You can hear it in the words of *Ghulam Ahmad*, a resident and a participant as well, *"If we continue to organise such events, the old beauty of Dal lake will be restored and it will become free from different polluting materials."*

We understand that this is just a drop in the ocean, but still, it's a step towards averting the choking of one of nature's jewels. The big ray of hope comes from the hard work, wisdom and efforts of local people who showed tremendous faith in Goonj's participatory approach.

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UPDATE FOOTNOTE

Post our flood relief work in the valley for some time, we shifted our focus to the border areas of *Jammu and Kashmir*, collaborating closely with units of the Indian army. The terrain in these remote geographies poses many challenges due to extreme climatic conditions. Over the past decade, from **FY 2014-2023** alone, Goonj has channelled over **95,000** carefully curated material Family kits and facilitated over **2,500** hyper-local, community-driven projects across the state. The story of *Dal* Lake has served as inspiration for Goonj's work on numerous large lakes across India, such as *Chilka* Lake in *Odisha*. The insights gained from this experience have also guided our community-led disaster rehabilitation efforts, leading to the repair and revival of water bodies damaged by cyclones, floods, and other natural disasters.