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ROLL OF HONOUR: VJ Jose

The job title is curious, but well-deserved: VJ Jose is the first 'River Keeper' in Asia. Until recently, Jose was an adamant but informal advocate of Kerala's once-magnificent Periyar river. Now, with an appointment from Greenpeace as the river's 'keeper'— a title the environmental organisation grants to activists around the world — Jose has found recognition after two decades of selfless work.

Born in Eloor to a family that has for generations derived its livelihood from the Periyar, Jose was moved enough by the plight of the river to take up its preservation as a full-time job. In Jose's lifetime, the river fell under severe threat from chemical factories that dot its banks. Now, as the River Keeper of the Periyar, it is Jose's responsibility to safeguard the river from further degradation.

In a sense, this is nothing new for Jose, who has spent years raising awareness about the state of the river. But Greenpeace has boosted his crusade by training him at the People's Science Institute, Dehradun, and equipping him with a boat that allows him to monitor the river and collect data, which he passes on to the Kerala Pollution Control Board.

While Jose is optimistic that more is possible in the future, his passion and hurt at the state of the river he loves, is evident. "When I was a child, the Periyar was beautiful. I still love her, but now she's like a coffin that has to be painted to look beautiful", says



SAVING THE PERIYAR: Jose

Jose. "All that remains today, resembles a dead body; with the soul gone forever."

In a typical week, Jose will steer his boat across the Periyar, take samples of water, use his mobile laboratory to analyse its quality, hold meetings with local youth, give interviews to the media, write letters to the Pollution Control Board and industry, and investigate reports of clandestine dumping of effluents.

His involvement with Greenpeace now ensures that he has their logistical and organisational help; that he is no longer alone. Recently, Greenpeace polled people from Eloor about the Periyar. As a follow-up, it organised a "Meet the Candidates" event, where the people quizzed candidates standing for elections on their commitment to the river. After the event, the sitting MP from Ernakulam, Dr Sebastian Paul, pledged his commitment to the Periyar and even revised his manifesto to reflect this stand.

Jose's work never ceases, and is occasionally overtaken by a crisis. A fire at the Hindustan Insecticides Ltd's plant at Eloor, on July 6, put at risk the lives of not just the employees, but also of the 30,000 residents of Eloor. Jose and Greenpeace have been trenchant in their criticism of the authorities, and have demanded a probe into the incident. "This is a dark day for the workers, and communities of Eloor, whose lives are blighted by expo-

sure to toxic pollution caused by the industries here. The HIL accident is the final nail in the coffin. We will no longer tolerate this," asserts Jose.

Although the Periyar remains his cause celebre, Jose's commitment to the environment, and his success as the River Keeper allow him to help out neighbouring communities too. In Patancheru district, Andhra Pradesh, Jose, along with colleagues from Greenpeace, trained volunteers in analysing the quality of water in their *cheruvus* (lakes), which have become highly polluted.

After almost two decades as an environmental activist, and having faced his share of closed doors and deaf ears, Jose remains unshaken in his faith, but realistic in his outlook. "We need industries," Jose agrees. "No nation, especially a developing country like ours, can do without industries. However, the industries need to learn to co-exist with the environment they operate in."

Namrata Chowdhary