

THE HINDU DAILY

## Restored Jal Mahal out of bounds for public

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT



Out of reach: People of Jaipur eagerly await the opening of the magnificent Jal Mahal for the public.  
PHOTO: Kamal Narang

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As the legal battle over the 99-year lease of Jaipur's Man Sagar Lake and the land surrounding it to a private company lingers on, the local residents are getting restive over their lack of access to the place. Man Sagar Lake, popularly known as Jal Mahal Lake, is ready for the visitors but the controversy surrounding its PPP (public-private partnership) deal is seemingly forcing the authorities here to remain non-committal.

About 250 citizens, representing six non-government organisations, stormed the lake's promenade the other day demanding reopening of the place now that it has been renovated.

It was a silent protest - not a single slogan was raised – broken at times only by the cackle of a water bird.

RAKSHA's Rohit Gangwal led the initiative for he has been actively supporting the annual Birding Fair at the lake. Mr. Gangwal, along with his group, takes care of the birds which get injured by the "manja" (glazed thread) during the kite-flying season. Sajal Jugran, representative of the House sparrows conservation initiative, led his ICAN unit at the show.

"For the past two years this garden monument, perhaps one of the 20 best in the whole world, is waiting for a formal opening. The monument is restored and the conservation of the lake too has been carried out," says Harsh Vardhan, who had set the ball rolling for the revival of the lake and its premises by initiating an annual Birding Fair over a decade back.

Mr. Vardhan notes that a Public-Private Partnership between the Government of Rajasthan and Jal Mahal Resorts Pvt Ltd resulted in two salient features -- renovation of the monument and restoration of this lake. "The State did not have to spend even one rupee," he points out, to add that Rufford Small Grants was received to initiate work here.

"Jal Mahal is the city's pride. It is our identity. My appeal to the Government is to make it accessible to the people," says Ruby Khan, a resident of Hazrat Ali Colony in the neighbourhood. Ms. Khan, a campaigner for women's rights, has also written to Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot appealing to him to throw open the place for the public. "A few years back the place was in a mess. Now it is restored. Let the people come and enjoy it," she argues.

Man Sagar is a shining example in the nation's lake restoration saga -- about 90 lakes so far funded nearly Rs.1,000 crore by the Union Ministry of Environment & Forests. It got Rs.18 crore in 2002 and then also Chief Minister Mr. Gehlot had led the de-silting-operation using a spade in the lake's bed. Diversion of two open nullahs and creation of two significant mechanisms — intake of storm water and sedimentation basis near this intake-point — caused an ecological revival in the lake's aquatic character. The BOD (biological oxygen demand) used to be 350 in 2000; it came down to 15-20 in 2011-12. "The stench too has disappeared and a few thousand citizens daily enjoy the lake at the wide promenade," points out Mr. Vardhan.

The travel agents too joined the catchy protest. Ayub Khan of Sanya Travels says the travel sector is keen on adding Jal Mahal to their Jaipur itineraries but was unable to accomplish this wish-list as the monument is not open to the public.

Volunteers point out that an Internet blog they have started for the cause had been visited by more than 22,000 persons within three months of launch.