

Children make art to save Vedanthangal Bird Sanctuary

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WRITTEN SPECIALLY FOR VIKALP SANGAM Wings whoosh loudly overhead. Resounding beak clatter. Squawks of herons, pelicans and storks drown speech. I have brought elementary children from my school to Vedanthangal bird sanctuary. They are all handy with open notebooks, binoculars, and bird identification booklets. As soon as we enter the gates and step over the lake's bund, some of them rush to fill their observation tables. Others take a minute to stare across this vista. It is for the first time many of them are seeing a heronry like this. Tree canopies are white with tens of thousands of birds. The air is thick with the water's smell. It is January, and the waterbody is full after the Northeast monsoon. Painted Storks carry metre-long sticks to the Barringtonia trees scattered in lake. They are just beginning to nest. The Openbill Storks already have chicks. The parents stand spread-winged to shelter them from the near-noon Sun. The necks of Darters dart in and out of the water.

Kruti Patel is an artist based in Bangalore. Her panoramic-painting of the Vedanthangal landscape captures the relationship and interdependence between the birds and farmers here. Over the Eastern and Northern embankments of the lake, hundreds of acres of paddy fields abound. Irrigation canals from the bund take the lake's water into these fields. Ibises forage here. Sandpipers and Pond herons haunt the levees. On some logs floating in the water we see Indian Black Turtles basking. Children excitedly point to the top of a bare Palm trunk, on which perched are three Spotted Owlets. They stare back at us with equal curiosity.

Diya Rajesh is a Class 8 student of Abacus Montessori School. Her art, showing birds and a rural woman together, evokes the region's longstanding bird-human kinship.

Vedanthangal is a centuries old lake and bird haven. It is an [Eri](#) – a traditional manmade reservoir in South India, to conserve water. It is one among nearly two thousand of them in Kanchipuram and Chengalpet districts. Each [Eri](#) is part of a larger cascading system of reservoirs, linked by overflow from rivers and each other. This region is traversed by only seasonal rainfed rivers, which flow for a few months. The rest of the year is dry. People built [Eri](#)-systems to store rainwater, prevent flooding and recharge ground water for yearlong use. This is known to have transformed this landscape. The oldest known inscription on [Eri](#)-science is from 1291 AD in Cuddapah, Andhra Pradesh.

[Riya Nagendra is a young cartoonist and student of English Literature. Her Painted stork here makes a bold political statement.](#) Vedanthangal is one such

Eri,

with an extraordinary history.

Vedan

in Tamil is 'hunter'.

'Thangal'

is a reservoir, often a protected one. The name has been interpreted both as 'hunter's reservoir' and as 'a reservoir protected from hunters'. The latter meaning rings truer. The agrarian community in this village understood that when water mixed with bird guano is used to irrigate their paddy fields, their yield is abundant. Hence this lake has been a community-protected heronry for centuries. It has been built such that its embankments fade into grassland and scrub to its West and Northwest, where its catchment is open to the floodplains of Cheyyar river. [Japhia Allwyn is a Class 7 student of Christwood School. Her artwork evokes the lake's habitat and shows some of the birds which breed here.](#) The villagers by tradition, do not celebrate festivals like Diwali, or practice other activities which may scare the birds. In 1790 the people here got a 'Cowle' from the then British district collector L. Place, recognizing the village's rights to safeguard the tank and its birds from hunting. And in the years to come they got it more and more protection, until in 1998 it was declared a sanctuary. The birds over years of respect have come to trust this village, and visit here to breed in huge numbers, generation after generation. On average 40,000 breeding birds are seen here each season, which is between October and March. But when the rains are good, numbers cross 70,000 within this 30-hectare tank.

Hemavathi is a Class 9 student of Abacus Montessori School. Her Pelican feather-trail spells out 'Help' and is a call to action. The naturalist and writer M. Krishnan, who through his life worked for the conservation of Vedanthangal, mentions that there are about 300 Barringtonia trees in the lake. The locals say that these trees didn't grow here naturally but were planted by their forefathers to encourage water birds to nest. Barringtonia canopies are more flat than spherical – their top profiles are platform like – allowing birds like Pelicans, Storks, and Ibises to comfortably make their ramshackle nests on them. The tree crowns meld together. Where one tree ends, and another begins is difficult to discern. And they have grown such that when the [Eri](#) is full, their trunks are submerged, and their canopies seem as if they are floating on the water. These mangrove-trees form green islets in the lake, which are safe and secluded spots for the nesting colonies.

Artists for Animals is an artist-collective working for the welfare of animals and nature. Their 'bird in a pill' picture and the feather-splatter around, is a powerful image alluding to the threat from a Pharma company. But strictly speaking, Vedanthangal is not a single lake, but a lake-wetland complex. The sanctuary extends from the central reservoir till a 5km radius. This area has more than 80 big and small waterbodies and vast paddy fields, connected to each other. These are used by birds to forage, roost, collect nesting material and even breed in smaller numbers. Vedanthangal, India's oldest bird sanctuary, is now threatened by industrial companies. Deanna Maria Michael is a Class 9 student from Christwood School. Her painting predicts what may befall Vedanthangal if industries were allowed within the sanctuary. In March, Tamil Nadu's Environment Secretary sent a proposal to the National Board for Wildlife, to denotify the bird sanctuary's limits from 5 km to 3 km – more than a 60% reduction. Following this, in May, Sun Pharma – one of the industries which have been functioning illegally inside the sanctuary – applied for a forest clearance to enhance its facilities and production. Though these may seem to be two different proposals, the state's denotification of the sanctuary would shrink its boundary, making it easier for Sun Pharma to legalise its operations. And Sun Pharma had falsely framed its proposal as if the denotification had already taken place.

Ishaan is a Class 5 student in Abacus Montessori School. He shows a caricature of an Openbill Stork and its habitat, before and after industrial pollution.

Early in June, a team of us went ground-truthing to Vedanthangal – surveying the area and speaking to the local people. Our findings were the following – Other than Sun Pharma, two more red category industries – Ordain Healthcare and Amco batteries – have been operating unlawfully inside the sanctuary, in gross violation of the Wildlife Protection Act. They are all within 3 – 4 km from the main lake, while the sanctuary limits presently extend till 5km. These industries have been releasing toxic effluents into waterbodies which the villagers and birds use. The people have been complaining of poisoned wells, lack of drinking water, skin disease and other sicknesses. The ground and surface water in villages around these industries is discoloured and foamy. Soil smells of chemicals. Farmers face acute crop failure due to water contamination. They grieve that their cattle have been dying. Many have had to sell their agricultural lands due to this and move away. Locals also observe that the bird numbers have been

reducing through the years, and they think this has to do with the water contamination.

Vishnu is a Class 7 student of Abacus Montessori School. His sketch in monochrome highlights the pollution caused by factories. [Smriti is an illustrator and graphic designer based in Goa. Her torn painting of an Ibis, a bird which nests in thousands at Vedanthangal, is a powerful symbol of biodiversity loss.](#) The state's move to denotify Vedanthangal, incited public outrage across Tamil Nadu and beyond. Streets remained Covid-closed for campaigning. But twitter trended with the hashtags # SaveVedanthangal and # SavePrideofTamilNadu. Local panchayat members demonstrated outside the sanctuary, condemning the proposal. Public have been sending hundreds of emails to the Chief Minister and to the members of the NBWL, to reject this plan and take action against the offending industries. Following these digital protests, a PIL has been filed in the Chennai High Court and the NGT has ordered a probe into Sun Pharma's operations. Ruth Andrea is a Class 7 Student of Christwood school. Her art and words embrace the more-than-human world and highlights its rights. As these proceedings go on, art is pouring in for this cause. Many of these pieces are by school children, reminiscing fondly of their field trips to Vedanthangal, and asking for it to be saved. Nithya is a Class 7 student of Abacus Montessori School. Her work depicts public protest and the local community's solidarity for the protection of the sanctuary. Contact [the author](#)