

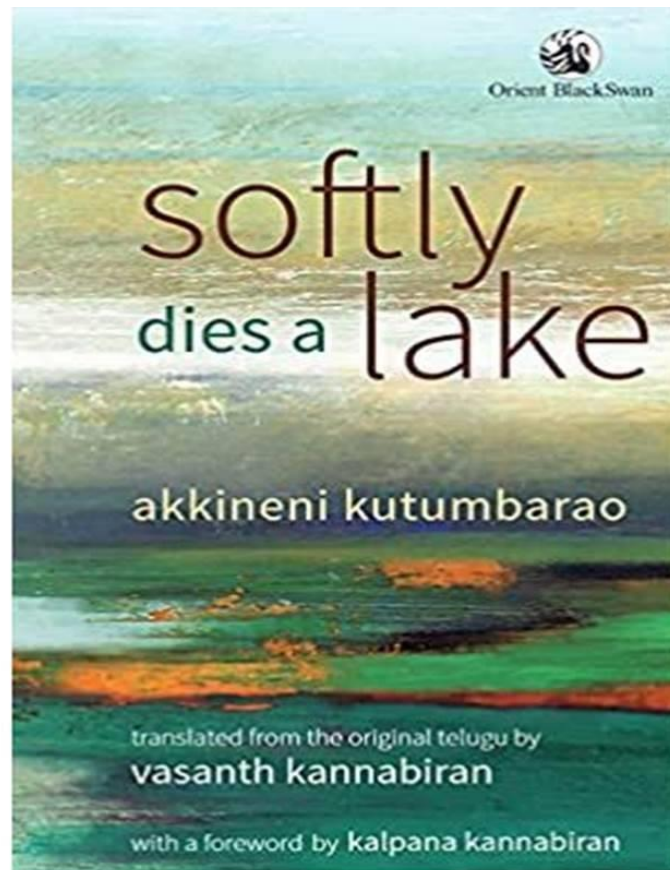
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How floods devastate lives! This tragic story of Kolleru demonstrates a village's travails

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What happens during a devastating flood? Not headlines that scream for attention! Empty bellies and starvation in homes that dot many villages remains the stark reality



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What happens during a devastating flood? Not headlines that scream for attention! Empty bellies and starvation in homes that dot many villages remains the stark reality. The horrors of missing children who get swept away in the floods is another facet of the nightmare. While Malgudi was widely known as a fictional setting for RK

Narayan's books, Kolleru is not fictional. It is one of India's largest freshwater lakes located in Andhra Pradesh. Unlike the quaint charm of Malgudi, the tragic reality is that Kolleru has been one of the most neglected lakes, due to which nearby villages continued having their share of heartwrenching travails.

For those who wonder about why lakes and communities living close to lakes survive during floods year after year, 'Softly Dies a Lake' is a must-read literary translation that brings to life all these issues from the perspective of a child named Seenu.

The book tells us how people from villages find ways to survive when floods strike year after year. If one person in the village is in trouble, all are ready to help. The fault lines emerge when people receive no support from those governing them – the administrators who turn a blind eye to villagers and their travails.

Kolleru: History and significance

Kolleru is brought to life in Akkineni Kutumbara's masterpiece 'Kolleti Jladalu' in Telugu. According to the book, the inscriptions of emperor Shalivahana mentioned 'Kolleru' for the first time. The great Dandi and the Chinese traveler Huan Tsang made references to Kolleru. Not only did Huan Tsang term Kolleru as a 'beautiful lake', he also documented that graded pelicans and flamingos from as far away as Siberia, the Philippines and the Fiji Islands had migrated here, laid eggs, hatched chicks and returned to their lands with their young.

Little tidbits of information make the book quite fascinating. Urban dwellers would probably find eating an octopus 'exotic' but in a village, where food is scarce, people make do with the luxury of eating snails or even cranes.

Eating snails to stay fit and not hungry

You may be shocked that eating snails is not uncommon in villages around Kolleru. Eating snails keeps men and women from putting on weight around the stomach, the book conveys. In fact, snails are eaten by extracting the flesh and throwing away the shells, which do not mingle easily with the mud. Result? Heaps of shells lying around the premises. As a result, it is mostly men who cook as their wives have to go out and sell the fish they catch and bring home.

No caste barriers but village elders reign

Social reforms are inherent in the village way of life even as fault lines exist in the narrative. While the caste system has no rigid sway as villages of both communities share everything without the slightest adherence or interest in preserving caste barriers, there are issues that indicate how village life adopts a closed mindset towards change particularly with regard to its women. However, every problem is addressed by a community of village elders who act as 'Judges' and their verdict is final, however unreasonable this may seem.

How the village community utilizes money

Further, money earned from fish auctions are used for the village's welfare and monitored by a group of nominated village elders who are honest.

Published by Orient BlackSwan, the English translation by veteran feminist rights activist and writer Vasanth Kannabiran brings to the English readers a real-life glimpse of Kolleru and the travails of villagers.

'Softly Dies a Lake' can be inevitably linked to India's ecology mantra – everything is connected – and is undoubtedly a wake up call for lovers of Nature, clean air and literature. Towards the end of the book, a poignant message is delivered, "Today we have given up thinking responsibly or thinking about our villages. We stopped co-existing with Nature and began to destroy it. We have all turned into voters but not responsible citizens."

Simply put, every Indian who feels deeply for preserving the country's villages, lakes and rivers should read the book to get a real life understanding of the faultlines.