



Pondi loses its cherry

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Beach tourists who drive six hours southeastward from Bangalore to Pondicherry are facing a unique problem — there's little beach to go to.

Along the main promenade of this old French outpost lined with whitewashed colonial bungalows, there is just a jagged coastline guarded with boulders.

Satellite images juxtaposed with old photos show that large portions of the coast have been carved away by the Bay of Bengal. The coastal erosion has been accelerated by unscientific construction of breakwaters that jut out into the sea and sea walls that prevent beach building, scientists say.

Worse still, the proposed building of a major port in Pondicherry with bigger breakwater structures may just make the beach disappear altogether, leaving a maze of concrete and tarmacs for its visitors — devotees of Sri Aurobindo and lovers of sun and sand, wine and cheese.

The breakwaters or groynes that jut out into the sea perpendicular to the coast, built for smooth passage of boats and ships, act like dams, blocking the waves and the sand that flow from south to north along the seashore.

Thus, on the southern side of the existing small port, a lot of sand has accumulated and an artificial beach has been created.

On the flipside, to the north, waves and currents have washed away with no natural replenishment. In effect, local fisherfolk, who have lost hamlet after hamlet to the angry waves, find their catamarans and nets sandwiched between thin strips of sand and rough boulders.

"Erosion has been going on along Pondicherry coast ever since they (the French) built the first pier," said Commander John Jacob Puthur, a retired naval hydrographer and expert on coastal sediment dynamics. "That perished and a new one was again built, and erosion continued ever since, but on a milder scale," Puthur said.

Piers did allow some sand flow. "Then came the Pondicherry Port. The breakwaters of the port shut the sediment movement to the north and so erosion has not only intensified but will continue unabatedly," Puthur said.

The solution is to restore nature's original sediment flow, that is, by pumping sand from south of the port to the north where erosion is taking place. The port authorities' efforts at this kind of nourishment could not be sustained. The authorities did not respond to queries.

"In the east coast if we put a groyne or a breakwater, there will be accretion (sand deposit) at its southern side and erosion on the north," said Dr S. Kathirolu, director of the National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT), Chennai. "A system can be designed to avoid it. Groynes are only one method (of coastal protection) and even without erosion we can build it," Kathirolu said.

“For Pondicherry, the sand bypassing scheme apparently was an inherent component of the harbour breakwater scheme. Their revival is an alternative, and so are detached breakwaters and beach nourishment,” said Dr Rajat Roy Chaudhury, an NIOT expert.

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