

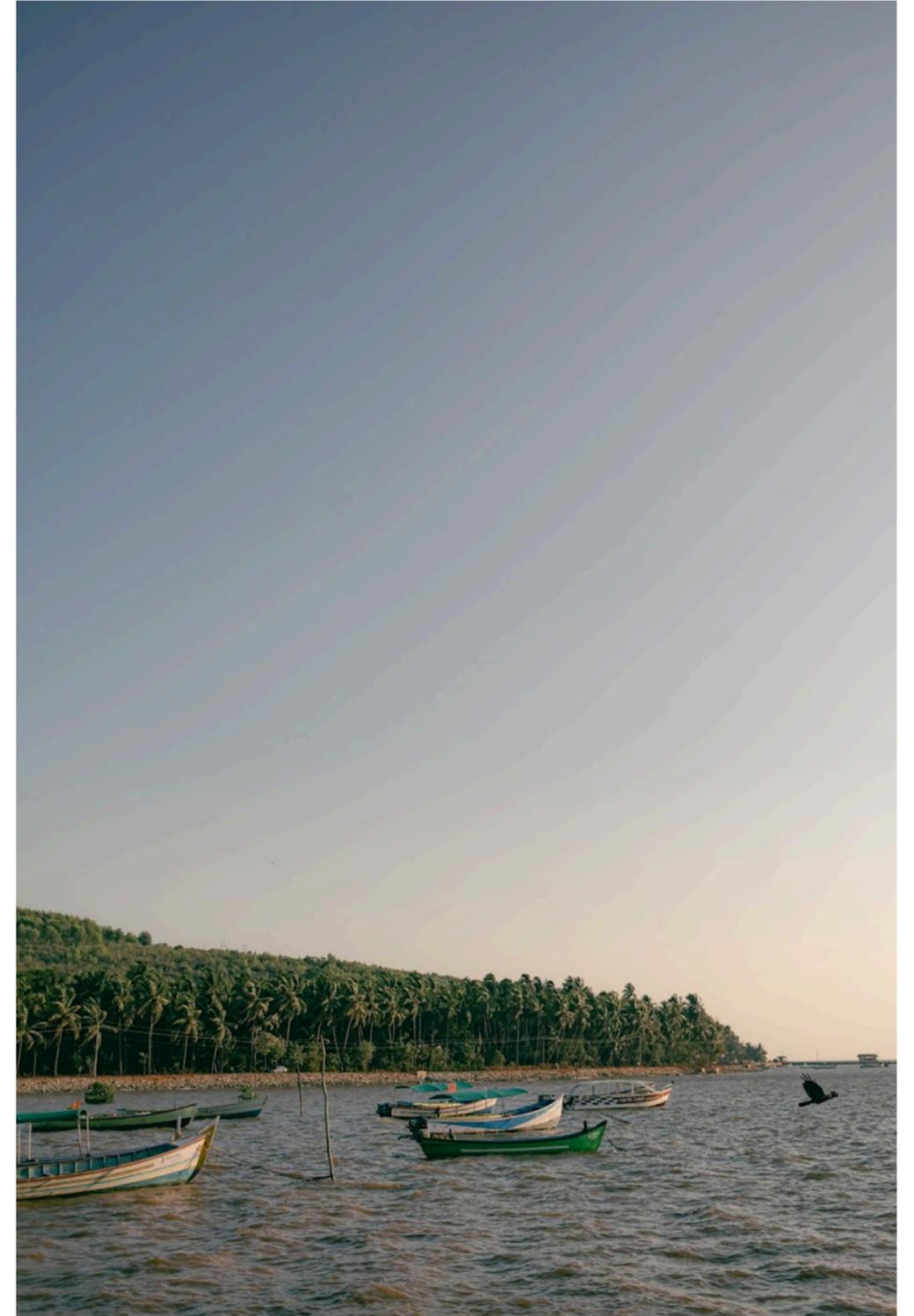
Conserving the Aghanashini





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Aghanashini, one of the last remaining free-flowing rivers in India, originates in Sirsi town in the Western Ghats in Uttara Kannada District of Karnataka and flows for about 120km west through stunning mountains, waterfalls, valleys, and landscapes before merging into the Arabian Sea, creating a 3000-acre biodiverse waterbody. It holds within its waters a tapestry of stories that speak of belonging, connection, and resilience. The rhythmic currents of the river are intricately woven into the lives of those who rely upon it for their livelihoods, forging an unbreakable bond between humans and nature.



People of the Aghanashini



Savitri, from the fishing village of Aghanashini in Kumta, lives with her family of ten. Among them are her six school-going daughters and two sons who take turns fishing day and night. Savitri's husband, now retired from fishing, manages the family boats and guides the sons with his decades of experience and wisdom. The family's primary livelihood depends on fishing, even during the off-season when earnings are barely enough to survive. In recent years, the fish catch has declined due to the large boats that use lights to attract and capture fish. Despite the challenges, Savitri's family holds on, recognizing their connection to the river and the significance of their trade to their way of life.

People of the Aghanashini

Mansoor's life is intricately tied to the rhythm of the Aghanashini river. Fishing is his heritage, his roots, and a testament to his resilience. During fishing season, Mansoor ventures out on a large diesel boat with other fishermen, hauling in two to four tons of fish each day. When the season wanes, he has to rely on his dinghy for fishing. Mansoor's father was the one who taught him to fish, passing down generations of wisdom and skills. When asked about the once-proposed industrial port in Tadadi, Mansoor's eyes filled with concern. "Dhanda bandh ho jayega" (trading will be stopped)," he remarked softly. The port threatened to disrupt the delicate balance of their way of life, casting a shadow of uncertainty over their future. As he casts his net into the unknown, Mansoor carries within him a profound truth: that the preservation of his livelihood and the traditions of his community are intertwined with the currents of the Aghanashini, and that any disruption to that balance may lead to the loss of more than just a means of sustenance—it may mean the loss of their very identity.



People of the Aghanashini



Shrini, a tuk-tuk driver in Aghanashini, may not depend on the river for his livelihood, but he is deeply connected to its ebbs and flows. Behind the wheel of his colorful tuk-tuk, he entertains visitors with stories about the river and its people. During his free time, he plays cricket with his friends on the banks of the river. His family owns some ghajini (tidal wetlands) land in the Aghanashini estuary, which they lease annually for rice and fish farming, providing essential income for his household. Despite growing up in a fishing village with family members involved in fish farming for generations, Shrini had a different dream and went off to Bengaluru to pursue an engineering degree. However, Shrini's roots and longing for the river and his village led him back to Aghanashini after college. A true native at heart, Shrini's desire is to spend the rest of his life in Aghanashini, where his roots run deep.

People of the Aghanashini

Shivanand has spent four decades witnessing the changing currents of the Aghanashini that shaped his livelihood. Throughout the monsoon, the fish catch dwindles, leaving him with a meager haul; however, August rolls in with abundant catches for him. Shivanand heads a bustling household of twelve, with five sons, three of whom are fishermen that venture out, crewing big boats. Over the past ten years, he has witnessed a decline in fish population due to overfishing. The increase in fishermen and the presence of larger boats further complicate matters, casting shadows over the future of their trade. When the Karwar port was built, it displaced many fishermen from their ancestral fishing grounds. Shivanand fears a similar fate for himself and his family if the Tadadi port were to become a reality.



Along the banks of the Aghanashini River, Savitri, Mansoor, Shivanand, and Shrini stand as living embodiments of the profound connection between the people and the river that sustains them. These individuals, each with their unique roles and aspirations, find themselves entangled in a delicate dance with the currents of the Aghanashini. Savitri's family, relying on fishing for their livelihood, understands that their very survival is intricately linked to the river's bounty. Mansoor, a seasoned fisherman, carries the weight of generations of wisdom passed down through his family, recognizing that the river is not just a means of sustenance but an essential part of his heritage. Shivanand, a witness to the shifting currents of the Aghanashini, sees firsthand the impact of overfishing and the threat of ports encroaching on their way of life, reminding him of the river's power to shape their destiny. Even Shrini, as a tuk-tuk driver, finds himself rooted in the river's stories, guiding visitors along its banks and leasing the precious land near its estuary, binding his own journey to its flow.

In the lives of these four individuals and many others, the Aghanashini emerges as more than just a source of water—it is a lifeline, a source of resilience, and a testament to the enduring spirit of those who call it home.



The Aghanashini River has flowed freely for centuries, untouched by major industrial establishments or disruptive dams. However, in recent years, proposals have threatened to disrupt its natural flow, including the Karnataka State Industrial and Infrastructure Development Corporation (KSIIDC)'s proposal in 2009 to build a multi-purpose estuarine port that would have affected the livelihoods of the villagers. Thanks to the relentless efforts of local communities and the lack of forest clearance documentation by KSIIDC, the construction of this destructive port was delisted in May 2020, bringing a sigh of relief to the people of the Aghanashini.

To improve the understanding and stewardship of the Aghanashini and ensure the long-term conservation of the river, we worked with the communities who called the river their home, alongside our local partner [Panchabhuta Conservation Foundation](#). We dreamed of building a network of field stations in the estuary to create immersive learning experiences and foster a harmonious relationship between the communities and the environment.

Our work with local communities was not just about exploring their connection to the river; it was also about aligning our lives with our true purpose and learning to live in harmony with nature. We sought to co-create regenerative economic pathways rooted in deep ecology and a profound connection with the river and its surroundings.

Photos by: Kiran Topiwala





If you're inspired by what you've read and want to explore your community's connection to the land, river, and the environment, we offer tailored support for individuals and organizations passionate about ecological storytelling and advocacy.

Get in touch with us at lamia@inserviceofearth.org