

Fish in the Time of Malaria

A visit to the District Malaria Officer's premises reveals that the National Malaria Control Programme could well be upset by urchins stealing larvae-eating fish to make pakoras.

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The entrance to the compound is a broken wooden gate. On both sides of the entrance are small kiosks—on one side, a cobbler's shop selling handmade *sherwani jootis* (whatever they are), while on the other side is a wholesale grain shop. Needless to say, the wares of both these shops are stacked outside and encroach on the approach to the compound. And to top it all, a roadside tailor has set up his sewing machine there as well, blocking a substantial part of the approach. The tailor, with a board proudly hung on the wall of the compound, advertises “all repair and new clothes.”

I have seen this building for years—a decrepit structure inside a walled enclosure with a massive compound. The compound was unpaved and therefore somewhat slushy because of the overnight downpour. The building itself is almost certainly more than five decades old. A board, which is worn out with age and is barely readable, informs me that this is the office of the District Malaria Officer.

I am here to see if I can get some mosquito larvae-eating fish for the ornamental ponds in my house. The waterbodies have water roses and lotus in them and though I have already put some ornamental fish in the ponds, I am not sure if that is enough. The newspapers have been highlighting the earlier-than-usual dengue season this year. From one of the articles, in which the District Malaria Officer is interviewed, I find out that one can get these larvae-eating fish from their office.

Which explains why I am here. The building is constructed in the old colonial style—a deep verandah in which the rooms open up faces the compound. The verandah has a couple of tables which presumably function as the office. There are several officious-looking people sitting around those tables, staring curiously at me while not hiding their perplexity at this non-official type wandering into these hallowed precincts. As I walk across the compound, I notice that they have stopped chatting and are waiting for me to come up to them. The situation doesn't look very promising for me.

I tell one of the gentlemen sitting at a desk the purpose of my visit, which leads to puzzled expressions on their faces. I tell them about the waterbody in my garden, the lotus plant and the ornamental fish and how I am here to get the deadly fish being recommended by them.

A lady, who clearly looks like she is in charge, asks me what fish I have in the waterbody. I tell them I have no idea but it is orange in colour and the kind that one usually finds in pet shops. At this she says, “Please leave your address and phone number and we will come and inspect first to see if you already have the fish which we are giving out.”

Knowing the ways of the Indian bureaucracy, I know this will never happen—it is a standard procedure to make sure that whatever you have gone to the office for doesn't get done. So I persist and say that no, I know that the fish I have are ornamental and so won't do the job as effectively as the ones that the District Malaria Officer is proffering.

After about five minutes of this back-and-forth chat, the lady realises that I am not one to be fobbed off easily. So she instructs one of the minions to give me two fishes. I tell her that I have more than one waterbody and so would possibly need more. At this, there is general amusement and the lady tells me that these two fishes will breed so fast that I would have trouble keeping them. “Have you got a container to take the fish?,” she asks. Obviously, I don't and so two polythene bags are fished out from one of the cupboards.

Two of the minions at the office—one with a net and another with a stick—ask me to accompany them to the water tank. It is fairly large and swarming with fish. While the fish are being taken out, the lady officer calls me and asks me to give them my address and phone number.

I am a bit surprised as to why this is needed. And also a bit scared—the malaria inspectors are supposed to go around the city and if they find any mosquito larvae in your house, then heaven help you. A friend of mine had that experience and I certainly don't want to go through the harassment which comes naturally with inspectors of all kinds armed with strange powers under laws and rules framed in colonial times.

So I hem and haw and try to divert their attention by asking all kinds of trivial questions related to the upkeep of the fishes, their food habits, and so on. Meanwhile, the lady keeps insisting on getting my address. This goes on for some time until I am told the reason they want my address—I will soon have so many fish in my ponds that they might have to come to me to collect some for their own use. Given that there are tonnes of fish in the water tank in the District Malaria Officer's compound, plus their general disinterest in

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giving them out, I find this unbelievable. But I am stuck and so I dutifully give out my address and phone number, hoping for the best.

Meanwhile, Operation Fishing-out-the-fish has ended. The result? Two polythene bags with water and two fishes in each. I can't believe my luck—I am being given four fishes instead of the regulation two! While all this is going on, I casually ask the lady officer if there are others who have taken the fish from them. She tells me that no one has yet come to take the fish but they still run out of fishes. That seems odd—until she elaborates. It turns out that though the compound is enclosed by a wall, some urchins regularly come in after office hours to steal the fish. And what would they do with these fishes, I ask? “Well, the urchins go and make fish pakoras and eat them! We have complained to the authorities and also told their parents about this, but to no avail,” she laments. So much for the National Malaria Control Programme!

As I walk out of the compound past the roadside tailor on my way out, the rain starts falling. What better time to enjoy pakoras than in the rains, I wonder.

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