

The Plight of Keenjhar Lake

Manchhar Lake is one of the biggest natural Lakes of South Asia. It is located in the eastern foothills of Khirthar Range about 18 km of west of the town of Sehwan and is spread over the area of 200 sq. km. the lake was once known for its beauty and the largest population of migratory birds and wild fowl. It was a rich source of fisheries and provided livelihoods to more than 10000 fishing families living on 2000 floating boats. Today it stands severely threatened wetland dying due to pollution, toxic affluent and mismanagement.

Historically Manchar Lake's major concerns date back to 1921 when the Main Nara Valley Drain, originally designed as an inundation canal, was remodeled to transport raw sewage from the Upper Sindh and parts of Punjab. The remodeled MVN Drain became the only source of drainage along the right bank of Sukker Barrage. During the implementation of RBOD project, the MVN Drain was further widened and remodeled to drain the saline water pumped by tube wells of the Salinity Control and Reclamation Project (SCARP) and the effluent of industries in district Dadu. This development exacerbated the toxic content of effluent being drained into the lake. Meanwhile during 1970 the construction of more drains, canals and dams for water storage and power generation, diversions upstream for agricultural and industrial use led to water shortage, downstream. This in turn reduced the amount of fresh water flow into Manchar Lake. Apart from RBOD, the Nara Valley Drain constructed in 1932, the North Dadu Surface Drain constructed in 1976 and the Right Bank Master Plan (RBMP) in 1992 prepared by MMP International also contributed to the degradation of Manchar Lake.

Issues: Mountain torrents supplying fresh water have declined. So too has the flow of the Indus itself into the lake, due to the building of dams and greater irrigation. The pollution has killed off flora and fauna and it has become impossible to grow vegetables in the toxic silt. Migratory birds, which once came in thousands to rest among the reeds on the lake, are now rarely seen. In the 1970s, more than 15,000 tons of fish were netted each year compared with 2,000-3,800 tons in recent years. The number of the fishing families living around the lake has halved in the last 25 years as per the PFF's assessment.

An unrelenting flow of toxic wastewater is pouring into the lake, a byproduct of industrialization and aggressive agricultural practices upstream and has slowly rendered it inhospitable, poisoning the water and almost everything in it.

The degradation of Manchar Lake has a significant economic impact on livelihoods of the local communities. The decreasing fish catch is inadequate to provide a satisfactory source of earning. Resultantly, the monthly average monthly household income ranges barely from 2000-3000. Moreover, there is a widespread prevalence of tuberculosis, anemia, malnutrition and many other water-borne diseases.

The major violation of rights done by RBOD and other projects relating to Manchar Lake include; The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social

& Cultural Rights and International Covenant on Civil & Political Rights, Sindh Wildlife Ordinance 1972, National Forests Policy of Pakistan (2011) and National Environmental Policy 2005, Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora signed By Pakistan in 1973 and ratified in April 1976 and Convention on Biological Diversity and Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

Moreover, the damage done to Manchar Lake has also been carried out ignoring *Basic Principles and Guidelines on Development-Based Evictions and Displacement, developed by the former UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing and International Bill of Human Rights.*

Major Solutions:

- Over irrigation should be stopped and the crop pattern system should be ensured.
- The desalinations plants should be installed at the all entry points of drains which bring saline water into Manchar Lake.
- Sufficient water to be discharged into River Indus so as to ensure fresh water flow into Manchhar.
- Rehabilitation, alternative livelihood options and conservation plan to be prepared with participation of local fisher community and experts.
- Fisherfolk community living in boats to be provided alternates for solid waste disposal outside the lake body so as to reduce the pollution of lake water.
- Manchhar Lake Development Authority to be constituted with representations of local fishing community, NGOs and concerned Government Departments.
- Mass mobilization and advocacy efforts may be continued strategically.

By: Roshan Bhatti