

# **Troubled Waters of Karachi**

Ammara Durrani

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Foundation for Universal Responsibility

Of His Holiness The Dalai Lama, New Delhi, India, 2005.

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# Preface

The *Scholar of Peace Fellowships* awarded by WISCOMP for academic research, media projects and special projects are designed to encourage original and innovative work by academics, policy makers, defense and foreign policy practitioners, NGO workers, and others. The series WISCOMP Discussion Papers in conjunction with WISCOMP Perspectives brings the work of some of these scholars to a wider readership.

The seventh in the series, *Troubled Waters of Karachi*, is the outcome of a media project awarded to Ammara Durrani to research how the prevailing water crisis in Pakistan has emerged as a non-traditional security issue particularly in a setting like Karachi with its ethnically volatile faultlines. The premise was that all too often governments tend to focus exclusively on disputes of territorial /military nature and that such an approach frequently leads to the overshadowing of internal situations and crises which have the potential of becoming serious conflicts within borders, if they are not dealt with in a timely and pragmatic fashion.

Typically, security concerns today encompass a whole range of ‘extra-territorial’, ‘trans-state’, ‘non-military’ issues from drugs, trafficking, organized crime, displacement of human beings within and across borders, ethno-political tensions and ‘human security’ concerns such as food and water security, environment crises, state atrocities, human rights issues and so on. The “non-traditional” variables of security are now recognized as impacting both inter and intra state security beyond what the cold war discourse cognized or envisaged. The globalized environment of the post-cold war period has thrown up new challenges, threats, new actors and indeed new concerns that decisively change the contours of ‘security’. The outlines of the non-traditional security discourse still seem to be emerging and there appears to be little consensus and considerable ambiguity on what constitutes its domain. However it is recognized that many of these non-traditional security issues can be arranged along a continuum that has freedom from fear and freedom from want as its twin axes. The politics of water – its availability, distribution and the resources

allocations associated with it – has emerged as a significant concern in these new mappings of security.

Through a series of six media articles published from January-May 2000 in the *The News International*, the largest English language daily in Pakistan, Ammara Durrani studied the prevailing water crisis in Pakistan and its impact on the country's largest city, Karachi, which has also witnessed a steady rise in the graph of ethnic violence in recent years. The hypothesis was that given Karachi's backdrop the city's water problem may aggravate its law and order situation on two counts. First, the water crisis may be politically manipulated by contending political forces for their own ends. Second, given the fact that it directly affects a large number of the city's civil population the scope of this conflict may enhance traditional ethnic rivalries therein.

The themes chosen for the project stories include the political dimensions of the inter provincial conflict between the Punjab and the Sindh provinces on sharing of the Indus waters, the governmental and experts' responses and initiatives to address the conflict, the impact of the water crisis in the poorest urban communities of Sindh, living on the coast of Karachi, and the most water starved and politically sensitive localities of Karachi. The project also investigates the gender dimensions of the water crisis. By writing an article based on the overall assessment of the observations, Ammara Durrani also attempts to reach out to pockets and constituencies of stakeholders who are actually setting the direction and pace of the conflict.

Considering visual reality an important part of the media presentation of an issue, the author also took photographs on the field which were published along with the feature stories to provide readers a first hand exposure of the problem at hand. These have been reproduced in the publication.

WISCOMP has through its fellowship programme sought to promote scholarship on issues at the interstices of gender, non-traditional security, conflict resolution and peace. The collection of articles on how a vital, life sustaining resource like water can become a security issue offer fresh insights on how economic and social issues get "securitized" and carry lessons that resonate for the South Asian region as a whole.

# Distribution in question

While many towns of Karachi trudge the slow path to urban development, life for Lyariites gets tougher by the day. Anger and disillusionment have found a permanent home among these citizens deprived of as basic an amenity as water.

Mariam, 35, lives with her husband and five daughters in a congested neighbourhood of Chakiwara, Lyari Town in Karachi. She earns most part of her family's bread by labouring as a domestic worker in various homes around the area. Thanks to the rising inflation rates in the country, however, domestic labour does not bring Mariam enough for her family, in which the female majority is seen as bringing additional 'burdens' to home economics. For the past few years, therefore, Mariam and her husband have been struggling to meet their gaping ends meet by undertaking an additional yet a different kind of labour – selling water to their water-starved neighbours in Lyari.

It is not as if the couple have an abundance of water in their own little house. On the contrary, residents of Chakiwara are the worst affected when it comes to Lyari's historical problem of water shortage. Irregular supply of contaminated water is a routine in the area. Thin, lead water pipelines snaking through the narrow lanes of the colony's many dark and dank apartment buildings and houses are a sad reminder to their inhabitants of their failed attempts at getting water on a self-help basis. For them, the government went into slumber long ago.

Thus, Mariam and her husband walk everyday to Ghareeb Shah colony in Lyari to buy eight gallons of water for Rs.50. It takes them two rounds to bring this amount of water to their neighbourhood, where they sell it at a rate of Rs.3 per gallon. "I'm able to afford education for only three of my daughters, because I don't earn enough even after working like this for the whole day," says Mariam. "I don't like selling water to my own neighbours but what can I do? I try to derive consolation from the fact that this way, at least they are able to obtain some water rather than none at all!"

Sale of water in Karachi no longer remains a disquieting phenomenon. In the valley of River Indus, where fresh water once flowed freely for all forms of life as chief means of sustenance, today fresh water is sold as an urban commodity by various actors in various forms. Whether it is the sparkling bottled water produced by multinational companies; or water quotas regulated and sold by the Rangers; or private gallons delivered to the doorstep by the Tanker Mafia; or donkey-cart drivers and their water-filled plastic drums doing the rounds in water-starved localities; or little boys dashing around bus-stops with their glasses of water for weary passengers – this precious gift of Nature is now being profited on, because nothing in life comes free now.

Still, there are big pockets of human living in this urban jungle, where citizens seem to be paying too high a price for obtaining as basic an amenity as water. Life for Lyariites – one of the oldest city communities – seems a bit too unfair with perpetual shortage of water, electricity, basic health, education, and roads; topped with rising unemployment, politics of corruption, crime and drug abuse.

With a teeming population of 6,07,992, Lyari was part of old District Karachi South; but since the introduction of the City District Government Karachi, it has now been given the status of a Town, divided into 11 Union Councils, headed by a Town Nazim. Lyari – named after the now dead River Lyari, which once flowed into the Arabian Sea – is historically considered as the ‘Mother of Karachi’. It played a crucial role in Karachi’s transformation as a thriving commercial port city, by providing cheap labour and resources. Yet, today it represents urban decay and poverty. At a level of basic provisions not exceeding subsistence level, provision of water remains a primary grievance for the bulk of the town’s population.

“Don’t give us anything; just give us water,” cries Mohammad Ali, 45, another resident of Chakiwara as his neighbours join him to register their complaints. As a ‘consumer’ of water, Mohammad Ali buys a portion for his household everyday from various sources, with his daily expense amounting to Rs.40-50. As a daily-wage labourer having a large family, it does not take genius to figure out how water must dominate his household budget at the expense of other essentials.



While water is supplied to several parts of the town, Middle Lyari – which houses the town’s bulk and poorest population – is facing acute crisis in areas such as Chakiwara, Jhatpat Market, Gulistan Colony, Phoolpati Lane, Baghdadi, Daryabad, Nayabad, etc. Interestingly, class divisions cutting across the town also affect appropriation/distribution of water. At the same time, several inter-family arrangements are struck between the haves and the have-nots to extend ‘water co-operation’.

Outside homes, however, life is tougher. At the local City Government Karachi Girls’ Elementary School No. 40, Principal Rukhsana tells of the appalling conditions under which her young students are trying to get education, with lack of water being their chief complaint as another sweltering summer descends. “Forget about not getting textbooks on time; these kids don’t even have clean water to drink through the day.” She points to the new blue-tiled *sabeel* (water tank) constructed with funds once received courtesy Khushaal Pakistan Programme. “It is of no use to us, since the water that comes in those taps is not even fit to wash bathrooms with; it’s black and it reeks of sewage.” Sure enough, it’s ugly looking and it stinks, and the school has been receiving this water since 30 January 2004.

Rukhsana tells that the Town Nazim had visited the school upon receiving complaints, but to date no action has been taken to correct a situation, which is putting the lives of 80 young girls in extreme danger. “Perhaps the government thinks that if these people don’t die any other way, they will die this way!” she laughs with irony.

Anger and disillusionment have found a permanent home among the residents of Lyari. Public demonstrations and agitation to protest against shortages of water and electricity are routine features.

“With its poverty and social deprivation, this place has long been a breeding ground for hardened criminals,” says Town Police Officer (TPO) Lyari, Faisal Noor. “With no basic facilities or employment, what else do you expect but gang warfare, drug abuse and public outrage!” Noor tells that stone-pelting at the police and torching of rubber tyres and vehicles during power and water shortages is a common occurrence in Lyari, whereupon the police can do nothing more than informing the concerned authorities for action, which seldom comes.

On the other hand, local elected representatives find themselves powerless and disgraced for not being able to deliver what they had promised in lieu of their election. “People have turned against us because we have not been able to solve their problems,” says Abdullah Rahim, councilor, Chakiwara. “They know only us and no one in the bureaucracy, so they look towards us for action; but we are helpless; even the Town Nazim is not heard,” he says, adding: “We are not given water connections, which is our due right. When the tenders carry our names, then why aren’t the connections given to us?”

Rahim informs that his Union Council gets Rs.97,000 per month, most of which ends up being spent on road and infrastructure maintenance, despite water and sewerage being priority areas. “We would be getting a Rs.65 lakh budget in the near future, and we aim to work on the underground water system first and foremost,” he says.

Indeed, such crises as Karachi’s persistent water-shortage have proved to be the biggest testing grounds for the embryonic City District Government, which came to power three years ago as a result of General Pervez Musharraf’s Devolution of Power Plan, aimed at ‘bringing democracy to the grassroots’. Local Bodies complain of not being empowered or resourceful enough to bring about that promised change.

“This is a new system, but it is being run on old theories,” says Lyari Town Nazim, Abdul Khalique Jumma, while commenting on the worsening water crisis and the failure of the local government in dealing with it effectively. “They have told us to generate our own revenues and spend them on our development; but how can Lyari – which earns only two crore rupees – be as developed as Saddar, which earns forty crore rupees?” he questions sarcastically. “We also want clean, continuous water supply, health, electricity, roads, parks, schools for our town, but we can’t have any of that unless we have equal distribution of resources,” he says, adding: “We cannot earn revenues on our own to develop ourselves like other towns; they need to think this whole thing through.”

Jumma is of the opinion that dilapidated towns with little resources should be granted special grants by the government to develop themselves at par with better towns in the city. “I have drawn a Rs.680m budget for Lyari and have sent it to all the higher authorities; but I have yet to hear anything on it from any quarter.”

Political representatives, however, see water deprivation of Lyari as a microcosm of the larger political persecution and ethnic political divisions, which have prevailed in the city for years. “Lyari has been the fortress of the political power of the People’s Party in Karachi,” says PPP MPA Nasreen Chandio, elected from and resident in Lyari. “It was Z. A. Bhutto who first brought education, health, electricity and water lines to the locality, and since then every time, there has been a PPP government in power, this area has benefited in one form or another.” It was during the Zia years first, says Chandio, that the area was cut off from the rest of city development plans, and it suffered backwardness for many years. “People have been made victims for their political orientation and loyalties; when those opposed to the PPP come to power, they deliberately undertake actions, which increase the plight of our people.”

Chandio informs that she recently tried to lodge a protest in the Sindh Assembly to bring attention to the water crisis in her constituency. “I wanted to sit on the assembly’s floor everyday until the concerned minister took up my complaint, but the Assembly Speaker ruled out my point of order, insisting that he would only allow debate on the one-point agenda.” She believes that Lyari is being deprived of its rightful share of water as a result of deliberate unequal distribution across the city: “If the pipelines of Gulshan-e-Iqbal burst everyday with the sheer pressure of water abundance, flooding its roads, then why isn’t there enough water for Lyari?”

Voicing her concern about the shortage affecting public attitudes towards political engagement, Chandio says that people have become extremely disillusioned with political parties: “They are no longer willing to vote because they feel that their votes have no value. They turn away politicians and engineers alike, saying no one takes any action to better their lives. Even demos have lost their significance for these people!”

Yet, she points out, PPP is at the forefront of the anti-Thal Canal and Kalabagh Dam movement, which aims to stop construction of these mega projects seen as threatening the meager water resources of Sindh. “That battle is, of course, for Sindh; and Lyari and Karachi are parts of Sindh,” she says.

Urban community developers see Lyari's enormous problems as an example of lack of proper urban planning of Karachi. "Because of community and political processes in the area, people have become conscious enough that they are being denied services and, therefore, being meted out with injustices," says Abdul Rahim Moosvi, president, Lyari Community Development Project, which has been working in the locality for the past 50 years. These injustices are connected to the larger national issues, he says, pointing: "Water is not a Lyari-only problem anymore; it has become a problem for the whole province."

Moosvi, however, feels that the problem is technical and not political. "NGOs took up the water issue many years ago, but organisations cannot take up all the issues," he says, concluding: "Government has to step in, own up and carry out its responsibilities. It is a matter of better planning and management. There should be an integrated programme for the uplift of the whole town so that its people can be engaged positively."

# Living on the fringe

Devoid of life's basic provisions, Sindh's many fishing villages depict their inhabitants' helplessness in the face of government apathy. For them, God – and the sea – is their only hope for survival.

Heading towards the beaches of Hawks Bay, Sands Pit and Paradise Point, entertainment-starved Karachiites are usually too focused on their picnics to pay much attention to the numerous little *goths* (villages) scattered along the city's coast. Tucked neatly behind yellowed boundary walls erected by the Karachi Development Authority (KDA), separating them from the main road and the beautiful sea huts of the rich and the famous, these *goths* extend along the coastline up to the Hub Mountains, situated on Sindh's border with Balochistan.

Inhabiting these *goths* are the oldest people of present-day Karachi – Sindh's fishermen. Until recently, their villages were referred to as rural Karachi. With the setting up of the City District Government (CDG) in 2001, however, they were brought into the 'urban' administrative fold – on paper at least. Bunched together within the CDG unit of UC-8 Gabopat, there are 104 *goths* spread across eight *dehs* in Keamari Town No. 1, mostly inhabited by fisher folk and those linked to the fishing trade in one way or another. Local population mostly consists of Sindhis and Balochis who have been living in these villages for generations.

Administrative 'up-gradation' of these communities, however, has done little for their betterment, with rural poverty now transformed into a unique case of urban poverty, without a chink in the old setup. Though the villages sit on land owned by KDA, CDG and the Cantonment Board, yet the only sign of these agencies' groundwork in the region appears to be the concrete boundary walls encircling the *goths*, prohibiting their expansion; and the narrow road linking them to the city, which in their case is UC-6 Maripur!

Our first stop is Abdul Rehman Goth. With a population of 7,000, it is considered to be the most 'developed' of all Gabopat villages.

“Our main problems revolve around lack of basic amenities such as water, health, education, electricity, gas etc,” a local informs us, as we walk along the village’s narrow lanes twisting between tiny wooden huts outlined with fishing nets. “Lack of potable water is our biggest problem,” he adds.

A handful of village men and children accompany us, as we go around looking at the rustic settings, with aquamarine waters of the Arabian Sea glittering under a January sun just a few furlongs away. A spiritual chant in women’s voices echoes out of the tiny local mosque, enveloping the village in its hushed hypnotism.

Abdul Rehman Goth, like all villages of Gabopat, has not been provided with a water connection. A pipeline extends from Maripur to the neighbouring Karachi Nuclear Power Plant (KANUPP), going directly through the village, but neatly leaving it without a connection. As in other water-starved localities of Karachi, the tanker mafia comes to the rescue of these villagers to meet their crucial water needs. The whole *goth* buys water from private tankers after every 15 days or so, which is then preserved in small tanks built in their little huts, to be used miserly. Approximately 200 gallons worth of salty water obtained from central city areas, such as Sher Shah Colony and Manghopir, is purchased for Rs. 400 from these tankers, which is used for washing and bathing purposes.

Access to sweet water is even more difficult. A household may go to the Gabopat UC office – where the village water is stored – to register its name with a request to the UC Nazim for water delivery. A number is given to the family, and thereupon delivery of the requested supply takes between 20 days to 1.5 months. A single UC tanker delivery of this lone source of sweet water costs Rs. 75; given its value, it is used only for cooking and drinking purposes by the villagers. Cleanliness of water – whether sweet or sour – remains questionable. Water-borne diseases are, therefore, common in the area, with only one ill-equipped dispensary struggling to meet the medical needs of the villagers, without a doctor.

With so much of their meager income spent on appropriation of water, it is but natural for the villagers to spend less on other essential items of daily use, such as food, clothing and fuel. They seek to cut their

costs in other ways. For instance, women avoid going to the city too often, and collect firewood from the nearby forests themselves, instead of purchasing it from the woodcutters. Firewood is their only source of fuel, since the village has no gas; whereas villages beyond Abdul Rehman do not even have electricity.

On the other hand, dwindling livelihood in the seawaters due to the harm caused by deep-sea fishing and use of harmful fishing nets is adding to the poor fishermen's woes. As compared to the past, their present fish catch comprises of 75% less than the earlier ratio. "We are left with virtually no catch for days now," says Niyaz, a resident. "The situation has become bad; we are now forced to leave our ancestral occupation and increasingly depend on taking tourists into the sea in our boats, and earn our bread thus," he says.

The result is a perpetual cycle of indebtedness for these poor fishermen and their families who often take loans from their dealers to meet their daily expenses. In the seasonal trade of fishing – with only five months out of twelve suitable for the catch – the current livelihood crisis faced by Sindh's fishermen has assumed disastrous proportions. Much of this crisis is also attributed to shortage of fresh water inflow from River Indus into the Arabian Sea.

Water needs of the *goth* are also met by the nearby rain reservoirs – which fill when the skies are kind – a few underground wells, and some hand-pumps. Nearby Sumar Goth has become relatively fortunate because its residents steal water from the KANUPP pipeline. Women of Abdul Rehman Goth often travel the distance to Sumar Goth to fetch water, instead of buying it from the tankers to save money.

"We are still far more developed than the rest of the villages in Gabopat, because at least we have some education and awareness in our village," says 27-year-old Parveen who teaches at the local primary school. A Matriculate herself, Parveen hails originally from Lyari Town; she came to Abdul Rehman Goth after getting married to her fisherman husband, Mehboob, 35. "It is because of this awareness that at least some of our women are able to go to the UC office to demand water," she says, adding: "Women in other villages can't even do that, not only because of lack of education, but also because of lack of encouragement from their men folk."

To be fair, the village does boast of a community water tank constructed by the first PPP government in 1988. To date, however, the tank remains empty due to lack of a water connection. “If the KANUPP line is extended to our village, all our problems would be solved,” says Haider, 24, a second-year college student who also teaches at the local school.

Shouldn’t the *goth*’s inclusion in the CDG make its future any brighter? In answer, locals express a high degree of pessimism. Traditionally a PPP electoral constituency, they have been disappointed too many times by successive governments, which have been unable to solve their most basic of problems. Political apathy pervades within the community, which seems to leave its matters to fate and resign itself to the sea and its elements. “Our nazim is familiar with our problems, and he conducts his monthly rounds in the village,” says Umeed Bakhsh, 20, a first-year college student who also teaches at the local school. “But the situation remains unchanged on the ground,” he laments.

Breaking from their past political loyalties, the villagers voted for the rival MQM in the 2002 elections, on the promised hope of employment generation for the village youth. “Our MPA always assures us of things changing soon, but they remain the same,” says Umeed Bakhsh. “Our main problem is lack of education and mobilisation on the issue of our rights; our people expect everything to be done by those whom they have elected to the assemblies through their votes,” he says.

The prospect of traveling further ahead to see the ‘less developed’ villages of Gabopat appears daunting, as we leave Abdul Rehman Goth behind on our way to Mubarak Village, the last and apparently the poorest along the coastline. As the Hub Mountains near, we see several trucks loaded with red sand and stone heading towards the city to provide building material for its high rises. “Not only are these people’s livelihoods threatened in the sea, and their land becoming infertile due to the persistent drought; now even their mountains are being reduced to rubble, thanks to the builder mafia and the unending greed of the city, which denies its original inhabitants as basic an amenity as water,” laments Mohammad Ali Shah, chairperson, PFF. Shah points out that sand-lifting continues unchecked despite the imposition of Section 144 in the area.



The road narrows further as we get closer to the Hub Mountains and the Sonera Bander Creek, which the fishermen use as their harbour, and where also Mubarak Village is located. The fume-emitting chimneys of the neighbouring Hubco Power Plant are clearly visible. Shah tells us that the plant has also become a source of grievance to the locals who blame its poisonous fumes for an increase of night-blindness among them, and marine pollution due to its effluent being discharged into the sea.

We make a brief stop at Deh Allah Bano, where fisherman Abdul Sattar, 58, is waiting at the local tea-shop to tell us about the problems faced by the 18 villages of his *deh* – the chief being absence of a link road from the villages to the main highway, and lack of water – thus making the lives of its 5,000-6,000 resident population extremely difficult. “In the absence of a link road, even private water tankers are reluctant to come to our *deh* to provide us with water,” says Sattar, who also enjoys the ‘distinction’ of having spent 16 months in the Indian prison as a captured Pakistani fisherman. “We pay them Rs. 1000 to come here, and we have no UC tanker at our service,” he informs.

Local health facilities are also dilapidated, depending on a lone dispensary constructed in 1972, which has been dysfunctional since then! “We have to carry the sick on camels from our villages to the highway, and then get a vehicle to take them to the city hospital,” tells Sattar. He says that when he went to the local nazim with a request for the construction of a link road for Deh Allah Bano, the nazim sent him back instructing him to get the total estimate of the costs incurred for such a project. Sattar further tells that City Nazim, Naimatullah Khan had also been apprised of the situation, when he visited the area last year to inspect the outbreak of the Mubarak Village Dam; but no action was taken to address the villagers’ plight, who have not heard from the City Nazim since then.

As we prepare to move on, Sattar hands us a torn piece of paper, on which he has painstakingly scribbled down the multitude of problems faced by his people, expressing his hope that we would be able ‘to do something’. “They have now become cynical and tired of attending to visitors who come to see their plight out of some interest, only to

return and not come back,” utters Shah. His cynicism is apparent: “I’d like to ask the City Nazim, ‘Where is their share in the Rs. 29bn CDG development package for Karachi?’”

During our journey, we come across several *madressahs* scattered between villages. Shah tells us that these *madressahs* are a recent phenomenon. “Historically, the fishing community was not religious to such a formal extent,” he says. “But since these *madressahs* were established here – mostly by the Jamaate Islami – the local people have been happy because their children can now get some kind of education for free, which in the past they couldn’t.”

The landscape opens to show many scattered villages, with scanty vegetation and muddy water ponds, where both humans and animals avail their water needs at the same time. The life stories of their residents are no different from their neighbours in Abdul Rehman Goth or Deh Allah Bano; on the contrary, increased distance from the city perpetuates their problems manifolds. On the Sonera Bander Mountains, Pakistan Navy’s Nathiagali Base is visible, which has conveniently fenced the region, making most of it off limits to the locals.

“The base has electricity, but they don’t give it to the villages,” says Shah, who points to the fenced land, adding: “The locals fear that in future they would be taken off from their ancestral lands. This may lead to our conflict with them. First, we had the KDA putting us behind boundary walls; and now we have these agencies fencing us out. If the rest of the city population is allowed to expand their colonies, why can’t we?”

Khuda Gunj, 35, a local of Mubarak Village, informs that PN uses the area for its firing drill, which disturbs the villagers. “In the past, they used to issue warnings to the locals before starting their drill; now they don’t even do that,” he complains.

Situated at a distance of nearly 30kms from the city, Mubarak Village has a population of 5,600, facing similar problems as its neighbours. Poverty’s extent can be gauged from the appalling fact that the village is devoid of household toilets. Rocky cliffs on the shore are used by the village men for the purpose, while women go to the nearby forests outside the village.

The village has its own water tanker provided by the government, which remains under the control of the local *wadera*. The *wadera* takes Rs. 1200 for each tanker full of water delivery to the village; in that amount not only does he cover the expenses incurred but also his own 'service charges'. Most of the village's community services – such as school, community hall etc. – are located nearer to his own house, situated at a distance from the rest of the village. Locals say the *wadera*'s children are better off than most villagers, with the best opportunities at their disposal. Fear and suppression, however, keeps the villagers from voicing their concerns.

Khuda Gunj tells us about an NGO recently coming to the village to set up windmills for extraction of water and other water projects. "But we are not happy because they did not include community participation in the design and implementation of the project," he says, adding: "There isn't enough groundwater or wind anyway for its success!"

His 4-year-old son, Junaid, shyly joins us for a humble late afternoon lunch in his one-room hut, as we sit on the floor listening to Gunj's stories of his work as a local activist struggling with a rights-based advocacy within his community. Junaid has been suffering from Hepatitis for the past several days. While his father has been busy with the city journalists all day, briefing them about the plight of his community, the boy's mother has been up since morning at the village's dirty pond to wash clothes. She has not returned even as the day comes to an end. Little Junaid has been on his own all day.

"If you ask my people what complaints they have against the government for their miserable lives, they'll tell you they have none," says Gunj, adding: "They'll only say, 'Our votes don't work, so we have left our lives to God'."

# The vulnerable water carriers

*Fishing village of Ibrahim Hyderi's water carriers, i.e. women, stand at the very bottom of the social hierarchy when it comes to water appropriation and use by the community.*

The bumpy, near-broken road leading to the biggest fishing village of Asia goes through the heart of Karachi's industrial area. Traveling from the bustling city center to Ibrahim Hyderi Village, one finds the route offering a study of stark contrasts. Commercial high-rises gradually give way to vast industrial plants of Korangi creek, their monstrous chimneys puffing out thick pollution across the coastal skyline. On the ground, the picture is no less ugly with small creeks and fertile patches blackened with sewage and chemical waste freely saturating the area.

Across the horizon stretches a thick, long pipeline carrying millions of gallons of precious water from Korangi to its rich neighbourhood of Defense Housing Authority (DHA). Along with the puffing chimneys, this pipeline manages to remain the longest in view as one moves towards Ibrahim Hyderi. When the village finally comes into sight, it comes as a surprise.

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Teeming with a population of 1,25,000 spread across an area of 480 acres, it sits adjacent to the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) Base Korangi Creek on its southeast, with a low-lying wall dividing the two. Nearby lies the Korangi Thermal Power Station, and to its south extend the deep blue waters of the Arabian Sea. Standing at the apex of the dividing wall with the heavily guarded gate of the Base on one hand, and the maze of the village on the other, one is struck by the difference between the two worlds of a powerful state establishment and an ancient community settlement – the latter having constituted 'rural' Karachi for the past 400 years.

The village air is thick with a stench of fisheries and sewage combined. While traversing the narrow, sewage-filled lanes of the village, one sees the typical paraphernalia of a fishing culture in the form of fishing nets, boats, and fish trucks scattered across the locality. An outstanding

feature, however, is the sight of local women and girls of all ages carrying aluminum water pots – locally known as *handas* – on their heads and waists, doing their morning round of collecting water for their households.

“Scarcity of potable water is the biggest problem for our village,” says Tahira Ali, deputy general secretary and president of the women’s unit of Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF), the largest non-governmental organisation representing Pakistan’s coastal communities for the past several years. “While the local fishermen spend most of their lives in the sea waters in search of livelihoods, local women spend their lives as the village’s water carriers, embroiled in a generational struggle to obtain this precious commodity for their families.”

A popular local account narrates that the village was once visited by the Nawab of Kalabagh several years ago. Given his political clout, the Nawab was requested by the then local union council chairman for facilitating a line connection for water delivery to the village. To this, the Nawab had pointed to the sea and said, ‘When such a large river is present near you, why do you people demand water then?’

With the popular adage of ‘water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink’ being thoroughly applicable to Ibrahim Hyderi, the tragic fact of the matter is that the village has remained without adequate fresh water supply for more than three decades now. Centuries ago, this tail-end region had easy access to the Indus Delta’s fresh water, which provided the local women with the opportunity to undertake agricultural farming, besides contributing to their traditional economy of fishing.

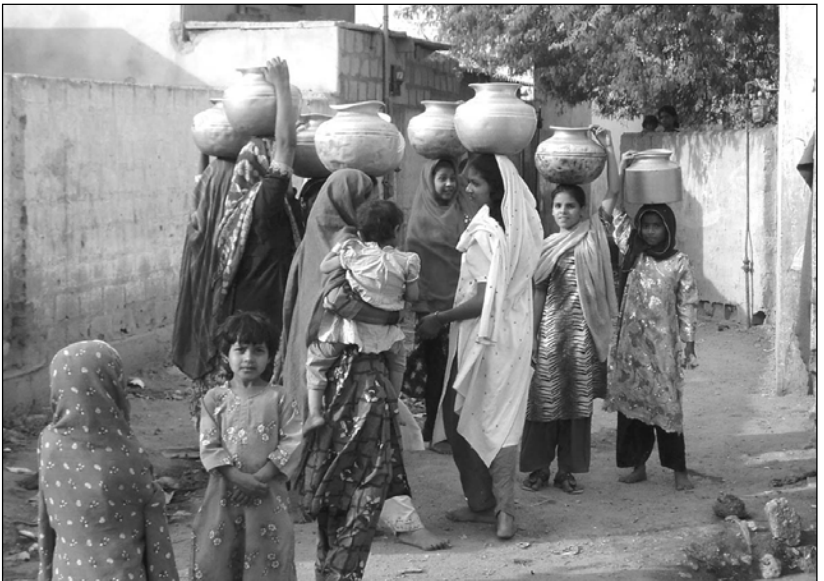
Those were prosperous days for these fisher folk. For them, even though fresh water remained precious because of its relative scarcity in the tail-end region (as compared to the upper riparian region of the Indus River Valley), yet their village had plenty of underground wells from where the local women would draw sweet water for household use. Rainwater reservoirs were another source, which provided sufficient amounts for the community, to the extent of fostering livelihoods for some women. The passage of time, however, brought in its wake a burgeoning population, environmental degradation and the state’s controversial water management policies, which impinged on the local community’s limited water resources.

## Ibrahim Hyderi Village



**State negligence:** The village's central pumping station lies destitute, neglected and unprotected from water thieves and stray animals amidst overgrown vegetation mixing with surrounding sewage water and muddy grounds.

24



**Burden of responsibilities:** It's a long journey from the source of water to their homes, and these women make four to five rounds on foot every day to fetch water, carrying heavy *handas* on their heads and waists.

## Mubarak Village



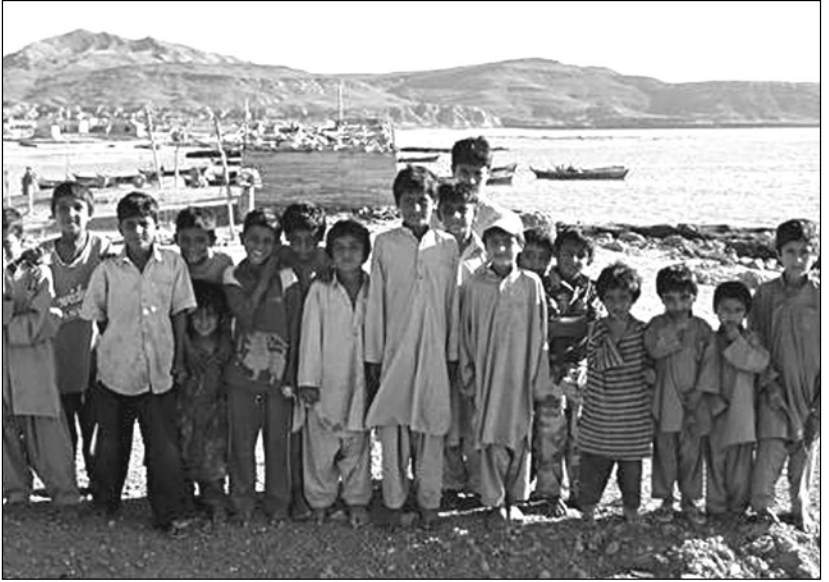
*Net results:* Fishing nets are an integral part of this fishing community's lifestyle – whether for making a catch or building a home.

25



*Rain, rain, come again:* Natural ground troughs filled with rain water are the best resource for local villagers, who remain far from the reach of city supply lines.

## Mubarak Village (Contd.)



*Children of the sea:* Born and raised on the shores of the Arabian Sea, these children are destined to follow the ancient profession of their fishermen ancestors, while education remains a dream.

26



*Home sweet home:* Dangerously close to the seashore, small wooden huts of the local fisher families are still built with the same materials and on same designs as built by their ancestors; there is no concept of latrine or sewerage.



## Mubarak Village (Contd.)



*Life of labour:* An old fisherman mends his aging net in the shadow of an abandoned hut.



*Shared bounty:* Village women and animals draw and use water from a nearby rain-ground for washing, bathing and drinking purposes.

## Lyari



*Urban living:* The hustling and bustling streets of Lyari.

28



*Selling water wares:* A local woman sells earthen water pots and jars in the colony market. In the age of bottled mineral water, these clay utensils are still used for fetching and storing water by local families.

## Lyari (Contd.)



**Measured supplies:** Thin water lines snake into the local apartment buildings, seldom delivering the utility for which they have been laid uncovered.

29



**Tanks galore:** Smack in the middle of their apartment entrance, residents have stored all kinds of water utensils for daily usage.

After independence in 1947, the village remained without a water supply line until 1973, even though the adjacent PAF Base had promptly been provided with one. Riding high on the power of the village votes, it was Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's government in 1973, which delivered Ibrahim Hyderi its first – and to date, the only – water line – actually an extension of the PAF Base line. Some locals recall that they first saw water coming out of taps during the Bhutto years; this bounty, however, was short-lived as with the end of the Bhutto government in the late '70s, those taps only emitted air!

Since the '80s, thus, Ibrahim Hyderi has continued to experience acute water shortage.

“Global water consumption indexes put the present day per head need of water between 10 to 30 gallons everyday,” informs Mohammad Ali Shah, chairperson, PFF. “If we calculate our village's daily water needs from the least required scale of 10 gallons per head every day, then we should at least be getting 12 lakh gallons of water daily. But we are receiving only 1.5-2 lakh gallons of daily water, which is not even covering 30% of our community needs.” Shah believes that even if the government provides the village with six lakh gallons of water out of the least required 12 lakh gallons, many of the village's problems would be solved.

Government apathy is, indeed, a major source of the village's water dilemma, which in turn breeds numerous health and environment-related problems for the community in general. Water-borne diseases constitute the highest ratio of health risks in the area, with women and children being particularly vulnerable to them. With only one government hospital operating in the village – and that too without proper staffing and resources – these risks get multiplied manifolds.

Lack of state support aside, water scarcity in the village is perpetuated at the hands of the local tanker mafia, and routine theft of water by the more 'resourceful' elements of the community. Even though the local Jamote *waderas* are firmly seated at the top of the village's political hierarchy as community 'leaders', and they regularly dispense 'justice' in their *panchayat*, problems pertaining to basic amenities, such as water, remain unresolved for the villagers of Ibrahim Hyderi.

Ironically, the village's water carriers, i.e. women, stand at the very bottom of the social hierarchy when it comes to water appropriation and use by the community. From an era when they were active contributors to the once prosperous economy of their village, most women of Ibrahim Hyderi today find themselves caught in a vicious cycle of poverty and depravation, by virtue of which their traditional role as water seekers and carriers has become more arduous than ever.

"I came to this village fifty years ago as a child," says Masi Hanifa, 60, mother of six. "Back then we had no water; and after all these years, there's still no water for us," she says with a twisted smile, her hazel green eyes reflecting a hardy glint, which speaks of her contented acceptance of such a basic depravation as her 'fate'. "In the past I used to fetch water for my family, now my three daughters do it," she smilingly points to her eldest daughter Mehr-un-Nisa sitting nearby.

Mehr has never been to school so she does not know how old she is. But she knows her daily tasks by heart, and performs them efficiently round the clock. Being the eldest daughter of the house, she is responsible for looking after the needs of her fishermen father and brothers, as well as younger siblings. Among her chief daily duties is fetching water, which she does twice a day. She conducts her first set of water rounds between 9 a.m. and 12 p.m. during which she transports 5-6 *handas* of water from a nearby house fortunate enough to have a connection. Her second set of rounds is conducted between 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. In her entire day spent between carrying water and household chores, she gets only one hour for herself in which she stitches clothes to earn some extra money for her family.

Mehr's father, Ali Mohammad, tells that their daily income amounts between Rs. 200 to 300, out of which between Rs. 50 to 100 are spent on water every day. "In this situation, we cannot afford to send our children to school," he explains his rationale for not educating his children. "The boys can't go to school because they have to catch fish with me in the sea; and the girls have to spend the day collecting water and doing housework. Even then, we are too poor to afford education anyway!" he laughs cynically.

But lack of education is not the only loss for Mehr and other young girls of Ibrahim Hyderi. Becoming water carriers at an early age brings

responsibility as well as pain and sacrifice. A common complaint among young women of the village is loss of hair due to routine carrying of heavy *handas* on their heads; constant pain in the head, neck, shoulders and waists; and blisters in their feet. The mental torture of stepping out of the house everyday and facing frequent eve-teasing, harassment and invasion of privacy at the hands of the local louts is another story altogether, which often results in community conflicts. Competition and conflict among the local women for obtaining water is another characteristic feature of this daily struggle for survival.

At home, women are no winners either when it comes to the actual use of this precious commodity, which they appropriate at the cost of such physical and mental torture.

“Most of the water in my house is used for the purposes of washing my father’s and brothers’ clothes and their bathing, because of their frequent exposure to sea air and water, which requires much use of fresh water to fight off its harmful effects,” Mehr laments. “This leaves little water for my use or that of my sisters and mother.”

“Naturally, when we earn the main livelihood for the family, then it is our right first to use water,” quips Mehr’s elder brother sitting nearby, who has plenty of his own grievances against government attitude towards the fishermen and their rights. It becomes apparent thus, as confirmed by Mai Hanifa and her daughters, that family feuds on judicious use of water is a common occurrence in the lives of the villagers.

“To say that this is our ‘fate’ and accept it as such is not the right attitude,” argues Tahira Ali, who has been at the forefront of voicing to the government and other concerned agencies her community’s many concerns, including the demand for water. “We see that water pipeline stretching out over our heads and going to the rich houses of DHA with as much water as they desire; the government has been delaying laying down new connections for our village saying that it has to make sure first that DHA’s supply does not get affected. But we have as much right to this water as them, so why are we being denied our fair share?” she questions.

Tahira says that Ibrahim Hyderi's history of community resistance and struggle has primarily revolved around demand for adequate water share for the village and its people. Though she sees most of the village's problems intricately linked to each other, and growing in proportion by the day, yet she believes that community awareness and organised struggle is the only way for gaining rights to life's basic amenities.

"We are angry because we believe that justice must be given out at all levels." She acknowledges that media and civil society intervention in recent years has brought to the fore the problems of the fishing community, which is a source of some comfort. "But," she says, "the struggle is far from over. It needs to be taken to the next level."

# Sindh's conflicting realities

*The February 10th rally held in Karachi against greater Thal Canal and Kalabagh Dam signified a shift in the water conflict from being labeled as 'ultra-nationalist' to a 'national' political issue, the taking up of which the major political parties consider crucial in order to protect their respective electoral constituencies in Sindh.*

If one is to believe that e-governance is the future of Pakistan, then a visit to the website of Government of Pakistan's Ministry of Water and Power (<http://www.pakistan.gov.pk/water-power-ministry/index.jsp>) may prove to be an enlightening exercise for anyone following news and views on the country's on-going water conflict. The 'Vision Statement' carried by the Ministry's 'Overview' put up on the website reads thus: "Ministry of Water and Power will plan to meet future Energy and Water requirements throughout Pakistan. For this purpose in liaison and in consultation with Provinces, Wapda (its successors Organisations), International experts etc., plans will be developed, financing arranged and monitoring systems put in place, to implement the plans using, all available indigenous resources and I.T. facilities."

Even if one ignores the glaringly obvious typos and absence of context in the Statement for hope of finding relevant information supplementing its claims, one could be in for further disappointment. A visit to the linked website of the Water and Power Division of the Ministry (<http://www.pakistan.gov.pk/water-power-division/index.jsp>) reveals the 'Currently not available' status of almost all of the website's components, be it News & Press Releases, Policies or Publications. Despite the Division being "responsible for all the policy matters related to the subject of Water and Power", and "for the overall supervision of performance of organisation under its administrative control", little is available on its website in terms of basic information: it does not carry even the 1991 Water Apportionment Accord document, supposed to be implemented by the Indus River System Authority (IRSA). No mention is made of the two Technical and Parliamentary Committees



appointed by General Pervez Musharraf in August 2003 to look into and resolve the conflict, which has plagued the country for nearly four decades now. As for the Honourable Minister of Water and Power, Aftab Ahmad Khan Sherpao, the website carries a passport-sized photo of fading colours, underlined with an elusive promise of “details will be available soon”.

Should the government’s virtual attitude towards this crucial area of governance be pardoned on the excuse of lack of cyber sophistication; or should it be taken as an indication of, among other things, its apparent reluctance to take into account the gravity of the on-going inter-provincial water conflict? The latter being the case has been strongly worded in the World Bank’s latest Public Expenditure Management report on Pakistan titled “Accelerated Development of Water Resources and Irrigated Agriculture” (28 January 2004), leaving little room for doubt as far as the ground reality of the water debate is concerned. Analysing the government’s water policies, the report asserts: “While most of the debate has been about which major projects should be undertaken, perhaps the greatest challenge – the extent of political conflict over water and the breakdown of the last vestiges of a consensus on water – have received little effective attention,” (*Dawn*, April 1st).

The Bank’s remarks may come as a surprise to many of its critics in Pakistan, who have repeatedly accused it of providing financial assistance – particularly for construction of mega projects – to the government on conditions of compliance with policies, which are contrary to the socio-economic and developmental interests of affected communities threatened by loss of land and livelihoods.

It was to underscore this very threat-breakdown of the ‘consensus’ – that on February 10th, major political parties of Sindh had called for an anti-Thal Canal and Kalabagh Dam rally in the provincial capital Karachi. Sponsored by Greater Thal Canal & Kalabagh Dam Action Committee—a composition of the province’s major political parties – thousands of political activists, party workers, leaders, and ordinary men, women and children gathered in the city center and led a march on foot, bikes, cars, buses, trucks, and even camels, blocking several city arteries and causing a major traffic jam which lasted for hours.

Security was tight with the city police in their mobiles and the Rangers blocking major roads and monitoring the peaceful rally with eagle eyes, ready to spring into action at the slightest show of disturbance. Armed with loudspeakers, party flags, angry banners, symbolic matkas and water tanks, the procession began from the Mazare Quaid and after three hours of traversing through the city center, ended in front of the Karachi Press Club, where for another three hours several party leaders delivered fiery speeches, denouncing the centre's 'unjust' treatment of Sindh, and vowing to safeguard Sindh's water rights at the cost of their own blood.

Participants of the rally had come from all the major cities of Sindh including Hyderabad, Thatta, Badin, Nawabshah, Sukkhr, Larkana, Tharparkar and Jacobabad. "It is a matter of life and death for us Sindhis," said Mahmood, 45, an Awami Tehreek activist present at the rally. "50 years ago, our lands were green, now they are deserts; we don't even have water to bathe our dead; if they don't agree to our demands, then we will destroy the federation; we will leave Punjab." People from various parts of Karachi also came to register protest against water shortage in their areas, which they attributed to the lessening of Sindh's water share. "Water is now a major problem for Karachi also," observed Dr Shahida Rehmani, a PPP women's leader. "We will continue to protest against Kalabagh and Thal Canal."

For those, who had cynically written off the future of nationalist political parties owing to their huge losses in the last general elections, February's Karachi rally came as a bit of a surprise due to the show of strength put up by parties like Sindh Taraqqi Pasand, Sindh National Front and Awami Tehreek. On the following day, Jeay Sindh Qaumi Mahaz initiated its own campaign against the water projects by setting up a fast until death strike camp outside Karachi Press Club (KPC), which continued for nearly one month and ended only with the intervention of Sindhi intellectuals and literary organisations requesting the near-death striking party workers to end their fast.

At the same time, a leading presence of the PPP, PML (N) and MMA in the February 10th rally also signified a shift in the water conflict from being labeled as 'ultra-nationalist' to a 'national' political issue, the taking up of which all the major parties consider crucial in order to protect their respective electoral constituencies in Sindh. While the

conflict is still largely perceived as inter-provincial, the joining of ranks by these parties indicates a deliberate strategy to depict the conflict in a new light: on one hand is the military regime of General Musharraf, who has made known his controversial intention to go ahead with the construction of the water projects; while on the other hand are the opposition parties pitting themselves against the President on this contentious issue.

“The Nawaz Sharif government had not allowed construction of these projects, because we realised that they put national unity at stake,” said Zahid Rafiq Butt, senior vice-president, PML (N) Sindh. “This is not a Punjabi conspiracy against Sindh; we think these projects are only beneficial for army lands and not for the farmers; we reject these projects in favour of Sindhis, for Sindh’s rights; we demand an equal treatment of all provinces.”

The fact that eight attempts have been made since 1935 to reach inter-provincial agreement on water sharing in the Indus river basin is evidence of the difficulty of establishing water equity between the riparian units. In *The Politics of Managing Water* (OUP, 2003), Kaiser Bengali et al record that since 1947, the Sindh-Punjab Draft Agreement of 1945 had provided the legal framework for water distribution. However, with the drastic change in water resources brought by the Indus Waters Treaty (1960), the completion of most of the civil works (dams, barrages, gated siphons, and link canals) of the Settlement Plan thereafter, the allocation of water resources according to the 1945 agreement became invalid. Thereafter, four inter-provincial water apportionment commissions were set up between 1968-1983, which attempted to resolve the conflict, but without success. The Indus Water Accord of 1991 is the latest schedule of apportionment of the waters of the Indus River System, which is mired in controversy on several counts.

Last year, the water conflict achieved the status of a national political issue, coming second only to the Legal Framework Order (LFO). Sindh and Punjab remained at loggerheads in all the Irsa meetings, which failed to reach consensus on the distribution of the Indus River waters between the riparian units. In March 2003, the Sindh Provincial Assembly unanimously passed a joint resolution moved by both the treasury and the opposition, asking the Federal Government “to stop

the construction of the [Thal] canal as the province of Sindh has legitimate grievances, which need to be redressed.” This was followed in December by General Musharraf calling a high-level meeting on the issue, during which he directed the Parliamentary Committee as well as Irsa’s Technical Committee to come up with a “workable solution to all contentious water issues”, enabling the government to start the construction of Kalabagh Dam or Bhasha Dam “not later than” 2004 (*Dawn*, 10 December 2003).

The February 10th rally, therefore, marks something akin to a small watershed in the history of the conflict. It brought Sindh’s water war to its capital city, and got highlighted in mainstream media. In the past, protests launched and arrests made in interior Sindh on this issue were largely left for the vernacular press to cover. A scrutiny of the national press during the past two months, however, reveals a greater coverage of activities of the anti-Thal Canal and Kalabagh Dam forces as the conflict intensifies.

On March 30th, despite a strong warning issued by Sindh Chief Minister, Ali Mohammad Maher, JSQM activists held province-wide demos & sit-ins against the water projects; they tried to block all the major highways in Sindh leading to Punjab, causing traffic jams for several hours. The attempts resulted in police action leading to tear-gas shelling, lathi charge, firing, and hundreds of arrests of activists and party leaders in various cities of the province. JSQM Chief, Bashir Qureshi was reported as saying that their protest would continue until the government announces an end to the construction of the greater Thal Canal and Kalabagh Dam projects (*Dawn*, March 31st).

Given that the socio-political fabric of Pakistan is already checkered with sharp ethnic political differences, the water conflict is the latest and most active manifestation of these inherent traditional political divisions. Nationalist forces are citing it as the most obvious betrayal of their aspirations for socio-political and economic development within the federation, which they had adopted half a century ago. For the nationalists, their water war is a statement of their unfulfilled aspirations for national progress, and a resolve to fight back ‘designs’, which are aimed at their repression, subjugation and backwardness.

# Turbulent waters

*Political passions aside, the general public has little knowledge about the ground situation of the impending water crisis in Sindh.*

“A matter of life and death” is how most people in Sindh pronounce the inter-provincial water dispute, which has pitted Sindh and Punjab provinces against each other for years. Multiple facets of the resource related to the country’s socio-economic and environmental spheres have been studied in depth by various governmental and non-governmental actors. But nowhere can one identify as emotionally intense perspectives as those on the question of a fair distribution of the Indus River waters between the two provinces.

“Water scarcity is widely assumed,” observe Kaiser Bengali et al in *The Politics of Managing Water* (OUP, Karachi, 2003), a study published last year, which looks at the many problems of Pakistan’s water resources. “Yet, with more than 1300 cubic metres per person available annually, Pakistan is – by hydrological definitions – not exactly a water-stressed country. Nevertheless, tremendous shortages are experienced and most of the burden of scarcity affects the poor and poorer regions and areas.” Thus, says the study, water shortage is not just an issue of natural scarcity; it is a socially generated scarcity as well, created as a result of distortions in social and economic policies, which serve some sections of society at the cost of others. “Water scarcity is, thus, a function of politics,” asserts the study, at the center of which is the capture of the resource by the elite and the powerful, aided and abetted by the state.

With the Indus River System being its main source of water accumulation, Pakistan’s annual average flow is 140 million acre feet (MAF). The country depends on river and groundwater for about 80% of its agriculture, whereas, irrigated agriculture consumes about 97% of the total freshwater diverted from the rivers. Increase in industrialisation and urbanisation coupled with environmental degradation and climatic change put major demands on this finite source for a country of nearly 146m people, as the population graph continues

to soar. The problem, therefore, appears to be two-pronged: of scarcity *and* distribution. Both carry root causes of conflict, which are further magnified when they take on regional, class and gender dimensions.

“It’s not a conflict,” says Senator Nisar A. Memon, chairman, Parliamentary Committee on Water Resources. The committee was appointed by General Pervez Musharraf last year to put forth recommendations for a successful implementation of the inter-provincial 1991 Water Accord by the Indus River System Authority (Irsa). “This is a narrow view of looking at the issue,” Memon says, referring to the political controversy surrounding the projects of Kalabagh Dam and Greater Thal Canal. “We first have to look at the levels, the treaties, the ministerial decisions, the reservoirs, the dams etc. and we come to the question of larger dams much later. For the last 12-13 years, this controversy has remained unresolved. It would have been resolved if there had been a will by the past political governments. Why was the 1991 Water Accord not implemented for 10 years? They were even stuck on the Terms of Reference (TORs) of a study meant to be undertaken on the issue! Now we have a consensus that the Accord needs to be implemented. There are a few problems on its interpretation, but we are working on that.”

Memon informs that his committee is working to develop a water strategy for all concerned, where all aspects are well-defined, the objective being that the system must be effectively and equitably utilised. “We need a well-managed irrigation system and the funds to maintain it,” he says, adding: “Our present focus includes lining of canals, tributaries and channels and to ensure the effects of water in terms of environment, ecology, and to provide water to arid provinces likes Balochistan, 91% of whose lands fall outside the river system. We are working on a study of our water resources, which will take about one year; we want to ascertain our facts and figures and provide them to the public prior to making our recommendations to the government, so that if one wants to dispute those facts, they can do so openly.”

According to Memon, one big achievement of efforts for data-accumulation and transparency would be visible on Monday, April 26<sup>th</sup>, when the government would launch a website ([www.pakwaters.gov.pk](http://www.pakwaters.gov.pk)) containing all the relevant information and

documents pertaining to the water resources. He further tells that the committee plans on submitting its interim report to the government in June this year.

Setting up an official data-base ranks high with the Technical Committee on Water Resources, also appointed by General Musharraf last year. Says Chairman A N G Abbassi: “Our committee has the TORs relating to the water issues and our purpose is to complete coverage of the official data-base. Upon our request Irsa, Wapda, Planning Division and Ministry for Water and Power have also been co-opted in the committee. We are working as fast as possible, despite infrastructure problems.”

Abbassi further informs that initially, the committee would restrict its consultations to official agencies, with only suitable unofficial agencies consulted at a later stage if the need arises. “If there are missing links in the official data then we will seek unofficial expertise,” he says. “The official agencies were and would remain in-charge of the affairs of this country. We would do our job and walk out, while they would have to be responsible, fair and equitable.”

Abbassi is hopeful that all issues would soon be resolved if a professional approach is adopted. “There is no controversy,” he says. “Things are not as difficult as they seem, if looked at professionally. But if anyone wants to politically twist it, so be it. My personal view is that problems can be solved if two conditions exist: 1) that the person sitting across the table has his five senses intact; and 2) that he has bona fide intentions.”

But politics remains the sour point in this issue. When referred to Sindh’s political opposition to the government’s water policies, Memon quickly points to his committee’s efforts at creating a political dialogue. “We invited all political groups for a dialogue in the past, and opposition parties from NWFP, Balochistan and Punjab came, but not from Sindh,” he says. “Ask them why they did not come. Meanwhile, we are initiating another dialogue next month, and this time we would invite even those political factions, which are not in the Sindh Assembly but which enjoy a public voice and following. It is important that they be heard. After all, the consensus we are looking for must serve national interest, and it must rise above political perspectives.”

For opposition parties in Sindh, however, their political perspective speaks nothing short than the province's fundamental rights. "We refuse to talk to the Parliamentary Committee because it's illegal and it's not constitutional," says Leader of the Opposition Sindh Assembly and Provincial President Pakistan People's Party, Nisar Khuhro. "Any conflict has to be resolved by the Council for Common Interests (CCI) and only CCI has the power to constitute such committees. General Musharraf had categorically ruled out inclusion of any member from the Opposition – whether from MMA or ARD – in the Parliamentary Committee. What good is it then? The Technical Committee does not even have the TORs that Sindh demands. What good is it then?"

Pointing to Sindh Assembly's three unanimous rejections of construction of the projects, Khuhro says that both the projects are against the 1991 Accord since it makes no mention of them. He says that international water formula gives tail-enders the first right to water, and Sindh being the tail-ender, has been given a right by the Constitution of Pakistan to demand its rights. He rules out the possibility of any dialogue with the Parliamentary Committee: "No matter how many times they invite us, we will not go because we do not consider them legal. General Musharraf wants people to remain divided and the provincial governments don't have the guts to take up the issue with him. If he wants people on the streets, so be it."

Khuhro's views are shared by almost all major parties of Sindh. "The principled stand of all political parties is that the 1991 Accord be implemented in letter and spirit," says Jalal Mahmood Shah, former Sindh Assembly speaker and general secretary, Pakistan Oppressed Nations' Movement (PONAM). "Our main demands are that 10MAF minimum downstream Kotri flow out of the total 140MAF be ensured for Sindh, and the agreed percentage of Sindh should be given to it during shortages and surpluses. Today, however, Punjab does not cooperate with Sindh during shortages. Apart from Sindh Assembly, even Balochistan and NWFP Assemblies have also rejected the projects; only Punjab is sticking out. This means this is a Punjabi Pakistan, with no room for other nationalities or their needs and resources."

Political stakes in the water dispute – at least for political groups – are clearly high. A look at developments comprising of rallies,



demonstrations, hunger strikes and road blocks in Sindh during the last few months shows that no efforts have been spared to raise the issue by the major parties, drawing particularly on an emotional nationalist rhetoric. Political passions aside, however, the general public has little knowledge about the ground situation of the impending water crisis in Sindh.

Not only complex technicalities about the controversial water projects are often ignored in the larger debate, but also the ‘costs’ and ‘sufferings’ caused by the crisis often remain ambiguous for lack of enquiry – both aspects being seen as boringly tedious for consumption and mobilisation of the masses. This could partly explain the visible dichotomy that exists between the rather simplistic coverage of the issue by the national media, as opposed to the less publicised but detailed studies of the issue conducted by the scientific and academic communities.

“City journalists are simply not interested in this issue, neither do they understand its significance for the people of Sindh,” complains Karachi-based Aijaz Shaikh, staff reporter of the Sindhi daily *Khabrun* and Urdu daily *Khabrain*. “They don’t even know what the term ‘MAF’ means! For them, water shortage only becomes visible when they don’t get enough water in their taps for a shower during shortage in the city. Otherwise, they have enough water in their pipelines and even mineral water for drinking; why should they care what happens to the people interior Sindh where the crisis is actually visible at present?”

Stressing the importance of the role of national media in highlighting the issue, Shaikh further expresses his disappointment by revealing that in his own capacity as a journalist, he has tried several times to take city journalists to the affected sites in the province so that they could see the ground realities and talk to the affected people. “But they just don’t want to spend the time and energy required for that purpose,” he laments. “I often debate with them in the local press club, but they say it’s a purely technical issue and nothing more. They have little idea that for people living in interior Sindh, it’s a matter of life and death since their whole (agrarian) economy is linked to this precious resource.” Commenting on the routine disturbances reported in the vernacular Sindhi press, Shaikh says that people are fed up of the deteriorating situation. “If the shortage persists, then we can expect more local reaction and that could occur even next year.”

For those dealing with the economic repercussions of the crisis, however, the picture is vivid and worrisome. “It’s not technical but an economic issue, closely connected to the survival of Sindh,” says Qamaruzzaman Shah, president, Sindh Chamber of Agriculture, and a landlord with holdings of 125 acres in the province. Sketching a detailed picture of the historical and technical complexities involved in water sharing between Sindh and Punjab, Shah says that the Sindh Chamber of Agriculture first raised the issue when no one even knew about it, and that it became politicised much later. “The issue is simple,” he says. “Either Sindh gets water or it does not; and if it does not then even Karachi would not get its water, which comes from the Kotri Barrage through the Kulri Baghar Feeder.”

Citing negative effects of the water shortage in the province, Shah points to the human suffering caused by mass migrations from Badin, Thatta and Mirpurkhas to regions scattered all over the province. “There is no plan for their relocation; their cattle is dead and they have not cultivated any crop; they have become destitute,” he says, adding: “Most of these people have migrated to upper Sindh where there is a law and order situation today. Much land has become salty because of increasing sea intrusion, which is slowly traveling upwards. Downstream Kotri is totally dead, and half of the province is not under cultivation. If it further deteriorates, then the landlords would also feel the choke. Some in Punjab are even beginning to suggest that Sindh should now only take up industrialisation, while Punjab could produce agriculture; that is not on!”

But why do we see the landlord community largely passive in pressurising the government on this issue? “Unfortunately,” says Shah, “Sindh’s landlord community is sleeping. They think that somebody else would do the job for them. It will cost them in the long run. At present the upper landlords are getting some water from somewhere, while it is the lower landlords who are suffering. This division within the Sindhi community is protracting the conflict.”

# Towards a just distribution

*The inter-provincial water dispute continues to remain unresolved at the cost of the masses. Can the Ministry of Water & Power take a leaf from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' current manual on conflict resolution? No harm in trying.*

“Instead of communicating, we have been shouting at each other,” said Chairman, Parliamentary Committee on Water Resources, Senator Nisar Memon here in Karachi on Monday, while addressing a group of media persons. “We need a dialogue on the (water) issue instead of a shouting match!” he said at the end of a marathon session in which journalists from the Sindhi press and electronic media in particular felt no hesitation in throwing critical questions, arguments and jibes towards his appraisal of the issue. Earlier in the morning, key political parties of Sindh had made a pointed no-show at the meeting held particularly for their participation and engagement by the Committee. The message was loud and clear: dialogue is not possible unless demands are met.

Islamabad’s efforts notwithstanding, the mood in Sindh is clearly hostile. Recent calls emanating from the capital for ‘unemotional’ and ‘technical’ appraisal of the question over sharing of water between the country’s provinces have been met with derision and rejection. “The issue here is lack of trust between Punjab and the smaller provinces,” said one Sindhi columnist at the meeting, adding: “Even now you have come here with your mind made up that the controversial water projects would be built; this whole exercise in the name of ‘dialogue’ and ‘transparency’ is merely to fill paper. Where would trust come from, then?”

Over the years indeed, the distrust has become so deeply ingrained in the national psyche that nearly all policies of the Federal Government with regards to allocation of national resources and funds to the four provinces is perceived as nothing short of a conspiracy by the populous Punjab against the smaller provinces of Sindh, North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Balochistan. Punjab’s ‘design’, allege political representatives of the smaller provinces, is to deprive them of their

due rights and share in the national wealth, to safeguard its own vested interests.

It is true that nationalist politics feeding on such semantics has never been able to achieve major breakthroughs in mainstream politics of Pakistan; yet, at the same time it has never been shoved into political oblivion either. With regular intervals of emergence and subsidence, issues – such as the National Finance Commission (NFC) award, wheat procurement and water distribution – are taken up and coloured with nationalism to incite regional/provincial grievances vis-à-vis the Centre. Ethnic allegiance, thus, becomes the primary rule of the political game. Consequently, these issues have remained unresolved, and have only strengthened ethnic fissures and provincial disharmony as the characteristic features of the national polity. Opinions are freely expressed about ‘threats’ to the Federation looming large on the horizon if matters remain unresolved. The country’s uncomfortable historical reminders such as the 1971 debacle further reinforce a deep sense of mistrust and insecurity within the polity.

Given the longevity of the inter-provincial water dispute, coupled with an increase in the nationalist rhetoric, and that too at a time when the country finds itself on challenging foreign policy grounds in the wake of 9/11 and the ‘war on terror’, there is little wonder then that General Pervez Musharraf’s government stresses ‘national unity and harmony’ as a controlling strategy. The General’s personal intervention on the issue speaks volumes about its significance for the country’s political scene. For all its attempts at downplaying the ‘conflict’ dimension, Islamabad realises today that it has an inland crisis on its hands, which – if not resolved – could have serious consequences.

The India-Pakistan Indus Basin Treaty (1960) is marked as one of the most successful peace treaties in the history of bilateral relations between the two countries. In recent months, Pakistan and India have again found themselves facing critical questions on their existing mechanisms of water-sharing; both governments are actively engaged in a dialogue to overcome their differences in the spirit of confidence-building measures initiated since the peace breakthrough achieved earlier this year. It is, however, the inter-provincial water dispute, which has grabbed more headlines in the national media ever since General Musharraf first announced plans for construction of Kalabagh Dam

soon after assuming power in 1999. Today the issues of Kalabagh Dam and Greater Thal Canal Project incite more outrage and debate than Pakistan-India water parleys. Peace may look possible on the borders, but within the Musharraf regime finds itself faced with uncompromising attitudes of provincial groups, which consider the water issue as 'a matter of life and death' for their people.

Why has a natural resource assumed conflict proportions in a land possessing the largest river irrigation system in the world? What is the magnitude and depth of the issue? What factors and processes are at work behind the façade of this conflict? These questions are now being addressed by various independent researchers and non-governmental organizations, who are looking at various dimensions of water scarcity and inequity in Pakistan.

In September 2003, this scribe undertook a six-month study as an inquiry into the nature of the water conflict in Pakistan. The main objective of the study was to investigate the depth of this problem from various socio-political and economic angles, and to put it into a context, so that its stereotype could be de-mystified to some extent. The underlying hypothesis of the study was given that the problem directly affects major segments of the country's rural and urban population, the negativity of this conflict could inflate ethnic rivalries therein, with a possibility of violence and bloodshed.

At the outset, one can identify the issue prevailing in the sectors of: 1) agriculture; 2) power generation; 3) consumer supply & demand; and 4) environment. Each of these sectors possesses highly complex technical, economic and political dimensions in terms of appropriation and use of water. A substantial amount of work has been produced, which studies areas such as flawed technical planning of the rural irrigation system and urban supply & drainage system; skewed state management of the existing sources and their irresponsible consumption & wastage by the users; impact of mega projects on the affected regions and populations; disparities of distribution between upper riparian and tail-end regions & arid zones; environmental degradation; policy reform proposals and debates; and historical agreements aimed towards a national 'consensus'. For its part, this study focused on the problem's gender dimensions; the poorest populations of the tail-end regions;

underdeveloped urban localities of Karachi; responses of mainstream political parties in politicising the issue; and views of various experts (in government and non-governmental sectors) closely involved with deliberations and developments connected to the issue.

The purpose behind looking at these seemingly disconnected areas was to try and find a common thread of how this one issue is affecting the lives, livelihoods and belief systems of millions of people in so many different ways. The following observations are recorded to serve as poignant conclusions about the current nature and direction of the conflict:

1. Far from the maddening crowd of bureaucratic tussles and political vitriolic, water woes of the common users – whether they are living in cities or villages – present a highly complex picture, which often fails to register on politicians and policymakers alike. A poor fisherman of Mubarak Village on Sindh's coast, a poor cleaning woman living in Lyari Town of Karachi, and a poor farmer living in Badin are faced with different environments, but their common woe is poverty of water, which results in many other poverties for these individuals and their families. These other poverties include lack of proper health & sanitation, constraints on meager home budgets due to major spending on accumulation of water, no access to education or opportunities for growth, and loss of livelihood. The result is a mass sense of psychological dejection, social disillusionment, economic deprivation and political disengagement. The dominant attitude is that of anger against the rich and powerful and rejection of proposed reforms from above. While the elite minority of the country discusses policies and strategies of political and economic empowerment in terms of billions of dollars, the mass majority of millions – when queried as to how they feel about the quality of their lives – respond by pointing to the sky and saying 'God is our keeper'! This abject social condition of fatalism sans purposeful rationality poses crucial questions for the efficacy of state policies and machinery supposedly designed and oiled to provide basic amenities to its populace.

2. When it comes to appropriation and use of water, the most vulnerable segment in the general population remains that of women. It is a fact that in water-starved rural areas and urban localities, accumulation of water for household consumption is the responsibility of women and their young children. However, the most tragic aspect of this unending cycle is that despite being its carriers, women stand at the far end of the line when it comes to the actual usage of water. For a majority of these women, a daily bath and freshly washed clothes remain a sinful luxury – sinful because their primary responsibility is to fetch water for household chores and for the men of the house who have the first right to it because of their role as family heads and breadwinners. A close look at this unequal division of amenities – as with an unequal division of labour – reveals micro-conflicts within family structures, which may be cause of far more concern for a majority of women and children, rather than the headline-grabbing political conflict.
3. In recent years, considerable academic focus and media attention has been given to problems caused by water shortage in the cities. As a result, urban water politics thrives on change – for better or for worse – because of its proximity to and influence on power structures. The country’s great rural expanse, however, remains understudied and underexposed. Governmental devising of a national water policy puts agriculture as the topmost priority since it constitutes a high percentage of the national economy. However, beyond statistical information on declining crop yields and decreasing river/canal flows, little is known about how these changes are impacting the rural population. In Sindh, for instance, ecological imbalance caused by scarcity of water has dilapidated livelihoods, which in turn has led to mass migrations from rural to urban areas with scant opportunities for resettlement and growth. Resultantly, urban Sindh from Hyderabad onwards is facing increasing lawlessness and insecurity. In addition, little attention is paid to highlighting the intra-provincial rivalries over the flow of water.

Landholders of lower Sindh hold grievances against landholders of upper Sindh for appropriating large flows for their own lands, leaving very little for tail-end users. Observers note that this has led to many small landholders selling their property to big landholders, which in turn is strengthening traditional feudalism and hierarchy in interior Sindh.

4. The Devolution of Power Plan, launched by the Musharraf regime in 2001, is touted as an effort to bring democracy and empowerment to the grassroots. The litmus test for the success of any local government is efficient and equitable delivery of basic services. Local government has been functioning in Pakistan's cities and towns for nearly three years now. Yet, grievances of millions of citizens vis-a-vis supply of clean and continuous water appear to increase by the day. Conversations with local government officials in Karachi during the course of this study reveal a sense of dejection and disillusionment within the local bodies as well. A common perception is that they have not been empowered enough, neither have they been equipped with sufficient funds and adequate infrastructure to perform their public service duties. As a result, they say, they are facing humiliation and derision within their own constituencies. Similar utterances are also made by local MPAs and MNAs who find themselves powerless to play any meaningful role vis-à-vis decisions taken by the Federal Government on the issue. This state of affairs points to the yawning gaps inherent within the overall governance structure of the country.
5. Traversing the socio-economic scenario in this context, one then takes into account the role of the mainstream political parties. Taking up of the water issue, fortunately or unfortunately, has become one consequence of the dubious drive for democracy for most of these parties. In Sindh, for instance, nationalist parties – such as Jeay Sindh Qaumi Mahaz, Sindh Taraqqi Pasand, Awami Tehreek and Sindh National Front – have launched a 'war for water' as a manifestation of their ultra-nationalist ideology against an



‘unjust’ Centre. The JSQM, in particular, adopted extreme political measures across the province during the last three months to get its message of dissent across. The mainstream parties, however – such as Pakistan Peoples Party Parliamentarians (PPPP), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Muttahida Majlise Amal (MMA) – advocate the issue’s contention in the context of their opposition to the Musharraf-Jamali government, accusing the government of denying Sindh its rights. The joining of ranks of PML-N and MMA with other parties is a clear indication of their efforts to protect their newly attained constituencies in a province, which has largely remained loyal to parties with ethnic bases. Politicians, it appears, are more concerned with scoring electoral brownie points, rather than adopting an approach, which puts people – and not assembly seats – at the center. This facade raises questions marks about the usefulness of politics of representation when it comes to solution of basic problems of the commons.

6. Last but not the least, the state’s role in perpetuating the crisis is not free from criticism by any way. While it continues on the path of its economic reforms for growth, its development policies indicate a clear disconnect with the mass reality. Political parties argue that the state is flouting the clear verdict of three Provincial Assemblies (Sindh, NWFP and Balochistan) against the controversial mega projects, by insisting on their construction. Furthermore, they say, the starkest indication of the state’s fallacious dealing of the issue is its failure to implement the 1991 Indus Water Accord, which remains to date the only agreement signed with the consensus of all the provinces. The present lack of consensus on the issue is also not lost on the international donors pumping billions for the construction of the projects. In its January 2004 review of Pakistan’s public expenditure, the World Bank chided the government for not paying enough attention to the “extent” of the political conflict over water. The Parliamentary Committee’s objective of engaging political representatives for a consensus on the issue is the state’s attempt to address this problem, but a rejection of any such

engagement by the political parties indicates that stronger and more effective government strategies are required towards this goal.

At the meeting in Karachi this week, one Sindhi journalist suggested the Centre and Punjab should offer confidence-building measures (CMBs) in order to create trust between the provinces for any meaningful dialogue on the dispute; and one such measure could be allowing downstream flow of River Indus according to the 1991 Accord for at least one year as a starter. The suggestion met with unanimous nods across the room. Can the Ministry of Water & Power take a leaf from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' current manual on conflict resolution? No harm in trying