

The Hanji Community of Kashmir and the Dal Lake Crisis: Navigating Livelihoods and Ecological Sustainability

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Abstract: *Dal Lake is the most beautiful lake in the world. Dal Lake is an urban-type lake located in the Srinagar City of Jammu and Kashmir. The issues plaguing Dal Lake are primarily the result of anthropogenic activities, which have caused a reduction in the lake's area due to encroachments by local communities and the presence of floating gardens. The Hanji Community, which is one of the marginalised communities of Kashmir Valley is held responsible for the changes in the lake environment. The present paper discusses how the culture of the community is linked to their environment and how the contemporary changes in the environment affect the community's livelihood. The present paper is based on qualitative analysis. The data is collected through participant observation and case studies. It draws linkages between environment and culture, taking the ecosystem and the local human population as the basic units of analysis. The community members associate themselves with the lake ecosystem in terms of all aspects of their lives including the mundane realities of their daily lives, and professions among others.*

Keywords: Dal Lake, Ecology of Dal Lake, Hanji Community, Culture

Dal Lake is the most beautiful lake in the world.¹ Dal Lake is an urban-type lake located in the Srinagar City of Jammu and Kashmir. It lies between 34°52' and 34°92' N to 74°49'2" and 74°53'2" E at a mean altitude of 1,583 m above mean sea level. The lake is beset with problems arising predominantly due to anthropogenic activities. It includes a reduction in the lake areas owing to encroachments by communities and floating gardens.² Being an urban lake, the water quality of Dal is severely impacted by anthropogenic activities such as urbanisation, agricultural-intensive practices both within the lake as well as its catchment and untreated sewage from the catchment.³

This can lead to the accumulation of pollutants such as nutrients,

sediments, and organic matter in the lake, which can lead to eutrophication, decreased oxygen levels, and the formation of harmful algal blooms. Agricultural practices in the lake and its catchment, such as the use of fertilisers, pesticides, and herbicides, can also contribute to water quality degradation by introducing excess nutrients and chemical pollutants into the water body. These pollutants can have significant impacts on the lake's ecosystem, affecting aquatic plants and animals' health and growth and altering the lake's overall water quality.⁴ Increased pollution because of the mushrooming number of Dal dwellers also called Hanjis and floating gardens, discharge of raw sewage and solid wastes from the bordering areas and within the settlements, and the houseboats and agricultural return flow from the catchment into the lake.⁵

The impact of human activity and environmental factors on the water quality of the lake can have significant implications for the health and well-being of the Hanji community and other people who rely on the lake for their livelihoods. The potential consequences of poor water quality on the aquatic ecosystem of the lake, including fish populations, are an important source of food and income for the Hanji community.⁶ It can lead to algal blooms and reduced oxygen levels, which can harm fish populations and other aquatic life, impacting the livelihoods of the Hanji community who rely on fishing and other activities related to the lake.⁷ They are heavily dependent on the lake's ecosystem for their livelihoods and are uniquely positioned to observe and experience these changes first-hand.⁸

The Hanji community is held responsible for the lake's shrinking water. Both the state and civil society consider Hanjis as impediments to the lake's long-term health and renewal.⁹ They have been the primary target of violent interventions by the Government and of the people associated with environmental concerns. Several environmentalists attributed the lake's decline to Hanji's encroachments on the lake. Their residence on the water, their dependence on the lake for livelihood purposes, as well as their backward caste status, became especially significant markers of Hanji's difference from other people of Kashmir. These differences have made possible the objectification of the community.¹⁰ The conservation efforts in Kashmir have led to the displacement of local communities including Hanjis and the destruction of their livelihoods. It shows how conservation efforts have been used as a pretext for counterinsurgency operations, leading to human rights abuses.¹¹

The issues facing Dal Lake are primarily due to human activities, which have a significant impact on water quality and may have serious implications for the health and well-being of the Hanji community and others who depend on the lake for their livelihoods. The Hanji community has been accused of contributing to the lake's decreasing water levels, and both the government and non-governmental organisations view them as obstacles to the lake's sustainable health and restoration. Therefore, the Hanji community is considered both the impact bearer of ecological

changes taking place in the lake ecosystem and is also blamed for the degradation of the lake. However, how Hanjis comprehend this reality and their take on the changing ecosystem of the lake is taken as a case in point to decipher the problem further in the present paper.

Method and nature of data

The article adopted a case study method to elicit relevant data. Eight in-depth interviews with key informants from members of the Hanji community engaged in different occupations (two with fishermen, two with vegetable growers, two with shikara owners and two with houseboat Hanjis). Moreover, fifty structured interviews with community leaders and people belonging to different occupational categories of Hazrat Bal, Dal-gate area and towards the interior of the lake (Moti Mohallah). Besides, four focused group discussions at Hazarat Bal and Dal Gate area were carried out. The respondents for the interview and other key informants were chosen based on the purposive sampling method.

The narrative of the article is built upon the way of collecting data from the following sources:

1. Qualitative fieldwork within the community locality.
2. Participant observation during different periods of the day. It included both covert and overt observation.
3. Published and unpublished materials about the community, including internet searches and local and national newspaper articles.

Origin and Background of Hanjis

One of the ancient works of literature on Kashmir Rajatarangini of Kalhana testifies to the existence of several low castes among the population, besides the Brahmanas. These were the Nishadas, the Kiratas, the Kaivartas, the Dombas, the Svapakas and the Cahndalas. Nishadas are the aboriginal tribe. They occupied a very low position in the social life of the community. They earned their livelihood through hunting and fishing. It also included the boatmen of the valley called Hanjis.¹²

Similarly, another ancient literature Nilamata Purana refers to the Pisachas and the Nagas as of special significance of all the tribes mentioned in the Nilamata Purana, only these two have been described as the original inhabitants of Kashmir.¹³ The boatmen of Kashmir are known as Ha'enz or Hanji, Kishtiban (Boatman) or Jalbashi (Water-dweller) in the local language and are considered the descendants of the Nishada tribe. Hanjis are considered strong, and hard-working and have many sub-castes who have mastery in the art of living on water and know the real depths and mysteries of lakes and rivers.¹⁴

The Hanji is a marginalised community of boatmen and fisherfolk who traditionally live and work on the waterways of Kashmir. They are often discriminated against and excluded from mainstream society due to their lower socio-economic status and their association with the water, which is

seen as a lower caste occupation.¹⁵

The Hanji community faces numerous challenges concerning their socio-economic status. They have limited land for agriculture, and their land consists mostly of open water. Additionally, literacy rates among Hanjis are low. The increasing population and competition for resources around Dal Lake have put significant strain on the lake's environment and economy. Basic civic amenities and facilities are inadequate, and the situation has only worsened with population growth and increased activity. Despite being located within urban areas, Hanji communities do not have access to most of the city's civic benefits. The Hanjis still maintain a traditional way of life and remain one of the less developed communities in Kashmir.

Furthermore, it can be understood that the socioeconomic status of the Hanji community, except houseboat owners, is indicative of their classification as Socially and Educationally Backward Class (SEBC) based on their status as a weak and underprivileged Social Caste. As a result, they are entitled to a 4% share in reservations in the UT of Jammu and Kashmir.¹⁶ The Hanji community, excluding houseboat owners, is an integral part of the common central list of OBCs in J&K, as determined by the Government of India in 1995. The Hanjis consider themselves distinct from mainstream Kashmiri society, and their traditional occupation is the primary factor that sets them apart. The category of weak and underprivileged social classes is primarily composed of castes or groups associated with their traditional occupations.¹⁷ As a community with a diverse range of occupations, the Hanjis have numerous connections to the lake that intersect in many ways.

The Hanji community is comprised of various subgroups and their stratification is primarily based on economic factors. There are eight distinct categories of Hanjis which include Demb Hanji (vegetable growers), Gari Hanji (water nut gatherers), Doonga Hanji (owners of passenger boats or *doonga*), Ma'er Hanji (boatmen of Ma'er Nallah), Gaad Hanji (fishermen), Haka Hanji (collectors of wood from water bodies), Shikara Hanji (Shikara owners) and Houseboat Hanji (Houseboat owners). They have been recognised as a separate caste in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. They are a unique homogeneous community, sharing common, traditions, ceremonies and traditional occupations.

Affiliation of Hanjis with Dal Lake and Their Distorted Relationship with the Lake Environment

The findings of the study show that different occupational subgroups among Hanjis though carry diverse occupations, however, share one common trait, they all depend on the lake ecosystem for their livelihood. They have evolved rationales and strategies according to their economic capabilities and cultural orientation. These communities have been living in and around the lake for centuries. They claim that they used eco-friendly methods to clean their surroundings and the lake environment. For instance, vegetable growers or Haak Hanjis make use of weeds and sand to

make floating gardens.

The case of vegetable growers or Haak Hanjis highlights the interdependence between the community's livelihood and the environment in which they reside. The community's occupation and livelihood are closely tied to the lake ecosystem, as they rely on it to grow their vegetables. Additionally, the limited accessibility to the community's location underscores the importance of infrastructure and transportation systems in facilitating access to resources and opportunities. Furthermore, the community's use of the Hail weed and grass to create floating gardens highlights the resourcefulness and adaptation of communities in utilising available resources in their environment to sustain their livelihood. This highlights the importance of understanding local knowledge and practices in developing sustainable solutions and policies for environmental conservation and community development. According to Mohd Abrar, the president of Moti Mohalla, our community is not harming the lake ecosystem. "We use the Hail, a weed which grows freely in the lake, to create ground for the floating gardens. A type of grass is used to create the boundaries of the floating gardens."

The respondents shed light on the changes that have occurred in the lake ecosystem over time and the impact of these changes on the livelihood of the community of vegetable growers. The memories of Ghulam Haider of drinking clean water from the lake in his younger days suggest that the quality of the lake water has deteriorated over time. This decline in water quality can be attributed to the increase in filth and dirt in the water due to human activities in and around the lake.

However, some respondents admitted that they use fertilisers on an occasional basis to enhance fertility and gain more yield. It suggests a shift towards modern and unsustainable agricultural practices. This shift can be attributed to the changes in the social, economic, and environmental context in which the community operates. The adoption of modern agricultural practices may be seen as a strategy to cope with the increased competition and market pressure, but it also has negative implications for the long-term sustainability of the ecosystem.

Moreover, the water cleaning machines are the reason for spilling oil into the lake and poisoning the water. Lilly is an example of how technology can have unintended and negative consequences. The use of technology in the form of water cleaning machines was intended to improve the water quality but has resulted in unintended consequences such as oil spills and further contamination of the lake. This suggests the need for a more integrated and holistic approach to managing the lake ecosystem, one that considers the social, economic, and environmental aspects of the community's livelihood.

The respondents highlighted the case of 20 cattle dying after consuming contaminated water. Lilly highlights the implications of ecosystem degradation on the livelihood of the community. The dependence of the

community on the lake ecosystem for their livelihood makes them vulnerable to the impacts of ecosystem degradation, which can result in economic losses and even threaten their subsistence. This further emphasises the need for sustainable practices that balance the economic needs of the community with the long-term health of the ecosystem.

Moreover, the houseboat Hanjis or houseboat owners highlighted several significant issues related to the pollution of the lake. Sewage disposal from houseboats to the lake, which is a major cause of pollution. The other factor contributing to the poor water quality of the lake, such as sewage from other parts of the city. The pollution had impacted their income, as tourists prefer not to stay in such an environment. This shows how environmental degradation can also have economic implications.

Mr Mehmood also discussed the history of the lake and how sustainable waste disposal practices were used in the past, such as the "Pot system".

A person used to come every morning in his boat and collect sewage from the houseboats. However, the number of houseboats has increased and such practices are inefficient, leading to the disappearance of this practice over time.

It emphasises the significance of sustainable waste management practices and the importance of collective action from all stakeholders, including government bodies and individuals, to address environmental pollution and degradation.

The fisherman community or Gaad Hanji is in a dire state, occupying the lowest position in the community's social hierarchy. Their living conditions are extremely poor, lacking even basic amenities like fans and coolers. In addition, their traditional occupation is facing a crisis due to various factors, including the impact of climate change, particularly the increasing temperatures, which has resulted in a decline in the number of fish in the lake. It is evident from the narratives of Sameena Akhter, one of the respondents.

I feel saddened by the pollution and decreasing charm of the lake. I remember my young days when I used to live on the doonga boat, and the water quality was good enough for me to drink water from the lake. I have been selling fish for the past 35 years, but due to pollution in the lake, the native fish has significantly reduced, and new varieties of fish such as Punjabi fish have been introduced in the lake. Now, I have to go far from the city to the villages to sell fish.

The changing lake ecosystem is also raising health concerns among the fisherman community. Five respondents reported the drowning of their children in the lake. In one case the child lost his ability to move and cannot speak after the incident. Such cases and the disease increase the financial burden on the fisherman community. The reason for this is limited space for living. They have only small land parcels which are half inside the lake and half on the solid land. Therefore, their children have no space to play.

The living conditions of the fisherman community in the interior part of the lake are quite precarious. The unhygienic environment in the mohalla, coupled with the foul smell and the increasing mosquito growth during summers, is taking a toll on the health of the community, especially the children. This can be seen as an example of how poor living conditions can lead to health problems and the need for better infrastructure and facilities. The decrease in fish numbers in the lake is also a major concern, as it directly affects the livelihoods of the fisherman community. This highlights the need for sustainable fishing practices and conservation efforts to ensure that the lake's ecosystem is not destroyed. One of the respondents highlighted the need for better living conditions and the importance of preserving the natural resources on which communities depend for their livelihoods.

The affiliation of Hanjis to the lake is centuries old as is evident from the ancient literature of Kashmir such as Nilmat Purana and Rajatranagni. The community history and cultural practices are closely linked to the lake's ecology. They have the unique knowledge and expertise in managing the lake's resources which have helped maintain the ecological balance of the lake.

The accounts of research participants bring forward their deep association with the lake. They do not want to be shifted to other locations. One lady belonging to the fishermen's community expressed her reaction towards the action taken by the Lake and Waterways Development Authority (LWDA) to relocate people living near the lake to other locations. She narrated that

even if they (LWDA) relocate us, I just want them to relocate me to a place where I can see the lake. My young days were the golden days of my life I used to play on the lakeside.

The fishermen completely depend on the lake for their livelihood their boats are designed so that they can sleep in it for the whole night while catching fish. It has been observed that they keep big teapots, bread and other edibles in their boat. This shows their commitment to their occupation. One person describes

Catching the fish is a difficult task. I have learnt it from my father. Sometimes I stay in the boat for a whole night. I enjoy catching fish since this is the profession of my ancestors.

The vegetable growers show their affiliation to the lake to the extent that when they go out to sell vegetables in the market, they first lick water with their tongues. According to them, it will increase their sales. One of the respondents Irshad Ahmed (name changed) said

Every morning on reaching Hazrat Bal Dargah, before going to the market I first lick water from the lake. It will increase (Barkat) my earnings.

In addition, the Hanji community's cultural practices include conducting marriage ceremonies on Dal Lake itself. This aspect of their

culture serves as a unifying factor for the community, with fishermen Hanjis renting shikaras to transport the groom in a decorated boat to the bride's location while other members of the wedding party travel in larger boats. Likewise, the houseboat Hanjis celebrate wedding ceremonies in their luxurious houseboats, while a new open boat resembling a houseboat has recently been introduced for community members to use for parties and related celebrations.

Therefore, people belonging to the Hanji Community maintain a strong association with Dal Lake. They are known for their expertise in fishing, the cultivation of floating gardens, and their skills in crafting Shikaras and houseboats. Their culture and way of life have become intertwined with the Dal Lake, making them an integral part of its ecosystem and history.

The study discussed the environmental challenges that Dal Lake and its environs are facing, such as pollution, encroachment, and loss of biodiversity. The boatmen or Hanjis, who are heavily dependent on the lake's ecosystem for their livelihoods, are uniquely positioned to observe and experience these changes first-hand. The voice of the marginalised and their sensitivity to the ecological disaster were explored in the research. The study found that the community's narrative is often neglected in mainstream discourse and environmentalists and others hold them responsible for the lake's deterioration. Environmentalists and others hold them accountable for the lake's deterioration. Therefore, the government has started the process of relocating community residents to places other than the lake, and Bhimna is one such place. For the Hanji population and other stakeholders that depend on the lake for their livelihoods, the study's findings may be crucial for assessing the health of the lake and its ecology. The lives of the local community, which depends on fishing and other lake-related occupations, can be negatively impacted by poor water quality that can cause algal blooms and reduced oxygen levels. These conditions can also affect fish numbers and other aquatic species. Nevertheless, despite their close relationships with the lake, respondents know that their actions harm the lake. But they feel helpless in comparison. They accuse the administration of doing nothing to protect the lake. The degradation of the lake ecology was evident from the respondents' accounts. Both Hanjis' activities and the state's incompetence may be at fault for this. Even though the lake remains magnificent, its natural beauty is fading.

The Hanji Community has historically employed sustainable practices for the management of Dal Lake. However, with the increasing temperature and population growth in the region, these practices are no longer sufficient to safeguard the lake's fragile ecosystem. Therefore, both the state and civil society must implement measures that do not undermine the livelihoods of local communities living in and around the lake, while also addressing the pressing need to preserve the lake's health and resilience. This requires a collaborative effort that takes into account the perspectives and knowledge of all stakeholders involved, with a focus on sustainable, equitable, and

inclusive solutions that benefit both the environment and the people who depend on it.

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