

The Dal Lake: Looking Beyond Pollution

I am reminded of Bob Dylan's words "how many times must the cannon balls fly before they're forever banned...how many deaths will it take till he knows that too many people have died?" Likewise, I ask the state machinery of India, how many waters must dry up completely, for them to open their eyes...how many people must be left homeless before they wake up from their sleep?

One is amazed at the sheer indifference and unconcern displayed by the state machinery every time it pulls out yet another policy to displace the poor from their homes, in order to 'protect the environment'. This time it is the Dal Lake in Srinagar. In order to 'clean up' the lake, the Dal dwellers are being displaced from their homes and livelihoods in the lake, which has defined their identities and lives for generations, centuries. The lake will now be 'protected' from any human activity, and is thus 'safe'.

This notion of *protecting* the environment from *pollution* by rigidly divorcing it from humans who live off it is problematic. There are some basic assumptions this notion is guided by, which need to be questioned. To begin with, who is causing the real pollution? Why is it that the people who are in direct contact with the environment (the slum dwellers on the banks of Yamuna in Delhi or the Dal dwellers in Srinagar) are always the ones fingers are pointed at?

In the case of Yamuna's pollution in Delhi, dearly, a city that flushes out tonnes of untreated sewage in complete violation of all existing pollution control laws, everyday into the river is polluting it far more than a community that doesn't even have a regular source of water to flush out. Just by virtue of living by the river, the community is declared as the cause of pollution and dislocated. Of course, the river is only getting filthier by the day, their removal made no difference to it.

Similarly, the communities residing in the Dal Lake are being held responsible for the lake's pollution, when the truth is that the entire Srinagar's sewage flowed into the Dal till a few years back. Only recently has Srinagar acquired a sewage system that is supposed to handle the city's waste appropriately. And whether this is merely on paper or is really functional is still a question.

Besides, the siltation of loose soil caused by deforestation and other activities around the catchment areas of the Dal is a major factor polluting the lake, but remains ignored.

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Moreover, the sewage of the Dal dwellers can easily be used up or treated before it enters the lake. Each household and houseboat in the Dal lake can be provided with biogas plants (shared or individual) which will put the sewage to an effective use and provide the people with an eco-friendly and cheaper alternative to LPG. If this doesn't appeal, sewage

treatment plants are not rocket-science either. Why has the government failed to provide any such mechanism to the Dal dwellers? Sewage disposal and treatment is whose responsibility? Do we, in our city homes think twice before disposing our sewage? Do we treat our own sewage? No, because this is supposed to be the government's job. Then why do we expect the Dal dwellers to do this on their own, when anyway they survive on very meager resources? This is not to say that the community is not responsible for its actions and all public services are only the government's responsibility; but if any community initiative is expected, the government has to step up and support it, financially,

technically or otherwise. Particularly when governments have been saying that these are government monopoly areas and citizens have no role.

Since the government came up with nothing, an NGO called HOPE has been collecting sewage door-to-door from the Dal dwellers

for some years now. While a remarkable effort, the condition of the Dal Lake remains the same. This has proved that the real pollution is coming from elsewhere, for why is the Dal lake water quality not improving when so many Dal dwellers are now not throwing their sewage in the lake?

We come to the second and more important issue of going beyond pollution while looking at environmental problems. A water body is an ecosystem, not just a carrier of water that is susceptible to pollution. It is a system unto its own that is dependent on plant and animal activity around it. What trees grow around it, which birds nest in them, which seeds pollinate, what is the nature of the soil, what kind of fish breed here, etc.

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are the factors that determine the life of the lake. All of these are highly interdependent. A change in any one of the factors affects all others, dismantling this delicately balanced system. Humans too are part of the ecosystem, not above it, not outside it.

However, unlike plants and animals, humans have the dangerous capacity to step out of the system, mould it for their own needs and therefore cause its destruction. An example is deforestation causing siltation – a permanent factor for the lake's deteriorating condition. The second one is building bunds and embankments along the lake for rigidly separating it from the land, which is very much a part of its ecosystem. Separating land and water in this way spells out doom for the fragile ecosystem of a water body. Damming rivers, cutting forests, building roads and constructing around the lake, all have had their share in dismantling the ecosystem in a way that a domino effect has taken place, spiraling out of control.

The lake is fast drying up and has reduced from 75 sq. kms. to just 12 sq. kms. When the lake has no water, how will it clean itself? The pollution will of course mount.

The real problem lies here – in an ecosystem that is rapidly vanishing, not just in a lake that is getting polluted (this is not to disregard pollution, but to place it

in the right perspective). And the truth is that the Dal dwellers are hardly responsible for this vanishing ecosystem – they didn't cut the forests, build bunds, construct on the banks or dam the rivers. It is the way

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our nation has industrialised that we cannot see nature as an ecosystem, but only as resources. The Dal dwellers on the other hand are much closer to nature and much more respectful towards it. They are much more in sync with the moods and temperaments of the lake than any of us 'concerned citizens' are. Their life is shaped by the rhythms of the lake and they are more concerned for it than we think.

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Restoring the Dal lake as an ecosystem is more vital and complete, than just 'cleaning' it up. There are several ways to address pollution, but not many to restore a bionetwork before it is too late. The pressing issue for any water body today is not only pollution, contrary to what most of us think, it is the dams, embankments and construction on the banks that disrupt a fragile bionetwork. The problem isn't always pollution and the solution isn't always separation of humans from nature. The solution lies in nurturing a healthy, democratic and accountable relationship between humans and their natural habitat, for the sustainable survival of both; which is highly possible in case of the Dal, the Yamuna as also in the case of many other natural resources.

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High Court Intervention and aftermath Six months after Jammu & Kashmir High Court asked houseboats on the Dal lake to shut shop and clean up their act, it's back to square one. Just three out of the about 1200 houseboats have so far installed the drainage system. In fact, one of the houseboats, which had got the drainage system installed, is thinking of discontinuing it. The system has failed as it couldn't adjust to the varying water level. Far from improving the drainage, it has proved counter-productive thanks to the rotting stench it produces, said the houseboat association. For years, conservationists have cried hoarse and argued that the ornate, carved cedar houseboats are turning the lake into a weed-clogged swamp. The lake has shrunk to 12 sq. km. and lost 12 metres in depth in two decades. Houseboat owners say that the ban dealt a body blow to their business still grappling with the losses suffered after last year's Amarnath agitation. The association said that the court had never ordered the sealing and that Lakes and Waterways Development Authority (LAWDA), the nodal agency responsible for controlling the pollution, created a wrong impression to save its skin. LAWDA did so to justify crores spent on the Dal conservation, they said and added that the houseboats are mere scapegoats and according to an IIT-Roorkee report contribute only 3% to the lake's pollution. What about the hotels around the lake? One hotel has more capacity than the houseboats combined together. Neighbourhoods around the lake including the upscale Gupkar Road, where the who's who of the state including CM Omar Abdullah live, also direct their drainage into the Dal. The association was trying its best to save the lake. They have roped in a Chennai-based company to install the drainage system on 10 houseboats. IIT-Kanpur is also piloting a Zero Discharge System, which would cost Rs 65,000 per houseboat. Houseboat owner Altaf Ahmed said, "Our livelihood comes from the lake and we more than anybody else are for the lake's conservation. But 70% of houseboat owners aren't in a position to invest in the drainage system. We've hardly had any business in two decades. I tried to install the drainage system but the water level keeps changing rendering it useless. We've approached the authorities to subsidize the system suggested by IIT Kanpur." (The Times of India 280909)