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Environmental degradation in Azad Kashmir



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Images: Hanif Gharib, Asif Mir

Everyone has the rights to life, no matter who they are or where they live. Nearly every government in the world promised to protect, respect and fulfill these rights, yet human rights are still violated worldwide. At the Millennium Summit, world leaders committed themselves to halving the number of people living in extreme poverty, (i.e. those with income less than one dollar a day), by 2015. Poverty is directly linked to the economic policies and activities. Poverty is not just about lack of resources. In a developing world it is about bad decisions made by powerful and influential people.

Poverty, disease and misery, along with environmental degradation and destruction of forests, are great concerns in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Though in recent years some interventions have been made by state and non state organisations to introduce concepts of sustainable livelihood and the preservation of natural resources in Azad Kashmir, the earthquake affected area is the focus of all these developmental efforts. In comparison the rest of the area, particularly the state's South zone, has been neglected in policy formation and implementation. Contrary to a general perception of improvement of socio-economic conditions of this zone, there are various areas in Kotli District where the local populations live in extreme poverty and lack the most basic life essentials. The village of Barali Kass of Kotli is a major example of this. The village situated only 15 KM from Kotli city and is a huddle of houses located on a barren slope of rocky hills.

Life is harsh in Barali Kass. The overall living conditions of majority of locals are very poor and they suffer the worst effects of social, economic and environmental problems. Inadequate transportation has serious impacts on their lives and welfare of due to the lack of proper and appropriate road link with the Kotli city. The dilapidated Barali Kass road is at present the only way of communication.

In spite of claims by the present government about the provision of basic health and education facilities to the people of the state, Barali Kass presents a different picture. The Village Barali Kass

and its allied areas (Fafeel, Dhar, Seri and Mankasl) are without any medical facility despite modern medical and scientific development. The local patients, particularly the old and pregnant women have to cover a long distance to reach the nearest hospital and unfortunately many die en route. Similarly, lack of education facilities in Dhar and Seri is also detrimental.

The complex structure of local forests in the area offers a great diversity of habitats. Few other habitats contains such a diverse range of trees and medicinal plants, but poverty and ignorance forces local communities to exploit natural resources and exacerbate problem like deforestation. In the area Forestry projects have not related much with the concept of landscape protection. Woodland degradation has devastated swathes of forest. Sustainable forest management and conservation is the source of conflict between the government and dependent communities. Some of the Government owned forest areas have been occupied by local influential people. Furthermore, this trend of occupation on government owned forests by the local communities is also a permanent cause of conflict in the area, as the there have been quarrels among these occupants over the possession of so called disputed lands.

The deforestation in area of Barali Kass is not merely an environmental, economic or a technical problem but also a sociological and behavioural one. The forest habitat management in the area is unsustainable and lacks popular public participation. The top-down command and control system support massive resource abuse. Poverty and unawareness, coupled with lack of education, are the major causes of deforestation and habitat loss. The timber “mafia” generates anti-conservation anger in the area. Illegal logging and fire are destroying many of the forest habitats. The forest clearance, especially of ancient woods in the area, yields a financial profit but has many adverse side effects: soil erosion, nutrient loss, water pollution, landslides, flooding, reduced wildlife habitat, loss of recreational value, loss of species diversity, increased fire hazards, and increased risks from insects and disease.

Protected areas are one of the most effective tools for conserving species and natural habitats in the world. They also contribute to the livelihoods and well-being of local communities and bring a multitude of economic and cultural benefits to locals. These areas are the cornerstone of all national and regional biodiversity conservation strategies. They give many indigenous peoples vital protection and space where they can continue traditional lifestyles that are often impossible elsewhere.

Bearing this in mind, we consider the best option to conserve this wealth of resources of the Barali Kass is to declare it a highly protected area. In addition, suffering of the local people could be lessened by: the establishment of Basic Health Unit (BHU) in the area, construction, improvement and maintenance of the road from Barali to Mansooh and some linked roads, up-gradation of the primary school in Kass and the launching of awareness programs about impacts of deforestation and environmental degradation.



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