

An Ethnographic History of Manchar Lake, in Sindh, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the ways Manchar Lake, one of the oldest and largest freshwater lakes of South Asia, shapes and reshapes the making of the history of itself as well as people and other-than-human beings that inhabit the lake. Going beyond anthropocentric accounts of settlement, fishing, hunting, and livelihood, the article examines how the life of the lake has shaped the political, economic, and cultural worlds of the people who live with it. Drawing on Hugh Raffles' idea of writing "historically with ethnography and ethnographically with history," the article illustrates an ethnographic history of Manchar Lake. In doing so, the article challenges the historiography that privileges humans in history-making, while overlooking the role of other-than-human actors in the history-making processes. By treating the lake as an active participant in shaping the lives and livelihoods of humans and other-than-human beings, this article treats the lake as more than a mere landscape. Drawing on one year of ethnographic fieldwork with the lake, fish, waterfowl, and people who inhabit the lake, this article recommends exploring the world, in this case, the lake, as a multispecies life where meaning-making and history-making are processes in which both humans and nonhumans equally participate. In this sense, the history of Manchar Lake is not only a history of people around water, but of water itself as a historical agent.

Keywords: *Ethnographic history, humans and nonhuman relations, multispecies, Manchar Lake, Pakistan*

INTRODUCTION

Manchar Lake is as old as the Indus River. Because the lake has such a long history, people can talk about its past in many ways. There are political, economic, and cultural histories, as well as myths, rumors, stories, nostalgia, and sometimes very exotic accounts of the lake. People also talk about the lake, like how people settle here, fishing, and also hunt migratory birds, those birds that fly here from the northern parts of the world. But all these histories, even if important, are mostly humanistic; meaning, this is how humans do the history of the lake. But how does the lake itself shape history? Or do lakes even make history?

This article discusses how Manchar Lake shaped history. By doing this, I want to downsize (or maybe broaden) the whole history-making process; talking not only about how people, through their economic, political, and cultural activities, made and remade the lake, but I will also show how the lake made the political, economic, and cultural history of the people of Manchar Lake. When discussing the lake's history, one can take a linear approach using historical records and archives. This is an important story because it traces the present through the past: how the lake came to be as it is today through a series of human political, economic, and cultural activities. But this kind of history can also make other histories invisible. In this regard, this chapter is about those invisible histories.

Where to locate these invisible histories? For me, these histories are in the lake itself, its past when it was flourishing, and its present when it is degrading. Such a transformation of the lake also transforms

people and their cultural, economic, and political history. For this type of history, one needs a historical, natural, and ethnographic understanding of the lake. Here, I resonate with Hugh Raffles's (2005) question: *how can anthropologists write history?* For him, his book *In Amazonia: A Natural History* (2005) is the answer, which is written “historically with ethnography and ethnographically with history” (Raffles, 2005, p. 375). Following Raffles, I will present a kind of ‘ethnographic history’ of the Manchar Lake.

So, for me, we were already doing multispecies—as well as nonliving things—ethnography, but what we usually don’t acknowledge is the presence of nonhuman and nonliving things in our ethnographic writing. And this also created another problem: how to conceptualize them within anthropology. In other words, anthropology was, and still is, so preoccupied with the Anthropos that we never really considered developing expressions, concepts, and vocabulary to talk about nonhuman and nonliving things without always relying on humans. With this intention in mind, this chapter examines how Manchar Lake, with its multi-species and many non-living things born on this earth, emerged through a process that cannot be reduced to human actions alone, and thus the emergence itself becomes more than anthropomorphic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Environmental history, especially the environmental history of South Asia, has long been discussing how humans and nonhumans have shaped each other over time. Environmental history asks, how do rivers, lakes, forests, seas, mountains, animals, and other influences shape societies, and how cultural transform environments? In so doing, it explores environmental change and, more importantly, the political, economic, and power dynamics at work in transforming those environments. By foregrounding these dynamics, environmental history takes a long-durée approach to show how, when, and by whom environmental change is caused. During the 1990s, as the environmental history of South Asia emerged as a distinct field, it was strongly influenced by the theories and methods of subaltern studies, with a focus on narratives of domination and resistance (Sivaramakrishnan 1999). The initial question for them was how colonialism defined and shaped the environment. In answering this question, early environmental historians, especially Gadil and Guha (1992), focused on “degradation, neglect, and vandalism” by colonizers and on how the exploitative colonial governance system degraded the environment in South Asia (see also Rangrajan 1996). For Gadil and Guha (1992), the precolonial societies had prudent relations with nature, whether those were hunters and gatherers, shifting agriculturalists, or pastoralists. For them, prudence was inherent in these societies, rooted in religion, ideology, and a communal social system. Later, during colonial government exploitation, new laws governing access to and use of resources changed the social structure of societies, resulting in a change in prudent relations with nature (Gadil and Guha 1992). Later, state-focused environmental histories sneaked into postcolonial works, showing how the postcolonial state transformed the environment and society, following the colonial imagination of progress and development (Gilmartin 2015; Haines 2013). Focused on colonial discourses of environmental degradation, many scholars have since shown how colonial scientization and bureaucratization of forests (Rajan 2006) and water infrastructure (D’Souza 2006; Stoddart 2011) changed forests, rivers, and the irrigation landscape. Going beyond colonization, scholars like Hardiman (1998) and Mosse (2003) have demonstrated that although the taming of water infrastructure dates to pre-colonial times in India, it was the colonial and postcolonial imagination of progress manifested in the building of large dams and irrigation canals that intensified environmental degradation (Arnold and Guha 1995).

In the Pakistani context, Haines (2013) explored how the colonial state used mega-projects, such as the Sukkur Barrage on the Indus River in Sindh, as a symbol of colonial authority and power. He argued that through the symbolism of tangible mega-projects, the colonial government legitimized its domination with the power of technology and science. The postcolonial state, he argues, followed the colonial pattern in this regard. Similarly, Gilmartin (2015) showed how, by using canal and irrigation

development projects in the Indus Basin, the colonial government in Punjab, northern Pakistan, transformed society, which is why Akter Majed recently called Pakistan an “infrastructure nation” (Akhter 2017). The colonial government allotted large tracts of land to new landlords, some of whom were local and others brought in from other provinces to irrigate the land. This new landlord class created a socioeconomic rift, dividing society into poor and rich classes that persist to this day and transforming society altogether.

D’Souza (2006) also articulated how our understanding of “flood” today is shaped by colonial discourses deeply rooted in colonial politics. In trying to capture land, resources, and the “many rivers of the Orisa delta”, the colonial government shaped the discourse of “flood” as threatening. Controlling “floods” thus became one of the key motivations of colonial science and technology. This colonial imagination continues in the postcolonial Indian state. In South Asia, a flood is seen as a threat, and controlling floods is a culmination of the state’s use of science. (see also Weil, 2006).

These scholars have focused on the colonial formation of the environment and, specifically, on how the state transforms it. Less attention has been paid to other forces of change, such as the environment itself and indigenous people. For these reasons, scholars today call for a historically and politically contingent environmental history of South Asia as contrasted to essentialist understandings of environment and society (Sivaramakrishnan 1999). As Amit Baviskar (1995) argues, scholars have portrayed interactions between indigenous people and nature as harmonious, a portrayal that was shattered when she conducted fieldwork among the indigenous people of the Narmada Valley. She argues that indigenous people have also been taming and exploiting nature for centuries; for her, human and environmental relations are intricately intertwined, shaping one another (Baviskar 1995). Other scholars have tried to present a more holistic understanding of the environment in South Asia by going beyond colonial and postcolonial discourse. For example, Ludden (1999) in his book *An Agrarian History of South Asia*, provides a “longer view” of the agrarian society of South Asia, from medieval to present, showing how agrarian societies in the region vary greatly. Furthermore, he argues that, due to the diversity of South Asian societies, the region should be viewed as a place of many civilizations rather than as a single homogeneous agricultural society (Ludden 1999). Similarly, Sivaramakrishnan (1999) presented a history of India’s forests, while combining methods and theories from ecology, history, and anthropology. Such integration brings a more nuanced understanding of forests, showing how society and the environment co-create one another, in contrast to an environmental history of domination and resistance.

On the other hand, scholars of place and place-making have been enlightening us about how human practices and rituals, encounters with places and place names, and the intimate relationship between people and places create memories. They also draw inspiration from environmental history by foregrounding place and sense of place through stories, narratives, and rituals. Ben Orlove (2002), in his book on Lake Titicaca in Peru, tells the story of the lake, the villages around it, and how the communities that lived there went about their lives. He argues for seeing the lake as more than a vacation spot, but as a place of sustenance and memory. This place of memory, Orlove suggests, establishes an affinity with the landscape. This affinity, argues Keith Basso (1996), results from our sustained cultural practices. In this book, *Wisdom sits in places*; he shows how places, place names, and human practices reveal deep meanings, memories, and a sense of place. For him, Western Apache placenames and narratives function as living archives of history, ethics, and social life of the people living around the Apache mountains. In an edited volume by Feld and Basso (1996), the authors gather works that explore how places are experienced and made meaningful through sensory experiences and stories. They further explore how sounds, speech, air, rituals, movements, seasons, and even changing landscapes create a sense of belonging among people. These place names are sources of historical memory, guidance for travel, and a means of cementing strong social relations. These works allow us to understand the value of place and place-making practices.

Tim Ingold (2000), a prominent anthropologist, in his book *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill*, challenges the traditional dichotomy of culture and nature, in which culture takes on a dominant role in defining nature. He argues that we “dwell” in the environment and make sense of it by living in it, rather than observing it only from the outside. Thus, our knowledge of the environment is embedded in the constant movement, attention, and making of the environment in which we are part. Ingold’s “dwelling perspective” thus emphasizes that humans and environments co-develop one another and the landscape in which they live, and that both are relational. This approach supports claims that affinity with landscape results from sustained practice and offers a strong theoretical bridge between phenomenology and ecological anthropology. Before Tim Ingold, Casey (1987) treats memory as an active set of practices embodied in the human body. Thus, the intimate encounter of the human body with the environment builds “body memory” located in places, streets, rooms, mountains, forests, and other places where humans dwell.

Beyond these works, the works of Hugh Raffles (2002, 2005) are inspirational in writing this article. In the article titled “Towards a critical natural history”, Raffles (2005) argues that scholars must refuse the division of objective nature and social world; rather, they should pay attention to how both natural and social worlds are intertwined. Moreover, he pays close attention to power dynamics in the production of environmental knowledge. Thus, for him, it is important to rethink environmental history from an ethnographic perspective to foreground the historical, relational, and contested nature of places. In the book “In Amazonia: A Natural History”, Raffles (2002) tells a fascinating story of a small community in Para, Brazil. He demonstrates the ways ecology, history, politics, human activities, and nonhuman labor, such as shifting river courses, forests, and others, are inseparable. In the following pages, I draw on the above literature to tell the story of Manchar Lake in Sindh, Pakistan.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on one-year ethnographic methods – participant observation and semi-structured interviews with the fishers of Manchar Lake during 2015-2016. The researchers lived with the fishers of Manchar Lake to observe their daily lives, particularly to explore how they understand, experience, and interpret the degradation of the Lake. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted (n=27) with the fisherfolk of the lake. Further interviews were conducted with the different communities, such as the Nohani who live around the lake, who practice agriculture. They have long relationships with the people of Manchar Lake, and their observations and stories have enlightened us on the life of the lake. Further, archival research at the Sindh archives in Karachi, exploring colonial documents, helped to understand the life of the lake before the Indus River was dammed. Together, these data sets allow me to understand the history of Manchar Lake with ethnographic practices.

The Etymology of Manchar Lake

During my school years, I recall a lesson titled “*A Visit to Manchar Lake.*” One specific phrase captivated us all: *Mar Char-e-Char, Akh khuti pave per pani netho kuthe* (Alas! Water and more water; your eyesight may fail, but the water will never end).

The name *Manchar* is widely understood as a compound of two words: *Man*, meaning “heart” or “handsome”, and *Char*, signifying “wide [flood] water”. However, others believe the name of Manchar Lake is derived from *Mansarowar*, the sacred lake of the Himalayas. It is also associated with the name of a Persian King. “Lake Manchar derives its name from a Persian monarch, ‘Mannuchar’—son of Eraj, son of Faridoon—who ruled over the Indus around 1000 B.C.” (Sahrai, 2012, p. 74). These different names accentuate the complex, ancient, and multifaceted history of the lake. The local people of Manchar Lake describe it as the “daughter” of the Indus River and believe it is as old as the river. The lake is situated beneath the Kirthar Mountain Range in the west of the Indus and swells during the summer monsoon, expanding to 230–240 square kilometers.

The life of the lake depends upon water from three sources. The most important is the Indus River, which flows into the lake through two ancient canals, namely the Aral Wah and Daniester Wah. During the flooding season, when the Indus River swells, it discharges water from these two canals into the river, and when the Indus recedes, the lake discharges water back into the Indus from Mor Lak. Local people describe this phenomenon with a biological analogy: a lake “eating” the water, fish, and important nutrients from the river, and “excreting” them back into the Indus like a living organism.

After the Indus River, the second important source of water is the Nara Canal to the West. In the past, the Nara was a massive river that discharged water into the Manchar. However, during the British colonial administration, the Nara was converted into the MNVD (Main Nara Valley Drain), designed to channel overflow from Lake Hamal into Manchar. The final source of water is hill torrents, locally known as *nai*, which rush down from the Kirthar Mountains. Numerous significant *nais*—such as the Gaj, the Showl, the Angai, the Naig, and the Jhangari—outflow into the lake. All these names are derived from the mountain peaks of Khirthar, from the water flowing into the lake.

The Indus River, historically and even today, is the lake's most important source of life for two main reasons. First, the river not only fills the lake with freshwater and nutrient-rich silt but also discharges a huge number of small fish locally called *bheej* [literally, “seed”]. This small fish is nurtured in the unique flora and fauna of the lake and becomes, what local people call “Manchar Lake fish”, with a unique taste, smell, and vitality. And second, the Indus River allows the lake to discharge back into it, allowing it to “wash” itself from waste.

The Degradation of Manchar Lake

In 2010, the Chief Justice of Pakistan initiated a *suo motu* case regarding the degradation of the Manchar Lake. During the court hearing, the relevant stakeholders informed the court that several factors are contributing to the lake's degradation.

- Reduced inflows from the Indus River via the Aral Wah and Aral Laki.
- Drainage effluent from the Main Nara Valley Drain (MNVD).
- Increased local diversion of hill torrent water, depriving the lake of its natural supply.
- The use of hazardous chemicals by fishermen.
- Lack of regular water replenishment.
- Siltation of escape channels and main canals (Rice and Dadu).
- An extended dry spell from 1996 to 2009¹.

However, the report did not highlight the most crucial reason for the lake’s degradation: the Right Bank Outfall Drain (RBOD). The RBOD-I project was designed to remodel the MNVD, improve environmental conditions in Lakes Manchar and Hamal, and rehabilitate existing drainage systems. Its stated benefits included increasing crop yields across 842,500 acres and segregating saline effluent for diversion to the sea via RBOD-II. Despite being launched in 1994 with a scheduled completion date for

¹ Supreme Court of Pakistan 2010. SUO MOTO Case No. 10 of 2010, decided on 30th September 2010

1998, the project remains unfinished. Over the decades, its cost has ballooned from 4,395 million to over 17,505 million PKR².

Fisherfolk call the RBOD *Chaddan*, named after the village, where it discharges into the lake. While the official narrative presents a different story, in reality, RBOD discharges industrial, agricultural, and domestic waste directly into the lake. The project started in 1994; its lethal effects became visible by 1996. Fisherman Moula Bux Mallah recalls the unprecedented sight of mass fish die-offs: “Initially, we didn’t know why there were only dead fish. We later learned it was Chaddan who was pouring toxic water into the lake. The *Chaddan* is evil—an ‘atom bomb’ that has killed the lake.”

Liaquat Nohani, a retired schoolteacher and social worker, nostalgically remembers the once-flourishing lake and says, “The RBOD is the central culprit of the degradation of the lake.” He points to oil and gas exploration in the Kirthar Mountains; according to Nohani, these companies discharge toxic “grey water” into the hill torrents. Thus, the *nais*, which historically provided the lake with “sweet” freshwater, now serve as conduits for chemical waste. This has depleted the lake's resources, especially its fish. Historical records show that in 1950, the catch was 3,000 tons, which fell to 300 tons by 1994, and today, fishermen catch hardly 100 tons. A 1930 survey identified 200 fish species; today, at least 14 are extinct (Memon & Birwani, 2002, p. 08). Beyond the economy, the lake was once the primary source of drinking water. Today, the water is a slow-acting poison. While the acceptable level of Total Dissolved Solids (TDS) is 1,000 mg/l, Manchar Lake has been recorded at a staggering 32,000 mg/l. Similarly, salinity levels have reached 7,000 ppm, far exceeding the safe limit of 500 ppm. For those living on the lake’s edge, drinking this water has become a grim, unavoidable fate (ibid, 09 and The Daily News, October 31st, 2013).

An Ethnographic History of Manchar Lake

Throughout history, Manchar Lake has been transformed by natural processes of change. Indeed, the lake’s dependence on the Indus River has always placed it at the mercy of how the Indus behaves. Before the construction of the Sukkur Barrage under colonial rule, the Indus River flowed largely unleashed, frequently changing its routes, leaving some places arid while inundating others. There are many myths about the Indus changing direction. For example, one story tells of a Hindu king who wanted to do evil to the beautiful daughter of a Muslim seller who lived on the bank of the Indus. When the girl prayed to the saint Khawaja Khizer, the saint appeared in her dream and asked them to sail their boat on the Indus; as soon as they did, the Indus's course changed from Aror to Thatta. This shows that in Sindh, the Indus is often understood in anthropomorphic terms and believed to possess metaphysical powers.

This changing course of the Indus was halted by the British colonial government in 1932, when it completed the construction of the Sukkur Barrage, thereby allowing the Indus to flow permanently in one direction, running through the middle of the province. This had a significant impact on Manchar Lake. Moulla Bux Mallah, aged 62, a fisherman turned activist who formed *Manchar Bachao Tehreek* (Save Manchar Movement) in 2002, said:

Physically, the lake was not as you see it is today; it was very different. It was a deep lake, not as flat as it looks today. Our forefathers used to say that they had to jump into the lake from the bank; the banks were high. But it has changed significantly. This all started after the construction of the Sukkur Barrage and the flood-protection embankments (locally called the FP Band). In the past, when the Indus was still an unrestrained river, it flowed from east of the lake and would rejoin the main route in the south. The flow of the Indus, especially during the flooding season, was so powerful that it would take all the silt with it out of the lake. But since the construction of FP Bands and the control

² (<http://wapda.gov.pk/htmls/RBODI13.html> as accessed on 1-25-2014)

mechanisms developed to manage the water flow into the lake from the Indus, it has reduced the power of the Indus to carry the silt out of the lake. The silt deposits have transformed the deep oval-shaped lake into a flat-surfaced lake.

This change in physical characteristics has larger implications for fishing. When the lake was deep, there were upper and lower parts, locally called *kootha* (upper part) and *pootha* (lower part). As fish tend to swim against the current, fishermen knew where to place the fishing nets. But today, silt deposits have flattened the lake, and there are no more *koothas* and *poothas*, making fishing more difficult. Although this was not the only way to locate fish, it had a significant impact.

The construction of embankments has also significantly affected the flow of water from the Aral Wah. Historic documents and maps show the Aral Wah as a large river that flowed between the Indus and Manchar Lake. Many travellers in history thought of Manchar as Aral, or vice versa. But today, Aral is only a small canal, and officials open it mainly during the flooding season; otherwise, water flow from Aral remains very low or is halted. Indeed, today the flow of water from historical sources has significantly decreased or stopped entirely. Water flow from the Daniester, another historical canal, has also been reduced. Moreover, another old river that brought water into Manchar from the east, known as Kumbh Darah (Nara Canal), has completely dried up. Instead, the Main Nara Valley Drain (MNVD) was constructed under colonial rule to connect Lake Hamal with Manchar. Today, this route is used mainly during the flood season to protect major cities in eastern Sindh from floodwater. Water from the Nai Gaj hill torrent has also been stopped. The government is constructing a dam to generate electricity and use the water from Nai Gaj for agriculture.

All this has physically changed the lake over decades and has had a major impact on its biodiversity, but these changes have had only a minor impact on the culture of Manchar Lake. Until recently, fishermen lived in floating villages (boat houses) and practiced traditional fishing and waterfowl hunting. The major change—or, rather, the devastating change—occurred with the construction of the Right Bank Outfall Drain (RBOD), which drains industrial, domestic, and agricultural waste into the lake.

This multispecies world of the lake is what the fishing community feels it has lost with the lake's degradation. Although they have been coping with new ways of life by migrating to the lake's banks and adopting new ways of living, their memory still celebrates the vast forest that once stood on the lake. Baradi Mallah said: In the past, the lake was covered with a huge dense forest. It was so dense in a few places that even boats just a few meters away could not be seen. Having a dense forest was a blessing for us. We could locate fish; it had food for fish and waterfowl. Even for us, the forest had everything to eat.

In the past, fishermen did not purchase anything from the market. Everything they needed, Manchar Lake gave them, or it was provided through a barter system with other communities living around the lake. Liaquat Nohani, a retired schoolteacher, now 70 years old, said:

In the past, fishermen had fish and waterfowl, as well as other flora and fauna like *Narr*, *Phubban*, *Burani*, and many other things. While we had wheat and rice, we also had domestic cattle, which provided dairy products. We used to exchange wheat for fish or waterfowl, or we used to ask fishermen for *Narr* for our cattle, and in exchange we would give them milk.

Similarly, Ghulam Hassan Mallah, aged more than 50 years, said:

Our meal would consist of whatever we got from the lake. We would put the inner part of *Kuum* and fish in the pot to cook our meal. It was such delicious food. You people corrupt the food by adding all those spices. After cooking the meal, we would put a huge cloth or *thall* (a big oval-shaped plate) on it

and pour all the food into it to eat together, male and female. They still feel attached to living in the boathouses and have ambivalent feelings about living on land. Given the highly patriarchal structure of the fishermen community, they said that living in boat houses always gave them an edge: they could form their own village on the lake, away from other sub-caste groups of the Mallah community or those who were not their relatives. Ghulam Ali Mallah narrated:

We were very happy in the boathouses. Nobody would come near our boats. We were all family members and relatives. But now we live on land, and streets run through the middle of our houses. We cannot stop anybody from crossing these streets. We don't like this. We were happy in our boat houses. Boathouses also gave them the advantage of moving within the lake when they wanted to. In other words, when they found fish, they would move their boathouses there. During flood seasons, they could move their boathouses closer to the lake's banks, where the water level was low. Even during torrents in the lake, they would move their boathouses into the deep forest to protect themselves from high waves and strong currents.

Mohana

In Sindh, fishermen are known as *Mohanna*, and they are also called *Mallah* or *Mir Behar*. According to Taj Muhammad Sahrai, an eminent scholar of Sindh, the word "*Mohanno*" comes from "*Mein*" or "*Mahi*", which means fish, and "*Hano*", which means connected, in touch, or associating with. Thus, *Mohanno* means a person connected with fishing (Sahrai, 2012). They are also known as people of the Indus, who crafted the Indus Civilization, and they are sometimes termed Dravidian people—the original inhabitants of this area (ibid.).

The fishermen community takes great pride in being Mohanna. They believe they are the first people to inhabit the land and Manchar Lake. They also say that all caste groups of the world are, in fact, offshoots of the fishermen community. Within the context of Sindh, there are many caste groups who are actually *Mallah*—for example, Solangi, Mir Behar, Macchi, Merrani, Mazlani, to name a few—who later, due to migration or a change in occupation, changed their caste identity. Moreover, they take pride, within the Sindh context, in not having any feudal lord in their community, unlike other caste groups that do. In this regard, the Mallah of Bubak considers the Mallah of Shaikh Daman as inferior because the Mallah from Shaikh Daman now think of themselves as under the feudal lord of the Nohani community, which is politically strong in the area. Even Mallahs who marry outside their caste group are considered impure or lower, as they think of themselves as the superior caste group.

T. Postans, a colonial administrator, also wrote about fishermen, or the Mohanna tribe of the Indus:

"The Moana or Miani tribe of fishermen and boatmen, who find occupation and subsistence on the river Indus, form a third class of the Mahomedan population of Sindh, and form a large tribe, apart from either the Jutt cultivator or the turbulent Baluchi.... They are the most active and athletic race in Sindh, with buoyancy of spirits and generally frank bearing unknown to other classes. Many of them, as fishermen live, it may be said, in rather than on the river..." (Postans, 1973 [1843], p. 58).

At Manchar Lake, the Mallah caste group is divided into different sub-castes. These sub-castes may be based on the geographical location where they live, their occupation, or their forefathers' names; sometimes it is a combination of two or all three factors. For example, *Paryanni Mallah* are those who make boats, and within Paryanni, they are further divided according to their forefathers' names. Similarly, there are caste groups that are based mainly on geographical location. For example, *the Miyannies Mallah are people who lived in boathouses on the banks of the Dniester Canal*. They are further divided into *Mathein Miyanni* (upper Miyanni), those who live near the protective bund, and those who live at the tail of the canal are called *Hethein Miyanni* (lower Miyanni). Mallah. Similarly, the Shaikh tribe is the richest among them; they usually do not fish themselves but purchase fish from

other fishermen and sell it to traders, earning more than many other fishermen. However, many Shaikhs now fish for themselves since the lake's degradation.

The following are a few sub-caste groups of the Mallah community: Admanni, Aqbanni, Arbanni, Badranni, Bawanni, Bhallai, Bhirkanni, Bulwanni, Chandanni, Doryanni, Paryanni, Karyanni, Thanganni, Thatyar, and Topyanni.

The environment of the lake has a huge impact on the behavior of fishermen: the lake can be calm at times and, at other times, violent—so, too, can the fishermen. When they fish, their behavior can be violent, of course, not physically. In the past, when fishermen used the *Bhaan* technique to capture fish (a technique that yielded more fish than any other), they had to shout, cry loudly, and make all kinds of noises to create chaos among the fish, as required by this technique. The lake, too, behaves violently during the flooding season, producing large waves that unsettle their boathouses, forcing them to move closer to the banks to protect themselves and their homes. Yet they did not like being near the bank, for fear of land animals or other people who lived there.

Fishermen also communicate while fishing—abusing one another, calling each other funny names, telling each other how many fish they have captured, and sometimes chit-chatting about various things: relatives, the lake, and fish. For this, they have to shout to make their voices heard over the sound of the waves.

This “violent” nature of the lake and fishing techniques is replicated in everyday life when fishermen sit together. First, they speak so fast and loudly that one cannot understand, at first attempt, what they are saying. This was a challenge during my fieldwork: I had to ask them repeatedly to speak a little more slowly. Over time, I trained myself to hear and understand their fast and loud speech. When they spoke to me, they followed my request, but when they spoke with each other, it was faster than I could imagine. In the initial days, I often had to interrupt them to ask what point they were making.

Moreover, during household conflicts, their aggressive behavior is often visible. Once, during my stay at Baradi’s house, he had a conflict with his brother, who had a separate homestead within Baradi’s territory. This form of housing is common in Sindh and around Manchar. Early one morning, when Baradi returned from fishing and was on his way to the market to sell his fish, he started a fight with his brother, Bhutta. The conflict was over the share of the money each brother contributed to maintaining the land they live on. Four brothers live together on a small piece of land at the bank of the lake. Each has its own small plot, but all contribute to maintaining the overall area.) Baradi is the eldest and the wealthiest, and everyone thought he had more responsibilities than the others. That was the issue. Baradi argued that he had contributed enough and could not contribute more, especially since the flood season was ending and they needed money to repair the damage. (Here, “repair” means adding more earth where floodwater had washed it away and reduced their living space.)

Their reactions were so intense that I thought it might turn physical at any moment. They continued shouting and abusing each other in front of all family members—parents, women, children, and other brothers. They went on like this for almost an hour, and I was waiting, as Baradi was supposed to take me to Jhangara town, from where I usually took local transport whenever I needed a break from fieldwork.

This aggressive nature is also visible during the annual festival of Shaikh Daman. Although the festival has a religious character, much of the time is spent by fishermen in entertainment and social activities. I was told that every year, fishermen fight with one another or with members of other communities over very minor issues. Over the three days, I did not witness any major physical conflict, but once, during the local wrestling sport called Malakhro, fishermen supported a young, very inexperienced player who looked promising as he challenged more experienced players who were physically stronger than him.

During the wrestling match, members of the other side tried to interrupt as the young player was winning. Instead of the umpire managing the situation, many fishermen entered the ring and nearly began beating the players, but others intervened and settled the issue.

It is not, however, that fishermen are only aggressive, as the examples above might suggest. As I said earlier, the lake is calm as well, especially during the non-flooding season, and this too has an impact on fishermen's behavior. For example, when they are not fishing, they can remain so calm and quiet that the sound of air is clearly audible—as if nobody is inhabiting the village, as if it is empty.

The Distribution of Manchar Lake

This is quite an interesting phenomenon. Although fishermen are the original inhabitants of the lake, they do not own any land inside Manchar Lake. Rather, the lake—its water and land—is the property of various caste groups who are not fishermen but live on the banks of the lake. Hence, the fishing community has to pay tax to their landlords. In the past, such a tax was paid by offering fish or waterfowl. But today, fishermen have to arrange matters with their landlords regarding money, especially during the waterfowl season, as capturing and selling waterfowl yields a good income.

I learned this in Hyderabad when my host's nephew, Baradi, told me about his conflict with his neighbour. His neighbour, a Nohani by caste, had tied waterfowl nets, called *wanjhars*, in an area that Baradi had leased from his sister's husband. (Baradi has one sister married into the Nohani caste, and that is why they are considered 'low', as mentioned above.)

Later, Baradi narrated the conflict as follows:

I had invested thousands of rupees—purchasing nets, bamboo, tape recorders, and other necessary items. You see, I have even moved house near the land I leased from my brother-in-law (my sister's husband). Now he (my neighbour) is saying, "This land is mine, and I will capture the waterfowl from here." This land belongs to my brother-in-law. I have asked him to come and settle the land issue by marking where his land starts and ends. He will be coming in a few days.

Later, Baradi's brother-in-law and Baradi, along with his neighbour, sailed on the lake to mark the land. Baradi's brother-in-law asked the other Nohani to untie his *wanjhars*, as they had been tied on his land, which he had leased to Baradi, and the matter was settled.

Such conflicts arise mainly during the days of waterfowl hunting, as capturing waterfowl can earn a good amount of money in two or three months, compared to fishing in the next seven months. Moreover, waterfowl hunting has become more important since the depletion of fish in the lake.

For fishing, however, the lake is common property for all fishermen: they can fish anywhere in the lake without conflict. But while fishing, they have to be careful not to disturb others' fishing nets. Fishing depends on where fish are abundant; fishermen place nets where they believe fish will be. Since forest loss due to degradation, the ecological signs that fishermen used extensively in the past to locate fish have also vanished. Today, it has become a matter of luck to catch fish.

Once, when I accompanied Haji Karro, a fisherman from Bubak, into the lake early at pre-dawn, he said:

Yesterday we captured 13 kg of fish (today, 13 kg is a good catch), all big enough. We earned a good amount, and some also went home as our own food. Today, we have again set our fishing net at the same point as yesterday. But look—today we have captured only two pieces of fish. Each may weigh 1 kg or just more than 1 kg, so the total catch is two or two-and-a-half kg. It is a matter of luck nowadays.

We don't know where the fish are or whether there are any in the lake. But as we don't have anything else to do, we test our luck daily.

Dahal (Fish Distribution Points)

These are the places where captured fish are brought and auctioned by local sellers, who then distribute them to different parts of Sindh province, especially to Karachi, the port city, and also to Punjab. In the past, fish from Karachi were also sent to other countries. Today, the depletion of fish stocks has reduced daily buying and selling, but in the past, fish were so abundant that it took the whole day and night to load the trucks.

Agha Rafique, a professor of Mass Communication who, during his university days, had to travel by train (which crossed Bubak Town near Manchar Lake), described Bubak as the main distribution point for fish because it was the only rail junction serving the Manchar Lake area. He said:

After travelling for almost three hours, the train would stop, and if it stopped for longer, we knew we were at Bubak. The fish was so abundant that it always took more than an hour to load it onto the train. We would get off the train—sometimes eating lunch or dinner at the railway hotel—and a few would even go for nature's call without any worry. We knew the train would not move for almost an hour. And the smell—ufff, don't ask me. Passengers always cursed the railway department and the fishermen for the bad smell of fish. But we had to bear it because it was the only feasible mode of transport at the time.

Such views were also echoed by many fishermen during my fieldwork:

In the past, fish in the lake were so abundant that you could smell them even in Dadu (the district headquarters, 45 km away from Manchar). Private fish farm owners always cursed us because buyers from Karachi preferred Manchar's fish.

Although fish have been significantly depleted due to degradation, during the fishing season, tonnes of fish are still captured and distributed to other parts of the country. Fishermen often compare their present condition with the past, when the lake was flourishing, and they think of themselves as earning nothing. However, the situation is not that bad. Today, most fishermen earn 300–500 rupees a day during the off-season, and this can rise to more than 1,000 rupees per day during the fishing season.

This income is mainly earned by fishermen who own their own hunting boat, called a *hurro*. Almost every household has one hunting boat, and some have more than one. But there are a few households that do not have a hunting boat, because when their boat "dies", as they say, they do not have enough money to purchase or order a new one. Today, a *hurro* can cost 30,000 to 40,000 rupees.

In addition, many young fishermen from most households go to coastal areas during the off-season and return with a handsome amount of money within one or two months. They come back to stay for a few weeks in the village and then go again. During the fishing season, they usually stay in the village to capture more fish from the lake.

In winter, waterfowl can also add a handsome amount to a family's income. However, waterfowl capture is as expensive as well as risky business today. The required items (hunting net, bamboo, recorders, USB, battery, sound player) can cost up to 50,000 rupees. And due to the lake's degradation, fishermen do not know how many waterfowl will arrive or how many they will be able to capture. This makes the investment risky. Moreover, the Wildlife Department also troubles fishermen who capture and openly sell waterfowl. The government calls it "illegal". Such an incident happened this year as well:

When I reached Manchar Lake at the start of the waterfowl season, Baradi Mallah asked me, “Did you know the government has banned waterfowl capture?” I said, “I don’t know anything about this.” He went on: “If the government has done so, what will happen to us? How will we spend our days? Already, there are no fish in the lake, and now the government has banned waterfowl capture. They want us to ‘die’. If so, why don’t they just kill us?”

He continued:

You know I have invested more than 35,000 in the purchase of waterfowl [equipment]. Now see (pointing towards the sky), birds have started to arrive, but I have not yet put my *wanjhars* in the lake. What if the government doesn’t allow us to capture waterfowl? I have borrowed all this money, and I have to pay it back. Where will I pay?

I asked him to give me some time so that I could speak to a government official and understand the matter. Soon, I learned that the Supreme Court of Pakistan had issued orders prohibiting the capture of a particular migratory bird, locally called *Taloor* (Houbara Bustard). Baradi was happy to learn this, but before I could tell him, he had already tied his *wanjhars* in the lake, taking a risk.

The most favored kind of bird, which can earn fishermen a good amount of money, is the *Aari*. A pair of *Aari* can sell for 500–700, depending on the weight and size of the bird, as well as whether it is male or female. The second important one is *Nerag*, a pair of which can sell for 400–500, again depending on size and whether it is male or female. Although fish is distributed at local collection points—the most important of which is at Bubak bund—waterfowl can be sold almost anywhere. One can find fishermen selling live waterfowl in the middle of the road, in the fish market, or in any other market near the lake.

At the *dahal* points, in the past, the scene was quite exuberant: fishermen shouting prices while fish lay in their boats, abusing each other, making jokes, betting on the weight of fish, feeling proud if someone had caught a big fish or a large quantity, and so on. But today such scenes are rare, as fish are rare in the lake. Indeed, only a few fishermen capture enough fish that they need to stay at the *dahal* for any length of time. Haji Karro, aged 48, said:

Those were the days when we used to catch tonnes of fish, and it took time to weigh them. We needed to stay, and when we stayed there, what else do you think we would do? Of course, we made jokes, teased each other, and did other things. But today you can see yourself: I have just captured two pieces of fish. Do you think I need to stay here to sell them? Indeed, we feel ashamed—what type of fishermen are we; we can’t even capture enough fish. But we know what we can do when there is no fish in the lake.

This chapter presents an ethnographic history of Manchar Lake by shifting attention from a purely human-centred narrative towards the lake itself as a historical force. Manchar is often remembered through politics, the economy, culture, and nostalgia, all of which are important ways of telling its story. Yet, as this chapter has shown, such histories can also hide other histories—those that are carried in the lake’s own transformations: in the way water enters, circulates, stagnates, and drains; in the changing shape of the basin; in the disappearance of forests and the arrival (or absence) of birds; and in the slow collapse of fish populations. To write Manchar’s history only through archives and human actions is to miss how the lake, as a multispecies and multi-material world, has shaped the lives, practices, and imaginations of those who depend on it.

CONCLUSION

This paper tells the ethnographic history of Manchar Lake. Ethnographic history, as argued by Hugh Raffles (2002), tells us that place-making is a work of human-nonhuman entanglement. In this paper, I tell the story of the place-making of and in the Manchar lake. This place-making is the work of multiple forces, including the Indus River's flows, hill torrents, silt, fish, waterfowl, and numerous other beings, including fisherfolk. The etymological layers and local memory inform that Manchar is more than a body of water. It is "wide floodwaters", an ancient, sacred, and socially meaningful lake. The myths, stories, and nostalgic memories of the lake evoke an ecological thinking of living in and with the lake and the numerous beings that inhabit it.

Thus, the making and unmaking of the lake cannot be separated from the various processes and practices of humans and nonhumans. Before the British colonial interventions, the Indus River, its sediments, and the fish in the lake were flourishing, and the fisherfolk were thriving. These flow rhythms created a way of life for the lake, shaping the lives of the people and other nonhumans inhabiting it. However, colonial and later postcolonial policies, especially the construction of flood embankments, reduced river flow into the lake. This had a greater impact on the lake's physicality; as fishermen recounted, the reduction in the river's force altered the lake's depth, oval shape, and internal ecologies. The loss of *kootha* and *pootha* was not simply a physical change; it altered the life of the lake by changing fish movement and how fish were located, nets were placed, and everyday knowledge of the lake was practiced.

Juxtaposing this history of the lake with its recent history, as the lake degrades, reveals how the lake has been transformed and, in turn, has transformed multispecies relations. Memories of dense lake forests, fish, waterfowl, and barter trade with surrounding communities describe not only the food, materials, and social stability, but also the life of the lake. These memories are not only nostalgia, but they are diagnoses of loss caused by the policies of colonial and postcolonial administration. These policies collapsed the fish population, diminished migratory bird populations, and forced people to denounce the boat houses and settle around the lake. Thus, this chapter suggests that Manchar's history should be read as a history of multispecies relations between the Indus River and lake, barrage and drain, hill torrents and canals, fish and forest, birds and fisherfolk. If the RBOD and associated drainage systems have intensified the lake's degradation, then the struggle over Manchar is not only environmental but also historical and political. To recognize the lake as a maker of history is, therefore, to recognize that restoring Manchar is not simply a technical project; it is also a question of justice, memory, and the possibility of life, human and nonhuman, on the lake's edge.

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