

## ***Media and its Environmental Concerns, A Critical Appraisal***

### **Prelude**

It is commonly said that what affects the world affects us. That is the reason that global warming and sustainable development have become the cynosure of all the intellectual discourses. But such deliberations will bring fruit only when all... government, private sector, civil society, every community, family and individual alike integrate and become a solid force in managing the natural resources. Among all of them media definitely has a bigger responsibility. Their responsibility lies not only in spotlighting the sustainable development stories of their regions and highlighting the gaps where governments and other decision making bodies should be held responsible but, also in informing the masses. It is a common advice given to people in public life, “if they have not heard it, you have not said it”. Media being the cornerstone of a healthy and prosperous society has to cast light on those unlit corners of society which are subtly altering our ecological landscape, and which may shake the very future of our coming generations.

### **Issue**

Jammu and Kashmir, one of the federal states of India, comprises three different regions, each having a distinct topography. Kashmir region, being famous for its natural beauty, has been an attraction for travellers and tourists and compelled people and even emperors to say:

*“Gar firdous baroye zameen ast, hami asto, hami asto hami ast”*

“If there is paradise on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here”

So, its beauty was sold like a commodity to outside world without talking into consideration the fragility of ecosystem of the mountains. It was hoped that the

expansion of tourist industry will provide new source of income for economically underdeveloped areas. What is happening? “Tourism contributes only 7.93% to the gross domestic product (GSDP) of Kashmir and provides livelihood to only about 2% of its population. In contrast, agriculture constitutes an important sector of Kashmir’s economy as around 70% of the population derives its income directly or indirectly from this sector. Agriculture also absorbs 49% of the total work force of the state with 42% as cultivators and 7% as agricultural labourers depending directly on agriculture for their livelihood”<sup>1</sup>. Now is it prudent to base our economy on this sector alone when our ecosystem is at risk.

The problem is not with tourists, the problem arises when tourism is mixed with politics. The situation becomes grim when religious pilgrimage is linked to patriotic enterprise. In the present ongoing turmoil in Kashmir, the influx of tourists is considered as an indicator of normalcy. The more the number, the better it is for the state to brag about the normal situation in the Valley. So efforts are on to increase the number. As a result most health resorts of Kashmir give a plagued look infested with human beings in the summer months. The tourists mostly come on package tours bringing most of the facilities with them, even sometimes one can have the sight of food stock loaded at the top of the tourist vehicles. Tourism contributes little to the economy, but the problem of sanitary and refuse disposal is grave.

Among all the places, the most affected place is the Liddar Valley, situated in the east of Srinagar, the summer capital of the State, popularly known as Pahalgam. Liddar valley covers an area of 1,200 sq. kilo meters and sustains 48 glaciers covering an ice covered area of 39 sq kilo meters. “Prior to 1950, the region immediately above Pahalgam was used by highland Kashmir farmers used it not only for grazing, but also for growing maize, potatoes, vegetables, and buckwheat. Since the 1960s, or there about the face of the region has been changing steadily under the impact of regional, national, and international

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<sup>1</sup> Ashraf, M, “De-Politicize Tourism”; Greater Kashmir, 09 May 2013

tourism. By the 1980s, farming had declined considerably. Buckwheat had nearly disappeared, and numerous fields had been sold off as building sites for hotels and private guesthouses<sup>2</sup>.

Pilgrimage tourism is another problem which is subtly posing a threat to the Liddar Valley. The Amarnath Cave, holy to all Hindus of India, is visited by lacs of pilgrims each year. In 2012, more than 6 lac (0.6 million) tracked to Amarnath Cave to pay their respect to giant ice stalagmite associated with the Hindu God Shiva—one of the powerful Hindu Gods of trinity that includes Brahma and Vishnu. The Cave is located amidst Kolhai Glacier – one of the largest Himalay glaciers in the Valley. The Glacier as per the experts, is one of the fastest receding glaciers in the world. We have already lost 18% of the Kolhai Glacier (source is missing). This glacier is lifeline of the Kashmiri people as it is the main source of drinking and irrigation to a vast part of the valley.

Though on one hand environmentalists are stressing for immediate measures to stop melting range of Kolhai glacier, on the other hand government seems in no mood to think about curtailing human interference. In fact, in 2008 Jammu and Kashmir Legislature approved the transfer of 40 hectares of forest land to the organisers of this pilgrimage which erupted into wide spread public protests. The protests continued for three months. These protests forced the government to withdraw its decision.

It has been estimated that every day during the pilgrimage 55,000 kg of waste is generated. Apart from this waste, the degradation caused by buses and vehicles carrying pilgrims, trucks carrying provisions and massive deployment of security forces contributes further to air pollution. Another fallout is the threat posed by local inhabitants from crowding of the ecologically fragile area where they have to compete to retain their access and rights to their resources to both water and land.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Michael J. Casimir and Aparna Rao, Sustainable Herd Management and the Tragedy of No Man's Land: An Analysis of West Himalayan Pastures Using Remote Sensing Techniques *Human Ecology*, Vol. 26, No.1, 1998. (This content downloaded from 14.139.240.146 on Sat, 11 May 2013 05:46:32 AM All use subject to [JSTOR Terms and Conditions](#))

<sup>3</sup> Gautam Navlakha, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 43, No. 30 (Jul. 26 - Aug. 1, 2008), pp. 17-18

## **Role of Media**

Media, as an institution, has acquired a dubious attribution of sensationalizing the simplest. But that is not the whole story. Amid all the sensationalism and height, there is a positive role of media highlighting the environmental issues.

Whether exaggerated or balanced, the fact of the matter is that many environmental related issues including the transfer of land were brought to us by media alone. This way media connects us to rot that is eating us away from an environmental point of view.

Mostly it is said that media is a product of its milieu. Jammu and Kashmir also saw reporting on this issue catering to the home base, and rapidly turning provocative as popular sentiment was whipped up by leaders in both regions<sup>4</sup>. Whether provocative or balanced, the fact of the matter is, order was revoked because of sustained media support. Mere reporting though makes us aware, but follow up takes the issue to its logical end. That is what is needed while reporting our eco system.

In today's market driven world most issues are set by corporates. Capital is unarguably one of the strongest links that connects media to political institutions. Economic interdependence of media and politics further commercializes the whole scenario. It is a situation where mostly environmental issues are taken only when the interests of corporates are not hurt. Other than that in conflict areas like Kashmir there are other considerations. Media in conflict areas is under unwritten codes and conducts, do's and don'ts and threatens from both State and non State actors. Everything that is covered in conflict areas is viewed through security prism. Even environment is not spared which is prerequisite for the survival of humans whether it is State or non State actors.

The issues of environment, in a place that is paradise for tourists, are of

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<sup>4</sup> Aaliya Ahmed, Sabeha Mufti and Zara Malik, [www.thehoot.org](http://www.thehoot.org)

utmost importance. Yet the coverage of environmental issues is negligible. The only environmental concern in Kashmir is related to Dal Lake. Every week a story about Dal Lake would come in at least one newspaper of the Valley—be it English or Urdu. Beyond that media has been mostly silent on other environmental issues. The enormous vehicular movement of troops in an ecological fragile environment is huge cause of concern but it is held back. Dozens of rivers have been converted into drainages but such issues have rarely taken prominence.

Media can only play a significant part when its coverage is not viewed through national interests and narrow security prism. In Kashmir there is severe restrictions and constrains on journalists and as such reporting environmental issues of concern is severely restricted. All Kashmiri journalists do believe that while Amarnath Yatra is holy place for millions of Hindus they do point out the regulation of pilgrims in other parts of India particularly in Gangotri, Uttarakhand; a statement echoed by Swami Agnivash as well<sup>5</sup>. But such views fell to deaf ears. Even journalists from India have raised concern that with such a flow of pilgrims the icy stalemate melts and has to be artificially created<sup>6</sup>. Even Commissions appointed to look at the cause of deaths of hundred of pilgrims annually has suggested regulation of yatris<sup>7</sup>.

Pahalgam, Gulmarg and Sonamarg—the three major tourist resorts are fast turning into concrete jungles<sup>8</sup> as government has allowed construction to go unabated. But before reporting it one has to take utmost care that the organization that is giving air to such stories may suffer the ignominy of being banned<sup>9</sup>. The problem that it will pose can be understood that the hotels constructed there have no disposal systems for solid and liquid wastes<sup>10</sup>. Yet

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<sup>5</sup> Arif Shafi Wani “Regulate Amarnath Yatra on Gangotri pattern: Kashmir Civil Society”, GK, March 22, 2013

<sup>6</sup> Madhur Singh “A Perilous Religious Game in Kashmir”

<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1829965,00.html>

<sup>7</sup> Sant Kumar Sharma, “AMARNATH YATRA: Inventing a controversy”

<http://www.indiatogether.org/2008/aug/pce-yatra.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Athar Parvaiz, “Pollution in paradise” <http://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/4948-Pollution-in-paradise>

<sup>9</sup> Tasavur Mushtaq “Curfewing Media” Kashmir Life, March 4, 2013

<sup>10</sup> Athar Parvaiz, “Pollution in paradise” <http://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/4948-Pollution-in-paradise>

all the environmental reporting is restricted to Dal Lake because government itself is interested in pumping money into it.

While many journalists do report environmental issues but they are published in international news portals. For tourists, State is constructing infrastructure at the expense of environment yet the newspapers of Valley cannot touch the subject. If they do they have to be careful not to invite the wrath of the State. Because tourism is related with normalcy and as such reporting anything against it is considered anti-national. It is strange place where wanton destruction of health resorts sells but concern for them makes you anti-State. While we struggle to figure it all out, the face of the Kashmir as we know it—streams, glaciers, forests, farms and snow-capped mountains—hangs in the balance. In that background how can environment as an issue be taken up as a serious subject of research is something to ponder over.