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<th>Media coverage of environmental problems in Pakistan.</th>
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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Shah, Nafisa.</td>
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Media Coverage Of Environmental Problems In Pakistan

By

Nafisa Shah
Pakistan: Socio-cultural environment

Till the midnight of August 14, 1947 Pakistan India and Bangladesh were one country. Pakistan was born in the name of religion which is Islam and the nationhood was based more on the political exigencies of Hindu and Muslim leaders and passions of their followers. It was literally slicing off the Muslim contiguous areas from Hindu ones. The British Lawyer Radcliffe who had never visited the subcontinent before spent two weeks holed up in a hotel in Lahore carving two countries on the map and dividing a landscape he’ll never see. The waters of rivers were divided, mountains sliced, deserts that were one country for a millenium were now two halves. Suddenly people could not draw water from their wells because it had become another country. It was a unique way to come on the map. And suddenly people were made to realise that where they were living since the past many centuries was now not their land, it was some one else’s.

Geographically and ethnically, the country is divided into four provinces: the NWFP where Indus is born among the majestic Karkorams, Himaylayas and Hindu Kush, Punjab, the plainland where the Indus swells, and Sindh the desert with a green belt nurtured by the Indus that finally unites with the sea. Rich cultural heritage of the past, ruins of ancient civilisations starting with the Indus valley civilisation 5000 years ago, forts in every second town, temples of Buddhist era, mandirs of hindu ones, mosques of the Moghul period – all are part of the environment.

Pakistan inherited mountains, rivers, sea all. Though the forest cover was still low – about 5 per cent then, the Indus was there and there were five other rivers in the Punjab. The country began its life with one press and British army barracks for its offices (our govt offices are still functioning in those barracks!). Consequently the stress was always more on survival, since it was life from scratch, and life to prove to the world that we could survive. The business of government was conducted with a desperation – first decade saw intrigues and dissolution of assemblies then it was one dictatorship after another broken by brief spells of democracy. People were never a part of whatever little development took place, which is why it was so lop-sided all the time.

Population
The population of Pakistan is estimated to be 110 million as compared to 29 million in 1951. Pakistan is among the fastest growing states in South Asia with a population growth rate of 3.1 per cent. Illiteracy, cultural beliefs that child bearing is a gift of God – government’s reluctance to promote contraceptives and generally a clumsy approach to family planning has caused little or no change in controlling the exponential growth. Urbanisation is also sucking the population into the cities at a very high rate. Karachi, the fastest growing city in the country has a growth rate of 6 per cent.

Education
Pakistan has a dubious distinction when it comes to literacy. It’s perhaps the only country in the world where literacy rate has actually gone down since independence. Only 26 per cent of the Pakistani population is literate which makes us at the bottom of the list of South Asian countries. The education budget spends a sizeable amount on researching and planning which is never implemented. It has not yet been decided what should be the medium of instruction. Perhaps this is one reason why print media – the most independent network is unable to mould public opinion to the extent it should.

Economy and Development
Per capita income is US $ 390, one of the highest in South Asia. However, this is certainly no yardstick to measure socio-economic condition of the people since unequal distribution of wealth, class and caste systems and yawning gaps between the urban and rural areas makes majority of the population poor and unable to make ends meet.

It is very difficult to provide the very basic services to the population. But that is more by choice of the establishment that creates walls of insecurity by encouraging more and more money to be pumped into defence budget. The establishment spends crores on military budget whereas the same money could be diverted to educating the masses.

Pressure of a competitive international market, and therefore looking as everything in life as a commodity or consumer and the route to progress through industry which is considered inevitable by our policy makers and economic policies are therefore designed to exploit resources to the maximum and this has taken its toll on the environment.

In the cities one sees development in the form of garbage heaps and plastic bags, smoke and smog, deafening noise of vehicles, and in villages logged and lopped trees on the hills, and saline and unproductive lands in rural areas. The negative impacts of development if recognised are combated with more development. The extensive
The Role of Media in Environmental issues

State of the Environment

In such a situation the state of the environment cannot be very picturesque. Deforestation is occurring at the rate of 1 per cent and the total forest cover is 4.7 per cent. Desertification has affected 60 per cent of the area of Pakistan, soil erosion 1.2 million ha and waterlogging 2 million ha. About 40,000 ha of productive land is lost to salinity waterlogging and desertification every year in Indus Basin. An estimated 9.6 million ha of irrigated soil have excessive salts in the soil. These are the direct or indirect results of overpopulation. The other threat is increasing urbanisation; water, air and industrial pollution.

The wildlife of the country is in bad shape. A wide ranging species of plants, animals and fish, face the threat of extinction due to the destruction of land and marine ecosystems. The black buck vanished from Pakistan, the marsh crocodile, gavial, snow leopard, rhesus monkey, are threatened with extinction and so is the blind dolphin and the houbara bustard.

The Role of Media in Environmental issues

Though the means may be new, the cause of communication of environment is by no means a new one in my land. Love for nature, love for mother earth, and soil is something one grows up with. We are taught never to sell our land. For it is mother and mothers are not sold. The sufis — Shah Latif, Bulleh Shah — of Pakistan lived lives of hermits and were almost a liaison between nature and man. Folk poetry sings of nature. Folk craft has always communicated the discipline of nature. Fairy tales where animals talk and trees save life, are told to children every night.

One of the folk tales in Pakistan goes like this: A very old man is seen planting trees. A young man comes to him and says, "You know that you'll die before this tree starts giving fruits. Why are you planting it?" The old man replies, "My elders planted trees and I ate their fruits. I'm planting these trees so that you can eat their fruits."

But unfortunately these traditions could never be woven into our development process. It is only very recent that the modern media has shown responsibility towards the surroundings.

At this point I will quote a few instances of how the sins omission by the media where it could have been instrumental in preventing the crisis the people and their environment beyond repair. In Gadap, Malir, Konkar, rural areas outside the urban Karachi, the villagers know why unemployment has increased. Their agricultural lands have become dry and the poultry farms have mushroomed on the earth now turned yellow. The gravel and sand has been removed from the river bed ruthlessly to satisfy the demands of the construction rackets and a rapidly growing city and have lowered the water table tremendously — wells that were at a depth of 35 feet 30 years ago are now as deep as 200 feet. There is no water to green the former green belt of Karachi which provided it with the food essentials. Men and women both are unemployed. While men, after fighting a losing battle have moved to the city to look for jobs or have simply joined the construction racket, many a woman has retreated into the world of home to do purdah and tend to livestock and children. Even though these areas are a stone's throw away from the industrial heartland, Karachi, the people have never been able to access to electricity, and negligible education or health units and yet they knew exactly what and where their problem was which eventually is was just not their problem, but a problem of the whole city. The issue of removal of gravel and sand from river bed is continuing as before. No part of media took it up to build public opinion and give the issue its due recognition or to shake the slumberous authorities. Meanwhile the water table wanes, and the village ecosystems have been irreversibly damaged.

In Rehri and Ibrahim Hyderi, two fishing villages engulfed in the growing city have been ravaged by drugs, unemployment and poverty. Overfishing, overcrowding, immigration of Bengalis in huge numbers to our coast have all caused the state of affairs. Trollers have exhausted the shrimp and fish — the king prawn, which was in abundance at our coast is now wiped out. This has led to deep sea fishing and one hears of numerous cases where fishermen are caught in the foreign waters. The damage to the mangrove ecosystem due to over-grazing, scarcity of freshwater due to overexploitation of Indus up stream has affected the breeding of shrimp. At the same time the influx of Bengalis and their hijacking of the fishing business has deprived the local population even further.

65,000 inhabitants were dislocated during the building of Tarbela dam. No one knows what it was worth
it but media never tried to find out. River Indus it seems is dying and yet we continue to boast that our irrigation system with canals, barrages, bunds and dams all over the Indus is the largest in the world, not realising that it is a death knell of the river which stopped flowing as the barrages took over. The media is not shaken...

In such a scenario, the role of media in mustering the public opinion cannot be over emphasised. In a poor country like ours, where people do not have access to basic health services and education, when little girls have to walk for miles to get to the nearest school, and expecting mothers are sometimes taken on camel backs to get to the nearest hospital, (here I am talking about the rural areas where 60% our population lives) it is often debated that to speak about environment is premature, since the people are neither free from the shackles of poverty nor from illiteracy. But the fact remains that people and environment are one, and there is no way one can isolate one from the other. And it is medias to learn first environmental problems are eventually human rights problems: a environmental damage will one day damage man.

On the other hand, media and the intellelgenstia and information dissemination bodies approach mimicing of the west towards environment. Let us not forget that the colonisation of the west/north, caused in great deal, the disruption of our village systems by their top down approach to ‘develop’ our country. The concept of sustainable development - except that it does not sound so bombastic - is not a new one to our elders - who live for their children - though it may be a new one to the city dwellers.

I shall now delve briefly into the way each aspect of media has approached the problems of environment.

Press

Pakistani Press consisting of newspapers in Urdu, English, Sindhi, Punjabi and Balochi has a limited circulation and a limited reach. (The total circulation of the major newspapers is 1.5 million. But newspapers are read almost with a cause by the polluted young activists, interest groups, people who matter and newspapers are taken more seriously than any other media.

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No of dailies

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With the relaxation of declaration rule and the freedom of the press during the government of Prime Minister Bhutto, the press has discovered the strength of its word and despite repeated attacks from government, political parties and other groups, has continued to write vigorously. It is in this atmosphere that the pleas to save diminishing wildlife and forests are being noticed with a sensitivity as never before, negative impacts of development are being voiced,

Since the last two years, it is the English newspapers and journals which are read by decision-making elite that have been the most vocal about environmental issues. Among them are the Daily Dawn, The Nation, Frontier Post, The Herald, Newsline and The News. The newspapers often have strong editorials on various aspects of the environment. Though investigative journalism is weak, and issues are relegated to back pages.

The most effective section of the print media in Pakistan is Urdu. As opposed to 1 million circulation of English newspapers that of Urdu newspapers is 2.4 million. However Urdu newspapers and magazines, normally don't find the environment related topics newsworthy until it's a political issue or a statement made by a known politician. Thus Kalabagh dam - strictly environment and development issue will get coverage in the Urdu press because it is a highly political issue also but the issues of deforestation in the mountains or waterlogging in the plains will not unless it is newsworthy or political. Droughts, decreasing rainfall, floods, landslides make news with the number of dead reported. But the question why is not asked. Informative role is weak and investigative non-existent. Jang and Nawaiwaqt which have the biggest circulation follow the above trend.

The Urdu newspaper from Lahore, Pakistan is leading the pack in environmental reporting especially the issues which affect peoples’ health. Although the quality of reporting is not up to the mark, what is remarkable is that these features are displayed prominently usually on the first page which is otherwise reserved for politics. One of the recent features focused on how the unhygienic conditions in the 'gwala colonies' are polluting the millions of liters of milk consumed daily in Lahore. Pakistan's magazine section has also carried features on wildlife conservation and industrial pollution. Pakistan has proved wrong the old assumption that readers don't want to read about these things. Most other Urdu newspapers remain indifferent to the changing sensibilities of their readers.

Despite freedom of press, the conservative sections continue to control it. Ownership of the newspapers ironically is as feudal as the rest of the country. The major papers are handled by barons who decide every-
thing from the staff salaries to the policies and many times are editors too. And the barons have commercially oriented policies. They sell news and unfortunately, the number of trees felled or the audio terrorism of rickshaws or the overfishing are so much a part of life, they do not make news. Reporters are strictly an ownership of the company and they seldom use their initiative. Even if they do, the stories that don’t conform to the editorial policy are dropped.

Environmental journalism requires longterm investigations, and may require extensive travelling. These are two things which are discouraged. For they take up the precious time of the newspapers and require costs that editors who are also owners are not ready to pay.

Press has, nevertheless, been instrumental in generating and making the difference in some way or the other. I have three case studies of environmental issues that are fervently debated or written about in the national dailies and journals. Kalabagh dam, the plight of houbara bustard and the story of Kirthar National Park.

**Kalabagh dam**

Kalabagh dam is perhaps the hottest environmental issue which has repeatedly made headlines in the newspapers. The reason: it’s probably the first environmental issue that has turned political. The dam is to be located about 120 miles downstream of existing Tarbela dam, in the region of Potohar, where Indus drops from an elevation of 8000 feet above sea level to 680 feet and enters the plains of Punjab from the hilly tracts of NWFP. Once built the dam will be one of the largest generating stations in Asia with an ultimate capacity of 3600 MW. Among the other merits of dam cited by the WAPDA (Water and Power Development Authority) are water storage up to 7.6 million acre feet, Generation of low cost hydroelectric power near major load centres for meeting the growing power demands of agricultural, industrial and domestic consumers, alleviation of flood damage downstream, etc.

The dam has been strongly opposed by two provinces, Sindh and NWFP. Thousands of acres of Sindh’s land have been ruined by water logging and salinity due to over irrigation of land, construction of barrages etc. And the other threat is non-availability of water as much of it is consumed upstream. Sindh’s fears that vast tracts will become uncultivable due to shortage of water. NWFP has already borne the brunt of construction of Tarbela dam contend that besides dislocation of people, their agriculture will be threatened by waterlogging. The Punjab meanwhile is hellbent on its constructions as it will be able to reap the benefits of the dam the most.

The issue has now taken ethnic proportions. Sindhis reinforce their nationalist sentiments, Punjabis continue to call them traitors and Pathans call Punjabis usurpers.

Massive felling of trees, failure of watershed management programmes which have caused a steady death of Tarbela dam by silting it up. Kalabagh dam is sure to be affected by these problems and if a cost and benefit exercise is done keeping the longterm hazards of dam building, it is sure to become more of a liability than an asset.

The dam has generated controversy since the inception of its idea. Newspapers in all towns, of all languages have had headlines splashed on and of but only because the political parties are also pitted against each other on the issue. While it is interesting to see how politicisation of this issue has caused participation and protest at grassroots level, the danger inherent here is that it overshadows the deeper environmental impact of the dam.

**Houbara Bustard**

While the hunting of the houbara is banned for the local population under the Environmental Protection Ordinance 1972, the Arabs are cordially invited by the ministry of foreign affairs to grace the land with their hunting and they have religiously done so since 1963. Conservationists recall that “in winter the number of houbaras was like butterflies on a mustard farm.” While the WWF places the number of birds at 20,000, it is doubtful that there are that many. In fact in Sindh there was not a single Arab party when the writer left for Singapore simply because the hunting was no good. There is no doubt that the bird is threatened with extinction.

Since 1983, after an international symposium on the houbara bustard, the press (in this case English) has been writing almost with a cause for the plight of the bird. Reports, editorials, public service ads feature houbara regularly. It is irrational that though the awareness has been created over the years about the unregulated massacre of the bird, the Arabs continue to hunt the bird with a vengeance.

But it is very positive to see the public interest generated on this and the prime tool has been the press. SCOPE, a new NGO went to court against allocation of Thatta for the training of falcons for five years by the Sindh government to the rulers of Dubai.

On January 8, the Sindh High Court bench comprising Mr Justice Mamoon Kazi and Mr Justice, Wajehudin Ahmed admitted a constitutional petition filed on behalf of SCOPE, and suspended the Sindh government order under which the rulers of Dubai were allotted Thatta for the training of falcons for a 5-year period commencing dated 10-6-91.
Television

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ment, Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation has a programme duration of about 300 hours from 18 Stations in 21 languages. Radio seems to be the most grassroots form of communicating different messages in the rural areas because it does not require its listener to be literate. However, it has had a great setback in the urban areas especially after the onslaught of the TV.

Long before the modern concept of sustainable development came home, radio Pakistan was running programmes for farmers educating them on seeding, plowing, and demerits of excessive fertilisers and and pesticides. Agricultural programmes like Sohni Dharti broadcast from Lahore and Fateh Khan Ji Katcheri from Hyderabad, where wise old men would educate the farmers. That way, Radio was doing its bit on the environ­

languages. Radio seems to be the most grassroots form of communicating different messages in the rural areas because it does not require its listener to be literate. However, it has had a great setback in the urban areas especially after the onslaught of the TV.

Now, from programmes on traffic, pollution, area profiles, news events related to environment are covered in the radio. Recent examples are three programmes, 20 minutes on Mahol aur hum and a programme for youth which deals bravely with the negative impacts of development and technology.

Unfortunately, it is a controlled medium and all that it must or must not do is laid down by the authorities. The radio therefore cannot use its enormous potential to raise awareness in an objective way. The policy as described by one producer was “Omit the doubtful and the controversial.”

Radio:

About 77.5 per cent of the population has access to radio making it a very powerful medium. In its home service, Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation has a programme duration of about 300 hours from 18 Stations in 21 languages. Radio seems to be the most grassroots form of communicating different messages in the rural areas because it does not require its listener to be literate. However, it has had a great setback in the urban areas especially after the onslaught of the TV.

Kirthar Park

Kirthar is Pakistan’s biggest national park and the only one to be mentioned in the United Nation’s list of national parks. It is home to urial — the wild sheep and the Sindh ibex, the wild goat along with several other plant and animal species in a protected ecosystem.

The highways department had planned to construct Indus Highway, a 5.5 billion rupee project envisaged to open out the underdeveloped west bank of the Indus river. At this point the funding agency Japanese OECF made a no objection certificate conditional before it released its funds. The conservationists were against this road as it threatened the very existence of the Park. IUCN Pakistan sponsored an expert who studied the area and suggested alternate routes. The press - and here it was also Sindhi newspapers - took up the case in their hands - with follow up reports regularly. The issue was seen as a direct confrontation of development and environment. So much public opinion was generated that leaders like Benazir Bhutto started talking about the plight of Kirthar park. On 26th June Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif intervened and called for the road to be rerouted away from the park area.

While the story of Kirthar may be called a success story, the role of journalists needed much to be required. For example none of the journalists, which includes myself, went to see the situation in the park itself and the view of the locals, while doing the investigation. And the press considers the story over. Though the writer does not think so. The park has people living in it and is threatened with by the interwivelries of Sardars that often kills animals as a result. Moreover overpopulation, overgrazing are changing the face of the park ecosystem.

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Television

Television can easily be called the most popular medium of communication and entertainment in the country and therefore has a large audience in urban areas and a very very fast growing one in the rural areas. According to licences, there are 1.5 million television sets in the country, but unofficially television sets are estimated to be 2.5 million. Television has a viewership of 12 million.

The prime time teleplays are watched seriously, and the good plays are discussed for months after and some­times even before they are telecast. Unfortunately, the teleplay has never been used to convey this message although it is very versatile and has presented all conceivable themes. In 1989 alone, 796 such plays were produced. Like the radio, TV is a government controlled media and therefore all that is politically correct is shown on TV. But even within this limitation, television has a tremendous potential is raising an awareness about the various aspects of urban and rural environment.

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A gloomier picture emerges at the state of the regional programmes. Agriculture is an important issue but only form the angle of development in its strictest sense. The film on Nara Canal only showed how it had turned the fields green and increased the yield manifold but did not show the waterlogging or salinity of the nearby areas. Irrigation projects receive coverage on TV as development always appeals to the imagination of our producers.

Environmental themes are also incorporated in talk shows. Western documentaries dubbed in Urdu (Cosmos, Our Earth) are a regular feature.

In Khubarnamah, all that is officially correct is shown. Recently about 1 minute duration film was included on the rally for the cause of the environment. However, it became clear why. The chief minister of NWFP had taken part in it.

Advertising
Recently, a group of professional and progressive advertising agencies have come up to the surface. With the mushrooming of these and the willingness of multinational companies to pull up a green face and the realisation by both that it is a positive, clean and aesthetically sound concept to play with. The last two years have seen calenders on trees with intense poetry, on wildlife and general aspects of environment designed by Oscar, Blazon and Circuit among the ad companies that espouse the cause of environment. These are sponsored by different companies ranging from multinationals like ICI and PBS to small companies.

A once year plant-a-tree campaign by Crescent Group advertised and conducted by interglobe communications in 1991 which famous cricketers Imran Khan, Javed Miandad and Waseem Akram were shown planting a tree.

Among the public service ads, that also aimed at generating public interest were those that campaigned against the houbara bustard hunting and against the construction of road in Kirhtar National Park.

On TV, government sponsored ads included subjects like air pollution and noise pollution. At the same time one sees long ads on fertilizers and pesticides luring the farmer to increase his yield.

Visual and Performing Arts
Among the visual and performing arts, theatre and puppetry had deep roots in my land. In the remote areas theatre is still a means to communicate with the people. In Mithi a small town in the desert of Thar, during the theatre season, hundreds of people traverse the lengths of the desert to come and see the plays many of which are improvisations of religious themes. Modern day theatre however, up till now has focused more on social issues. However there is a growing trend to include the plight of environment into the social message. A new theatre group to have emerged in the recent years is Baang. Their most famous production up to now has been a children's play that carried the lament of a jungle under threat from development mongers and hunters. Changa Manga Mein aam khoa, a tale of a jungle habitat with animals and nature in harmony is threatened by shikaris, hunters and by the people of the urban areas who want to convert it into a touristy resort and build hotels in it. Hawa ko duwa do, a Gripp production (I have not seen it) is how children collectively oppose the cutting of a tree.

The story of cinema and documentaries in Pakistan is a very tragic one. It is only the regional cinema that is alive today. It is only the regional cinema that is alive today and that too because it is violent, loud and flamboyant and rotates round a hero and a villain. Private documentaries have never been encouraged. Talented filmmakers like Jamil Dehlvi faced severe hardship during martial law for his independent ventures. One of his good films is Qaf, a visualisation of a volcano in fury. Private documentaries suffer not only from censorship but also from paucity of funds. Even if government would sponsor films it would not be an environmental issue. Among the recent ventures are Mein boon Lyari, a civic portrait of the oldest area of Karachi by Mustaq Gazdar, Shireen Pasha's "Mekran coast of Balochistan" which is not yet released, a documentary on the desert of Mekran.

Painting in Pakistan is very versatile. ranging from the folk painting that can be seen on every truck in pakistan to huge canvases of the educated artists. In fine arts, although heritage and nature are favourite themes of the painters, that has always been so because of the aesthetic and philosopohic values. As such no concerted effort is made to show the degradation of the environment.

Children's Literature
In upper class schools, environment days are celebrated with fervour. There have been rallies organised by schools on World Environment day, and random exhibitions other times with thought-provoking posters made by children. At some private schools, children are encouraged to plant trees.

There is an increasing tendency to imbue the message of nature into children's literature. Thus TRC (an NGO which is a resource centre for teachers) publishes two magazines - one for children called Alif sjala and the other Gulistan is for teachers.
*Funline* is the first private children's magazine, and was a venture of *Newsline* publications. *Funline* is not exclusively a magazine on environment but every thing it writes has the undertones. There are special supplements, *Children's Dawn*, a part of the bigger *Dawn*, and *Us* part of *The News* are the other children's literature with strong guidelines on environmental issues.

**Conclusion**

Over the last two years an increase in frequency of seminars, workshops, conferences on environment has generated a lot of response from media. Here I must mention JRC, Journalist's Resource Centre, a very efficient and the only one of its kind, information resource on environment. The Centre has set up a library of books, reports audio and visual aids. The JRC in collaboration with IUCN has been organising workshops, seminars, conferences.

WWF and IUCN Pakistan are international organisations doing various projects and building up a public awareness among the people. At the same time, the past few years have seen mushrooming of environmentally aware NGOs. Among them SCOPE (Society for Protection of Environment) is worth mentioning for they have gone to court on environmental matters which something very rare in the judicial history of the country.

Recently, walks for the houbara organised by the WWF, demonstrations by village women carrying matkas on their heads for non-availability of water, riding for the cause of the environment, little children lining the streets for the cause of nature and even the Chief Minister NWFP leading anti-pollution rallies are a positive glimpse in an otherwise bleak background.

**Sources:**
- The Statistical Year Book, 1989
- The Media Fact Book
- Pakistan's Environment, a historical perspective
- An Assessment of the Kalabagh Dam project on the River Indus Pakistan by Mohammad Nasir Gazdar