



## The Political Economy of Urban Environmental Management in Kashmir: Reflections and Agenda for Change

*Mushtaq Pahalgami and Simin Akhter Naqvi*

*Himalayan Welfare Organization, Pahalgam, Kashmir  
Centre for the study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy,  
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi*

*(Corresponding author: Mushtaq Pahalgami)*

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**ABSTRACT:** Mountain ecosystems are under serious threat today and the weather cycle in the entire Himalayan region has been rapidly changing due to this over the last few years. The main reason for this is unregulated human inflow, causing unregulated vehicle plying, air pollution and glacier melting esp. in glacier regions of Lidderwat and Kolahoi. Unplanned and ever expanding concrete constructions in some of Kashmir's most sensitive areas like Gulmarg, Sonamarg and Pahalgam and lax administrative regulation of the same is another cause. While people's selfish and ignorant behaviour towards environmental degradation as individuals is often held as a cause, even rightly so to some extent, the administrative machinery's apathy and insensitivity are the main causes behind the slip. Both, central and local planning authorities have also failed to develop sustainable sanitation and waste-disposal systems and eco-friendly alternative developmental models that can ensure promotion of healthy living and non-industrial business-economy alternatives centred around education, health care, adventure sport training etc., so that the problem could be combated in the long term and the environmental challenge turned around into opportunity. Besides planners, local communities and regional media also need to evolve information sharing mechanisms to share and promote environment friendly traditional and modern-scientific life-style choices at the village-community level and school and college students need to be roped in and members of the academic community and legal fraternity brought on board on a war-footing to counter and arrest the vicious cycle of illegal land grab/deforestation/illegal construction/creation of parallel economies and avenues for bribery/political patronage/rent-seeking behaviour and more land grab, particularly in the cities.

The Himalayan Welfare Organization, based in Pahalgam has been working for the cause of Environmental Conservation and protection through the use of RTI, PILs and a committed and sustained media-information campaign on the subject in Kashmir since 2008 and this paper presents a summary of HWO's ground experience of working on Urban Environmental Management In Kashmir over the years. Critical reflections on various dimensions of the problem are shared in the first section of the paper and HWO's ground experience and insights there from discussed in the second section. The third and last section discusses an agenda for change and intervention, attempting to offer inputs and suggestions to

Planners / researchers / professionals on the issue of urban environmental management in Kashmir's mountain ecosystems in particular and in mountainous regions in the country in general.

### **I. MAIN ISSUES, PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES FACING URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT IN KASHMIR**

According to the Draft, Jammu and Kashmir State Disaster Management Policy prepared by the Government of J&K (2014), "Jammu and Kashmir covers the northern most extremity of India and lies between latitudes 32° 17' to 36°58' north and longitudes 73°26' to 80°26' east, with an area of 1,01, 387 sq. kms (under Indian Administration)inhabited by 1,00, 69, 917 people inhabit, resulting in a density of 99 persons per sq. km. The Census operation of 2001 has shown an increase of more than 40 lakhs over the census

conducted 20 years ago in 1981. The State economy is mostly agriculture based where more than 75% people are directly or indirectly dependent on it. Mostly, the people's prosperity or otherwise depends on the success or failure of the agriculture sector, after which Tourism and trade form the secondary employers. Physically, of the three divisions of the state, Ladakh alone covers about 70% of the total area of the state, Jammu accounts for 19% and the valley of Kashmir accounts for the remaining 11%. Morphologically, the state is divided into three distinct micro regions, the Outer hill division, which starts from the plains in the south to Pir-panjals in the north besides the Jhelum valley division and Indus valley division.

The outer hill division is separated by the Pir-panjals from the Jhelum valley in the south. Near Kulu the central Himalayas bifurcate into two, one going towards the north-western direction and are known as Zanaskar range and the other towards the southwest called as the Dhaulader range. In between these two ranges is the sand-watched green valley of Kashmir. The northern most extremity of the country is the extensive mountainous territory of Ladakh or the valley of Indus. Extending from the Zanaskar in the south to the Karakorum, the Nunkun and the Nanga Parbat in the north, Ladakh is almost a plateau desert and mostly is devoid of vegetation. The rivers Chenab, Jhelum and Indus constitute the main drainage of these three divisional regions respectively.”

Owing to a unique geo-political and geographic set-up, the state is prone to a number of natural and man-made disasters and calamities including, Earthquakes, Floods, Landslides and Avalanches besides political turmoil and civilian unrest, all in all constituting a major challenge for planners and policy-makers, particularly from the environmental point of view.

Main Issues facing the Semi-urban/urban planning-management comprise,

1. Rampant Land grab/deforestation/illegal construction, coupled with unplanned urbanization in a geographically tricky and varied setting.
2. Improper Sanitation practices and untreated sewage-discharge, Construction of illegal temporary toilets by campers including those built by armed forces and by SASB discharging huge volumes of untreated sewage into local rivers and Dumping of unsegregated waste on banks of local water-bodies and lakes by the local civic authorities.
3. Glacier melting/ rapid and sustained climate change due to vehicle and human proliferation and thermogenic human activity, particularly in glacier regions.

The main Reasons behind administrative insensitivity and popular apathy and indifference towards environmental problems can be understood in terms of:

- A. General Political instability and unrest
- B. Administrative sanction to the Crony-Capitalism-based economic model and wide prevalence of corruption and bribery.
- C. Local and Central Political pressures, Legal immunity enjoyed by the armed forces, the challenges of the Yatra-SASB Communal politics and wide-spread involvement of local politicians and business-community with the land-mafia.

The main challenge before planners concerned about urban environmental management in Kashmir is thus, to be able to articulate the environmental question in the wider politics and socio-economic set-up and to

understand why developing a more informed and participatory socio-political alternative is both necessary and pertinent to solve the problem. The twin facts of the inherent diversity and political challenges of the region having been ignored in development policy-making and the imposition of centralised solutions upon the region only point to the need and urgency of developing local alternatives informed by local experience/insights and ground-research.

## II. HWO'S GROUND EXPERIENCE, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The Himalayan Welfare Organization has filed and fought more than 250 RTI and PSGA cases, particularly concerning land grabbing, illegal construction and illegal land-use in and around Pahalgam; which has resulted in positive interventions and more than two hundred notices served in various cases, to the Department of Social Welfare, Ministry of Tourism, Department of Education, Department of Consumer Affairs, Department of Public Distribution, rural Development, Ministry of Environment, Forest Department, (Amarnath Yatra) Shrine Board, Integrated Child development project; GOI, and State Assembly Secretariat, among others besides ensuring implementation of the 2008 J&K High-court order staying all construction and repair in the region, on a daily basis through a sustained RTI and media campaign. The HWO has had a tumultuous and challenging experience of working on the fore-listed issues on ground, some of which include:

A. The People Welfare Organization's (PWO, Pahalgam) 2008 PIL which resulted in judicial intervention and a construction ban. The ban however has yielded iniquitous dividends and has only been selectively implemented, over-looking the excesses of the rich and influential business lobby while causing much harassment of the common residents who now need a permit to even repair roofs/windows/toilets in their houses.

B. Experience with 2014 floods; which made us realize that hazardous construction choices and a total lack of town-planning in and around Pahalgam has resulted in an environmental time-bomb like situation while the region only passively awaits more devastation following another disaster! While HWO volunteers went about on rescue and rehab missions following the floods, the one observation we made time and again was that flood-plains of rivers have been hazardously occupied and built upon and evacuation thereof needs to be addressed on a war-footing.

C. The Save Shakhul Campaign, 2016, launched by the HWO to save the dried-up Shakhul or Martand canal which has been used as a sewage drain for decades now by both locals and civic authorities alike; which exposed the limits of administrative intervention and told us how the land mafia-politician-bureaucrat-large business nexus works. Needless to say, repeated attempts to bring the problem to the local administration have only fallen on deaf ears, compelling the HWO to resort to seek media aid and appeal for legal intervention.

D. The recent case of a five story building near Veersaran Laddi where construction is still on even after building 5 stories, all built recently during the unrest, taking advantage of the lax administrative situation. Everybody, from Wildlife to PDA to Forest to PWD and Rural development say the land doesn't come under their boundary and so they have nothing to do with the matter. The question to ask is can the land on which it is being built, bear the load? Does it have the capacity? The Environment Impact Assessment, EIA, conducted a couple of years ago clearly shows that no land in the entire Lidder valley can bear such load. It also surprises and appals that the civil society and the media are largely silent on this. Except the DC, Ananthnag, who has taken due cognisance of the matter, all other officers, bureaucrats and political players seem to have succumbed to the owner's influence. Even the permits he had obtained from certain govt. departments have outlived their 6 months expiry but he is still going on with the construction. One can't help being shocked by this person's audacity and impunity with which he has destroyed more than 45 slopes and ruined the ecology despite notices for stopping work from CTP Kashmir and PDA, and the way he is still going on with the construction, the

entire region may even turn into another Uttarakhand in the times to come. Even if the land turns out to be the owner's own, which is at best dicey today, with no land-record or deed proofs, he still doesn't have the legal right to use the hundreds of tons of cement and steel for building this massive concrete structure here, in close vicinity of the lidder flood plain, a region already notified as 'ecologically sensitive' by the Hon'ble Supreme court of India. The HWO has appealed to the Environmental committee of the state assembly and the DC, Ananthnag to constitute a committee to review the environmental damage this structure is expected to cause, under the chairmanship of CEO, PDA who is familiar with the intricacies of the case and also tried to stop the construction at a point but the owner of the said structure influenced higher ups and took advantage of the unrest, making it difficult even for the CEO, PDA to intervene, despite sincere intent and efforts.

E. Political challenges faced in highlighting the environmental degradation resulting from the SASB yatra. Despite the fear of getting branded as anti-establishment and/or communal, the HWO has prepared a list of illegal/unsanctioned toilets and dug-pits on the yatra route and the defunct STPs which has been made public and circulated widely through the organization's pamphlets and brochures. The details of baths and toilet installations at various yatracamp sites are as in table 1.

a.) The organization's volunteers have also repeatedly engaged in voluntary collection of garbage and hazardous plastic waste from the yatra route and have succeeded in convincing the SASB and local civic authorities to take up similar collection activities in the area.

**Table 1.**

S.No.	Location	Toilets	Bath	S no	Location	Toilets	Bath
01	Nunwanan	444	76	01	Neelgrath Helipad	38	05
02	Chandanwari	184	17	02	Baltal Base Camp	498	100
03	Point 2 KM	05	01	03	RANGA Morh to	329	66
04	Pisutop	64	08	04	Railpatri 1	08	02
05	Zojipal	54	08	05	Railpatri 2 langer	12	04
06	Nagakoti	10	01	06	Brarimarg Down	05	01
07	Sheshnag	279	33	07	Brarimarg	53	07
08	Wawbal	15	02	08	Y -Junction	03	0
09	MG Top	30	06	09	Kali mata track	06	0
10	Poshpatri	21	10	10	Holy cave	209	50
11	Kelnar 1	02	0	11	Panjtarni	308	45
12	Kelnar 2	05	01	12	Sangam down	33	08
13	Dardkote	04	02	13	Sangam top	15	02
<b>Total</b>		<b>1117</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>Total</b>		<b>1517</b>	<b>290</b>

b.) Political victimization, harassment and the plight of the whistle-blower, and the administrative harassment and threats of physical violence that our volunteers have had to face almost on a regular basis, also needs to be recognised and countered through active citizen watch and media participation, which in view of HWO's own ground experience has been found to go a long way to help.

The organization's experience with studying and trying to constructively alter the environmental scene in the valley clearly points out two major impediments to environmental planning and administration in the area; one, the widespread ignorance of environmental issues and the urgency of the situation and widespread administrative corruption, second the very model of unplanned economic development which promotes large scale and ever-growing private business enterprises, without any substantial employment growth while causing immense pressure on the environment. The major opportunity, we have identified is in terms of the human resource, which the HWO strongly feels, needs to be professionally trained and developed into a skilled workforce and used as a centre-point of future development. This will not only bridge the gap between mostly non-local owners of large capital and the educated yet un-employed local labour force. This will also take the developmental focus away from polluting industries and the resource-contaminating hotel enterprise and allow proliferation of skill and knowledge intensive service sector enterprises, reducing resource-pressure in the long run.

### III. AGENDA FOR CHANGE AND EFFECTIVE INTERVENTION

The HWO has recognised that the first step in building an environmentally sustainable society and economy is to create awareness about the issue through an active civil-society campaigns government information campaigns, informed academic debate and media activism. Understanding the need to fight against Corruption using legal and judicial support and media vigilantism is also pertinent. A host of local changes that need to be brought about and have been repeatedly suggested by the HWO to various local and state-level authorities are as follows:

1. Sarbal Garbage Site and Zabikhud near Village Ganieshbal must be developed as Eco Friendly/ Environment Parks. It will become source of income for Government Departments and Local Population, it will preserve the environment.
2. Nunwanan base camp needs to be developed as a recreational park on the pattern of Beetab Valley Park.

Side by side Pahalgam Development Authority(PDA) should establish an institute of tourism where local youth can be given professional training in tourism related activities like-Guides, Hotel Managers, Water Sports, House Keeping, Trekking, Hiking etc.

3. PDA & Forest Department should take steps to alienate the illegally grabbed and occupied by encroachers and land mafias at Pahalgam market and must be used for various developmental purposes.

4. Sustainable development of fresh water natural lakes around Pahalgam needs to be carried out. All surrounding lakes be brought on tourism map and by making sustainable development like foot path treks for approaching these fresh water lakes, viewing decks, shelter sheds etc especially for Tulyan Lake and Source Lake for the encouragement of adventure tourism.

5. Proper and timely recovery of garbage and other pollutants after the conduct of Amarnath Yatra needs to be ensured and societal awareness created to ensure volunteer participation in the collection activity which is massive and thus legitimately an administrative nightmare, spread over hundreds of acres and kilometres uphill and spanning a period of two full months.

6. Regular monitoring of effluents dumped into rivers by local hotels and other private businesses and regular and proper cleaning of rivers, and setting up of functional Sewage treatment plants also needs to be ensured.

7. Prohibition of Vehicle-Washing of vehicles in Lidder and other streams near Nunwanan, Mamal and other places must be taken seriously, which is an activity that causes massive daily contamination by fuel and other pollutants, and needs to be regulated through development of proper vehicle-cleaning sheds with built-in refuse treatment mechanisms.

8. General promotion of low-impact and low environmental remainder economic activities like bread and breakfast schemes for tourists and local skill based cottage craft enterprises. Massive educational inclusion and outreach is also needed along with promotion of locally employable skills like adventure-training and tourism so that the vast unemployed pool of local educated youth could also be engaged productively, in a diffused service-economy set up instead of a resource-intensive industrial setting, to take pressure off the already over-pushed land, river and forest resources.

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