

Plunder at the hilltops

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Unnoticed in the heat of the moment and the prejudices of the politics, a quiet but remarkable change is taking place in the KPK province. Even a casual visitor cannot help observing that every child that you come across is attending a school, that the teachers are present in class rooms and the doctors are available at the rural health centers. The police is polite and efficient. A billion new trees are being planted. Over 480 schools are being run by solar energy and 356 micro-hydel power projects are being installed. An Independent Monitoring Unit has effectively controlled absenteeism, medicine shortage, stocks and financial irregularities in schools and hospitals. The government responds to the Right to Information Act. The roads are broader and forests more dense than ever before.

But there are other environmental issues that the province appears to have glossed over. Plot by plot the beautiful and scenic spots of 'Galiyat' are being sliced, allotted and rapaciously occupied by the rich and the powerful ruling elite of Pakistan. The winding 'katcha' trails, lush green vegetation and majestic pine trees are being sneakily replaced by sand, cement and bitumen roads that lead to exclusive private residences. The sights, smells and sounds of our finest forests and hilltops are being steadily stolen forever to feed the insatiable greed of our parasitic ruling class.

The Public Trust Doctrine, now a part of common law, recognizes natural resources like air, sea, water and the forests as public property and considers it unjustified to make them a subject of private ownership. The Supreme Court of India in its recent judgments has declared that the state is the trustee of all natural resources which are meant for public use and enjoyment. Public at large is the real owner of the sea shores, running waters, airs, forests and ecologically fragile lands, while the state is only a custodian. Such resources should be made freely accessible to all citizens and not converted to private ownerships.

Invariably the well-connected politicians, bureaucrats, generals, judges and corporates manage to get these plots allotted for themselves. The Chief Minister of the KPK's previous government, using his own discretionary powers allotted a large plot to himself at Dunga Galli. Six close relatives of the sitting Prime Minister have 'maneuvered' to own extravagant residences at priced locations in Dunga Gali and Nathia Gali. An ex Chairman of Senate now owns 16 Kanals of public property on the hilltops of Dunga Gali. There are hundreds of

other similar examples where the friends, relatives and cronies have been benefitted by each successive government.

The development of hill resorts appears to focus exclusively on appeasing its privileged residents. Trees are being uprooted to widen the roads solely to please this polluting class, now whizzing through (rather than walking) in their noisy and smoke-emitting luxury land cruisers. One can get some idea of the level of noise pollution and carbon emission by the fact that 200,000 vehicles transited from Murree on Eid day in 2015.

There is an urgent need to rethink 'development' on the hill tops. A complete ban on all land allotment and construction be placed. Invoking the doctrine of Public Trust, owners be made to surrender the already allotted land and be suitably compensated. All 47 government guest houses currently being used by government officials and their families be opened to public. The 'katcha' trails should be left in their perennial condition and saved from decorative 'envecreting' that benefits only the contractors and brick makers.

A 'park and ride' system could be introduced, making all vehicles to park and use shuttle services beyond a certain point. Private cars entering the 'Galiyat' roads ought to be heavily taxed. Most homes and hotels release their raw sewage directly down the slopes of the mountains. All such premises be fined heavily and closed down till they can build effective septic tanks. Likewise the slopes and trails are riddled with plastic bottles and solid waste. GDA could learn from Singapore where one would be fined \$2000 for littering first time and then upto \$10,000 for the subsequent convictions.

Despite heavy rainfall, there is shortage of water supply in the 'Galiyat'. Almost no one appears to be utilizing the sloping roofs for collection of rain water – which can be easily achieved by installing trays at the lower surface of the slopes and collecting the water in the storage tanks. Finally a request on behalf of the butterflies and birds of the pipeline trail between Dunga Gali and Ayubia. Please ban the movement of motorbikes on this path so that we can live our lives without rubbing shoulders with the polluting elite of Pakistan.