

## Selling your soul

The premium residential plots of KPK's magnificent 'Galiat' hill stations have been carved, sliced and syphoned by the rich and the powerful ruling elite. The immensely beautiful natural resorts and the mountain slopes are now generously littered with plastic bottles, candy wrappers, non-degradable pampers and raw sewage of an occupationist elite. Smoke emitting Vegas and land Cruisers destroy its serene silence with their screeches and loud music. The soul of our hill stations has been traded for private residences of a small group of influential individuals. Forests, mountains, lakes and springs are a common heritage of our future generations. They are public property that must never be converted to private ownership.

As if all this was not enough. The KPK government came out with a plan to destroy the finest jewel in its crown – the magnificent Lake Saiful Maluk. In February 2015, the KPK government placed newspaper ads asking for proposals to build a 'Chairlift Resort' at Lake Saiful Maluk. Spread over 94 kanals of pristine land, the government promised a lease of 30 years – enough to completely convert this exquisite gift of nature into a huge dump of plastic bottles, empty cans, cigarette packets, wrappers, smoke, sewage, litter, and pollution of every conceivable kind.

The ad caused much drooling and delight amongst the contractors and developers. There were however others who saw this as the beginning of an environmental disaster that would essentially result in this 300,000 years old lake turning into a sewage pond. Many citizens sent letters to newspapers, made Facebook pages and appealed to the PTI Chairman to save the lake from becoming an ugly Disneyland. It appeared that someone understood the issue and a sane decision was made to scrap the project.

Lo and behold, one year down the road, on June 30, 2016 the newspapers were littered with a new ad, once again inviting pre-qualification of bidders for the same destructive project. This time the terms were even more lucrative - a 40 years lease instead of 30 years. The insatiable and criminal greed of a few individuals appears to override the need to preserve this exceptional gift of nature.

Saiful Maluk holds many species of blue-green algae. It is home to large brown trout, while about 26 species of vascular plants exist in the area around the lake. The splendour of Saiful Maluk is already on the decline. The increase in tourists and absence of effective environmental controls have already begun to show the signs of

plunder. Wrappers, plastics and other leftovers are littered all around the lake and can be seen floating on its surface. With the implementation of the 'chairlift' project, tourists will now have the additional opportunity to pollute the lake by dropping litter bombs from the air.

Carbon-emitting noisy generators, obscene gas-guzzling SUVs, junk food restaurants, non-degradable plastic bottles, cement structures, security barriers and a crowd in pursuit of 'selfies' will define the new ambiance of the Saiful Maluk. The lake needs to be preserved in its perennial condition. On the pattern of Mount Kilimanjaro, the last 8-10 kilometres leading up to the lake must be limited to walkers only and no vehicle or equipment allowed to go beyond this point. Walking could be encouraged by improving the trail and creating rest facilities at every kilometre. Tourists must be strictly forbidden from carrying any food items or throwaways in the last two kilometres before the lake.

Lake Saiful Maluk belongs to the people of Pakistan and their future generations. Its body and soul are up for sale to the highest bidder. Contractors, bureaucrats and politicians will destroy in a few months – and forever – the splendour and serenity that has stood the test of 300,000 years. Can the people of Pakistan unite once again and force the mindless KPK government to stop its destructive attempt at corporatisation of our natural heritage. The finest respect and reverence that we can offer to the lake is to leave it alone.

Naeem Sadiq

30 June 2016