

Defining borders

The long tentacles of sea intrusion

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The active delta once spread over 600,000 hectares has been significantly reduced forcing farmers along the coast to turn to fishing. But changing professions has only brought more problems. Zofeen T. Ebrahim reports

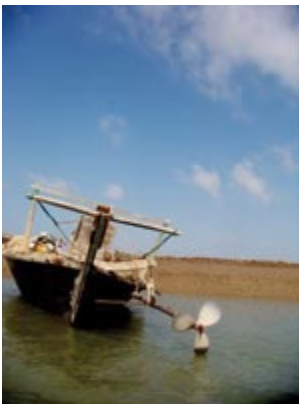
Haji Yusuf, 80, spends sleepless nights. All his four sons have been arrested for fishing in 'enemy' waters, and he does not know what to do. Yusuf himself is too old to work, but has 35 mouths to feed.



It was not always like this for Yusuf, who lives in the village named after him on the island of Kharo Chhan, 150 kilometres from Karachi. He used to be a farmer, but sea intrusion along the coast of the Arabian Sea forced him and many others to turn to fishing. "It is an occupation that we landholders held

below our dignity," he says.

The sea intrusion has devastated indigenous delta communities, with the salty water having turned once large swathes of fertile soil, barren. According to the Revenue Department, 86 per cent of the 235,485 acres of fertile land in Kharo Chhan has been swallowed by the sea, decreasing the population in the area from 15,000 to 5,000 in the last decade. Experts say that the active delta that was once spread over 600,000 hectares with creeks, mudflats and forests has been reduced to just 10 per cent of its original area, forcing farmers along the coast to turn to fishing.



"When the Indus River stopped flowing, there was no water to irrigate our land," says Abdullah Baloch, 56, who up until a decade ago, was a landlord with 250 acres of arable land to his name along with some 50 buffaloes and 80 goats. "Our pastures dried up and we had to sell our livestock. Many among us migrated to the cities. Those who stayed, turned to fishing."

But changing their profession has only brought more problems. According to Mohammad Ali Shah, who heads the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF), 70 per cent of the fish stock has been depleted because of over-fishing and the granting of licenses to foreign trawlers, who fish all year round. Moreover, the decrease in the flow of river water to the sea has been destroying the mangrove where fish and shrimps spawned. Because mangroves are

also natural barriers against cyclones, their destruction has made the people of the delta even more vulnerable. "The climate change is causing both temperatures and sea levels to rise," says Shah. "It had brought about a change in the continental shelf, leading to increased and unpredictable cyclones."

Shah explains that this change in temperature has pushed the fish further into the sea, which in turn has led to an increasing number of fishermen crossing international waters and mistakenly entering Indian territory.

With all his four sons were among the 17 fishermen recently arrested by Indian coastal authorities for fishing in their waters on January 15, it is a trial Yusuf knows all too well. All their boats, too, have been impounded. "We bought those boats on installments," laments Yusuf.

A small boat holding six to seven people costs between Rs300,000 and Rs400,000. A medium-sized one comes up to between Rs500,000 and Rs1 million, while a large-sized vessel, which can accommodate about 15 people, costs between Rs5 million to Rs7 million. Yusuf still has to pay Rs8 million for the lost boats, even though he believes that they will not return. He also believes that his sons were well within the Pakistani territory in Sir Creek when they were arrested. "Our fishermen have always fished in this water," he maintains.

Sir Creek is among 19 creeks in the Indus delta between Sindh in Pakistan and Gujarat in India, but even after 50 years, the issue of which country owns it remains unresolved. "The United Nations directed both countries to settle this issue by 2009 in accordance with the maritime boundaries, but I don't see anything happening any time soon," says Shah.

Abdul Ghani is in the same position Yusuf is. He three sons arrested were at the same time, and he does not know how he can continue feeding his family and pay for the boat at the same time. "I don't know how to pay off the loan of Rs1million when I have so many mouths to feed," he says. He, too, knows the boat worth Rs1.5 million is gone forever.

The exchange of fishermen was part of the many recommendations that became part of a Pakistan-India joint judicial committee on prisoners formed in 2007. "We have between 450 and 475 Indian fishermen, including eight juveniles, mainly from Gujarat and adjoining districts in our jails," says Justice Nasir Aslam Zahid, one of the members of the committee.

A total of 4,516 Indian fishermen, with 729 boats, have been apprehended by Pakistan over the last 20 years, according to a 2008 study by the PFF. Shah adds that there are a total of 125 Pakistani fishermen in Indian jails, some of whom have been there for years. Mai Asi, for example, originally from Shah Bandar in Thatta, has had her sons missing for 16 years.

"The family is so poor that even after working in various homes as a maid, Asi cannot feed everyone," says Hajan Solangi of the PFF. "Many neighbours have to help her." Zahid points out that fishermen just follow the catch and cannot determine the

demarcating line in the water. If their engine fails or if the tide is high, they may unwittingly cross the line, and are booked without being tried.

"As a goodwill gesture, Pakistan should release all detained Indian fishermen so that India can do the same," says Shah. "Apprehending these poor fishermen throws back the entire family deeper into the vortex of poverty and is one of the worst forms of human rights violations."

But even if the fishermen are released, the confiscated boats casts a shadow over what can be a happy ending to a sordid episode repeated by both governments. "The Indian delegate that had visited Pakistan had said that boats impounded by Pakistan had been auctioned off."

Both Shah and Zahid condemn the decision. Shah is adamant that the government has no right to do any such thing, while Shah says, "The auction should have been properly advertised and the owners informed."

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