

# Kashmir: The Plight of the Hanji Community of Srinagar's Dal Lake Area

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Nestled amidst the picturesque landscapes of the Kashmir Valley, the Dal has become an icon for promoters of tourism in the area. The Dal, however, also presents a sorrowful tale of the overlooked existence of an indigenous fishermen community, the Hanjis, who have depended on the lake (and fishing there) for generations.

The Hanjis, as custodians of the Dal, who formerly relied on its resources for livelihood, are now at the precarious risk of extreme marginalisation and vulnerability due to the disturbance of the earlier perceived equilibrium between preserving 'tradition' and catering to the needs of ad-hoc expansion of urban development.

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The art of fishing, which has been passed down through generations and has influenced the Hanji culture, has been one of the major contributors to the food ecosystem of the Valley and is the primary source of sustenance for the *Ga'ad Haenz* community. The community is facing a severe existential crisis because of various policies as well as negligence by the state and society alike.



Hanji women selling fish on the roadside.

Photo by Najam Us Saqib



Hanji *Mohalla* in Tailbal.

Photo by Najam Us Saqib

Our team at the Visual Storyboard initiative of the Centre for New Economics Studies went to the field locating the Hanji (fishermen) community to study some of these observed issues. This study is the outcome of the fieldwork done to examine the challenges faced by the Dal fishermen, investigating the factors contributing to their marginalisation.

The complicated tale emphasises the importance of addressing environmental concerns and emerging commercial influences at local and national scales. Understanding the profound impact on these communities and the intricate relationship between their future and the destiny of the lake is essential as we navigate through substantial changes.

**'Patriarchy Still Rules': Interview With Kiran Rao on Laapataa Ladies**

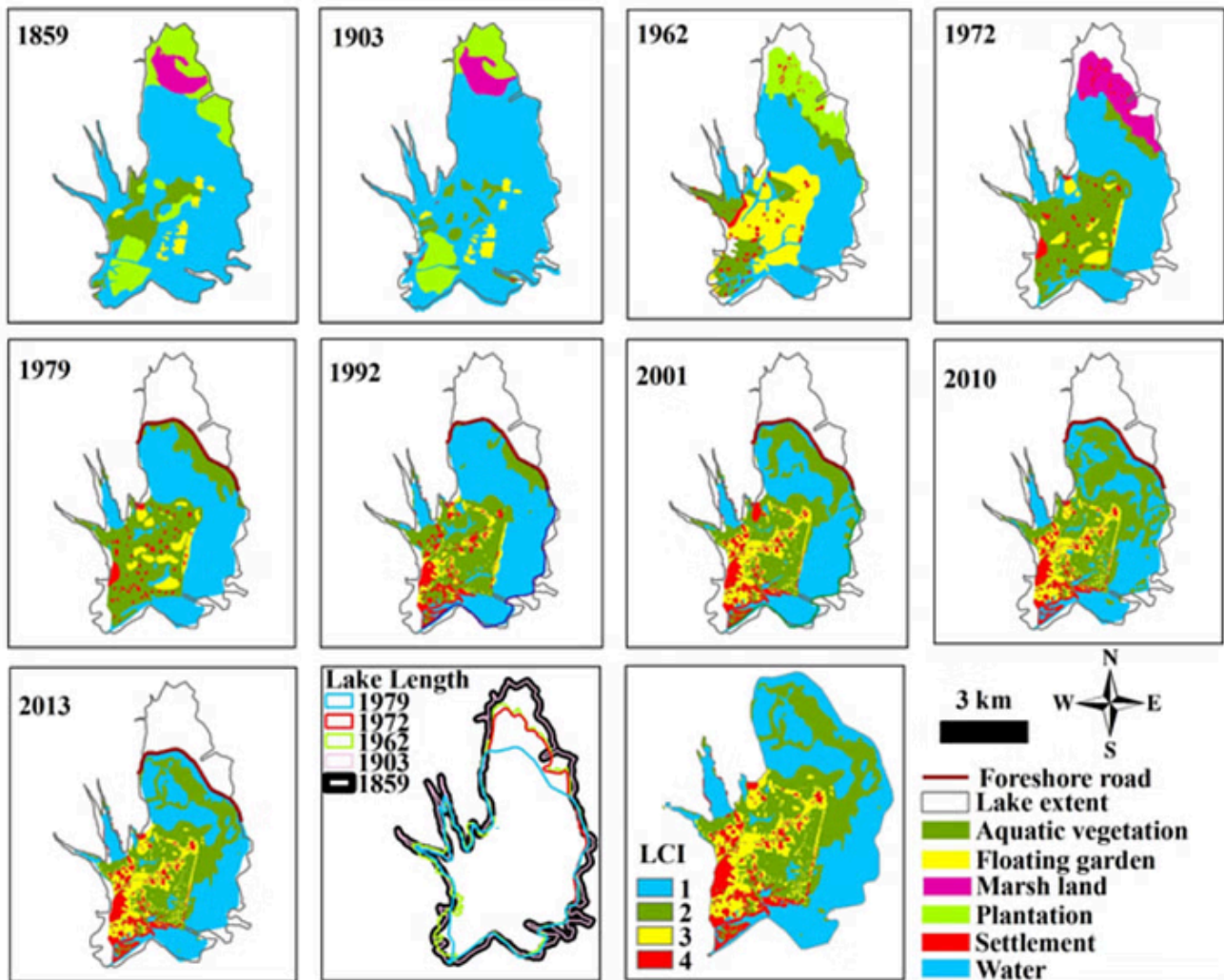
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Uncontrolled urbanisation has begun to manifest in the Dal, which was once an emblem of natural beauty.

The lake's water quality has greatly worsened because of the untreated sewage from various sources like houseboats and municipal sewers. A 2016 study by the University of Kashmir revealed that only 20 per cent of the lake's water was classified as clean, with 32 per cent being badly deteriorated.

An RTI request made by a houseboat owner uncovered that a total of 44 million litres of sewage were being released into the lake daily in 2017, with one million litres originating from houseboats. This was in contrast to the initial allegations made against the lake's residents.

Sewage treatment plants (STPs) constructed near the Dal to mitigate pollution have not met the anticipated standards. These STPs are excessively used and not maintained, leading to poor quality that fails to fulfil the standards established by the Central Pollution Control Board, according to the *Kashmir Observer* study.



Land use land cover within the Dal from 1859 to 2013.

Source: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0075951116302158#tbl0010>  
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## Consequences of Environmental Degradation

The consequences of this environmental degradation permeate the ecosystem, impacting the flora and fauna in the lake. The fish population, crucial for the Hanji fishermen's sustenance, has greatly diminished due to the detrimental effects of sewage on their surroundings.

The members of the community blame among various reasons the untreated sewage that flows into the Dal as a reason for the declining fish population in the Dal. Which has in turn led to the decline in the trade.

One of the respondents said, *“The fish in the Dal are small. Because of the sewage, the fish have declined. This sewage kills the seeds of the fish. When the seeds are killed what do we grow and what will we catch?”*.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/lhclWXttOO8>

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Another respondent added, *“The Dal had a lot of fish. But this sewage has destroyed the fish. All the garbage goes into the dal. Sewage too. We used to drink this water, but today you can’t even wash your face with it”*.

The declining fish population has significant repercussions for the Hanji fishing community. Members have seen a significant fall in the size of their catches, with the earlier catch being four to five kilograms, now reduced to barely one or two kilograms. Due to the decline in the catch, fishermen are purchasing fish from farms in various districts or importing them from neighboring states but the customers are not prepared to pay fair prices for fish farmed on farms. This has led to a drastic decline in the income of the community.



Hanjis cleaning the Dal of weeds. Government contractors employ some Hanjies to remove weeds and algae from the lake.

Photo by Najam Us Saqib



A Hanji fishing boat. Hanjis do not have access to modern fishing accessories. They take all the things needed to survive for a day with them on the boat.

Photo by Najam Us Saqib

The other aspect of urbanisation that threatens the trade of the community according to the members of the *Ga'ad Haenz* community is the Srinagar Smart City Project. The Srinagar Smart City Project aims at redeveloping the Foreshore around the Dal, which has led to the displacement of the *Ga'ad Haenz* who earlier used to sit on the footpaths around the Dal selling fish.

The reconstruction of the Foreshore road hinders fishermen from selling fish at their traditional fishing spots and using the road for their business activities, causing significant disruption to trade. Many respondents expressed frustration, stating that the fishing sector has greatly declined since the program started, likening it to unemployment.





Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/xxYLkVUMJNk>

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One of the field respondents added,

“They (authorities) don’t allow us to sit on the footpath. We had asked them to make a small platform here, but they did not allow that. I had made my own platform, but they demolished it. We had told them to provide us with a space for the markets. They have a lot of parks. Give one to us. We will set up our shops there. If the municipality comes, they take all our stuff. I have kept my shikara here, I put all my stuff in that and left. They even take tubs with fish in it. A lot of people used to sell fish on the other side but after they made the pathway along the road they had to shift. Our trade is based on water, we had asked them to at least make a stairwell along the road so that we may get some water, but they did not”.

The fishing community faces a lot of problems and the urban development without keeping them in consideration has added to the long list of problems they face.

## **'If Small Fish Die, What Will We Catch?'**

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As the Hanji community grapples with declining fish counts and the repercussions of urbanisation, another challenge emerges not from outside the ecosystem but from within. The members of the community allege that the Department of Fisheries provides licences to anyone who wants to fish irrespective of the community to which they belong, this has led to an increased number of fishermen who fish in the waters of the Dal.



Hanji women selling fish on the roadside, negotiation the prices with male customers.

Photo by Najam Us Saqib



A house belonging to a Hanji, house had become unsafe for living, so they had to shift to a different place.

Photo by Najam Us Saqib

One of our respondents also added, *“The government gives license to every Tom, Dick and Harry. Even non-Hanji people have been given license to fish in the waters of Dal”*. When we asked them about the government cannot stop people from fishing just because they do not belong to the community as it violated their fundamental rights, he added, *“We are not against people who do recreational fishing, but we are against the people who use nets.”*

*They don't know how to fish using nets and use banned nets, which lead to the death of small fish. If small fish die, what will we catch? If we don't catch fish what will we eat and how will we feed our children?"*

Another fisherman on being asked about the use of nets and who uses what kind of net added,

“Those who were not associated with this trade use banned nets. Maahigir (fisherfolk) don't use that net. Today, the people who are not Ga'ad Haenz (fishermen) also catch fish, but they use the Lamba Zaal. We use Goal Zaal (round net). They do not know how to use a round net. Lamba Zaal is used all over Kashmir”.

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The Hanji fishing community faces a crucial moment as the younger generation is reluctant to carry on this trade. Many people are discouraging their children from pursuing this trade due to economic barriers, prejudice, and the harsh realities associated with this sector. Once flourishing trade is now declining and pushing the community towards extinction as they grapple with the stark reality that the trade no longer sustains them or their families.

In summation: The Hanji community in Kashmir is confronted with environmental degradation, urbanisation, and economic pressures that threaten their traditional lifestyle. The Hanji fishermen are advocating for awareness, action, and long-term strategies to save their livelihood and the fragile ecosystem of the lake amidst difficult circumstances. The resilience of the Hanji community underscores the difficulties faced by traditional occupations as a result of rapid urban expansion and environmental disregard.

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*(Deepanshu Mohan is Professor of Economics and Dean, Office of Interdisciplinary Studies and Director, the Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES), O P Jindal Global University. He is a Visiting Professor with the Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre at the London School of Economics and Political Science and an Honorary Research Fellow with Birkbeck College, University of London. Najam Us Saqib is a PhD Student and a Research Analyst with CNES Visual Storyboard Team. Ishfaq Wani is a PhD Student and a Research Analyst with CNES Visual Storyboard Team. Video editing credits belong to Mr Rajan Mishra.)*

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