

# ***Affective Imaginaries of the Lai: A Tributary of the Soan River in Pothohar***

**Abdul Rehman\***  
**Ahsan Kamal\*\***

## **ABSTRACT**

*This article navigates the geographies of the Lai Basin (Rawalpindi/Islamabad) to grasp the complex synergy of affective registers of memory and practice to conceptualize the Lai River. The epistemic iconoclasm of techno-scientific knowledge and social modernity, defining the river as the Nala, the Nullah or the sewer and calling it 'Rawalpindi's greatest problem' requires a conceptual reframing of affect and enchantment. Rivers are not a problem to be dealt with, rather the waterscapes are animate, imbued with emotions. They had an organic relationship with the land and the people associated with them which was eliminated by the epistemicide inflicted through modernity-led-development. The present paper reflects on the conceptualization of Lai River that how conflicting registers constitute the 'structures of feelings' that shape and inform the venerations of 'water is life' experienced through sociability, spirituality, healing and*

---

\* Ph.D. Candidate, National Institute of Pakistan Studies (NIPS), Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

\*\* Lecturer, National Institute of Pakistan Studies (NIPS), Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

*on the antithetical cursing of water as “wretched river” due to pollution and frequent flooding in the downstream watershed area. The paper attempts to draw on ethnographic interviews with citizen historians, poets, pilgrims, activists, scholars, water experts and residents of Rawalpindi/Islamabad to analyse the memory accounts and oral histories. Instead of understanding river as a techno-managerial problem, the paper contends on the discourse of ‘water is life’ and presents an alternative imaginary of Lai Rive.*

### **Introduction**

The Lai River starts from the Margalla Hills and flows through the Pothohar Plateau until it joins the Soan River. Rawalpindi is situated along the Lai River, which passes through various areas such as Dhok, Dhokri, Mohra, Mohri, Chuwa, Thuwa, Dheri, Dandi, and Parri<sup>1</sup> etc. The river also marks the boundary between the city and the cantonment area, and it has bridges, highways, gridded planned city and housing societies. In 1960, a new city named Islamabad was built upstream as the capital of Pakistan. Upstream of Lai are springs, ponds, and lakes that echo the melody of Mahseer fish, the sound of chirping birds, and the fragrance of blooming flowers. The rippling waters of Lai create a soothing effect amidst the bustling city.

The Lai Basin covers an area of 244 square kilometres, with the majority conurbations falling within the Islamabad Capital Territory and the rest in the downstream Rawalpindi Municipal and Cantonment limits. The Lai is made up of five main tributaries, including Saidpur Kas, Kanitanwali Kas, Tenawali Kas, Bedranwali Kas, and Niki Lai, and several minor ones. The river’s length from its source to its final

---

1 Dhok, Dhokri, Mohra, Mohri, Dheri, Chuwa, Thuwa Dandi and Parri are the variants of a village but defined through their physical characteristics that highlight the diversity of settlements and their relationship with physical geographic feature. The Pothohari Village that is commonly known as a Graa’n, (Village) that is ontologically different from unified and hegemonic definition of Village.

convergence with the Soan River is 46 kilometres.<sup>2</sup> The banks of Lai provide shelter to subaltern inhabitants and migrants from rest of the country. The adjacent areas surrounding Lai and its tributaries are the most populated neighbourhoods where formality and informality intersect, producing differentiated relationships with the Pakistani state. According to Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2017, the overall population of Rawalpindi/Islamabad is around five million, with one fourth of the human population living in the 100-year floodplain along the Lai River.<sup>3</sup> The urban area serves as a vital economic and transportation hub, linking southern and eastern Pakistan with the northern areas, Azad Kashmir, Hazara, and Pakhtunkhwa Province. Islamabad is the administrative capital of Pakistan, while Rawalpindi is the General Headquarters (GHQ) of the Pakistan Army, the country's one of the most important institutions.

This paper aims at investigating the coloniality of rivers expressed through colonial forms of control and regularization while examining a case study of Lai River. Additionally, it offers an affective opportunity to re-conceptualize rivers at different locations and temporalities through ethnographic narratives.

### Who speaks of the Lai?

سے ہونے دروغے آپ تے نیں زمیاں راخے آپوں سے  
سے ہونے ڈوغے اتھیں ساڑھے ژان، کوٹھیاں نیاں باہر لیاں جتھیں

*We were the caretaker and protector of these lands and streams.*

*Where you see the bungalows of settlers, there were our dhoks (village).<sup>4</sup>*

2 Daanish Mustafa, "The Production of an Urban Hazardscape in Pakistan: Modernity, Vulnerability, and the Range of Choice," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 3 (2005): 566-86.

3 F. Khan, D. Mustafa, and D. Kull, "Evaluating the Costs and Benefits of Disaster Risk Reduction under Changing Climatic Conditions: A Pakistan Case Study," *From Risk to Resilience Working Paper no. 7; ISET* (2008).

4 Interview with Abbasi, June 19, 2022. H-8/1, Islamabad.

1. While sitting at the confluence of Lai near IJP road, the border of Rawalpindi and Islamabad, talking about Lai with the *Maqami*<sup>5</sup> people, it was asked how government officials responded to them when they raised their voice to save Lai, one of the respondents said:

We were clearly told that we have no relation with Lai anymore. We do not live here. Our houses have a water connection and sewerage system. So, we should not be concerned at all. What can we do now? All we got is some memories of how clean Lai was, and how we used to play here. If you look (pointing towards Islamabad) there, government officials, lawyers, and judges live there. They are the ones who can order to clean this mess, but you do not see them raising their voice, or even doing something like this. All they care about is water connection and sewerage drain in their houses.<sup>6</sup>

Focusing on the concept of inducing forgetfulness through state agency and power,<sup>7</sup> the state machinery is only concerned about the voices related to Lai, which see it as a source of pollution or danger of flood. The failure to recognize or identify any voice carrying emotion or memory has been an ontological base for technoscientific discourses and modern practices. This failure extends to the techno-managerial discourse of “connection holders”<sup>8</sup> as it neglects the affectual concern about water and reduce it to their home connection of water supply.

---

5 *Maqami* is translated as ‘local’ or ‘Indigenous.’ Both these words are not used here because they reduce the connotational meaning of the word *Maqami*. *Maqami* here refers to the people who were living in this region-the present-day Islamabad. They were made to migrate in 1962 and were given land as compensation in different districts of Punjab Chichawatni, Arifwala, and Khanewal. They sold that land and moved back to low-income neighbourhoods and outside the formal sector housing in Islamabad. In conversations, all the *maqami* people are anonymous.

6 Interview with Muhammad Jameel, age 50 years, June 23, 2022. New Katarian Brdige, Islamabad

7 Grada Kilomba, *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism*(Between the Lines, 2021).

8 Connection holders refers to the person who has government water supply connection. The concerned department (CDA and RDA) provides with water supply connections on monthly billing basis and only listens to complains regarding this water supply and sewerage issues.



*Sangam* / Confluence of Saidpur Kas and Bedranwali Kas and forming River Lai—the interview with Mr. Jameel took place here (conjunction of Twin Cities, 2022).

2. Policy makers, administrators, consultants, environmentalists, hydrologists, doctors, and residents of Rawalpindi (mostly RDA staff) gathered for a public hearing on May 11, 2022 to discuss the environmental impact of RDA proposed ‘disaster’ prevention project. NESPAK, an engineering enterprise, conducted the study on compliance with the National Environmental Regulations and the Punjab Environmental Protection (Amendment) Act 2012, thus introducing state machinery’s produced conception of straightening and concrete channelling of the river to solve the ‘biggest problem in the city’.<sup>9</sup> The Sewer Trunk and Sewage treatment plants have been excluded as a disclaimer (National Engineering Services Pakistan (PVT) Limited, 2022). The second part of the 16-kilometre highway project is to provide a route to connect the old GHQ with the new GHQ under the guise of solving traffic problems.<sup>10</sup> Activists asked about rights of way, and social impact assessments, and resettlement options for the human population. In public hearing of Lai Expressway, the ‘public’ was mostly government employees, who were sceptic about

9 ARY News, 2021.

10 Khan, Mustafa, and Kull, “Evaluating the Costs and Benefits of Disaster Risk Reduction under Changing Climatic Conditions,”.

the project but eager to hear from their bosses when it will be completed.



Image: Public Hearing of Lai Expressway and Flood Channel Project

3. Scholars in the social, natural, and physical sciences are producing extensive work on the Lai River with the imaginaries of nullah/nala.<sup>11</sup> Techno-managerialism and social modernity shape the discourse that makes the river a technical marvel, capable of controlling floods. Colonial dominant narratives of engineering create “river as stock” which dominates the dynamic geomorphological processes as “river of flow and pulse.”<sup>12</sup>

Scientists discuss rivers as volume and gradient data, with hydrological modelling, to predict flood extent for up to 1000 years. However, social scientists are deeply concerned about the risks of contamination, vulnerability, and flooding as a threat to human populations. This ontology of knowledge, produced in universities and research institutes, reinforces the epistemic absence about Lai River as a river

11 The state of art on Lai comprises of geological surveys, scientific research on water toxicity, environmental impact with regards to pollution statics and research about flora and fauna. All this research lacks human side of story, the lived story of how Lai turned into a nullah from a river/ river subsidiary.

12 Rohan D'Souza, “Drowned and Dammed: Colonial Capitalism and Flood Control in Eastern India,” (2006).

of memory, grief, sociability, identity, or a habitat that sustains biodiversity.



Image: Development work to divert the Kas

4. We walked with Lai from its origin, in the hills of Margalla, to its convergence of channel downstream, with the Soan River, where several *Chuwas* (springs) and *Kassis* (streams) meet and constitute Malaach (confluence of two or more *Kassis*), that take shape of five *Kassis* and formulate the Leh/Lai River that meanders in twin cities. The conversations on these locations resonated with poetry and stories explaining structure of feelings that helped to think beyond archives (colonial systems of representation) and hydraulic modelling (volume and slope) to capture the complex synergy of affective registers of memory and practice of linguistic thinking incorporating emotion, but not less rational. We listened to the streams and felt Lai's pulse with research participants and reflected on how the river is experienced in different places and at different times. We navigated through the repositories of memory, biography, history, poetry, music, theatre, and desire to map spatial affect, feelings, emotions, and experiences of sociability, identity, spirituality, and profanity. Hours long conversations with activists, scholars, poets, artisans, and research participants helped to think in relational and inter-reflexive

ways where the river is a subject<sup>13</sup> with ‘agency’ and not just an object<sup>14</sup> of academic appropriation.



Image: Lai River from Pir Wadhai Bridge

### Theorizing Epistemologies of River

With a large focus on rivers (water as liquid; water as river in material form), the academic studies on water are limited to only subjectifying water as resource and did not observe the politics, poetics, sociability, religiosity, surrounding water as well as limited to the liquid flowing form; thus unable to connect with other forms of water, i.e., mud, groundwater,

13 Reference to subject infers that the river is animate and has social life- a ‘total social fact.’ This concept is derived from Arjun Appadurai’s *the Social Life of Things* (1986). The agency of the river has been discussed in detail in *Island Rivers* Chapter Introduction: River as an Ethnographic Subject by John R. Wagner, and Jerry K. Jacka, eds. *Island Rivers: Fresh Water and Place in Oceania* (N.p.: ANU Press, 2018).

14 Bell hooks define the debate of subject/object. Subjects “have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their own history.” On the other hand, objects are defined by others, identities created by others and their history named only in ways that define (their) relationship to those who are subject. (Hooks, 1989).

ice, fog or snow.<sup>15</sup> The heterogeneity of these sociabilities, biopolitics, and knowledge systems regarding water also do not equip with the modern knowledge about water. Vogt and Walsh argue that instead of water as singular subject, there are multiple forms of water (not just physical) but different forms of water based on social structures, morality, biopolitics, citizenship, governmentality and socio-natures.<sup>16</sup> This argument that there are different waters simultaneously existing within “conceptual and temporal (before/after, premodern/modern) dichotomies” while displacing them and it “recognises that the processes through which water is made homogenous or heterogeneous (or both) are distinctly political.”<sup>17</sup>

This study further argues that uniform ‘water’ rarely fully replaces or displaces ‘waters’ materially or ontologically, rather they coexist in a tense and dynamic political balance. These sociabilities, histories, and politics in interaction with water from different shapes and structures of water, where water is treated as an animate object instead of a managed resource. It includes the cultural and physical elements of the sources of waters, how they are used, and how humans and non-humans interact with them. It also includes affectual accounts of people sharing these hydrosociabilities and political regimes based on religiosity, spirituality, sensorial interactions, special environmental settings and cultural traditions. “Multiple waters are created through multiple cultural enactments by assemblages of people, infrastructures, ideas and environments. These heterogeneous waters are often ‘enchanted’, that is, invested with intrinsic powers bestowed by divine

---

15 R. Kapuria & N. Kumar, "Singing the River in Punjab: Poetry, Performance," *Journal of South Asian Studies* 45, no. 6(2022): 1072-1094 .

16 Andre E. Guillerme, *The Age of Water: The Urban Environment in the North of France, A.D 300-1800* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1988); S. Rodriguez, 2006 as quoted in Vogt, 2021.

17 Lindsay Vogt and Casey Walsh, "Parsing the Politics of Singular and Multiple Waters," *Water Alternatives* 14, no. 1 (2021).

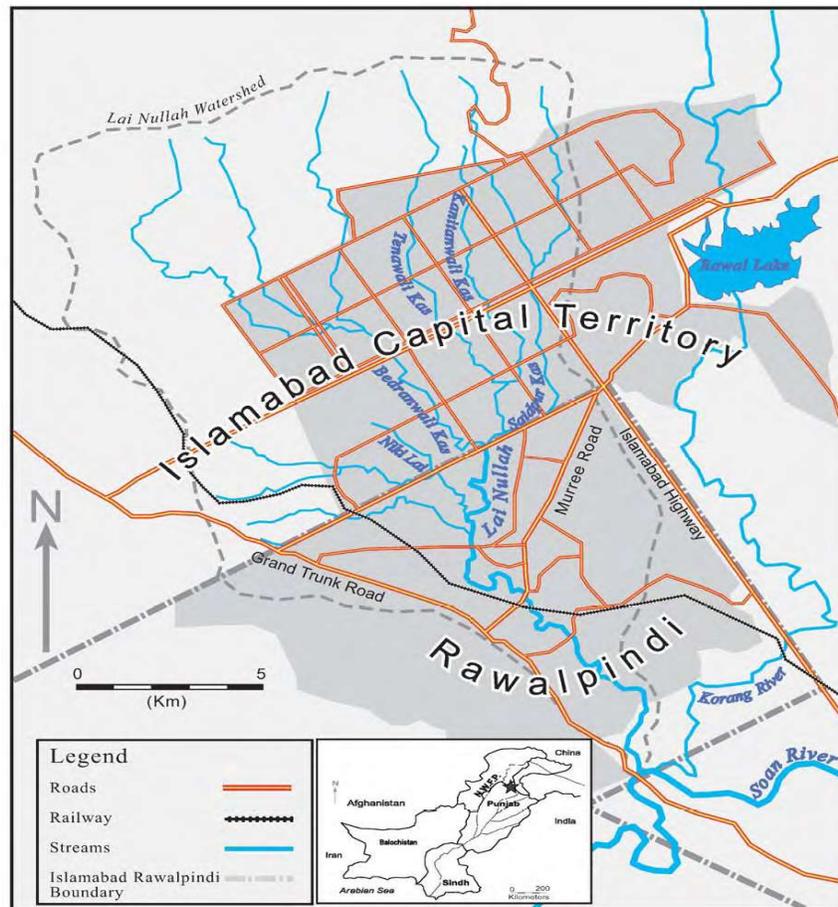
creation.”<sup>18</sup>This multiplicity of water produces multiple affects meandering from upstream to downstream.

This paper utilizes the concept of multiple waters to explore and understand the local relationship to waterbodies by focusing on local notions of waterways in recent historical memory. It explores their perceptions and explicates the practice of co-management of these streams while ensuring their livelihood and ravelling the space for non-humans and beyond.

Using the theoretical framework of multiple waters, we collect and analyse poetry, folk tales and memory accounts of the *Maqami* people to write about Lai. *Maqami* people treat these *Chuwa*, *Kas*, *Kassi*, *Chulyari*, *Khoi*, *Katha*, and *Malaach* as historical subjects and this Lai is continuously contesting over power and place. Ethnographic conversations about Lai and its tributaries stress on the importance of waterways' well-being and its organic connection with the community in form of natural border between the Rawalpindi city and cantonment, *Shamshan Ghat* (burning place), *Dhobi Ghat* (washmen place), *Chakla* (brothel), *Daan Dour* (bull racing) on the West Bank of the river. These water bodies give an emplaced identity to the community while nurturing a relationship with non-human and non-physical and religious realities.

---

18 Vogt and Walsh, "Parsing the Politics of Singular and Multiple Waters,".



SOURCE: Daanish Mustafa, "The Production of an Urban Hazardscape in Pakistan: Modernity, Vulnerability, and the Range of Choice," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95 (3), (2005): 566-86.

### Who Writes about Lai?

Grada Kilomba argues that the "process of writing is both a matter of past and present"<sup>19</sup>, then we begin the politics of scholarship by remembering the "epic engineering" of past to understand the present. In contemporary times, important critical works i.e., *Blood and Water*<sup>20</sup>, *Indus Divided: India,*

19 Grada Kilomba, *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism* (N.p.: Unrast Verlag, 2020).

20 David Gilmartin, *Blood and Water: the Indus River Basin in Modern History* (University of California Press, 2020).

Pakistan and the River Basin Dispute<sup>21</sup> have been produced to understand the construction of modern rivers which raise epistemic questions in historiography but rely on colonial archives and produce western system of representation. The historicization of the discourse of “epic engineering” explains that the primary concern was to control the rivers, because the power of water was being perceived as destructive and its merger (ملاپ) into sea as waste. This land-centred reptilian thinking of Arthur Cotton viewed floods as extreme events that could affect productive potential, and thus emphasised regulation, equalisation, and stabilisation to maintain the certainty of colonial rule.<sup>22</sup> To achieve certainty, embankments and bridges were built with mathematical alignment and geometric modelling, interrupting the flow of the river but facilitating the movement of the carriage to reach the market and containment. Another exponent, Cautlery, writing about the Ganges, celebrated the idea that rivers are naturally made to provide irrigation, but floods cause disruption and disaster. This argument further supported the land and river fence.<sup>23</sup>

Rohan D'Souza argues that the flood control strategy encouraged the fencing of land and rivers to collect more taxes by increasing the yield. To predict revenue, the colonial government wanted to standardise to achieve predictable returns. This calculation affected the understanding and ontology of rivers, as the report of the Ganges Canal project 1862 and the responses exemplify the language used by northern and southern engineers to discuss the rivers. Instead of looking at disagreements, he emphasised the language of agreement in which they discuss science, defining flows in terms of volume, gradient,

---

21 Daniel Haines, *Indus Divided: India, Pakistan, and the River Basin Dispute* (Random House India, 2018).

22 D'Souza, “Drowned and Dammed,” (2006).

23 D'Souza, “Drowned and Dammed,” (2006).

and mathematical measurements to formulate universal principles.<sup>24</sup>

This vocabulary of cusec/ cubic metre and slope controls, essentially dominates and defines the modern river, making it comparable to determine its usefulness. This patriarchal, colonial and capitalist sensibility to the cusec/cubic shaped and informed the river as an enclosure that suppressed inundation irrigation and instituted systematic perennial irrigation.<sup>25</sup>

William Wilcox argues that flooding is a form of irrigation, and that art has been destroyed by the construction of dams and weirs. Where there were no reservoirs, water and people could co-manage the irrigation, and place specific techniques were practised. The river was flowing, bringing with it silt and mud, and these deposits created new land, full of fertility.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, in Rawalpindi, there was a flood-based agriculture of maize by mud embankments on the Lai River. This cultivation art was destroyed during the colonial engineering of bridges that diverted the rivers to enable the movement of conveyance to the market and the cantonment. The literature produced on the Lai barely historicizes these human-centred interventions (even if only Gora Sahib was qualified to be human) that changed the understanding and course of the river. Daanish Mustafa states that although Lai was the border of the cantonment at the time, the floods were seen only as a problem for colonial regularisation.<sup>27</sup> In 1944, to respond to the problem of floods, only the technical knowledge of management was deemed credible with a solution, which proposed explosion of rocks to extend its

---

24 D'Souza, "Drowned and Dammed," (2006).

25 Ahsan Kamal, "Saving Sindhu: Indus Enclosure and River Defence In Pakistan," (PhD Thesis, 2019); <https://doi.org/10.17615/baka-52>

26 D'Souza, "Drowned and Dammed," (2006).

27 Daanish Mustafa, "The Production of an Urban Hazardscape in Pakistan: Modernity, Vulnerability, and the Range of Choice," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 3 (2005): 566-86.

southern end where it merges with Soan. However, this project was abandoned due to the railways bridge in the vicinity.

Two decades ago, Lai flooded and brought huge catastrophe for humans and domestic animals affecting more than 400,000 residents of twin cities. There were 64 human casualties in Rawalpindi and 10 in Islamabad. The official costing of the flood calculated 250 million US dollars, but unofficial sources mentioned 930 million US dollars.<sup>28</sup> This economic argument triggered the think tanks to conduct research to mitigate the floods. We will be mapping the significant studies to capture the epistemic diversity.

JICA conducted a foundational study to devise the master plan for flood mitigation using 1 D, visuals through MIKE 11 computer model to simulate flood events and produced hazard maps after extensive surveys.<sup>29</sup> The footprints of JICA study are visible in conceptualising the Lai as an endemic hazard. Hayat also used M11 to explain the hydro-meteorological model and developed a warning system to mitigate floods.<sup>30</sup> Kamal invoked legal aspects of flood management and developed an integrated approach, but the scientific conception does not go beyond volume and gradient.<sup>31</sup> Khan *et al.*, did nuanced study of cost-benefit analysis of various proposed river improvement project and provided hydrological basis to regenerate the river.<sup>32</sup> B. Khan<sup>33</sup> did IWRM analysis of the floods in context of

---

28 Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) (2003).

29 Japan International Cooperation Agency Report (JICA), (2003).

30 Azmat Hayat, "Flash Flood Forecasting System for Lai Nullah Basin (A Case Study of March 19, 2007, Rainfall Event)," *Pakistan Journal of Meteorology* Vol. 4, No. 7 (2007).

31 Ahmed Kamal, "Pakistan: Lai Nullah Basin Flood Problem Islamabad Rawalpindi Cities," *World Meteorological Organization/Global Water Partnership. Associated Programme on Flood Management*1 (2004).

32 F. Khan, D. Mustafa, and D. Kull, "Evaluating the Costs and Benefits of Disaster Risk Reduction under Changing Climatic Conditions: A Pakistan Case Study," 2008.

33 Babar Khan, "Making Better Choices by Using IWRM," 2011.

changing climatic situation and offered the “best practices” rooted in flood mitigation regime. Umer again visualises the flow of the channel and floodplain. It is pertinent to mention that most of hydrological writings relied on the JICA, 2003 study data and applied different models to narrate a news analysis. The understanding of river remains static and technocratic.<sup>34</sup>

Throughout the colonial and postcolonial period, these modern scientific thoughts lamented the flood with land-centric appropriations and failed to recognize the non-human life and ecological realities associated with rivers. The river is ignored as a habitat for biodiversity i.e., fresh water is a breeding ground for fish. Mahseer is native to the waters of the Lesser Himalayas and breeds in the ponds of Lai. With the onset of the monsoons, these fresh waters have the opportunity to meet during the monsoon when flash floods allow *chuwa*, *chulyari*, *dhan* and *kassi* to join together and become one wave.

When it rains, the rivers come alive, allowing fish to migrate and connect to other bodies of water. However, the modern/colonial technical discourse focuses on human centric sensibility and frame flood as a natural disaster and calamity. However, if one looks at memory and poetry of Pothohar, this flood is perceived differently, which recognizes the unification of different waters and loved ones. Mian Muhammad Bakhsh, a poet of Pothohar celebrates this union as:

آوے وچ مؤجاں جاں وڈیرا، دریا دا وحدت  
 بناوے لہر بکو ڈھناں بہن، وکھریاں، ڈھاباں<sup>35</sup>

When the river of unity overflows, it makes all the ponds, streams, lakes become one wave.

34 Umer, “Two-Dimensional Flood Inundation Modelling of Nullah Lai Stream. [MSc Dissertation]. National University of Sciences and Technology, Islamabad 2015.

35 Bakhsh, Kalam Mian Muhammad Bakhsh, Lahore. 2003

These verses capture the physical and geographic characteristics of this landscape and riverscape to offer theoretical potential for understanding the relationality of water bodies. This implies that the diversion of rivers has disrupted the process of ecological and cultural life. The wave not only unites the geography of the river, but also solemnly preserves its memory.

The lamentation of social scientists about Lai for pollution, liquid and solid waste creates a grim imaginary and reduce the river to a hazardscape. Anwar *et al.* developed a Vulnerability Index to define each participant's score on a scale.<sup>36</sup> This epistemic fixation essentializes a particular identity of the river as a central argument and explores questions surrounding this discursive and material formation. Muhammad theorised the Lai River as a "fully open sewer" and declares it as Nala Lai or Lai sewer due to its volume and size ranging from 100 to 300 feet.<sup>37</sup> Mehmood *et al.* writes ethnography of knowledge about the contaminations while declaring the Lai as sewer and source of pollution.<sup>38</sup>

However, most of the collaborative research works are supported by various research and development agencies, e.g., IDRC, UKAID, HI-AWARE and SANDEE, as they fund proposals and hypotheses that invite intervention by governmental or non-governmental agencies to repair the river. These academic appropriations frame the river as a problem with *nullah*, *nala* or sewer semantics, filled with disgust, nuisance, that is a psychic element and a third world problem, which has no alternative conceptions. To challenge this despicable construction and conceptualization of flow,

---

36 Nausheen Anwar, Daanish Mustafa, Amiera Sawas, and Sharmeen Malik, *Gender and Violence in Urban Pakistan* (Karachi: Institute of Business Administration). <http://hdl.handle.net/10625/55684>.

37 Muhammad, Irfan, "Disamenity Impact of Nala Lai (open sewer) on House Rent in Rawalpindi City," *Environmental Economics and Policy Studies* 19 (2017): 77-97.

38 Yasir Mehmood, Abdul Qadar, and Arslan Waheed, "Water Contamination, Households' Risk Perceptions, and Averting Behaviour: Evidence from the Nullah Lai, Rawalpindi, Pakistan," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (2022): 00219096221076112.

we draw on the poetic notions of Baba Farid, a 12<sup>th</sup> Century Punjabi poet, who radically inverts established meanings.

کوہ نہ جیٹ خاکو نندیئے نہ خاک فریدا  
ہوئے اُپر موٹیاں تلے پیراں جیوندیاں

*Underrate not dust, Farid! Like it is none. While you live, it bears your feet and when you die it covers your head.*<sup>39</sup>

In the language of power, dust is a sign of contempt, disdain, or scorn, and there is no respect associated with it. Farid reverses monarchical meanings and tells how the earth sustains life and after death it covers it. He uses the expression of *oo* to make the dead sound of a living being. Poets stole the arms of monarchical language to protect folk expression. We extend this understanding of Farid's *Khakoo* خاکو to explain the condescending *Nali* or *Nala* as written by the 16<sup>th</sup> Century poet Shah Hussain.

لنگھپاسے موریوں آسیں سجنا

*Beloved! We have passed through a Mori, drain vent.*<sup>40</sup>

Shah Hussain writes during the Mughal period when Lahore was a fortified city. The doors have been surveilled and the movements controlled. He exhilarates this walkthrough as he leaves the system of command. This *mori* (drain vent), the source of water, is not demeaned but develops a critique of the system which has reduced it to a drain. This *mori* is the manifestation of a whole system in which everyone contributes to trash.<sup>41</sup> It is the *mori* from which the springs of Ram Kund, Sita Kund, Laxman Kund, Hanuman Kund and Sakhi Zinda Pir flowed and constituted Saidpur Kas.

39 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).

40 Madho L. Hussain, "Complete Punjabi Poetry of Shah Hussain," (n.d.), Accessed July 1, 2022.

<https://apnaorg.com/poetry/shah/shfront.html>.

41 Punjab Government, 1895; Fauzia Aziz Minallah, *Glimpses Into Islamabad's Soul* (Islamabad: Sungi Development Foundation, 2010).

It was the culmination of this modern/colonial system that made the *Sarovar* (flowing water) a *mori*. The transition from *Sarovar* to *Mori* has a history in our context when the development regime took over and the new city of Islamabad was established that polluted the water sources of Lai.

### **Experiencing River: Lai to Nala Lai**

How does the river / stream turn into Nala or Sewer? This conversion did not happen with changed material connection, rather there is a history of shift in semantics. The Urduization<sup>42</sup> of Pothohari language, colonised the meanings of water bodies and transformed the water relations. In Urdu, *nala* is the masculine of *nali* that is part of modern street architecture. This not only changed the semantic relationship but rather converted the feminine *kas*, *kassi*, and Lai into masculine nala. Until these water bodies were feminine in the imaginaries of *maqami* people, living in the Lai basin, they were habitat of biodiversity that supported human and non-human life. The meanings of Nala are equal to sewer, which is an artificial drain that carries the waste. However, Lai meant in Pothohari, a small river that is perennial that flows all weathers. *Kas* means the path of flowing water or spring but nullah means the path of a dried stream. In the academic discourse Lai is defined by Muhammad as the “drain with one foot width is called ‘nali’, while the drain with 4–6 feet width is called ‘nala’, the drain with 100–300 feet width is called ‘Nala Lai.’<sup>43</sup>

The naming of a landscape/waterscape invokes an intimate relationship with rivers, rocks, or trees etc. This naming not only maps the local spaces in spatial terms, but it also expresses emotions about the environment through personal experience at spaces. These expressions of geographical linkage are common in the memories of people as compared to the archival marks in history. These oral narratives not

---

42 Urduization refers to the rising influence in speaking and writing of Urdu (national language of Pakistan) on the local and indigenous languages of Pakistan.

43 Muhammad, 2015.

only celebrate the water bodies and express biographical and spatial relationships, but also possess traditional environmental knowledge. The herbs along the streams were used the most among the hakeems of Rawalpindi. But what happened with the invasion of techno-managerial understanding, these streams were considered dried, replaced with sewerage water.

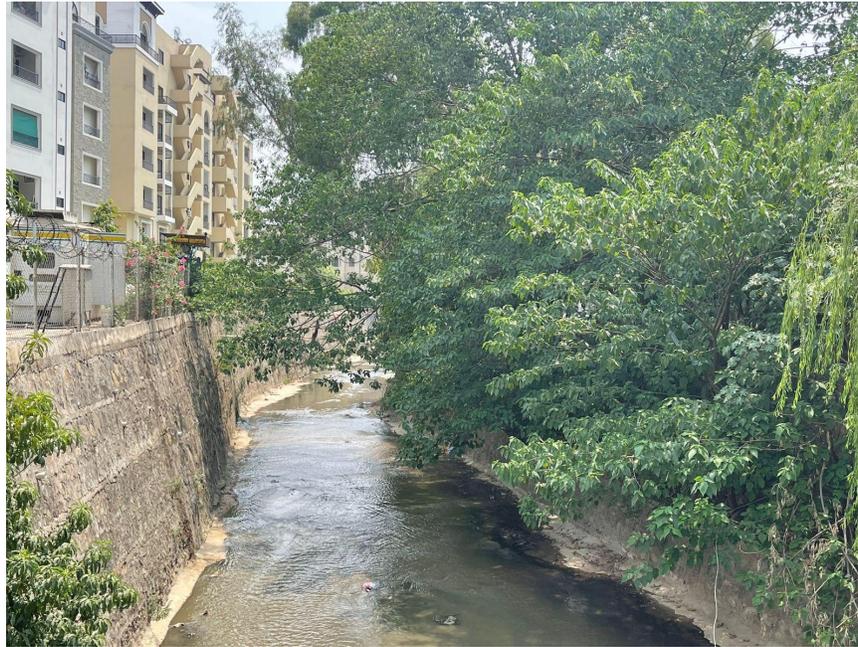


Image: Bedran wali Kas: G-11

### Memory of the Lai

Postcolonial urban modernity has not only contributed to subjugating the life of the river but also erased the memory of the river where the river existed as an animate object. According to Rosanne Kennedy, 'eco-memory is grounded in the deep memory of the habitat, conceived as an ecological assemblage in which all elements, human and non-human, are mobile, connected, and interactive'.<sup>44</sup> The modern

---

44 Rosanne Kennedy, "Multidirectional Eco Memory in the Era of Extinction," in *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, ed., Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen and Michelle Niemann (New York: Routledge, 2017).

infrastructural developments, social transformations, Eurocentrism, and anthropocentric regimes or if we term it in simple words by 'modernity/coloniality' has erased the organic and experiential relation of communities (indigenous) with the rivers, thus reducing its existence to a commodity. The restoration of this forgotten organic memory and rebuilding this experiential relation is decolonization. This memory does not separate the river and the human beings or puts the rivers in a subjective position to the human beings rather it preaches the notion of a correlation, co-evolution and interdependence. In this memory, the ecological relations are a part of social relations and there is no radical break between them. This relational ethos challenges the modern notion that 'rivers were created to serve the human purposes' and resultantly challenges the destruction and degradation of rivers as a result of human activity.<sup>45</sup> Rivers 'to serve the human purposes' is what devoid them of their animation and their 'agency' putting them in a non-co-relation with humans where they become colonised. While listening to Mr. Hakeem, a Taxi driver, who calls himself *maqami* of this region describes:

It was all forest before. Factories and industries started to develop here and pollute the water. In my childhood, it was all forest here. There were trees and many water streams with clean running water. We used to bathe in them as well as drink fresh water from the streams. Now, there is the forest on one side only. The water from these streams was used for daily home usage. Not every house had hand pumps or well. So, people from the villages used water from these streams. Now the whole environment has changed with the influx of development and industrialization.<sup>46</sup>

The stories of fishes are common in the memory of people of Lai basin: "There were fish in these streams. We used to catch them on the net. The water was so clear that one

---

45 Kennedy, *Multidirectional Eco Memeory in the Era of Extinction*, 2017.

46 Interview with Hakeem, June 20, 2022. G-9 Markaz Islamabad.

could see the fish standing by the side of the river. There was no fear of unknown or unseen objects in the water.”<sup>47</sup>

A friend of Hakeem, Nazakat Ali, who was Kohistani but living in Rawalpindi from 57 years, said that there was a *kassi* here. There were gardens of flowers in the surrounding area. This whole area, including *fauji* colony, was all gardens of flowers. Across the bridge, there was a *khudai chashma* (Godly Spring) which sprung from *dhobi ghat*, but it also diminished a long time ago. We used to play here. We did not know cricket back then. We used to play *Guli Danda* and *Bantay*.<sup>48</sup> The Lai River appears in official archives, academia, and policy discourse as a subject of state control articulated, as ‘coloniality of nature’ narrates that monsoon or heavy rains are perceived as a problem. They cause flash floods, but the repositories of memory express there was longing for the rain. There were rituals associated with rainfall. There were prayers for rain. A friend’s mother who still lights lamps in the name of Khwaja Khizr said that her mother remembered several folk *gawan* (songs) which were playful and performed as a ritual for the rain. I remember one of those:

سڑی گڈا گڈی  
 کالیا میاں وس  
 پٹیا گڈا گڈی  
 چٹیا میاں وس  
 روڑ چٹے پتھر کالے  
 کول گراویں پیا بدل<sup>49</sup>

*Dolls are burnt to ashes.*

*Dark clouds, come down.*

47 Fear refers to the clarity of water and refers to the current state of affairs of the Lai nallah.

48 Gulli Danda and Bantay are games usually played in Punjab, mostly in rural settings. Interview with Nazakat Ali, June 20, 2022 PirWadhai, Rawalpindi

49 Interview with Nazakat Ali, 20 June 2022 PirWadhai, Rawalpindi.

*Dolls are walled.*

*White clouds, gush rain*

*Stones black, pebbles white*

*Cloud bursts near the village site.*

There are gawan and geet associated with rain. Sammi is a folkloric song and dance that resonates in the memory of Lai basin's residents.

اے ڈھلدا پہاڑوں پانی جد  
 اے رلدا لُون نُوں ڈھلدے  
 ڈھو دی ہتھاں میل وستی وستیو  
 دھو نُوں دوئے بک  
 نیں تھیندے بک دوئے  
 او بک وی بُت روح تاں  
 نیں پیندے پیالہ

*When water flows down the mountains,*

*Their union makes the water salt,*

*Their meeting dissolves the salt into water,*

*They are burdened with each other's sins.*

*Immersed into oneness,*

*Putting an end to debates of Body and soul,*

*Drinks from the same cup*

#### **Hurmat/Behurmati (Respect/Disrespect) of Pani (Water)**

“What does it mean by *hurmat* of (respecting) water, isn't it about respecting ourselves? Our bodies are as fluid (watery) as the entire planet is? Sometimes we are rain, sometimes thunderstorm, sometime a *Chuwa* (spring), sometimes *Chil* or *Chlyat* (mud mountain), sometimes *Chilkaar* (reflection) in a *Chulyari*, (Spring), sometimes a *Kasari* (stalk) and sometime a *Harrh* (flash flood) in a *Kassi* (Stream) that takes

away all the *Gandghi* (dirt and pollutants) of those who disregard the water.”<sup>50</sup>



Image: People gather to collect water for daily use from Chashma

The geography of Lai from origin in Margalla hills to downstream Rawalpindi is full of water centric *mujizat* (miracles),<sup>51</sup> *karamat*, (blessings), *Karishmat* (origin in Sanskrit, used an alternate of miracles and it is widely used

50 Interview with Poet Ashraf Ali, (age 50) June 3, 2022. Tilla Chornia, Margalla Hills, Islamabad.

51 In Islamic perspective *mujzah* is divided into two broad categories *mujzah* and *Karamh*. *Mujzah* is an act which a *Rasool/Nabi* (Prophet) performs to showcase his connection with Lord or as an expression to validate his Prophethood by fulfilling a challenge posed by a society. On the other hand, *Karamah* is an act which Allah assists to happen through a *wali* (friend of Allah, commonly known as *bazurag*). Unlike *mujzah*, neither it is a sign of validation nor does it entertain a whole community. *Karamh* benefits to an individual or a group of people which has requested for it in a spatial sense.

in the Lai basin), eschatological quotes, anecdotes and legendary tales. Each incident carries a legacy of multiple human emotions such as hope, sadness, fear, joy, profane and sacred coupled with varied lived memories which are being preserved by hundreds of years of oral and written traditions of different communities of this place. In Saidpur, from where Saidpur Kas originates, a major tributary of Lai has several stories of revered waters in centuries old traditions. There are springs associated with Ram Kund, Sita Kund, Hanuman Kund, Laxman Kund and Sakhi Zinda Pir.<sup>52</sup> Few of the springs are dried up, rest are piped, and their water is supplied to the sectors of Islamabad by CDA. The most common story that I heard from several women who come to the *Baithak* of Sakhi Zinda Pir. Saleema Bibi, an 80-year-old woman told that:

It is said that once Sakhi Pir was passing through the *Garan* (village), and it was so hot that all the wells and *Chuwas* (springs) dried up and turned into salt. The *pathar* (rocks) shimmered and fire sprang from them, and the shoe was causing foot blisters due to heat. Sakhi was thirsty and there was no water, and no one was around. He stuck the rocks with his *Asa* (staff) and this source of water was born. He drank water and threw his *Asa* and the lake overflowed. He performed *wuzu* (ablution) and offered *dua* (prayer) over those burning stones. Till that day this *kass* is running and if all the waters of Pothohar dry up, if all the *dhand* (lakes) turn into ice, or if sun licks all the waters, this *spring and stream*, will not dry up. Due to the blessing of this (blessed) water no one fall sick and old aged people (men and women) can pass *Saidpur kas* in single breath.<sup>53</sup>

She further recounted:

This place is sacred because this land has kissed the *qadam* of Sakhi Pir. There were several other places that are more beautiful than Saidpur, but he chose this place for *chillah* (meditation). It is not the selection by Sakhi Pir, but it is a divine selection, because he was

---

52 FauziaAziz Minallah, *Glimpses Into Islamabad's Soul* (Islamabad: Sungi Development Foundation, 2010).

53 Interview with Mai Rehmatan, May 22, 2022. Saidpur, Islamabad.

54 Interview with Mai Rehmatan.

given this *izn* (intuitive knowledge). Because of his stay and payer for this region, this land and its water is sacred.<sup>54</sup>

A young participant, working in DHA, shared his perspective:

This sacredness is not mythological, it is because of the water quality. “*Pathar ka Pani* has different mineral composition, and it absorbs the nectar of herbs, therefore its natural composition is different. These springs are enclosed by CDA and piped to supply water to sectors of Islamabad, but still, these are the only source of drinking water in the village. The *maqami* people think that their sacred waters are disrespected. The people from different sectors come to collect water in bottles because of its cleanliness. Today, even bottled water is not pure, because they add chlorine and other minerals.”<sup>55</sup>

Apart from the reverence of blessed water, there was ecological grief as every *maqami* said that “*mahol*, the environment is destroyed and disrespect to the water has increased. Apart from these big restaurants, the *maqami log* are also not respecting the water. They have connected their sewage line with the *Kass*, that is polluting to *Chuwas* (springs). It is not only about the people of this village, rather mosques and Madaris are also discharging liquid waste into the *Kas*.”<sup>56</sup>

This legacy is predominantly enshrined in theological epistemologies, deeply syncretic, invoke memories as alternative imaginaries of grief. The upstream is seen as celebratory, a place of Karamat, beyond human population, but the recent speculative real estate “established properties classes” have taken over to correspond to aspirations of “world class globalized culture of a ‘world-class city’.”<sup>57</sup> In downstream, ecological grief is prominent is *maqami log* who think this is all Pakistan Lai. The *maqami* people were displaced physically long ago in terms of land, but now they

---

55 Interview with Farman, age 30, April 13, 2022. Darra Jabbi, Islamabad.

56 Interview with Muhammad Shamil, (Age 63), June 29, 2022, Saidpur Pekha Syedan, Islamabad.

57 A. S. Akhtar, & A. Rashid, “Dispossession and the Militarised Developer State: Financialisation and Class Power on the Agrarian–Urban Frontier of Islamabad, Pakistan,” *Third World Quarterly*, 42(08), (2021): 1866-1884.

are displaced from their waters, the Khudai Chashma was the last one that dried up because that *Pak* (Pure) water could not bear the industrial waste that dates to Indian Railways burnt engines oil. The ethnographic accounts lament the Municipal Administration and RDA as there is no garbage disposal system and all the waste goes to Lai. The residents of the adjacent areas pay an extra amount to the WASA employees to pick up garbage, but they also dispose of in Lai.

### **Conclusion**

Lai has been part of waterscapes of Islamabad/ Rawalpindi before the inception of Pakistan. With the rise in population in twin cities over the period of time, poor urban planning and failed resource management, this river has turned into a nullah. The absence of local discourses about Lai is rooted in the epistemic hegemony of scientific knowledge based on modern development infrastructure. The pre-partition Hindu-centric neighbourhoods with Chuwas, and Kas and other water bodies connected with Lai have their remnants present now. Lai, which was considered an alive river with emotions now lies as a nullah filled with sewerage and industrial waste. Angry Lai was still remembered till a few years back during the flood season as culturally flood is seen as a blessing instead of a disaster as it cleans away the Lai and turn it into an alive river again. This yearly cleansing is not just associated with the water bodies but it reflected on the usually flood areas and their cultures. Multiple waters came to surface by theorizing the poetry, stories, memory accounts and ongoing contestation over water in Islamabad/ Rawalpindi, i.e., the dead water, the dying water, the sacred water, the angry water. The aim of this paper was to highlight and bring into account new definitions of water based on live interactions of culture, history and politics with the Lai. Walking with Lai, explained the relationality of water, that how human and non-human life depends and thrives biodiversity that remains on disconnect in scientific research papers and reduces the animate elements of waters, encapsulates the failure of modern techno-managerial

understanding of water and sewerage in Lai and its greater impact on the climate of twin cities. From its originating point in Margalla Hills, Lai is full of religious and culture histories, alive and practiced even today. The development discourse around Lai also fails to encompass the history surrounding Lai, thus failing to achieve its own goal, a channelized nullah. On the other hand, the origin of Lai, where the water is considered sacred, shows the affective and spiritual value of water as it is used with care in order not to waste it.

The changing dynamics of twin cities and their growing need of clean water accessible to homes are constantly challenged by the modern scientific knowledge which created these problems. The dry bed of water ways turned into roads and housing societies have shattered the old ecosystem and have worsened the impact of climate change on the region. The struggle for clean water has worsened in the neighbouring areas of Lai where violence has become a norm on water tanks, water pumps and public water filtration plants. The Lai with clean drinking water and fish in it now remains part of memories, poetry and stories. I end with few lines of Farid who wrote about dying of river long time ago.

متراسن تاں ہے مردی ندی  
ہے مردا دل ہے مردی اکھی  
دی اپنی وسوں ہے مردی سوں  
ہے مردی گھل دی پانیاں نیلے  
مردا نہیں کلہا دا ہنساں جوڑا  
ہے مردی کھل دی دریا پورے

When the river dies, my dearest listen!

The eyes die, the heart dies.

The life of our life-worlds dies.

The slumber of blue water dies.

It's not just a pair of swans that dies.

But the laughter of the entire river dies.