



Unheard Indigenous Voices: The Kihals in Pakistan

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Washing on the banks of the Indus, Pakistan Photo: Jim Holmes/Panos Pictures

Background

Religious and national minorities, women, tribal groups and indigenous peoples in Pakistan face serious threats to their livelihoods and identity. Since the partition of the sub-continent in 1947, the ideology of government-backed official Islam and processes of development have increasingly suppressed them. The government has little tolerance or respect for religious, ethnic and socio-cultural diversity.

The vulnerability of tribal groups and indigenous peoples is increased when development is imposed on them. Commercial logging, the construction of big dams and corporate agricultural farming threaten tribal and indigenous peoples with loss of their rights over natural resources and thus with ultimate extinction. The increasing role of international financial institutions further weakens the ability of tribal and indigenous peoples to influence decision-making processes. Their voices are unheard. This case study of Kihals – a riverine indigenous group living in the upper Indus region – illustrates the process of the weakening of their already fragile identity and displacement from their livelihoods.

The Kihals: an endangered indigenous people

The Kihals are boat people who live in the upper Indus region. They travel up and down the river, shifting their

huts according to their needs and the time of year. They have distinct livelihood and food consumption patterns, and an equally distinct social organization and cultural value system.

Identity

'The Kabils and Mors are said to be one tribe. In the North of the district they are called Mor, eat crocodiles and tortoises and no Mohammedan will associate with them. In the south they do not eat these reptiles, and are considered good Mohammedans. Kabils and Mors live by fishing, but some have taken to agriculture.'

(Gazetteer of the Muzaffargarh District, 1929)

Kihals and Mors are considered low caste non-Muslims in some areas, in others they are generally accepted as Muslims. A considerable number still make a living through fishing and basket making – their traditional livelihoods – supplemented by seasonal agricultural labour; but some have abandoned these activities and started farming near the river. The size of the population is not known because the concept of indigenous peoples is not officially recognized in Pakistan so they are not counted separately in the census.

Means of livelihood

Of the Kihals' major activities, fishing goes on all year round, but agricultural labour and basket making are seasonal. As well as many local types of fish, Kihals also eat *sisar* (crocodile) and *kumi* (tortoise), which are considered taboo in mainstream society. In early summer, Kihals work as harvesters in the *kutch*a (low-lying delta area) but the introduction of modern technology and cash crops has reduced this option. In late summer Kihals cut *kanmban* (*lai* plant) from the deltas and make *tokarey* (baskets), cages and ropes for the markets.

Culture and patterns of social organization

Kihals do not have a caste system; they are organized into extended families with no higher-level political structure. Each extended family (*miani*) inhabits a cluster of huts. Recently, they have started to incorporate elements of the caste system, because of displacement and increased dependence on mainstream society.

For conflict resolution, they choose a *Malik*, who calls a meeting of elders and concerned parties to resolve issues. They do not go to court.

Kihals simultaneously exchange their men and women in marriage. If a family is marrying away their daughter, the bridegroom's family will be asked to marry their daughter to a son, or to give cash compensation instead. Kihals spend very little on marriage.

Kihals do not have any regular religious practices or prayers. They say their religion is that of Imam Shaafi, founder of the Shaafi sect. Recently, however, more Kihals have been becoming Muslims and Islamicizing their names, because of the pressures on their livelihood base and increasing economic dependence on neighbouring Muslim communities.

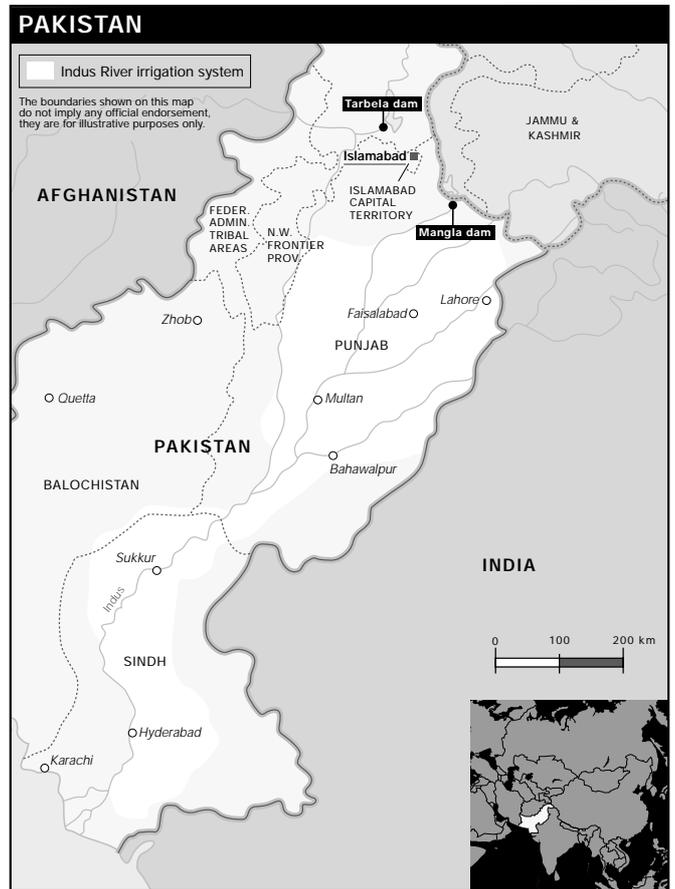
The impact of water resource development

The advent of modern irrigation

The Indus River basin stretches from the Himalayas to the dry alluvial plains of Sindh, covering an area of 944,575 sq. km. The annual floods of the Indus River have shaped the livelihood systems in the region for at least four millennia. In pre-colonial times, responsibility for the management of water, land and forests was vested in local communities. Inundation canals were constructed which opened up areas beyond the direct impact of river floods to regular irrigation. Farmers and fishing communities were mutually dependent and the economy was one of reciprocity and exchange.

British colonial rule brought the construction of perennial canals, which opened up millions of acres of arid land for new settlements and played a central role in building colonial state power. Water resources came under bureaucratic control and most local communities were excluded from natural resource management.

The Green Revolution¹ in the 1970s further alienated local communities and indigenous groups from natural



resources. The World Commission on Dams (WCD)² calculates that dam construction around the world peaked in 1970s at about 5,400 annually.

The Indus Basin Project

Immediately after the partition of India and Pakistan, India unilaterally cut off water supplies to Pakistani canals. The conflict between India and Pakistan was resolved in 1960s by the Indus Water Treaty (IWT) and the Indus Basin Project (IBP) was implemented. Pakistan built two major storage reservoirs: the Mangla Dam Project (completed in 1968) and the Tarbela Dam (1974), financed by the World Bank. The Chashma Barrage was also constructed under this project.

The IBP significantly disrupted the annual flow cycle and thus the livelihoods of communities downstream. There were substantial losses in downstream biodiversity and fisheries, and degradation of wetlands.

WCD's case study on the Tarbela Dam

The World Commission on Dams (WCD) was established in 1997 to assess the development effectiveness of large dams, and their social and environmental impacts. The Tarbela Dam case study records that the dam directly affected 32,800 ha of land in 135 villages; a total of 96,000 persons were displaced and 120 villages submerged.³ Compensation was inadequate and many of those affected have yet to receive any. The demands of tribal groups living in upstream areas, that they should be resettled collectively, were ignored. Adverse social impacts on downstream com-

munities as far as Sindh province include reduced fishing opportunities, loss of grazing land, deforestation and sea intrusion in coastal areas.

Among the most severely affected groups were the Kihals, Jhabils and Mors of Punjab province. However, these groups were largely ignored in the Tarbela Dam case study because (1) the consultation process in the upper Indus region excluded boat people dependent on fishing and basket making; (2) these groups were politically weak and marginalized; (3) there is no national policy on indigenous peoples protecting their social, cultural and economic rights.

During a group discussion and interviews undertaken for this study (2001), the following impacts of upstream water diversions, and other factors, were identified by Kihals:

- The construction of the Chashma Barrage, Taunsa Barrage, TDA Thal canal and Chashma Right Bank Canal have deprived the River Indus of almost half of its water and fish.
- In order to create a fish market in urban centres, the government is selling fish contracts to contractors.
- In the late 1980s the fisheries department introduced Mujahid fish (of Chinese origin) into the Sindh waters. This exotic species lives on other fish species and thus eats up the local fish.
- The last couple of decades have seen a large-scale migration of fisher folk from Sindh to areas around the Chashma Barrage, because of the reduction in annual flood flows, and contamination and silting of natural lakes in Sindh province. They work as bonded labourers. Kihals feel that the migrants have decreased alternative employment opportunities for them.
- Deforestation because of the construction of dams, barrages and canals means that the Kihals have to go deep into riverine forests in order to collect *lai*.
- Boats are becoming less essential as a means of livelihood.
- Contamination near urban centres is another major cause of the sharp decline in fish life. All the effluent from D.I. Khan City goes into the river, as does hundreds of tonnes of untreated solid waste and effluent from Chashma Sugar Mill.
- Human settlements are encroaching on the banks of Indus River, leading to a sharp decline in forest, cutting into Kihals' livelihood resources by around 30–50 per cent, according to their own estimates.
- Kihals living near D.I. Khan City in the rainy season suffer from intrusions into their households from urban youth who have no regard for their household privacy.
- The trend of migration to urban areas in summer in search of work has led to many Kihals settling there permanently in urban areas and thus moving out of the social network and marriage system.

Conclusion: challenges and opportunities

The government did not consider the adverse social, environmental and livelihood impacts on indigenous boat peoples, including Kihals, Jhabils, Mors and Mohanas, during the water resource development planning and implementation process. International financial institutions (IFIs) have also until very recently ignored the impacts of these processes on the identity and livelihoods of these indigenous groups. Currently, there are plans to construct a series of upstream storage and irrigation projects under Pakistan Water Vision 2025, which is an integral part of the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (I-PRSP).⁴ This document is blind to the adverse impacts on indigenous boat peoples, and lacks any measures to mitigate them. The recently prepared Pakistan Water Sector Strategy and the draft National Water Policy also pay little attention to the rights of indigenous and tribal groups. The only exception is the draft National Resettlement Policy that mentions and, to some extent, recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples. However, it lacks specific provisions with regard to the mega-water development projects and subsequent impacts on indigenous peoples.

Indigenous groups and civil society organizations must mobilize to demand a comprehensive national policy on indigenous peoples. The current mega-water projects could provide a focus for such a campaign. In the case of Chashma Irrigation Project (CRBIP), the affected communities and allied non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have already made a complaint under the Inspection Panel procedures and drawn attention to violations of the World Bank's Draft Policy on Indigenous Peoples.⁵ Similar action around other projects would help generate momentum for the advocacy campaign on the rights of indigenous peoples.

Another point of intervention could be a national process of stakeholders dialogue on dams and development. A national advisory committee should be established to coordinate dialogue on the principles and guidelines of the WCD final report, and its recommendations should be incorporated in relevant national policies.

Notes

- 1 The Green Revolution was the name given to a series of agricultural innovations introduced across the Third World between 1967 and 1978. In India this meant expanding farming areas, double-cropping existing farmland and using new high-yield strains of seeds. Double-cropping entailed creating a second, artificial monsoon by constructing dams for irrigation, and the use of more fertilizers, pesticides and fungicides.
- 2 The World Commission on Dams was set up in 1997 with support from the World Bank and IUCN, the World Conservation Union, by diverse participants including governments, private companies, international financial institutions, civil society organizations and affected peoples, to study the long-term effects of dams.
- 3 See Asianics Agro-Development International (Pvt) Ltd, *Tarbela Dam and Related Aspects of the Indus River Basin*, Pakistan, a WCD case study prepared as input to the WCD, Cape Town, www.dams.org.
- 4 Pakistan Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy paper, available at www.imf.org/External/NP/prsp/2001/pak/01/.
- 5 World Bank Draft Policy on Indigenous Peoples (OP/BP 4.10). Consultations were carried out from July 2001 to February 2002; the revised draft policy will be submitted to the executive directors in mid-2003.

working to secure the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples

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Recommendations

1. Both governments should undertake measures to ensure that minorities and indigenous peoples can participate in economic and public life without discrimination.
2. The Pakistani authorities should ensure that minorities and indigenous peoples are able to participate in all aspects of public life, and that they participate in decision-making that affects their lives through consultative bodies at national and local level. The international donors should ensure that all peoples who could be affected by development projects are consulted.
3. The government of Pakistan should set up a national advisory committee to coordinate dialogue on development policies and follow-up to international development commitments. The committee should set up an inquiry into the effect of major water development projects on indigenous peoples, and to follow up the World Commission on Dams' case study on the Tarbela Dam by recommending adequate compensation or other measures to remedy any negative impact of the projects.
4. The government of Pakistan, with support of the international donors, should review all aspects of the Interim-Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, in particular the draft National Water Policy and draft National Resettlement Policy, to ensure that they reflect the rights of indigenous peoples and the possible negative impact of development projects.
5. The World Bank should ensure that indigenous peoples in Pakistan are fully aware of the World Bank policy on indigenous people. The participation of indigenous peoples in the monitoring and evaluation of the Pakistan I-PRSP should be strongly encouraged. The Inspection Panel should promptly investigate the complaint regarding the Chashma Irrigation Project.
6. Pakistan should ensure that all laws, policy and practice comply with its obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It should take immediate steps to ratify and implement all of the remaining major human rights instruments, in particular the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Labour Organization's Convention 169 Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples.

Minority Rights and Development is a research and advocacy programme, established by MRG and its partners, to address the development-related exclusion and marginalization of minority and indigenous communities, and to work towards the elimination of poverty.

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