

# Rejuvenating the Dal Lake through abrogation of Article 370

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**“It** is a place where the sun shines mildly, being the place created by Kashayapa as if for his glory. The saffron, iced-water and grapes, which are rare even in heaven, are common here.” These lines are from the popular ancient script “Rajatharangini” of Kalana’s on the beautifulness of the Dal lake. But today, Kalana’s reincarnation in any form would have felt guilty for those lines. Because he would not be able to feel the essence of what he felt during those days. It’s next to impossible for him to feel the water of the Dal Lake as sweet and delicious as it was during that time, earlier it was so clear that he could see the fishes down below and the feeling of relaxation enjoyed by him when he opens his arms broadly towards Dal.

But today, the Dal is not in the same position as it was earlier. It has and is being disturbed continuously since 18th century by the city of Srinagar when it started expanding towards the lake, which resulted in far-reaching changes in its surroundings and human interference by way of settlement, floating residences (house-boats) and many other exploitative factors.

The amphibious inhabitants of the Dal lake practised cultivation on floating gardens and damp lands in late 19th century and had property rights on the marshy lands and related water

channels to it. In due course, the number of inhabitants has been continuously growing, the families have been expanded and the occupations have diversified. The lake inhabitants have become a part and parcel of the lake ecosystem and have consequently caused stress on the lake ecosystem. The settlements have been discharging waste since ages in an uncontrolled and untreated manner. Liquid and solid waste disposed in the lake have caused pollution and degradation. The swamps that were formed subsequently were reclaimed for the construction of shops and houses. In 1947, a pipeline was laid over a bandh to channel drinking water from the Harwan reservoir, dividing the Dal Lake into two streams and thus reducing the circulation of water. In the mid-1970s, with tourism becoming a key industry for Jammu and Kashmir the pressure on the lake multiplied manifold. There were less than a hundred houseboats on the Dal at the turn of the century, but their number grew to a staggering 1,400 by 1981. The 1981, census recorded that settlements around the lake had a population of 24,500, an increase of over 100 per cent since 1973. Some 4,580 people were found to be permanent resident of the houseboats.

Although the tourism declined after terrorist invoked violence broke out in 1989, the human population on and around the lake registered a steady growth. Based on a conservative estimate of 3.5 per cent annual population growth, today the Lake and water development authority of Jammu and Kashmir believes that 44,833 people are now the residents of the houseboats and they also reside in the other settlements. Around 5,000 tourists lived on them throughout the year, the lake bore a burden of waste from 49,833 people. Further, hotels could be built in the Boulevard area, which was once a part of the dense forest, and they were permitted to discharge the waste in the lake.

When the then Chief Minister Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah built the Marpalan Highway around Dal's western flank to ease traffic congestion in the downtown, a decision was taken to cover the key Nallah Mar rather than spending money to acquire private property around the land.

According to revenue settlement record of the geographic survey map, the Dal lake size and area revealed in the book "Valley of Kashmir" published in 1895 C.E. by Sir Walter Roper Lawrence who served in Indian Civil Service during British India and was the first residing Commissioner of Kashmir from 1889 to 1895, the area of the lake was 25.86 Sq. Kms. with 18.21 Sq. Kms. as water and 7.65 Sq. Kms as land mass, fixed cultivation, habitations, damp etc. But today the area of the Lake has been estimated to be 12 Sq. Kms.

It will be a misperception if anyone thinks that all this damage caused due to increased population and change in generation. I believe that damage was caused because of the



personal interest of the two families of the Jammu and Kashmir during post-independence era, this was primarily oriented towards politics. Damage done by the two political families of J&K was not stopped to earn bread and butter but it was done to squeeze the neck of Dal Lake, further, they found a royal way to enrich their meals by promoting the name of Dal to New Delhi`s Lutyens streets and further it was promoted to different time zones of the world.

The two-families started to feed their kith and kin to establish their royalty in the name of “The Dal Development project” which was formulated in 1978. Since then, the public exchequer has held extensive deliberations and many consultants have been hired. Under the Commonwealth Technical Co-operation programme ENNEX of New Zealand which was engaged in the 1970s to conduct a detailed survey and study of the Dal Lake. In the year 1985, the Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India engaged M/S Bitwater Balfour with the assistance of the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) from U.K. In 1978 plans to invest Rs.2,000 crores over a 10-year period were approved, assistance from the United Kingdom became available in 1987 to bridge the resource gap. In 1997, the Lakes and Waterways Development Authority (LWDA) was constituted. In the same year erstwhile Union Ministry of Environment and Forests launched the ‘Save Dal Project’ with an allocation of Rs.500 crore to clean the lake.

In 2005 itself, the Centre approved Rs.237.7 crore to conserve the Dal. The High court

of J&K directed the Registrar (Judicial) to open a Dal Conservation Fund, which would be opened to the public for contributions for saving the water bodies in Kashmir. In 2010, Government of India granted Rs. 3.56 billion for Dal lake conservation. Under National Lake Conservation Plan, Rs 298.76 crore have been sanctioned for the conservation of the lake in September 2012. From 2015 to 2016, the J&K State government planned to contribute of Rs. 315.90 crore. In the same year Government of India provided funds under BSUP component. The contribution amounted to Rs. 90.92 crore. Despite of all this, public exchequer did not drop a single drop of tear and the Dal lake tears are not swiped.

Saving Dal lake became a goldmine for LAWDA and a vote bank for two political families. They knew that nobody comes out to cast their vote in Srinagar, that is why they throng the Dal's interiors during elections to woo voters because dwellers of Dal Lake were vulnerable at that time. They made promises of giving them drains, constructing roads and building hospitals in the Dal's interiors. Unfortunately, many of them succumb to this hope and went out to vote. Once they were elected, nothing used to happen after that. Due to political interferences, many rehabilitated Dal Dwellers went back by selling their plots or providing a reason of unavailability of livelihood options at the rehabilitation site.

The Dal Lake has become a constant source of income for many people and this will continue no matter what happens to the lake. In the meantime, the people of Kashmir will watch its slow death with concern and occasional tears. Many innocent and dedicated people suffered due to their honesty. The media usually makes noise but do little to expose the real culprits.

However, some steps taken by the authorities like import of automated machines from the western countries for cleaning the lake turned out to be absurd and it was a complete wastage of the exchequer. According to the respondents, the rebuilding of the Dal Lake is the skill that only inhabitants know as a result of their organic relationship with the water body. De-weeding the lake also fall flat particularly when those selected areas of lake which fall in the vicinity of two political families of J&K and their so-called VIP residences. The rehabilitation of Dal dwellers remains a flawed process, especially since the newly built houses for the people are prone to damage. Moreover, there are no basic civic amenities in those areas.

“As Srinagar residents, we cannot remain blind to what is happening to Dal. This is the face of our city. Unfortunately, so far we have remained dependant on government, which has not delivered. The common people have to take onus to save Dal or our future generations won't be able to even see it,” Anzar Ahmad, a student at Kashmir University said.



In September 2018, the Jammu and Kashmir High Court ruling on a 16-year-old petition against encroachments on the Dal, observed that despite court monitoring the matter since 2002, despite over rupees four hundred cores of public money being pumped into the issues by the government, the authorities within the state have proved helpless and unable to effectively ensure some meaningful outcome. It was not the first time that the authorities had faced court's wrath for their failure to conserve the Dal. According to the order, directions issued by the court on the matter over the last 16 years runs into 13 volumes.

The State Vigilance Organisation of Jammu and Kashmir in recent years unearthed a multi-crore scam in the Lakes and Waterways Development Authority and the agency which was responsible for Rs 500 crore Save Dal Lake project. The project was launched 10 years ago to restore the Dal Lake. During that time around 14 officers (including two executive engineers of LAWDA) were arrested. Though most of them have been granted bail, around 11 engineers have been suspended. The project with an estimated cost of Rs 500 crore was given priority under the national lake conservation plan with the Union government agreeing to provide around Rs 297.90 crore for it. The state government also agreed to provide Rs 194 crore for the project.

But fortunately, the time has come to have sacred water drops of the Dal in the Shankaracharya Temple which is located on the banks of Dal lake. Abolition of Article 370 of Indian constitution and making of J&K as union territory by the Union Government will bring new administrative functionaries. The citizens will hope that the new team which already showed their ability to handle the situation of J&K from August 5th will further put its effort in brining old glory to the Dal Lake.

***(The author is a Research Associate at Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation)***