

INUNDATION CANALS AND WATER WORSHIP IN PRE-BARRAGE SINDH

**Autobiography of M.H. Panhwar
(First ten years of my life seventy chapters, 250 pages.)**

In pre-Sukkur Barrage era, water was scarce commodity. The entire life of people of Sindh and economy depended on it. I must have been very young to walk half a mile, so was carried on shoulders of adult males to see water coming into a minor canal, which irrigated about a thousand acres of rice land around our village through a number of watercourses taking off from it. The canal had already been desilted, weeds, shrubs and bushes removed. The whole village flocked on this great occasion to see water. There were five Hindu running a shop in our village and most adult males of the village, including Mullas, one Maulavi and one Hafiz who could recite the Holy Quran from memory were in the group. All of them marched one kilometre to welcome water, as it entered the minor watercourse leading to our village. As they were getting closer to their long awaited bliss, the Muslims started murmuring from Holy Quran in original Arabic, the Hindus from their Holy Book probably Gita in Sanskrit and rest of villagers were thanking God in Sindhi and joining the rest of crowd. As we reached the bridge under railway line, the crowd stood there as if brakes had been applied and they repeated the same prayers, while some men were already busy in removing trash from upstream of canal, so that water flows down-streams smoothly. I could not understand why they did not go beyond the bridge on the railway-line, but years latter, I found that their lands were limited on this side of bridge. As soon as water passed through the bridge, Rupomal a Hindu merchant of our village stood in the bed throwing sweets in front of water and kept moving backwards and yet his face always towards water murmuring Gita all the time. The Muslims murmur became loud and with both hands raised to the level of breasts and hands cupped they moved on the embankment along with water and looking to moving stream and not to the sky where the God is supposed to be. It was hot summer morning of June and it took more than two hours to bring water up to our village and all this time Hindu shop-keepers in turns offered sweets to water and Muslims prayed. Much before Gandhi read the three holy books; Quran, Gita and Bible in his prayers, the Hindus and Muslims of Sindh were praying together for hours, along the entire route water was to flow. Since that day, I have felt that in the remote past our ancestors must have been water-worshippers and this reverence for water is lingering but UN-forgotten influence of the bye-gone

religion. After all without irrigation, Sindh would be a true desert and water was and even today is worth reverence. The past few years drought and shortage of water in Sindh, has brought people to the verge of rebellion.

In my primary school days I saw in the maps that Sindh is a part of the World's greatest deserts extending from Morocco eastwards through Tunis, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Israel, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iraq to Iran. The western Sindh is an extension of the Persio-Baluchi desert connected to above deserts, while eastern Sindh is part of the Great Indian Desert, which also includes Cholistan, Bikanir and Kutch. With an average rainfall of about 5 inches annually and at least two rainless years in every five years, the our village had all symptoms of true desert. Added to it was high heat of summer, dryness in the atmosphere, green grass virtually no, where and only occasional trees were seen in far distance. The desert shrubs like Akk, Kirar, Khabar, castor and thistle, survived just in a pitiable condition. Their dry and thirsty trunks were helplessly and endlessly waiting for even a small shower of rain water. Thirsty animals had to be lead to village well twice. They needed drink more than twice. To digest feed they also needed extra water and when it was not supplied they ate less and less and lost weight.

The farmers could raise only one crop of rice a year. Ground water in 90% area of Sindh was brackish. Lack of water for bathing promoted skin diseases. If river came late or receded early, rice crop was bound to fail resulting into poverty, hunger, disease, no capacity to see medical professionals and no funds to buy medicines, clothing and shelter. Even the food was scarce and poor. There was no availability of fresh vegetables which require water inadequate grasses and fodder's for domestic animals, inadequate pastures for wild animals to feed upon and be prey to humans and in general all these lead to poor and insufficient food for the people. Since for centuries agriculture, animal husbandry and fisheries, were the main industries for employment, due to lack of water they did not flourish and even self employed persons were under-employed in disguise. One who has been part of this environment for years can easily conclude.

Harsh climate of our village can be understand from Summer temperature in May reaching 48°C (118°F), rainfall only 5 inches against evaporation of about 80 inches. The low humidity air simply sucks moisture from surface of skin of animals and humans. Before opening of the Sukkur barrage in 1932, canal water was available from mid June to mid October and then fields and canals were dry for next eight months. Cats, dogs, domestic animals and house-hold poultry were supplied water but wild animals, birds and insects

perished and became rare as incoming summer advanced. This desolate desert like environment of my child hood has lead me to insecurity for water and I drink water not by litres but gallons each day.

People in Sindh could grow only one major crop rice in summer and peas, beans, oil seeds etc., on preserved moisture in winter called Dubari or second crop. This lead to poor quality food, poor health, loss of height of people over the past four thousand years and consequently they were declared unfit for police and army according to British Government Standards laid for recruitment in India. Over and above this dependency on river water was never guaranteed. Only one in five years these would be a bumper crop in two years it would be average and another two years below average as in rice growing season, river water could recede too early in September or come too late at end June or early July causing late planting or lack of water during grain ripening. So much was anxiety for water that people from surrounding villages visited my maternal uncle Muhammad Saleh each day as he was getting an information card issued by irrigation department from Karachi every day giving level of water at various gauge stations like Attock, Panjnad, Mithankot, Sukkur and Kotri and people would apply water to their fields in advance, if river was expected to fall. For irrigating their lands getting proper share and stealing it from others, farmers fought with each other and murders on stealth of water from share of others were common occurrence.

I have studied the primitive religions as well as various deserts of the world. What I gathered from these studies that, like all desert people of the world, the Sindh is had reverence for water almost as a diety. The hunter food gatherers had to camp at perennial sources of water animals too came to drink water from these sources and springs of Sindh Kohistan were particularly settled by the man much before 3,500 BC, for hunting, raising crops and animal grazing. Early agriculture started either near springs or rain fed streams like Bolan, which discharged into the Indus via Manchar lake. The watering places became holy and were simply taken over by Vedic people, Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims. Thus Manjabari was already an established religious centre before Arab conquest and became Manghopir. Jhimpir is another such centre. Yark Thambi existed long before Qalander Shahbaz is said to have occupied it. Zindah Pir and Sadh Bella, the two islands were occupied by Muslims and Hindus as places of reverence long before creation of these shrines. Oderolal was another site of reverence by both Muslims and Hindus. Pir Patho near the delta became protector of boatmen wading through the deep waters. Kohistan has Muslim holy shrines near all springs and other sources of permanent water, some important of which are Shah

Godrio, Gazi Shah, Naing, Laki, Ghaibi Pir on Baran near Karchat, and Abdullah Shah Ghazi.

Ancients knew about ground water and its development by wells. A well at Ghazi Shah dates about 5,000 - 6,000 years back, but ground water in 85% of area in Sindh is brackish and this made people helpless. Many diseases develop in man and domesticated animals due to partaking of brackish water. When agriculture was started in Indus plain on vast area around 6,000 years ago, population increased and source of their water supply, the Indus became "Holy". It may have been holy during Indus Culture times and Vedic people (Rig Veda) continued it as their holy river.

The variety of food for people also depend on availability quality water and its quality. When water was not available people were unemployed in disguise. It also controls prosperity, poverty and life style.

All above thoughts have confirmed to me that reverence for water in arid area of Sindh was based on the fact that without the Indus, civilised life and the density of population would not have been possible in Sindh and for their mutual interests, members of different beliefs with inner feelings of their hearts, joined together to consider water as greatest blessing in their life.