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Indus river role in sustaining culture and supporting livelihood in Indus Valley: A case Study of Kehal People

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Abstract

This study examines at how essential the Indus River is to the Kehal people, a riverine community that lives along the banks of rivers, and how it helps them maintain their way of life in the form of culture and economy. The Kehal, considered to be a traditionally semi-nomadic people group, have created a distinctive way of life that is closely entwined with the Indus River, they are living near Indus for time unknown. This has an impact on their economic practices, social structures, and spiritual beliefs. Their primary economic activities—fishing, boat construction, and riverine trade—are what sustain them and help to establish their cultural identity. Their daily routines, mobility, and resource management strategies are determined by the seasonal rhythms of the river, demonstrating a profound ecological understanding that has been passed down through the generations. However, the Kehal's traditional way of life is in jeopardy because of environmental deterioration, limited access to river resources, and economical pressures. Despite these obstacles, the Kehal community exhibits great endurance, adapting to changing surroundings while fighting to retain their traditional legacy. This case study demonstrates the crucial relationship that exists between the Kehal people and the Indus River, highlighting the ways in which natural resources both influence and support indigenous civilizations. The findings underline the necessity for safeguarding river ecosystems and recognizing the rights of groups like the Kehal, whose livelihoods and cultural identities are inextricably related to these natural surroundings.

Keywords: Indus river, Culture, Livelihood, Kehal people.

Introduction

One of the world's first urban civilizations, the Indus Valley Civilization flourished in what is now northwest India and Pakistan between 3300 and 1300 BCE, and the Indus River was essential to its survival. The river was essential to daily life, trade, and agriculture, and it had a significant impact on the culture and economy of the civilization (Gilmartin, 2020). Rich silt that was deposited by the Indus River during its seasonal flooding produced fertile soil that was ideal for farming. This made it possible to cultivate dates, wheat, barley, peas, and cotton. The Indus

Valley civilization created sophisticated irrigation systems to direct river water toward their crops. Their year-round cultivation was made possible by this effective water management, which made agriculture the mainstay of their economy (Clift, 2002). Large towns like Mohenjodaro and Harappa benefited from being close to water for transportation, sanitation, and drinking when they were situated near rivers. The Indus River provided an abundance of water that allowed for extremely well-planned city layouts, complete with elaborate public baths and drainage systems. A key component of their urban infrastructure was water management. The river served as a significant trading channel, enabling the exchange of products with far-off areas, such as Mesopotamia and Central Asia, including cotton fabrics, beads, and pottery. The river promoted interregional contacts and the economy by facilitating the flow of people and products throughout the area (Jain, et al, 2007).

The people may have had spiritual or religious significance for the water from the Indus. It's possible that the river was revered, encouraging regular rituals of purification or ceremonial acts. The river's capacity to support transportation and agriculture created a stable, prosperous environment that allowed several towns to thrive and resulted in a rich cultural life that was reflected in their crafts, artwork, and architecture (Pascoe, 1919). Fish were plentiful in the river, and animal husbandry, including the domestication of cattle and sheep, was made possible by the fertile plains. The river made raw materials (such as clay for pottery, minerals for beads, and wood) more accessible, which encouraged the growth of specialized crafts and a trading economy. The Indus River had a crucial role in the Indus Valley Civilization's sustainability by facilitating trade, promoting urbanization, permitting agriculture, and offering cultural significance. The resources and opportunities offered by the river were vital to the livelihood and prosperity of the civilization (Kidwai, et al, 2019).

This research article is a case study of Kehal people who used to live near the Indus River from time unknown and Indus River is the main source of their livelihood. The Kehal people are traditionally a riverine group residing near the Indus River in Pakistan. They are a native, semi-nomadic or nomadic people whose way of life and culture are strongly entwined with the Indus River. The Kehal offer a valuable case study of a society that is heavily reliant on the natural resources and ecosystem services that the river provides for their way of life and culture. The Kehal people are mostly fishermen who get their food from the Indus River (Ishaq, 2020). They catch a range of freshwater species using conventional fishing gear, like nets and boats. This means of subsistence is closely linked to the river's cyclical cycles, particularly the monsoon floods that restore fish populations. The Kehal are expert boat builders in addition to fishermen; they create wooden boats that are essential for both transportation and fishing. The materials used in this craftsmanship—mostly wood—come from places close to the river and are handed down through the centuries (Noureen, Khan & Arshad, 2012).

The Kehal inhabitants trade, either trading for other necessities or selling fish to other towns and villages. Their involvement with local markets connects them to the greater economy while retaining their dependency on the river at the core. The Kehal people frequently practice a semi-nomadic life, wandering along the banks of the Indus River to follow seasonal fishing

patterns and the water's ebb and flow. They move their communities when necessary to avoid rising waters or to be closer to productive fishing grounds as a means of adapting to the river's flooding cycles. They avoid overusing river resources and fish sustainably, leading to a lifestyle that is highly attuned to the natural environment (Shaheen, 2011).

Literature Review

Role of Indus River in Sustaining Culture and Supporting Livelihood

The Indus River was essential to the formation and expansion of the Indus Valley Civilization. Early human habitation in the region was impacted by the flat physiography of the Indus River floodplain, seasonal water supply, and active river processes. The Indus Civilization's urban sites were situated where the Sutlej River once ran, offering steady conditions for long-term occupancy. (Nasir & Akbar, 2012). The region's sedimentary architecture and the establishment of the Indus Basin as a significant sediment producer are products of the geological history of the Indus River system, which was sculpted by tectonic plate collisions. Over millennia, the Indus River has been worshiped as a deity, used for imperial expansion, and functioned as a vital trading route. The broad and fertile plain of the Indus River stretches over 200,000 square miles (518,000 square km) and slopes gently from the Arabian Sea in the south to the Himalayan piedmont in the north. The slope has an average gradient of little more than one foot per mile. The plain has no features other than the micro relief. It is split into two regions, the upper and lower Indus plains, on account of their distinct physiographic features. In Punjab province, a sophisticated network of interfluves known as doabs is formed by the Indus and its tributaries, the Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej rivers, draining the upper Indus plain. The Indus River has a Nilotic quality in the lower plain (Ncube, Beevers & Momblanch, 2021).

The Himalayan piedmont, the doabs, and the Sulaiman piedmont—known locally as the Derajat—are the three segments that make up the upper Indus plain. The small strip of land where the rivers enter the plain from their mountain stage, providing them a somewhat greater gradient, is known as the Himalayan piedmont, also known as the sub-Shiwalik zone. Numerous rivulets that have created a fractured topography in some areas of the zone are what define it. Except during the rainy season, when they swell into roaring streams with significant erosive strength, these streams stay dry. Variations in temperature, soil type, latitude, and elevation have encouraged the growth of a wide range of plants. The desert's drought-resistant vegetation is mainly acacia, or stunted thorny scrub. The plains offer a vista of strewn trees in a parkland setting (Irfan, et al, 2019).

Kehal People and their Attachment with Indus River

The Kehal people have a great and enduring relationship to the Indus River, which defines their cultural identity, customs, and way of life. This bond signifies a deep-rooted relationship with the river that defines who they are as a people, going beyond simple reliance on it for subsistence. This article explores their special bond with the Indus River. The history of the Kehal people is intimately linked to the shifting landscapes of the Indus River, where they have resided for millennia. Their ties to the river are reflected in oral histories, folktales, and ancestor stories, which strengthen their sense of continuity and belonging. Part of what makes the Kehal

who they are is the Indus River. They identify as "people of the river," and their language, customs, and social structures all reflect this self-identification. In their cultural narratives, rivers are symbolic of life, continuity, and sustenance (Ishaq, 2020).

For the Kehal, fishing is not only a means of subsistence but also a way of life. The rhythms of the river dictate their daily schedule, which includes getting up early to fish, returning with their catch, and trading with the locals. This dependency on fishing shapes their abilities, knowledge, and even community bonds. The Kehal are expert carpenters who create the traditional wooden boats that are essential for river navigation. Crafting boats serves as a means of subsistence and a means of expressing one's culture; it frequently involves customs or group activities that strengthen ties to the river. For the Kehal, the Indus River is not simply a physical thing but a spiritual area. They frequently regard the river as a living being deserving of awe and respect. Water-related rituals are widespread, involving prayers or sacrifices to rivers that symbolize the rivers' spiritual link. The river is the subject of many tales and stories from the Kehal's rich oral traditions. These tales frequently present the river as both a kind and demanding power. These kinds of stories support the locals' belief that they should take care of and respect the river (Kanto, 2023).

The semi-nomadic lifestyle of the Kehal is tailored to the seasonal variations in the river. In reaction to floods, fishing seasons, or variations in water levels, they shift along the riverbanks. Their ability to move around is a crucial component of their cultural adaptation, which keeps them in close contact with the environment of the river. Using techniques that prevent overfishing, the Kehal engage in sustainable fishing. Their comprehension of the river's cycles allows them to modify their fishing techniques, exhibiting a customary ecological understanding that has been inherited throughout the years. The river has a significant impact on social structures, family responsibilities, and group activities in the Kehal community. The riverside promotes a strong sense of community by acting as a gathering place for events, storytelling, and everyday encounters. The Kehal community values the sharing of river-related knowledge and skills highly, including boat handling, fishing methods, and river navigation expertise. In order to preserve their way of life, elders pass on these talents to the next generation (Hameed, et al, 2021).

The Kehal's connection to the Indus River is threatened by pollution, overfishing by outside economic interests, diminished water flows from dams upstream, and environmental degradation. The health of the river is in danger, which also puts the Kehal people's traditional way of life in jeopardy. The Kehal are under pressure to modify or adapt their traditional river-based way of life because to modernization, urbanization, and marginalization by mainstream society. Many Kehal people make an effort to keep their connection to the river despite these obstacles. The Kehal have demonstrated incredible tenacity in adjusting to shifting climatic and socioeconomic circumstances while working to protect their traditional legacy. Some have kept their cultural beliefs intact while incorporating modern methods into their customs, such as employing powered boats. Elders and community leaders organize storytelling sessions, fishing tournaments, and cultural activities to honor their ties to the Indus River and to preserve

traditional ways of life. The community's ties to their ancestral river depend heavily on these initiatives (Singh Goomer, 2024).

Kehal people Culture and Indus River

In the Kehal community, sharing and living in community are highly valued. Families support one another in activities related to rivers, such as boat repair and fishing, by living and working together. Community ties are strengthened via social events held along riverbanks where people exchange music, stories, and food. Oral traditions are highly valued in the Kehal culture, since elders transmit tales, melodies, and insights into the ecosystem of the river, fishing methods, and local history. These stories frequently stress how crucial it is to treat rivers with reverence and live in balance with the environment. The Kehal identify as "children of the river," and they have strong ties to the Indus people. The river has had a significant influence on their way of life, customs, and values, and they are proud of their distinct background. Because of their long-standing ecological expertise, the Kehal are able to fish sustainably, preventing overexploitation of the river's resources (Kenoyer, 2006). They understand fish migration patterns, fish breeding cycles, and the most effective ways to fish while minimizing the negative effects on the environment. Their way of life and culture depend on their having this knowledge. The Kehals lead a lifestyle with little influence on the environment. They follow a concept of taking only what they need from the river, and their mobile settlements are constructed from locally available, biodegradable materials. Living in balance with the natural world is deeply ingrained in this sustainable way of thinking (Dani, 1975).

The Kehal community has persevered in maintaining their culture in the face of adversity. The community is teaching traditional skills, planning cultural events to honor their legacy, and fighting for the preservation of their rights to utilize and access the river's resources, among other things. Even while some Kehal have incorporated contemporary equipment, including motorized boats or sophisticated fishing gear, they still uphold fundamental cultural customs. By combining custom and innovation, they manage the demands of contemporary living without sacrificing their strong ties to the Indus. Important facets of Kehal culture include music and dancing, which are frequently displayed at festivities and get-togethers. Their songs serve as a vehicle for cultural expression as well as a historical record, frequently narrating tales of the river, historical figures, and ordinary life (Manuel, 2010). In addition to creating boats, the Kehal are adept at crafting nets, fishing tackle, and other necessities for riverine life. These handicrafts demonstrate the ingenuity and inventiveness of the makers because they are frequently created by hand utilizing traditional methods and natural materials. The Kehal community resists the deterioration of its culture in spite of these obstacles. In order to ensure that their legacy is maintained, elders actively teach the younger generation ancient skills, values, and stories. Events like festivals, get-togethers, and cooperative fishing trips provide a venue for the exchange of cultures (Mughal, 2012).

While many Kehal attempt to maintain their traditional way of life, some have adapted to modern influences, such as employing motorized boats or engaging in wage jobs during off-seasons. Their ability to adapt allows them to maintain essential cultural practices while

navigating the demands of modern society. The Kehal have begun to push for increased acknowledgment of their rights to dwell beside the Indus River and to fish. Leaders in the community endeavor to increase public awareness of the river's cultural significance and the need to prevent additional environmental damage to it (Raikes, 1964).

Kehal and their economic activities in Indus River

The Kehal people are mostly fishermen who get their food from the Indus River. They catch a range of freshwater species using conventional fishing gear, like nets and boats. This means of subsistence is closely linked to the river's cyclical cycles, particularly the monsoon floods that restore fish populations. The Kehal are expert boat builders in addition to fishermen; they create wooden boats that are essential for both transportation and fishing. The materials used in this craftsmanship—mostly wood—come from places close to the river and are handed down through the centuries. The Kehal inhabitants trade, either trading for other necessities or selling fish to other towns and villages (Aisha, et al, 2017). They maintain their central reliance on the river while interacting with nearby marketplaces to link to the broader economy. The Kehal people frequently live a semi-nomadic lifestyle, following the ebb and flow of the water and seasonal fishing patterns by migrating along the banks of the Indus River. They move their communities when necessary to avoid rising waters or to be closer to productive fishing grounds as a means of adapting to the river's flooding cycles. They avoid overusing river resources and fish sustainably, leading to a lifestyle that is highly attuned to the natural environment. This relationship indicates a deep grasp of the river's ecosystem and the imperative of preserving a balance with nature for long-term existence (Noureen, Khan & Arshad, 2012).

The economic activities of the Kehal people are mostly based on the Indus River and are intricately linked to the seasonal rhythms and ecology of the river. Their primary sources of income include fishing, boat building, and small-scale trading, all of which are concentrated around the river. These pursuits continue to be essential to the Kehal people's way of life and financial survival in spite of contemporary obstacles. The Kehal are noted for their craftsmanship in creating small, lightweight wooden boats that are important for fishing and transportation on the Indus River. Since the boats are not only used by the community in which they are made, but are occasionally sold or traded to other riverine settlements, boat building is an important economic activity. The Kehal not only construct boats but also maintain boats, making sure that both their own and other river users' boats are in good working order. This offers an extra revenue stream, especially in the off-season when fishing isn't as popular. The Kehal frequently exchange or sell their catch to neighborhood dealers or in adjacent markets. Their economy depends heavily on this commerce because it gives them access to commodities like clothing, food, and other essentials that they are unable to manufacture on their own. The Kehal still use a barter system in some places, trading fish or other products from the river (like reeds or handicrafts) for necessities from established communities. Their adherence to customary transaction practices upholds their financial autonomy and self-reliance (Sharma, et al, 2013).

The Kehal occasionally gather reeds, bamboo, and other natural items from the riverbanks in addition to fishing. These materials are either sold at neighborhood marketplaces or utilized to build temporary shelters or fishing traps. Since these resources are necessary for their

everyday lives and means of subsistence, their harvesting is done in a sustainable manner. Even though they are mostly fishermen, some Kehal also do small-scale farming in the rich riverside fields during the low-water seasons. They cultivate grains and vegetables; however, this is typically done as a supplement to their fishing industry. The environment of the Indus River is changing, posing a growing danger to the Kehal's traditional economic activity. Fish populations have decreased and the natural flow of the river has been deteriorated due to dams, pollution, and the use of water for agriculture. The Kehal's ability to maintain their fishing-based economy has been hampered as a result. The Kehal are a disenfranchised group that frequently has restricted access to resources that could enable them to expand their economic activity, such as formal marketplaces and transportation. It is challenging for them to completely integrate into contemporary economic systems due to their semi-nomadic lifestyle (Memon & Thapa, 2011).

The mainstays of the Kehal people's traditional economic activity include fishing, boat construction, and small-scale trading. Their economy is closely linked to the Indus River. A thorough awareness of the ecosystem of the river and sustainable activities are essential to their way of life. But contemporary issues including environmental deterioration, commercial enterprises' competitiveness, and marginalization are straining their traditional economy. Notwithstanding these obstacles, the Kehal have demonstrated resiliency by adjusting to shifting circumstances and making an effort to preserve their distinctive economic customs near the Indus River (Pandey, 2005).

Conclusion

An essential component of the Kehal people's cultural identity is the Indus River. For generations, it has formed the cornerstone of their way of life, molding their social structures, rituals, and spiritual beliefs. Through oral traditions, songs, stories, and rituals are passed down honoring the river as a sacred and sustaining thing. The Kehal people's identity is defined by their relationship to the river, which weaves a continuous cultural narrative between their history, present, and future. From an economic standpoint, the Kehal mostly obtain their subsistence from the Indus River. Their primary source of income is fishing, which is bolstered by their inherited abilities to construct boats, weave nets, and navigate the intricate ecology of the river. The Kehal are able to sustain an independent and flexible economic structure because the river makes trading, transportation, and the gathering of riverine resources easier. This economy reliant on the Indus River emphasizes how vital the river is to the community's supply of food, cash, and opportunity. Because of their extensive ecological understanding, the Kehal are able to manage the river's resources responsibly. Their low-impact way of life, seasonal mobility, and traditional fishing methods are examples of a centuries-old, sustainable approach to managing natural resources. The people and the ecosystem are preserved because of their harmony with the river, illustrating how indigenous knowledge can support the sustainable use of natural resources.

The Kehal people's situation serves as a reminder of the rivers' wider role in sustaining human societies and civilizations. The Indus River's presence in the lives of the Kehal shows the need of protecting natural water bodies not merely for their ecological value but also for their cultural and economic contributions. The Kehal way of life teaches important lessons about

resilience, sustainability, and striking a balance between environmental stewardship and human needs. For the Kehal, the Indus River is more than just a natural resource; it is a lifeline that protects their way of life, culture, and customs. This distinctive riverine culture must be preserved, which can only be done by safeguarding the river and helping the Kehal maintain their traditions. The Kehal's long-lasting ties to the Indus are a poignant reminder of the important bond that exists between humans and environment and the necessity to preserve these ties for coming generations.

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