

The Green Dream, Environmental journalism in Pakistan: A Tribute to Saneeya Hussain, Ameneh Azam Ali and Zulekha Ali, at 7.00 pm at The Second Floor

On Sunday, Aug 17, the Saneeya Hussain Trust, T2F and Shehri presented **The Green Dream, Environmental journalism in Pakistan: A Tribute to Saneeya Hussain, Ameneh Azam Ali and Zulekha Ali**, at 7.00 pm at The Second Floor (T2F - <http://www.t2f.biz>) in Karachi.

This commemorative meeting and roundtable discussion on environmental issues concluded the **Saneeya Hussain Week, August 11-17, 2008**. Friends and colleagues of three pioneering environmental journalists gathered to talk about their work and experiences in this field, where environmental journalism in Pakistan stands today and 'the way ahead'.

The concept was born out of a chapter written by Beena Sarwar on environmental journalism in Pakistan for Sage India (working title 'The Green Pen: Essays by Environmental Journalists in South Asia', forthcoming). The draft chapter, titled 'Uphill and downstream in Pakistan' acknowledged Saneeya as the person who first introduced many Pakistani journalists to the concept of 'environmental journalism'.

The evening started with Sabeen Mahmud, director T2F introducing the event. Beena and Sabeen kicked off the agenda with the documentary film 'Celebrating Saneeya' (ran the 14 min version instead of the 5 min version by accident but no one seemed to mind).

Owais Tohid started the Memories section of the evening, talking about the young environmental journalist Zulekha Ali of The News, who distinguished herself at the environmental beat of *The News*, Karachi in 1992 when the paper was launched. She made a name for herself in environmental journalism in a short career that spanned barely a year. In August 1993, she died while trying to save her friend Fizza who had jumped into the sea after a child who had fallen into the stormy monsoon sea at a rocky Karachi beach. They managed to save the child but both young women drowned. Ironically, Zulekha had only recently highlighted the illegal sand excavations and inadequate beach safety because of which a dozen people had drowned at a similar beach during the previous Eid.

Talat Aslam shared his memories of another pioneering environmental journalist, Ameneh Azam Ali, who contributed to greater awareness about the environment even before the IUCN launched its environmental reporting trainings in the 1980s and 1990s. She was senior assistant editor at monthly *The Herald* and was undoubtedly Pakistan's foremost 'environmental journalist' even before the term was popularised. Ameneh left the *Herald* in 1988 to join the newly set up Agha Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP), doing research, contributing to scholarly journals like *Sage India* as well as the *Herald*. Ameneh lost her battle to cancer in 1993, leaving a void in the field that has never quite been filled.

Sahar Ali talked about **Saneeya Hussain** and her contribution to environmental journalism with IUCN's path-breaking quarterly *NCS Bulletin* (later the *The Way Ahead* magazine) that she edited and its Urdu counterpart, *Jareeda*, edited by the prominent writer Obaidullah Baig. These were the first publications in Pakistan devoted to the environment. Aware that editors did not set

too much store by 'boring' environmental stories, Saneeya showed reporters that there is usually a solid political or economic angle involving juicy corruption as mill owners, builders and industrials try to cut corners, endangering fragile ecologies and people's health. She convinced reporters to explore such investigative stories and paid them for these stories -- a welcome incentive in the days when journalists were not as well paid as today. This reporting in the media further helped gain official support for these causes. At the same time Saneeya also mobilized supporters in the civil society and involved officials.

We started the section about activism and its results with Dhummai Cowasjee, a colleague of Saneeya's at IUCN, talking about the National Conservation Strategy (NCS) process and the standards it introduced. She said that the first workshop regarding the NCS was held in August 1986. The NCS was approved by the Federal Government on March 1, 1992. (The NWFP environmental strategy harks back to the NCS). Over 3,000 people were involved in discussing the NCS process and policy which was significant for several reasons.

- The NCS provided a space for public dialogue
- It was the first time that a federal level policy involved the provincial and council levels (the Local Government Ordinance was promulgated in 2002).
- The NCS mainstreamed environment, incorporating not just wildlife and parks but providing an in-depth analysis of what makes Pakistan tick, with a Rs 16 billion outlay.
- It also acknowledged women as users of natural resources and provided a holistic education on interlinked issues.

The SDPI (Sustainable Development Policy Institute) in Islamabad was formed after the NCS was in place, and continues to take many of the initial ideas forward.

Dawn environmental reporter Bhagwandas showed several slides of Haleji Lake, where the fish stock is being rapidly depleted due to commercial fishing. Haleji Lake was one of Karachi's water sources but a canal linking the city to the Indus River has reduced its importance. The flushing process has stopped and the lake has become stagnant. It used to attract over 100,000 birds species, but most have stopped coming there now.

Advocate Faisal Siddiqi and the News reporter Shahid Husain talked about the SITE toxic waste dumping case that Faisal Siddiqi had taken on pro bono and recently won – a first in Pakistan's environmental history. Toxic dumping in the SITE area had resulted in one child's death and the amputation of another child's limbs in early 2006. The case highlighted the impact of the media as it "created a narrative of public importance" as Faisal put it. "The judges knew about it which gave us a receptive ground to plead the case. The narrative continued to be constantly developed and remained in the public eye. There was aggressive moral shaming. Last but not least, the case mobilized the people – victims, families, supporters were all engaged in the struggle and formed an NGO to take the matter forward." The case also resulted in getting the factory closed down, compensation to the victims' families, and the stoppage of toxic dumping in the area.

Roland DeSouza of Shehri ended the evening by talking about the significance of environmental awareness in today's interconnected global village, and the connection between environment and peace. Even US military generals have acknowledged that problems with terrorism would be exacerbated if climate change is not contained. It is no coincidence that the Nobel Peace Prize

went to Al Gore for his environmentalism. He said it is the duty of the journalist community to educate themselves and get the word out. “The basic story is that the ship is sinking, not the events happening around it. Everything else is peripheral.” His presentation included slides taken from WWF’s Living Planet Report 2006 available on the internet:

http://www.panda.org/news_facts/publications/living_planet_report/lp_2006/index.cfm - the site includes explanations of how to use the graphics.

Download report at: http://assets.panda.org/downloads/living_planet_report.pdf