**Our Switzerland is dying**

**[Major General Syed Ali Hamid](https://nation.com.pk/Columnist/major-general-syed-ali-hamid)**

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“If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?”

-(George Berkeley)

In the first part of this two series article, I lamented on the unchecked construction astride the Islamabad–Murree Expressway and extending on towards Nathiagali. This part talks about the damage caused by the expanding road network and the damage it has caused to the forests.

The road to Nathia via Changla was converted from a pony track well before 1947 and to reduce the steep gradient between Barian and Changla, during the late 1960s the Highway Department attempted to realign the last 4 km with a couple of zigzag bends.

The mountain ranges in this region are new with weak crusts and in spite of building retaining walls, portions of the new road kept sliding and was finally abandoned. Sixty years later, the scars that were created by the landslides are still visible. Sadly, nothing was learnt.

Twenty years ago during the era of the first government of Nawaz Sharif, the Frontier Works Organisation (FWO) developed the road from Murree to Abbottabad into a modern 40-feet wide thoroughfare.

[Lay's Pakistan makes Guinness world record by making longest sharing chain](https://nation.com.pk/23-Sep-2021/lay-s-pakistan-makes-guinness-world-record-by-making-longest-sharing-chain)

The FWO had decades of experience in constructing roads in the mountains and the attention paid to the finish was excellent. Unfortunately, what was disregarded was the forest which dressed the Gali mountains with their stately beauty.

The road was broadened exactly how they did on the Karakoram Highway (KKH) by blasting rocks and bulldozing the rubble over the edge. On the KKH, the boulders go hurtling into the river but here they went crashing into three hundred-year-old pines and conifers.

In no time, reentrants which were clad by virgin forest became screes. Above the road, trees whose roots had been exposed came crashing down with snow and rain. As the thin layer of peat and soil vanished, foliage along the road side disappeared.

Thanks to my wife, our family developed a love of nature and flowers. Through the summer as the seasons changed so did the wild flowers along the road. After the snows melted, out came the violets and the Primulas; then flowered the creepers of clematis and white roses.

[PM Khan congratulates Saudi leadership on National Day](https://nation.com.pk/23-Sep-2021/pm-khan-congratulates-saudi-leadership-on-national-day)

As spring turned into summer, crowds of daisies were followed by Anemones, Queen Anne’s Lace, Astilbe and Geraniums, and within the crannies Gebreas and so on and on. This wonder of nature that grew along the roadside was replaced by stark rock-faces rising 30 feet at places and landslides.

It was an environmental disaster but no one cared or seemed responsible. Local forest officials could only guess that the number of large trees felled were in the thousands; smaller trees would have been five times greater. During the 1980s, the UN funded a watershed management programme for planting forests in the rain catchment areas of KP.

First, nurseries were established close to where the plantation was to be carried out and I recollect many varieties of spruce, pine and fir were propagated and planted in the thousands. In places the new forest is visible but a large percentage of the effort has been wasted by the devastation caused by expanding the main road.

It was a heavy price to pay and mutilated the Gali mountains for years to come and I doubt if they will ever recover. Viewed from a distance, the road towards Dunga and Nathiagali runs like the scar of a badly performed caesarean.

[Pakistan reports 2,357 COVID cases in one day](https://nation.com.pk/23-Sep-2021/pakistan-reports-2-357-covid-cases-in-one-day)

There are images of the massive road network constructed in China on social media and I envy the manner in which the highways have traversed mountains clad with virgin forest without disturbing the ecosystem—and we made a mess of just 70 kilometres of road from Murree to Abbottabad in the name of progress.

The contract should have contained strong clauses for preserving the forest and instead of being slung down the mountain side, the rubble should have been carted away in dump trucks. For every tree felled, ten should have been planted.

The damage caused by broadening the road accelerated the ecological disaster that is in the making due to over-population. Valleys are filling up with houses leading to a network of smaller roads constructed with government funds allotted to local politicians.

With no visible control by a single coordinating agency, more than one road is leading to the same village from different ends. A pertinent example is Tajwaal, a village of 700-800 inhabitants which had a road through dense jungle linking it to Changla from the south.

[Volcanic eruptions intensify on Spain's Canary Islands](https://nation.com.pk/23-Sep-2021/volcanic-eruptions-intensify-on-spain-s-canary-islands)

Twenty years ago the road was broadened which the volume of traffic did not justify. 10 years later, a local who was a member of the National Assembly decided that his village required another road from the north. Consequently, a 10-foot forest trail was broadened into a 40-foot road with indiscriminate felling of trees, some over 300 years old.

When funds were exhausted, neither was the road metalled nor any retaining walls constructed. Therefore, erosion continues above and below the road giving no time for the forest to recover and stabilise the soil.

Given a chance and with a little help, the forest can regenerate—it is in fact its own nursery. On the old road to Tajwaal where the forest is healthy and the road has stabilised, within a small patch of 40-square meters I counted over 30 pine and fir trees that were 5-7 years old.

Unfortunately, the Forest Department has not made any substantial effort to plant pine, cedar, oak, walnut or maple trees all of which do so well in this environment. Instead the trees that they have chosen are not native to the area and have little aesthetic or commercial value.