BARA, KHYBER — Early morning, Abdul Hameed stands on its dry bank by Upper Bara, a tin jug held in one hand. He dips it into a narrow stream and pulls it out half-full.

“This would be enough for all of us once,” he says, looking towards the dry riverbed where buffalos would bathe and children took their early lessons in swimming. “This cannot fill a jug anymore,” Hameed says while referring to the Bara River which is more scarred wound through rock and sand than river.

For generations, the Bara River was something more than water. Coming down from

the Spin Ghar mountains into Khyber and on towards the rich plains of Peshawar, it nourished orchards of apricot and pomegranate, drove wooden watermills, and watered wheatfields which sustained families. It bore festivals, song, and memory. To lose it, people say, is to lose part of oneself.

Today, the lifeline is vanishing. The Bara has become a narrow, dirty trickle, polluted by sewage and scarred by mining of sand. Where there used to be swimming lessons, plastic bags float on stagnant ponds. For families, the losses are no longer conceptual — they are hunger, sickness, and displacement.

Jamila, a mother of five near Bara Bazaar, measures the crisis in footsteps. “Earlier, I filled pitchers from the riverbank,” she says, balancing a steel container on her head. “Now the water stinks. We walk an hour to hillside springs. Children fall ill from stomach infections, but what choice do we have?”

A Local River, A Global Story

Bara’s collapse is not just a local tragedy. Around the world, rivers that sustained civilizations for centuries — from the Colorado in the United States to the Murray-Darling in Australia — are shrinking under the twin pressures of climate change and unregulated extraction. In Central Asia, the Amu Darya and Syr Darya tell a similar story: disappearing glaciers, erratic rainfall, and unsustainable use leading to parched fields and displaced families.

Peshawar scientists refer to Bara as a “microcosm of the Pakistani water crisis” — but its tale has international resonance: falling supply, increasing demand, and failing regulation. Climate change has redefined the pattern of water everywhere. What used to come in the shape of constant flow now does in the forms of floods or dry spells.

Broken Systems, Broken Trust

Deforestation of the uplands of Tirah has stripped the soil of its water-holding ability, and the area has summer flash floods by diverting the water downstream. In winter, they are left with bare ground. Sand mining removes the riverbed, and raw sewage scours what’s left. These are not Khyber-specific scenarios. From India’s Yamuna River all the way down to Afghanistan’s Kabul River, unregulated exploitation and poor governance are driving ecological collapse.

“The Bara is disappearing in slow motion,” observes a hydrologist at the University of Peshawar. “It is not only the river — it is the failure of the whole system which relied on it.”

The Human Cost

Farmers, once tied to the river’s flow, now abandon their fields. “When the Bara ran, we ate,” recalls Shah Nawaz, a maize farmer. Today he spends his savings on diesel pumps, their costs tripled by inflation. Many young men migrate to Peshawar or the Gulf, leaving behind silent villages.

Even those who are left are separated from their past. “The river was our festival, our playing field,” says seventy-year-old Malik Karim. “Without Bara, Bara is nothing.”

This feeling of cultural erasure is repeated around the world. In East Africa, the Maasai talk of rivers which do not flow; in Latin America, indigenous people grieve about streams which are poisoned by mining. Everywhere, water scarcity is not merely a question of survival but of losing part of one’s identity.

Looking for Hope

Solutions are whispered about. Small check dams are offered by NGOs to recharge groundwater. Older persons recommend re-establishment of ancient karez systems which used to distribute water evenly. Peshawar’s city managers discuss sewage

treatment prior to disposal. Such initiatives are reflective of global initiatives — from rainwater collection in India to river restoration in Europe.

Time is of the essence. Each passing year, the Bara narrows, its voice dwindling. Abdul Hameed, clutching his jug, looks out across the stones where, as a youth, he would swim. His children stand alongside him, looking into a parched riverbed. “When I was a young lad, the river brought joy,” he says, softly. “Today, it brings sadness. When Bara dies, we die too.”