

# DailyTimes | De-securitising the Indus

We can still end the 'water war' mantra if we bring the community, from both sides of the border, back into the fold



- SHEIKHUPURA

Are we securitising our rivers in South Asia, and, in the process, complicating the issue of water sharing even further? Are the actors engaged in water-sharing dialogues today usurping the process from those who have been traditionally involved in addressing the issue without politicising it? Finally, are the above two concerns reflected in the recent Indo-Pak debate on the Indus Water Treaty?

During recent years, water-sharing arrangements between and within countries in South Asia have been rife with multiple problems. Some of these have even led to episodes of violence — involving shutting down of towns/cities and resulting in colossal economic loss, besides straining relations between communities.

Problems of water scarcity and issues in water-sharing have been projected as part of impending “water wars”, thereby, securitising the debate on not only the big rivers like Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra, but also multiple tributaries of these rivers.

It is ironic that rivers that had defined the multiple civilisations of South Asia are today seen as a “problem” in the region. Once central to a thriving civilisation, Indus has today become a problem between India and Pakistan as well as between the provinces of Pakistan. How did the above change

come about?

Two specific reasons could be attributed to this development.

Firstly, new actors involved in water diplomacy — from political leadership to media personnel — see sharing of river waters as a political issue that could be used to serve their narrow purposes. The water bureaucracy is primarily led by engineers and administrative officials and they see rivers and their water as a commodity. They talk about this commodity in terms of dam heights and the quantity of water to be released or stored.

With increasing urbanisation and commercialisation, there has been a rise of a “water economy” and sellers and buyers of water. Water is a prized commodity in this economy — it may get marketed in bottles or distributed through tankers. A few decades ago, none in South Asia would have imagined such a fate for our water.

Alongside the rise of the above mentioned new actors, there has been a unilateral process of legalisation and legislations on water. Instead of addressing the issue bilaterally or multilaterally, our legislative assemblies have started passing unilateral legislations on what needs to be done. Such unilateral legislations result in provincial and national bravados, projecting an assertive approach towards the other. In turn, the other side also passes similar legislation, further exacerbating the situation. These “national” and provincial” legislations are projected as the “will of the people” and seen as gospels of truth that needs to be sanctified and adhered to. A related process entails approaching courts — national or international — to settle disputes.

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The second notable reason for securitisation of discourse on sharing of river waters has to do with marginalisation of the voice of actors who had traditionally dealt with the issue. Historically, farmers and local communities had dealt with water-sharing issues but they have now been pushed to the background, perhaps purposefully, by their presence may not suit the “water war” brigade.

All of the above can be seen in dialogues over the Indus water between India and Pakistan and between provinces within Pakistan.

Given that emotions, sentiments, history, culture, and, most importantly, livelihoods of millions of households are associated with rivers, the South Asian region cannot afford to securitise the water debate.

We can still end the “water war” mantra if we bring the community back into the debate. Rivers have

provided an identity to people for centuries; emphasising on this identity and creating river communities could once again bring people together. Against this backdrop, it is important to start talking about establishing an Indus Community that cuts across political boundaries. This Indus Community already exists at a psychological level but it needs to be pushed to the front.

There have been multiple track-II dialogues between India and Pakistan. Some of these dialogues were focused on sharing of Indus waters but they were led primarily by “security” experts. We now need a dialogue between the Indus Community cutting across political boundaries between and within India and Pakistan. Given the rising controversy over the Kabul River, communities concerned from Afghanistan could also be included in such a dialogue.

Such a dialogue need not be a one off affair. It could be entail a series of dialogues between different groups. And the focus need not necessarily be only on water-sharing. From history to culture, there is so much that could be discussed at such a platform. If there can be so much literature on the tragedy of Indo-Pak partition, we can also broach promotion of literature on Indus and its waters.

Working towards an Indus Community through an Indus Dialogue can also help sub-national units in countries across the region. A common Indus identity is likely to lessen the intensity of debate over rivers and their waters and help countries make important decisions without politicising the underlying issues. Given the projected gap between demand and supply of water, we need a depoliticised and constructive approach to the issue of water-sharing.

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This commentary is part of a series trying to find few “big ticket items” and “low hanging fruits” in the Indo-Pak context.

***The author is a Professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bangalore. He edits Armed Conflicts in South Asia and runs a portal on Pakistan — [www.pakistanreader.org](http://www.pakistanreader.org)***