

DailyTimes | South Asia's water bomb

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- SHEIKHUPURA

During recent weeks, there have been numerous commentaries and talk shows on the future of Indus Waters Treaty (IWT). Much time was spent upon in social, print and electronic media to discuss potential Indo-Pak water 'conflicts' and their fallout. While issues relating to sharing of the Indus and its tributaries are undoubtedly important, let our focus on IWT not undermine some of the equally important water problems facing South Asia.

Water issues on international level between Afghanistan and Pakistan, India and Pakistan, Nepal and India, Bangladesh and India, and China and India have subsumed some of the other important issues that the region would face in the future. Perhaps, it is already facing them. We need to invest more time, funds and efforts in understanding water problems from a multi-disciplinary perspective rather than entirely focusing on the notion of 'sharing the rivers' and their 'securitisation'.

One of the most important issues that South Asia is likely to face in the next few years is water scarcity. Barring perhaps Nepal and Bhutan, there are enough indicators backed by statistics at global levels about the impending disaster. We don't need rocket science to understand the basic issue — the population bomb. This means that the region would require more water for its basic needs. Any reasonable conservative estimate for the next twenty years would reveal the problem's extent.

An added point to the above debate is the emphasis on water 'quality' and not just its availability. If the focus on access to 'clean water' is considered, then the above calculations would be quite alarming.

Second important issue that goes unnoticed in the larger 'water wars' debate is the rapid urbanisation process. In historical terms, never before has our population lived in cities as much as it does now. On one hand, towns are metamorphosing into cities; on the other, there is a deliberate strategy to build satellite cities. Delhi and Karachi have a population of 23 million each, which is almost the total population of Australia. Mumbai, Kolkata and Dhaka have approximately a population of 15 million each; almost twice that of Austria. Lahore, Chennai and Bangalore have a population of around 10 million each - roughly the population of Sweden.

We seem to be proud of rapid urbanisation in the region; but, from a certain perspective — we need to worry about two factors. Where would we find water to support cities? This is not only about feeding the population, but also finding adequate water to service the entire urbanisation process. Second, where will this water come from and at what cost? Water for cities like Bangalore and Chennai come from afar, straining the already existing water agreements.

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Our cities are likely to appropriate more water, at the cost of spending the same on agriculture. Since politicking mainly takes place in cities, farmers and their requirements are either silenced or politicised. Added to the above appropriation is the presence of a sensational media.

Third problem over water would be the 'securitisation' of its debate by those people indulged in futile debates but talking about water wars from their comfortable lounges. They are scaremongers, who don't have to toil hard to access water or wait in a queue to fill a pot. Compare it to stories of 'water wives' in Maharashtra, where men marry more than one woman, primarily to ensure adequate water for daily use. If the society silently accepts and relegates our better halves to fetch water then there is a serious sociological problem.

We need to 'democratise' the debate, as our region seems to have abdicated it to war mongers. Even worse is its political abdication to bureaucracies and courts. Political and community leaders are better suited to discuss such problems. Unfortunately, despite their efforts and experience, bureaucrats and lawyers are the ones who could talk in terms of numbers — height of the dams and amount of water to be released. Water sharing is humanitarian issue that cannot be quantified and talked in terms of figures. Leaders will have to take charge and understand that it is a matter of life and death.

Fourth issue is related to water governance through institutions such as IRSA and WAPDA along with tribunals. Are they best suited to understand and resolve water problems? Or, should we take a basin approach for each of our rivers, and bring in the community? There could be a two-pronged approach with the above segments.

Fifth, we have to look into water's availability, scarcity and its quality for sustaining the environment. A region that believes in 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' — that the world is one family, cannot look at water needs from only humanity's perspective.

Finally, our investment in water studies needs augmentation. From the Amazon to Jordan to Mekong rivers, there is so much to learn in terms of the water's effective utilisation. Equally important is to understand climate change for the planet's future.

From a multi-disciplinary perspective, we need more institutions supported by regional dialogue. And this focus cannot be only on humanity; it must include the environment too. Don't let the 'water war' debate derail this primary objective.

The author is a professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bangalore, India. He edits an annual paper titled *Armed Conflicts in South Asia* and runs a portal on Pakistan — pakistanreader.org