

Rivers and Culture: A Bonding

Amit Ranjan, PhD

Introduction

In its Fifth Assessment Report on Climate Change, the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), once again warned about the ill-effects of rising temperature due to increasing pollution and the related phenomenon of global warming.¹ The status of existing rivers has been compromised due to the melting of glaciers, drying out of other sources of rivers and changing seasonal cycles. The report has also suggested ways to face the upcoming challenges, either through the adaptation or the mitigation process.² Rivers are not only reservoirs of fresh water but are also creators, carriers and preservers of human culture. They are 'embedded entities' that can be seen, felt, touched and traced on a map. Their characteristics are different and visible though they undoubtedly are, and have been lived out in a physical body.³ With rivers, human civilizations came into existence in different parts of the world. Two important contributions, which gave rise to human civilization and development, are: the beginning of agricultural activities and the industrial revolution. The practice of agricultural activities led to the beginning of human settlements, which further led to the development of communities, societies and the birth of religion. The Industrial Revolution⁴ opened up new avenues to discoveries, inventions and the beginning of modernism⁵, first in Europe and then in various parts of the world. Unlike agricultural activities, the industrial revolution was indirectly dependant on rivers for its production activities and transport of raw materials and finished goods on ships. Ships were an important source of transport for goods during the 18th and 19th centuries, when the industrial revolution was in its nascent stage. Rivers have also caused devastation and resulted in the destruction of civilizations, like the Indus Valley Civilization.⁶ During the colonial era, rivers aided the imperial powers to penetrate the hinterlands and establish their sovereignty over the indigenous people.⁷ In agrarian societies, rivers virtually regulate human lives. They shape cultures, act as a religious symbol and influence art, architecture and language.

Defining Culture

Raymond Williams wrote that every culture begins with agriculture. For him, culture meant both a way of life (culture in the anthropological sense, synonymous with everyday life) and forms of signification (novels, films but also advertising and television) that circulate within

a society.⁸ Etymologically, the word "culture" arises from the Roman concept *colere*, which means: to cultivate, inhabit, worship and protect.⁹ According to Terry Eagleton, culture is a concept derived from nature. One of its original meanings is 'husbandry' or the tending of natural growth. The word 'coulter' which is a cognate of 'culture' means the blade of a ploughshare. Explaining its relation with nature, Eagleton said that nature produces culture which changes nature.¹⁰ He further explains that culture in its original sense referred to the finding of natural growth. His definition of culture suggests the dialectic between the artificial and the natural; what we do to the world and what the world does to us.¹¹

In the *Dictionary of Marxist Thoughts*, two uses of the term culture have been discussed, which can be taken as the extreme poles. In one, the term denotes the aesthetic domain of art and literature and relations between them. At the other end of the spectrum are anthropological uses of the term to denote the whole way of life of a society, often construed in an idealistic way as founded upon meanings, values and so on. Somewhere between these two extremes one finds the cluster of senses, most fully developed within German idealist thought, in which culture is seen as a realm of the objective mind or spirit and its embodiment in human institutions. Here culture retains its original sense of cultivation and development – *Bildung*, sometimes identified with civilization and sometimes distinguished from it as something more profound but almost always given a strongly positive evaluation.¹²

Culture is not an independent entity, its formation and existence depends on the material situation of the society. In *German Ideology*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels write, 'Morality, religion, metaphysics and other ideologies and their corresponding forms of consciousness no longer retain their appearance of autonomous existence. They have no history, no development; it is men who, in developing their material production and their material intercourse, change, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking.'¹³ Culture changes with a change in the material condition and relationship and its practices vary according to the class of an individual or a group.

Although culture and religion are synonymously used, there are subtle differences. According to Clifford Geertz, culture denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols; a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about attitudes toward life.¹⁴ This definition extends the meaning of culture and relates it to religion, which too is about signs, symbols and emotions. For some, religion is a source of ultimate meaning, binding together diverse social and cultural elements and potentially providing solidarity and identity. Religion as culture comes in the form of explicit cultural objects

such as symbols or ideas. People use them consciously to understand and explain themselves. At the same time religion can be implicit in culture, defining the mental and measuring parameters within which things make sense, or as beliefs and assumptions that guide actions even if the actors themselves are clearly unaware of their influence.¹⁵

Rivers and Culture

Looking into the development of eastern societies, German social scientist Karl Wittfogel termed them as 'hydraulic societies'. He argued that it is water which determines the nature of societies in the East. Looking into the form of governance, he termed it 'hydraulic despotism' which meant that despotism in oriental societies was the result of centralized control over hydraulic property by the rulers. Later on, his thesis on the all powerful and centralized despotic state has been subsequently refuted through historical and sociological studies pointing to the peasant and communal control of hydraulic property.¹⁶ Clifford Geertz, for example, provides a detailed account of the *subak* or irrigation society, in the Indonesian island of Bali, which among other things plays a central role in the regulation of water supply to the community. 'Theories of hydraulic despotism to the control notwithstanding, water control in Bali is an overwhelming local and intensely democratic matter'.¹⁷ It is not important to enter into a debate on whether Wittfogel's argument was correct or of Clifford Geertz's, the important point to mark is that water bodies had played a significant role in determining the nature of society and its political governance. The studies by Wittfogel and Geertz were limited to the eastern societies but water has played a vital role in determining the nature of societies in other regions of the world as well.

In India, like other agrarian societies, rivers are part of rituals, folklore and customs. The Indus Valley Civilization (B.C. 3300-1900), settled on the banks of the River Indus, which shaped cultural traits, which in turn invented religious myths among the Aryans. More than two thousand years before Christ, the fertile plains of the Punjab (five rivers), watered by the five great tributaries of the Indus - the Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas and Sutlej, had a rich culture which spread as far as the sea and along the western seaboard at least as far as Gujrat.¹⁸

Gradually, rivers attained the status of gods and goddesses in the Vedic society (post-Indus Valley Civilization, 1700-1100 BCE). The Vedas¹⁹ were written after the Aryans settled down. According to a myth in the Rigveda, one feat for which Indra is praised repeatedly is the 'freeing of the rivers'. During the 19th century when nature-myths were made to account for everything, including the thematic destruction of Troy, this was interpreted

as bringing down rain. Indra was the rain-god who released waters pent up in the clouds. However, the Vedic rain-god is Parjanya. The rivers Indra freed had been 'brought to a standstill' by artificial barriers. The demon Vritra lay like a great snake across the hill-slopes. When this demon was smashed by Indra, 'the stones rolled away like wagon wheels' and the waters flowed over the demon's inert body. The word *vritra* as analyzed by philologists means 'obstacles' or 'barrier' but not 'demon' as such. Indra was called *vritrahan* *vritra*-killer for this spectacular feat. The same word was transferred as *verethragna* in Iranian to the supreme Zoroastrian god of light *Ahura Mazda*. At the same time, Indra confined the (unidentified) River Vibali, which had been flooding over its banks, to its proper channel. The myth and metaphors give a clear account of the methods whereby agriculture of the Indus was ultimately ruined. Flood-irrigation by special dams, sometimes temporary, had been the Indus practice, as noted. This would have made lands too swampy for Aryan cattle herds, while the blocked rivers made grazing over long reaches impossible. With the disappearing dams and the possibility of an enduring Aryan occupation of the Indus cities, the annual rainfall became low.²⁰

Historically, the complete ruin of the Indus cities has been due to the wiping out of their system of agriculture; the rivers may have changed course as has happened often, ruining the city as a port and making the maintenance of food supply difficult or the conquerors were not primarily agriculturists. They shattered the dams by which flood irrigation deposited silt on a wider expanse of land. This signaled the end of cereal production and so of the cities which had already begun to decay from long stagnation.²¹ Both reasons substantiate the role of rivers in the destruction of the Indus Valley Civilization.

The texts of the Vedic and post-Vedic Period were rich in linking gods or goddesses with water or rivers as both were agricultural societies. In his version of the Ramayana, Tamil scholar Kampan generally describes the process of rain, flooding the Saryu River down to Ayodhya (a city in the eastern Uttar Pradesh), capital of Rama's kingdom.²² Through it, Kampan introduces all his themes and emphases, even his concern with fertility themes (implicit in Valmiki) the whole dynasty of Rama's ancestors and his vision of *bhakti* through Ramayana. The emphasis on water itself, the source of life and fertility, is also an explicit part of the Tamil literary tradition.²³ As the Tamil Ramayana was written after the Valmiki (during the Gupta Period, 3rd century A.D to 5th century A.D.), it seems agricultural activities were then encouraged in that part of India.²⁴

In fact, the origin of the term Hindu, in the late 14th century, is related to the River Indus. The Indo-Greeks referred to the river as Indos.

Subsequent to this, the Arabs referred to this area and that beyond the Indus, as al-Hind, and the people came to be called Hindu.²⁵ Later on many of the myths were spun and traditions have been invented to forge an identity to build a nation.²⁶ Rivers have been a part of the process.

Conceptually, there are subtle differences between religious symbols and culture and practically, it becomes very difficult to differentiate between cultural and religious performances. Cultural performances are not religious performances and the line between those that are cultural and artistic or even political is often not so easy to draw in practice, for like social forms, symbolic forms can serve multiple purposes. But the point is that paraphrasing slightly, Indians – ‘and perhaps all people’ – seem to think of their religion as ‘encapsulated’ in those discrete performances which they can exhibit to their wishes and to themselves.²⁷

This tenuous link between culture and religion is visible in the relationship between the individual’s or group’s behavior with rivers. The reason for such behavior has been mentioned by F. Max Müller, who argues that nature worship is believed to be the earliest form of religion. He argues that nature worship arose from human experience of nature, in particular the effect of nature upon human emotions. Nature contains surprise, terror, marvels and miracles such as volcanoes, thunder and lightning. Armed with the power and wonder of nature, early humans transformed abstract forces into personal agents. The force of the wind became the spirit of the wind; the power of the sun became the spirit of the sun.²⁸ Both fear and dependence has made the agrarian class use various methods to deal with rivers - worshipping them is one of those.

In June 2013, there was a destructive flood in Uttarakhand, India. Various myths circulated among the locals explaining the cause of the floods. The myth of Ganga’s descent resonates at different levels in the lives of the people of Uttarakhand. At one level, the story of Ganga getting tangled in Shiva’s locks or inexplicably disappearing seems entirely believable in the geological landscape that has seen rivers changing course or getting blocked or swallowed by tectonic disturbances.²⁹ One myth largely circulated by the local and the national media was that the flood was a result of Lord Shiva’s³⁰ anger over the shifting of Bhari Devi’s (local name of his wife Parvati) statue/idol from its original place by the multi-purpose hydropower construction authorities. It is believed that Lord Shiva performed *tandav* (a form of dance related to destruction), which resulted in floods and destruction in the Himalayas.

Hindus consider the River Ganga a holy river and have spun various myths around it. For instance, there is a myth that Ganga is the daughter

of Lord Brahma (the creator of the universe) and her descent to earth is for the welfare of her people. Having a ritual bath in the holy river is believed to purify one of all past sins. As a mark of respect, usually, people do not sleep with their feet in the direction in which the River Ganga or its tributaries flow. In Hinduism, almost all religious activities and rituals are carried out with water from the River Ganga.³¹ It is supposed that providing water from the River Ganga to a dying man and carrying out his/her last ritual on the bank of the river, sends the departed soul to heaven. There are folksongs, dances and other forms of art related to the River Ganga. *Kumbh Melas*³² (fete) take place on the banks of the River Ganga or its tributaries and have religious, as well as cultural connotations. Rivers in various parts of India have acquired similar status. In the Northeast of India is the River Brahmaputra, the River Narmada is in Central India, the River Godavari is in Western India, and the River Cauveri is in the South. They are somehow mythically related with the River Ganga because of the dominance of the upper caste Hindus from north India over those who reside in other regions.³³

Various cultural activities like folkdances, folksongs and others are influenced by rivers. The popular folkdance, *Bhangra*, has a deep relation with rivers. It has evolved from the Punjabi dance genres whose history is embedded in the geography of ancient rivers and *bars* or jungle regions older than nations, which recognize no barrier or boundaries.³⁴ Cyril Radcliffe’s division of the natural topography in the 1947 Partition of India through imaginary lines could neither dim the memory of the rivers nor stem the cultural longing that rose across the borders. Another folkdance which has been influenced by a river is *Ravee da Jhummar*. This folkdance is popular in northern Pakistan which is also the catchment area of the River Ravi. This folkdance portrays love, affection and valor.

The bond between individuals and rivers is strong; the cultural trait is embedded and becomes an innate part of one’s life. After their displacement due to the construction of a dam on the River Narmada, the people in its catchment area faced many problems. They had to change the direction for their morning prayers and were unable to use the water of their holy river; for them the River Narmada is a religious symbol and a part of their culture. Communities also establish genealogical traditions with rivers: for example, in Wazirabad, Pakistan, there is a small river called Falku, which starts from Sialkot and confluences into the River Chenab in the Hinaki region. People from Wazirabad, who take pride in being Jalaur Rajputs³⁵, do not use its water due to historical reasons. The Jalaur Rajputs who were from Rajouri on the Indian side of Jammu and Kashmir, converted to Islam and in the 16th century migrated to Wazirabad. They do not use the

water from the River Falku as it is also used by people from Sialkot, who they consider to be lower in the social hierarchy.

Not only rivers but other water bodies are also considered to be pure and holy. Both religious and state institutions provide prescriptions for water use. Nagabai and Jivani Sati are two other female deities that watch over two of the drinking water wells in Merka, Kutch. The village tank houses on its bank the shrine of Jijiana, a Muslim saint venerated by the entire village, including its Hindu majority.³⁶

The role of rivers in shaping culture is a general phenomenon in all agrarian societies. Evans Pritchard had worked on Nuer in the Upper Nile. Nuer's annual cycle is largely a repetition of the same activities with regard to cattle, modified as rain and drought succeed each other. He highlights how land and other water bodies help to determine the placement of huts; how byres of the cattle are placed and how the people camp or make villages where ridges and bodies of water make it necessary; it follows that the simple (nuclear) family is attached to the hut, the household to the hamlet and the village communities linked together by paths.³⁷ Thus, according to Pritchard, water leads to settlements and the type of settlement is determined by a particular water body, which in turn influences cultural activities. Thus, the drying up of a river gradually leads to the death of culture. The River Hakara or Harxavati (Saraswati) which used to flow in Rajasthan and Cholistan, dried up centuries ago. People of this desert land still carry the cultural baggage associated with the river. Many of the folksongs of the region express sadness and sorrow. The issue of increasing pollution of the holy River Ganga is now being expressed through various songs and other forms of expression.

Conclusion

In the contemporary world, in spite of the impact of the forces of modernization and globalization, age old values are still intact. Rivers occupy the same cultural and religious space they previously held. The real issue is the gradual drying up of all the rivers. The physical requirement of water can be meted out either by choosing adaptation or mitigation but the lost cultural assets cannot be easily retrieved. As civilizations have been formed by rivers, now the civilizations need to save the rivers from drying. Though rivers have given birth to civilizations, they have also destroyed them. It is our choice which path to take.

Endnotes

1. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Retrieved from <www.ipcc.ch.> Accessed 10 April 2014.
2. Adaptation means adapting according to the changing cycle of seasons. In mitigation new technologies like drip-in irrigation facility has to be used to overdo the effects.
3. Dutt, Kuntala Lahiri, "Imagining Rivers" Economic and Political Weekly; Vol 35 No. 27 July 1-7, 2000 pp. 2395-2400.
4. The Industrial Revolution was the transition to new manufacturing processes in the period from about 1760 to 1820 and 1840. Western Europe, particularly England, was the centre of this revolution. It gradually spread to other parts of Europe and then to the world.
5. Modernism is a philosophical movement which led to the change in art, architecture, literature, culture and such. It began in the 19th century in Europe. Industrial societies which led to the mushrooming of cities were the main reason for the development of Modernism.
6. Indus Valley Civilization was a Bronze Age Civilization (3300-1300 BCE) extending from present northeast Afghanistan to Pakistan and northwest India. Along with ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, it was one of the three early civilizations of its period. It flourished on the banks of the River Indus.
7. Connard, Joseph (1999 edition) *In the Heart of Darkness* London; Blackwood Magazine.
8. Williams, Raymond (1989) *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*; London Verso pp. 3-14.
9. Eagleton, Terry (2000) *The Idea of Culture*; Massachusetts: Blackwell. p. 1.
10. Ibid. p. 2-3.
11. Eagleton, Terry. Cited in Baldwin, Jeff "The Culture of Nature through Mississippian Geographies" *Ethics and the Environment* 11(2) 2006. pp. 13-44.
12. Bottomore, Tom (1991) *Dictionary of Marxist Thought* 2nd Edition (ed) Laurence Harris V.G. Kiernan and Ralph Miliband; Oxford: Blackwell. p. 127.
13. Cited in Williams, Raymond (2005) *Marx on Culture*; New Delhi: Critical Quest. p.8-9.
14. Geertz, Clifford (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures –Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* New York: Basic Books. p. 89.
15. Williams, Rhys H. "Religion as Cultural System: Theoretical and Empirical Occupations". In Mark D. Jacobs and Nancy Weiss Hanrahan (ed) 2005 *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Culture*; Oxford: Blackwell Publications. pp. 97-113.
16. Wittfogel, K. (1957); *Oriental Despotism*; Yale University Press; New Haven. Also see Singh, Satyajit (1997), *Taming the Waters: The Political Economy of Large Dams in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
17. Cited in Singh, Satyajit (1997), *Taming the Waters: The Political Economy of Large Dams in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
18. Bhasm, A. L. (1967) *The Wonder that was India*; Calcutta: Rupa. p. 1.
19. Vedas are a large body of texts written in ancient India. There are four Vedas: the Rigveda, the Yajurveda, Samaveda and the Atharveda. They are considered an authority on Hindu religion. There are many sects like Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, which do not accept their authority.

20. Ibid p. 79-80.
21. Kosambi, D. D. (1965) *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India: In Historical Outline*; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. p. 71.
22. A. K. Ramanujan 'Three Hundred Ramayanas'. In Ramanujan, A. K, Vinay Dharwadekar and Stuart H. Blackburn *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*; Oxford University Press: University of Michigan. pp 131-160
23. A. K. Ramanujan 'Three Hundred Ramayanas'. In Ramanujan, A. K, Vinay Dharwadekar and Stuart H. Blackburn *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*; Oxford University Press: University of Michigan. pp. 131-160.
24. Ibid.
25. Thapar, Romila (2014) *The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities Through History*; New Delhi: Aleph Publications. p vi.
26. In all societies traditions are invented and myths are created by the dominant group to substantiate their hegemony. See Hobsbawm, E. J. (1992) *Nation and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Anderson, Benedict (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
27. Cited in Geertz, Clifford (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures –Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz*. New York: Basic Books. p.121
28. Haralambos, M with R. M. Heald (2005) 28th edition *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*; New Delhi: Oxford University Press. p. 454.
29. Chitra Padmanabhan "When the Ganga Descends" *The Hindu* 28 June, 2013.
30. According to Hindu mythological sources, Shiva is a Hindu god of production. He is married to Parvati who is a daughter of the King of Himalaya.
31. Most of the time plain water is assumed as water from the River Ganga. This is practised mainly in places which are far away from the banks of the River Ganga or its tributaries.
32. Its origin is found in a medieval Purana, the Bhagavata Purana. It is held every third year at one of the four places by rotation: Haridwar, Allahabad, Nashik, and Ujjain. All these places are on the banks of rivers revered by the Hindus.
33. The dominant group(s) decides and defines the culture of a nation.
34. Roy, Anjali Gera (2010) *Bhangra Moves: Flows across Chenab; From Ludhiana to London and Beyond*; New Delhi: Ashgate. p. 2.
35. Jalore Rajputs are converted Muslims but take pride in their genealogy and ethnicity. This is usual in Pakistan because most of them are converted Muslims who are yet to come out from brahminical caste order and related discriminations.
36. Mehta, Lyla (2005) *Politics and Poetics of Water*; New Delhi: Orient Longman. p. 143.
37. Cited in Redfield, Robert (1956) *Peasant Society and Culture*; The University of Chicago: Phoenix Books. p. 30.