



## Trans-boundary Co-operation: A Case Study of River Nile

MAANSI MALIK  
Research Scholar  
Department of Geography  
University of Delhi

PRERNA SIWACH  
Research Scholar  
Department of Geography  
University of Delhi

PREM PRAKASH  
Research Scholar  
Department of Geography  
University of Delhi

### Abstract:

*All human beings are the custodians of natural resources and have the privilege of utilising them for their own benefit. Territorial divisions have demarcated power centres globally which in their own way try to control ownership of the resources. Riparian regimes like rivers are flowing irrespective of territorial boundaries and are shared by many nation-states. However, the process of damming has led to obstruction of these flow regimes and preventing other communities to reap benefits. Construction of dams to generate power is a common practice and disputes arising out of sharing of water resources, in this case, cannot be prevented. The Nile River Dispute is the oldest one since the Nile is shared by eleven states. This paper is an investigation into the present status of the dispute post the construction of the Grand Renaissance Dam*

**Keywords:** Case study, Nile river

### 1. Introduction

Rivers have been considered as lifelines since ages and some of the biggest civilisations Valley have dwelled beside rivers like River Indus, Nile, Tigris. They not only became reasons behind flourishing economies but also an exploration of the world far beyond took the road through sea waters only. Such immense has been the contribution of water resources in making the globe as it is. However, the evolution of a tribal society where resources were owned as a part of the community to individual ownership post development of agriculture marked the beginning of resource exploitation. Land, water and other natural resources became subjects of conflict between people and the trend continues till date and have now acquired global significance.

Water is of poignant importance here. Rivers and sea waters continue to be the channels of communication and bind the world but the perception of water has undergone a rapid transition. For instance, the perception of water in India has seen two extremes – on one hand, we are reverent towards the mighty rivers like Ganga, Brahmaputra and Yamuna and consider them as holy waters and on the other hand, we have commodified them meant to fulfil the needs of mankind. This was a clash of two cultures: a culture that sees water as sacred and treats it's provision as a duty for the

preservation of life and other that sees water as a commodity, and its ownership and trade as a fundamental corporate right (Shiva,2002).

In the backdrop of globalisation we see flourishing streaks of corporate terrorism and ecological terrorism that aims to control, degrade and deny common people their right to possess resources centralising controls over decision making and displacing people creating a culture of insecurity. This rampant mishandling of water resources which has rendered perennial rivers dirty, polluted and no less than a dumpyard is no less than a grave act of terrorising climate. Many Indian rivers are victims of such anomalies of mankind. The self-replenishing and rejuvenating capacity of rivers has reduced abysmally given the volume of wastes they are exposed to. Bustling industries of packaged water is no more an indicator of a “hygiene-conscious” Indian population but definitely a growing polluting plastic culture that has devastating environmental implications. Not only this, we have also attempted to restrict the natural flows of these rivers by damming them here and there which are hydrologic ally unhealthy and also created political conflicts between countries that share them. Whether it is Punjab or Palestine, political violence often arises from conflicts over scarce but vital resources (Shiva, 2002). And also the pressure of the vast population base of the country on the scarce water resource is definitely a triggering factor behind all the maladies. The picture painted above attempts to caution about an impending threat – a threat of violent conflicts over water which might realise the prophecy of water wars!! (Ismail Serageldin,1995). For this very reason, water is the next *Liquid Gold*. This war shares the universal ethic of water as an ecological necessity, pitted against a corporate culture of privatisation, greed and enclosure of the water commons (Shiva, 2002). It cautions mankind to create a water-secure world. The Global World Partnership stated in 2013, that sustainable development as the goal of life was incomplete without water secure world. A water secure world harnessed the productive potential of water while ensuring safe and affordable water for all to lead a clean and healthy life. It attempts to integrate water resource management across all sectors to reduce poverty, advance education and improve living standards.

The United Nations attempted to formulate a unified definition of water security as part of its Global Water Agenda, 2013. According to it, *Water security is defined as the capacity of a population to safeguard sustainable access to acceptable quality of water for sustaining livelihood, human well-being, and socio-economic development, for ensuring protection against water-borne – pollution and water-related disasters, and for preserving ecosystems in a climate of peace and political stability.* Different aspects are associated with the concept of water security which includes –

1. Good Governance
2. Financing
3. Political stability and peace
4. Tran boundary cooperation

In this respect, water security lies at the heart of many security areas, each of which is intricately linked to water. Addressing this requires inter-disciplinary collaboration across sectors, communities and political borders to minimize potential conflicts.

## **2. Water as a subject of peace and political stability**

The borders that man created as political constructs are artifacts of dominant discursive processes that have led to the fencing off of chunks of territory and people from one another (Agnew, 2008). However, these manmade constructs have failed to divide natural waters. Rivers continue to flow their natural course across borders seamlessly without any visa or permit requirements uninformed about their supposed division and demarcation. Such divisions have often become subjects of political tensions and strain to develop countries all over the globe. Paradigm Wars which are actual wars over water are taking place everywhere, between regions, countries and communities. There emerges a politics of “we” and “they”. They undermine the principle of democracy with complete erosion of

democratic control of resources fuelled by countries grappling over scarce resources that define economic and political power. Riparian rights recognise the rights over waters of a flowing river claimed by different users located alongside that river. The term Riparian is derived from a Latin word “*Reparations*” meaning a river bank and it implies the riparian proprietor’s legal right over the waters of the river. The ancient Roman Law acknowledged the legal right of the Riparian state to exercise control over its river waters. Early riparian principles were based on the notion of sharing and conservation of common water resources. It is only after western inhabitation that individual ownership was stressed upon.

River water sharing is based on four theories of water rights- the territorial sovereignty theory, the natural water flow theory, the equitable apportionment theory, and the community of interest theory. The Harmon Doctrine is based on the concept of territorial sovereignty holds that riparian states have exclusive right over water resources flowing through their territory. It totally violates the concept of justice and equity. The natural flow theory, however, undoes this injustice and states that since river is a part of the territory of the state, every lower riparian owner is entitled to the natural flow unhampered by upper riparians. The theory of equitable use holds that international rivers should be used by countries in an equitable manner. Finally, while entering the era of ecological constraint, the community of interest theory necessitates the role of recognising water resources as belonging to the community and conserving it while integrating the society as a major stakeholder.

Water disputes are inevitably political and they cannot be removed from the domain of politics. It is not that conflicts over water resources worsen political relations but it may be because of a difficult political position that renders the water dispute intractable (Iyer, 2008). There is, therefore, a complex relationship between both.

The whole question of political subjugation begins with the upper riparian states claiming more access over water resources and infringe on the rights of lower riparian states. This has become a cause of conflict between participating countries sometimes because of the illegitimate demands of the lower riparian states which remain unacceptable to the upper riparian states or may be due to overuse of water resources which denies the lower riparian states of their legitimate rights over water resources. The water security of the lower riparian state becomes a concern here. These developing power relations between riparians is a crucial aspect since, rivers being a part of culture, history and even religion often evoke strong emotions in the minds of people which get enmeshed in political gimmicks making it extraordinarily difficult to resolve (Iyer, 2008).

Another crucial, aspect of trans-boundary conflicts is the practice of regulating natural flows of the river through the construction of dams. It is crucial to understand that large projects have often become the foci of conflicts. The India-Bangladesh dispute over The Ganga waters was precipitated by the Farakka Barrage Project in India. This is essential because:

- they tend to alter geography and hydrological regimes, sometimes drastically and
- they involve issues of control, power and political relations, social justice and equity

Dams are a popular means of shifting water control from communities to central governments colonising rivers and people. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru referred to the Bhakra Dam as the “Temple of Modern India” and used it to shift control over water from the regions and states to the central government.

Trans-boundary conflicts not only remain relevant to states but become a larger game of political control when they involve nations. In the absence of any national and international water laws dealing with political challenges over water conflicts, claims are derived from and protection is limited to

artificial concrete structures. This has propelled regions and states to enter a contest for the most extravagant water projects as a means of establishing their right to water.

However, the incipient losses that occur remain unnoticed. The kind of displacement these dams cause is unacceptable just to reap benefits. The damming of two of the two most sacred rivers in India – Ganga and Narmada has generated a vehement protest by women, tribals and peasants whose life-support systems have been disrupted and whose sacred sites have been threatened. They are not only resisting displacement but waging a war against the destruction of entire civilisations (Shiva, 2002). Dam conflicts in the past revolved around displacement. Today, the ecological imperative for the protection of nature has added a new dimension to the struggle of displaced people. Therefore, the role of dams as political constructs of control, power, and water rights needs to be revisited. They no longer are the temples of modern India but have become objects of political subjugation and have become subjects of violent conflicts.

The world's longest river, located in Egypt, the Nile is an international river as its water resources shared by eleven riparian countries namely Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan, Sudan and Egypt. Egypt and Sudan are entirely dependent on the river as its primary water resource. Conflicts have never been far from the banks of the River Nile. The entire dependence of Egypt and Sudan on this lifeline has always made the political and biological life of the river a source of conflict. Herodotus, the Greek historian wrote, "Egypt was the gift of Nile". The historical relevance of the river for the establishment of Egyptian civilisation cannot be ignored. River Nile and its delta in ancient times was worshipped as God. The God, Hapi who came in the shape of a frog, represented the Nile delta. They also served as means of communication and marked the beginning of agriculture as well.

The reason behind choosing River Nile as part of my case study primarily vests on the fact that it is shared by 11 riparian countries and the distribution of water resources among the riparian countries is governed by a colonial treaty envisaged by the British that is the Nile River Basin Treaty of 1929. Besides, the recent construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam has sparked another controversy and acts as an attempt to destabilise the existing power equations.

Today, Middle East is the driest part of the country with people having less per capita water availability. Many of the region's water resources are internationally shared rivers, giving rise to severe tensions over how to divide these waters among several interested countries. Observers predict that the next war in the Middle East would be over water and not oil or land. Since the Middle East is quite vulnerable, it can serve as an appropriate region to identify these power equations.

Therefore, the **objectives** of my research are,

1. to assess the interplay of politics and power equations at play in river water sharing between upper and lower riparian countries in the context of River Nile.
2. to identify the role of dams as political constructs of power and subjugation in the context of the Grand Renaissance Dam

### 3. Study Area

The Nile probably gets its name from "nahal" which means "river valley" in Semitic, later "neilos" in Greek and "nilus" in Latin. It rises south of the Equator and flows northward through northeastern Africa to drain into the Mediterranean Sea. It has a length of about 4,132 miles (6,650 kilometres) and drains an area estimated at 1,293,000 square miles (3,349,000 square kilometers). Its basin includes parts of Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Sudan, and the cultivated part of Egypt. The Nile is formed by three tributaries, the Blue Nile, the White Nile, and the Atbara. The White Nile is considered to be the headwaters and primary stream of the Nile itself. The Blue Nile, however, is the source of most of the water and fertile

soil. The White Nile is longer and rises in the Great Lakes region of central Africa. It passes through Lake Victoria and flows into southern Sudan. There, near the capital city of Khartoum, the White Nile meets up with the Blue Nile which has its source in the Ethiopian highlands, near Lake Tana. Over 53% of the Nile's waters come from the Blue Nile. The two flow together to just north of Khartoum, where they are joined by the waters of the Atbara, whose source is also located in the Ethiopian highlands. The river then flows north through Lake Nasser, the second largest man-made lake in the world, and the Aswan Dam before splitting into two major distributaries just north of Cairo. North of Cairo the Nile enters the delta region, a level triangular lowland. In the 1st century CE the Greek geographer Strabo recorded the Nile as fanning out into seven delta distributaries. The flow has since been controlled and redirected so that the river now flows across the delta to the sea through two main distributaries, the Rosetta and the Damietta (Dumyāt) branches.

The Nile nourishes nearly 60% of Egypt's estimated 85 million people. The basin's area is the third largest in the world, following the Congo and Amazon basins, following the Congo and Amazon. The Nile river is clustered into four subsystems: the White Nile sourcing from Lake Victoria, The Abbay or the Blue Nile originating in Ethiopian Highlands. The contribution of Blue Nile is quadruple the contribution of White Nile while its basin area is twice smaller than the White Nile. The third subsystem is the Tekeze/Atbara rising in northern Ethiopia and the fourth one the Baro-Akobo/Sobat emanating from western Ethiopia. The **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam** formerly known as the Millennium Dam and sometimes referred to as Hidase Dam is a gravity dam on the Blue Nile River in Ethiopia currently under construction. It is in the Benishangul-Gumuz Region of Ethiopia, about 40 km (25 mi) east of the border with Sudan. At 6,000 MW, the dam will be the largest hydroelectric power plant in Africa when completed, as well as the 8th largest in the world sharing the spot with Krasnoyarskaya. The reservoir at 63 billion cubic meters will be one of the continent's largest. According to the Ethiopian government, as of October 2014, the dam is 40% complete.

#### 4. Research Methodology

The research is based on qualitative methodology using the techniques of case study and interview method. A case study on River Nile is used to fulfil the needs of my research. The case study focuses on identifying the issues that concern the riparian states that share the waters of River Nile and what factors have played a major role in triggering the disputes over Nile waters. Further, an insight into the role of dams as constructs of political power and subjugation can be made through the study of The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which is being constructed by Ethiopia over the Nile. Secondary data has been mainly used for the case study mainly to construct a theoretical background.

#### 5. Analysis

Marx believed that the fact that these social and human interactions are dialectical in the sense that when a dominant nation seeks to control dependent nations or peripheral countries what yields, in consequence, is the tension to rebel against the oppressor by dependent states in order to agitate for an equitable and fair share of national resources. Water has been a central political factor in the Middle East since, ancient times. Most of the rivers here are international rivers shared by many countries, causing severe tensions.

The Nile waters became a serious cause of conflict in this sense. The Nile and its tributaries traverse ten countries, "united by the Nile" as string threads together the beads of a necklace. The Blue Nile is the major and highly variable source of flow of the Nile in northern Sudan and Egypt. Although Egypt contributes none to the waters yet it consumes approximately 75% of the total flow. The source of conflicts emanates from the colonial treaty concerning the sharing of Nile waters signed between Egypt and Britain in 1929. The treaty concluded by the British allowed Egypt to veto the use of Nile waters by East African countries if it believes this would be detrimental to the downstream nations. As

a result of the agreement, Egypt's absolute control over the Nile waters has well worked to sabotage the interests of other riparian countries through other international treaties and agreements.

The hegemonic status enjoyed by Egypt led Herodotus to conclude that "the Nile is the Egypt and Egypt are the Nile". The hydro-political power enjoyed by Egypt for several decades now has disallowed all other riparian countries along the Nile to negotiate any form of control on water resources and development of hydropower projects by neighbouring countries. The asymmetrical flow of water resources in the Nile has also afforded a position of dominance to Egypt among other riparian nations. The Nile's downstream is housed by Sudan and Egypt. Cascao argued that the asymmetrical flow of water resources in the Nile river basin and the access to the physical flow of the Blue Nile by Egypt and Sudan in the downstream has extremely heightened hydro-political tension over the Nile. Interests of Sudan came to be questioned in 1959 when Egypt attempted to construct the Aswan Dam to control flooding in Egypt which could leave about 6500 square kilometres of land inundated. Thus, "The Full Utilisation of Nile Waters" Agreement was signed between Egypt and Sudan to regulate the flow of Nile waters between them. Egypt got a massive share of 55.9 bcm while Sudan got a hike in its yearly allotment from 4.4 bcm to 18.5 bcm, though Egypt continued to exert control over 95% of Nile waters. The agreement reflected a united front to other Nile Basin states.

The importance of River Nile to Egypt cannot be ignored since it is an agricultural country however, the agreement excluded all the other eight riparian countries and apportioned the waters between two countries only. Ethiopia contributes about 86% of total annual flow of the Nile while remaining 14% is contributed by Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi (Shiva, 2002). Ethiopia which alone contributes a massive share was not even consulted while concluding the 1959 agreement. During this time, since Ethiopia was engulfed in a serious civil crisis, it did not undertake large projects, nor did it refrain from signing an agreement with Egypt in 1902 not allowing it to undertake any works which would diminish supplies to Egypt.

The 1959 agreement fuelled tension between riparian countries and did not put an end to the conflicts over rights to the Nile waters. Relations between countries strain whenever a new a project is proposed. Egypt, which holds a maximum share of Nile waters is most resistant to any upstream projects whether in Ethiopia or Sudan since it is Egypt which would lose access to Nile waters by development projects in other countries. It threatens to wage a war for waters of the Nile if its historical rights are denied. On the other hand, other riparian countries do not consider historical agreements concluded during the colonial times as valid and want to invoke newer agreements to regulate the distribution of water resources. Ethiopia renounced the 1902 agreement in the 1950s itself in this practice of denouncing colonial-era treaties.

The primary reason behind such an argument is the exceeding water resource depletion in the Northeast African region and issues of food security for their growing population. Climatically, as well the region is deficient in rainfall and has low per capita food and agricultural production. Egypt, however, does not fathom, and validates the historical agreements and considers them as untouchable. In addition, with timely alliance and support from global superpowers and the power of Egypt relative to the instability of upstream countries Egypt continues to exert unilateral influence on the decisions concerning River Nile.

We understand that power relations as pointed out by Cascao are driven by needs. Cascao also maintains that these power relations are not static and immutable, and this is quite evident from the above example. We see, that since there are nine diverse countries who claim rights over the waters of Nile, they have diverse needs and requirements and demand fair allocation of resources. These countries which were earlier considered to possess asymmetrical power relations with Egypt have begun to contest the existing status quo with alternatives. The whole power equation is moulded here in the event of global warming and climate change which pose a grave challenge in front of these arid

and semi-arid economies which are prone to droughts. This is because, in the past when life was booming riparian countries made no mention of inequity if water resources, however, with the emerging global water crisis due to global warming these riparian countries are beginning to contest power relation on the access to the Nile.

Ethiopia, for instance, chose to remain mute over this issue since long, when it also signed an agreement with Egypt in 1902 to refrain from trying to control Nile waters. However, the changing power balances in the region are much evident with Ethiopia's stand on developing hydropower potential and develop irrigation facilities drawing waters from the Blue Nile. The picture has begun to change. Ethiopia's recent initiative to build the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is a crucial example in this light. The dam is of great importance to Ethiopia since it will harness from the Blue Nile, 6000MW of electricity to fulfil its requirements of energy. The Egyptian Parliament has shown great resistance to the construction of this dam since the construction of this dam would diminish the supply to Egypt and Egypt's 85% fresh water needs are met through the Nile. Ethiopia, on the other hand, has maintained that the dam is meant solely to generate hydroelectricity and not for irrigation purpose and hence, would not cause any damage to supplies. The point raised by Egypt is regarding the time when Ethiopia fills the reservoir because if it fills it when the river is high, flood water can be diverted but during the lean period or during the drought period, Egypt's supply would be significantly impacted.

The emergence of new power symbols in North East Africa as dams is of crucial significance here. For Ethiopia, the construction of the dam is a symbol of a resurgent power, determined to play its apparently denied role in Africa. The role which was once played by Egypt is now transitioning towards Ethiopia as the completion of the dam construction nears in 2017. Egypt which is quite threatened has resisted this change of power relation through vehement protests and expressing outrage at the Egyptian Parliament. The once high-end Aswan Dam which has found no architectural parallels is now being challenged by the emergence of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. The name of the Ethiopian Dam itself symbolises this changing power balance. We are witnessing the emergence of a strong Ethiopia capable of playing a key geopolitical role in its zones of influence: the Red Sea, the Nile Basin and East Africa. Usage of the term Renaissance which means re-birth signifies the endeavour by Ethiopia to emerge as a powerful upfront against the hegemonic Egypt which has been ruling the hydro-politics of Africa since colonial times. Grand symbolises the zeal and enthusiasm for this emerging nation. This also provides the much-required trigger to the other nine riparian countries.

Another evidence of these changing power balances is the New Nile River Cooperative Agreement enacted by Ethiopia in alliance with other 5 riparian countries to escape the hydro-political isolation. Even the state of South Sudan, a historic ally of Egypt in this hydro-politics has ratified a new Nile Treaty with Ethiopia reaping great benefits in the form of electricity, increased irrigation capacity and joint agricultural project. Egypt has refrained from signing the new treaty and demanded the restoration of its historical rights over River Nile. In this event, Egypt finds itself in considerable isolation with no allies, and without any right of inspection in the Renaissance Dam project — a source of discord — and, for the first time in its history, without a right of veto, which it had thought innate.

## 6. Conclusion

It is true that power imbalances are driven by the possession of resources. Marx, in his concept of historical materialism, discusses the dialectics that emerges with the uneven distribution of resources. Possession of resources is synonymous with power, and dispossession with weakness, and helplessness. Those who are powerful look down upon others as the "other" who they cannot identify with the "self" and hence, power relations come to play in a society and it is the economics of these that governs a society.

From the above, analysis we can truly identify natural resources as symbols of power and as to how over time any kind of change or rebellion can reverse power equations which is very much cited by

Marx that exploitation would finally cause a revolution in the society. Two very important factors can be recognised that helped change power equations over time. The power balance with the tide of time became favourable to Ethiopia because of some very crucial reasons.

1. This change was driven by needs. Attainment of water security in the event of climate change caused other riparian countries to question existing laws.
2. Political stability in Ethiopia became a major factor to bring about a reversal. Since the country was under a civil crisis in the 1950s it could not think about development. However, after attaining political stability for over 20 years it was much better prepared to take up a firm stand on denial of its rights.

Besides this, while looking at a solution to these conflicts, the role of international organisations and financial institutions is crucial. The World Bank and IMF have stopped funding any projects along the Nile owing to conflicts among riparian countries. During an interaction with Dr Pandey, as to how we can find an appropriate solution to trans boundary conflicts which involves a crucial resource like water, in the event of Global Water Crisis, he said that the role fulfilled by international organisations like UN in such conflicts is synonymous to the roles played by tribunals in India. It is essential for anybody to look into various factors like – historical rights, the economic activity of riparian nations, rainfall patterns, patterns of release of water followed, the grounds of a higher demand etc. before a decision is reached on. It is essential that equity is maintained since resources are ubiquitous. Also, there is a need to reduce our dependence on a single resource and we need to diversify as well besides aiming to conserve resources like water for sustainable development. The shared need for optimum management of water, both because it's scarce and because it is an imperative human need, can become a source of regional unity rather than regional discord if the contending states are prepared to exploit this possibility actively and effectively rather than to allow themselves to drift into the mutually destructive competition. The competing states must commit to a fully developed legal and institutional framework in the face of increasingly desperate water shortages.

### References

1. Dellapenna, J. (2001). The Nile as a Legal and Political Structure. Conflict and Cooperation related to International Water Resources: Historical Perspectives. UNESCO: UNESCO.
2. Iyer, R. R. (2008). Water Conflicts: A Review. In R. R. Iyer, Water Conflicts in India: A million revolts in the making (pp. 369-76).
3. Shiva, V. (2002). Water Wars: Privatisation, Pollution and Profit. North Atlantic Books.

### Weblinks

<http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-geopolitics-of-water-in-the-nile-river-basin/25746>  
[http://www.egyptianagriculture.com/nile\\_river.html](http://www.egyptianagriculture.com/nile_river.html)