

Water Security and Insecurity: the hydro politics of fear

From the beginnings of the nineteenth century, South Asia, in particular, has been witness to a dramatic hydraulic moment: transformations effected by the construction of modern canals for perennial irrigation and the introduction of permanent headwork's such as weirs and barrages with shutters. This colonial hydraulic impress, undoubtedly, proved crucial in giving sturdy technical and political roots for formulating water strategies in independent India. This dam-diversion approach is often referred to as supply-side hydrology. In the words of one of its enthusiasts, it is a strategy wherein the need for 'an additional quantity of water' is met by increasing 'the available supply of water through new development projects'.

Despite the triumphant conquest of flows, supply-side interventions have been dogged by innumerable complications, sharply expressed in the form of disagreements, disputes and outright conflict. In a recent compilation on water conflicts in India – interestingly titled a “Million Revolts” in the making’ – it was noted with considerable alarm that clashes over water were ‘percolating’ to every level of society and were now erupting as a relentless series of interconnected confrontations over issues of allocation, equity, quality, access, ecological impacts, trans-border and inter-states quarrels and various micro-level antagonisms.

This crisis that was conventionally posed in terms of a “conflict resolution” model however is now being shadowed by a new language on securitization. Water has now become an object of endangerment. In particular, insecurities and anxieties of the Indian state over rivers: a) Brahmaputra (China), the b) Indus (Pakistan) and a c) slew of rivers that cross from Nepal and onto Bangladesh. Added to which are new alarms about Climate Change. The securitization of water, in effect, seeks to reinforce norms of secrecy and centralized water control in unprecedented ways through a new level of expertise built around the idea of national endangerment.