

**Book Review Article****Punjab's River Water Disputes and Political Dynamics**

**Kuldip Singh.** *Punjab River Waters Dispute in South Asia: Historical Legacies, Political Competition, and Peasant Interests* (London & New York: Routledge, 2025), 181 pp.

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It is often repeated that water is the genesis of all human and non-human life as without it, the ecosystem would collapse, leading to a catastrophe. Punjab has been blessed with several mountain-snow and rain-fed rivers to complement its annual rainfall, and historically, its access to this river water and its related agricultural prosperity made it *the* place to live. But modern-day Punjab - a truncated territory, forming perhaps only a fifth of its size at the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Kingdom - is not the same. Apart from losing two of its rivers and full access to their water flow due to various treaties and water sharing agreements since independence, Punjab's model of agricultural development, based largely on wheat-rice rotation, has necessitated that more and more water is drawn from the ground using tubewells. Tubewells now provide the main source of irrigation in large parts of Punjab rather than river waters. Further, whilst wheat is part and parcel of a Punjabi's staple diet, the same can't be said of rice. Apart from a small amount used for domestic consumption, rice is exported out of Punjab to India and abroad. Yet rice production consumes over 5,000 thousand litres of water for every kilogram produced. The comparable figures for wheat are relatively low, between 1,000-1,500 litres per kilo. In effect, rice exports also imply water export from Punjab. It is, therefore, not surprising that intensification of the same agricultural practices over decades, especially since the onset of the green revolution, have created a water crisis and water insecurity in Punjab with its devastating effects on the availability of groundwater resources, including rapid fall in the water table as recharge is less than the extraction and a dangerous deterioration in the quality of water given the intensive use of fertilizers and pesticides.

Taking a longer historical perspective, we can confidently state that the present dire water situation is the result of commercialisation of agriculture first started by the British when they transformed Punjab's peasant agriculture into a producer of cash crops to serve global markets (for details see: Darling, 1934; Hussain, 1939; Singh, 1983; Sohal, 2012). The establishment of canal colonies

and passing of draconian and repressive laws like the Punjab Land Alienation Act, 1900; The Punjab Land Colonization Act, 1906; and The Doab Bari Act, 1907, were designed to entrench its colonial policies and also empower its 'favoured' social and caste groups at the expense of traditional peasant cultivators (Barrier 1967: 353-383). These policies and laws created a political reaction among the peasant cultivators leading to a robust agitation, what popularly came to be known as the *Pagri Sambal O' Jatta* (Take Care of Your Turban, O! Farmer') movement (Ram, 2022, 2022a). Many other peasant movements followed during the pre-partition period, which had the effect of highly politicising the peasantry, creating new political parties and changing relations and political dynamics between the colonial state and the people it governed (Mukherjee, 1979: 216-283; Mukherjee, 2004). In the post-independent period, these trends continued but given the changing demographic, economic and political configurations in Punjab, each political party has sought to win over votes of the peasantry by claiming to best protect the interests of agriculturists, agriculture and Punjab (Thandi, 2023). Thus, protecting the interests of peasants, means protecting Punjab agriculture and hence protecting the Punjab state against Centre's discriminatory agenda. This equation, with river waters as its connecting symbol, has remained at the centre in Punjab political discourses and in competition for political power among the major political parties. The entry of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has only intensified the political competition, with each party now vying to be the best 'Punjabi patriots'. The book under review is a good example of how the equation has played out in the last 50 years with its focus on river water disputes of Punjab with its neighbouring states, especially Haryana.

Kuldip Singh's book *Punjab River Waters Dispute in South Asia: Historical Legacies, Political Competition, and Peasant Interests* attempts to explicate not only the complexities of the protracted rivers water dispute that unfolded in the aftermath of the Indira Gandhi Award of 1976 distributing Ravi-Beas surplus water evenly between newly carved Haryana and re-organized Punjab giving 3.5 million-acre feet (MAF) to each one of them, but also brilliantly unravel its linkages with various underlying layers of the competitive electoral politics in Punjab. As the Indira Gandhi Award failed to satisfy Punjab, a new water sharing agreement was signed in December 1981 by the three Congress Chief Ministers of Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan with active involvement of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. With this agreement, Punjab's share was enhanced from 3.5 MAF to 4.22, while Haryana share remained unchanged at 3.5 MAF. The un-organized Punjab's share, as per the January 1955 agreement, was 5.9 MAF while PEPSU's share stood at 1.3 MAF. After PEPSU's merger with Punjab, its river water share was also transferred to Punjab, raising Punjab's share to 7.2 MAF.

At the time of the January 1955 agreement, Ravi-Beas surplus water was assessed at 15.85 MAF. The Union government had organised a meeting between the three stakeholders - Rajasthan, undivided Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir - wherein non-riparian Rajasthan was allotted 8 MAF, undivided Punjab 7.20 MAF (after the PEPSU merger) and J & K at 0.65 MAF. In 1976,

the Centre issued a notification, popularly known as Indira Gandhi Award, allocating 3.5 MAF to Haryana and 3.5 MAF to Punjab. This reward was rejected by Punjab's regional voice, the Akali Dal party, paving the way for a new agreement in 1981. At the time of signing the tri-partite agreement in December 1981, the Ravi-Beas surplus was estimated at 17.17 MAF, of which 4.22 MAF was allocated to Punjab, 3.5 MAF to Haryana, and 8.6 MAF to Rajasthan. With the main opposition party, the Akali Dal, refusing to accept the tripartite agreement, this became the principal basis for the launch of Akali agitation in April 1982. This agitation pushed Punjab towards political turmoil which lasted for more than a decade. After many years of vacillation, the Congress led Central Government, with objective of restoring peace in trouble-torn Punjab, signed an agreement with the Akalis in 1985 that came to be known as Rajiv-Longowal Accord which, among other things, aimed at resolving river water dispute of Punjab. The Eradi Tribunal was constituted in 1986 as per the Accord, and its interim report came in 1987. The interim report, as per the mandate given to it, did not touch Rajasthan's share which was already fixed at 8.60 MAF. However, with the Tribunal finding more water available for sharing, re-fixed Haryana's share at 3.83 MAF, and Punjab's at 5.00 MAF, while giving Jammu & Kashmir 0.65 MAF, and Delhi 0.20 MAF. The Akali Dal rejected the Eradi Tribunal interim report as well. The final report of the Ravi-Beas Tribunal is yet to come despite it being in existence since 1986.

Though some literature does exist on some of the issues listed above, much of this scholarship has taken a narrow perspective, largely confined to arguments and counterarguments over the sharing of Ravi-Beas river waters between Punjab and Haryana. Much water has flowed through these rivers since the writing of N D Gulhati (1973), K L Rao (1975), Dhillon (1983) and Mann (2003), which can be treated as relevant works on the subject. However, apart from Mann's book, these works do not cover developments since the formation of the Eradi Tribunal in 1986, and its interim report submitted in 1987. Later, largely as consequence of the interim report, this resulted in the enactment of the Punjab Termination Act 2004 and the Transfer of Property Bill 2016. Recently we also saw the Supreme Court verdict nullifying the Termination Act 2004. More recently, the Punjab Chief Minister, Mann, requested a reassessment study on the availability of water and land before discussing any SYL issues.

Moreover, with the entry of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) as a third alternative political force in the competitive electoral arena of the state, the contentious issue of the river waters dispute was once again catapulted onto the Centre stage of Punjab politics with all political parties arriving at the same conclusion of 'sparing not even a drop of water' for other states, given the scarcity of river water for Punjab's own needs. Kuldip Singh's book is a welcome addition and holistically deliberates on the intricacies of this river waters dispute, encompassing both electoral politics and stances of various other stakeholders.

The book contains six chapters, including an Introduction and a Conclusion, which tie up the main theme of the book. The discussion is coherent, weaving

an affable narrative for those interested in making sense of the inter-linkages between electoral political dynamics in the state regarding its long-drawn-out dispute on river waters and other related contentious issues of agricultural crisis. Each chapter presents an engaging story about the protracted conflict and its underlying implications for the larger politics of the state - which remains primarily an agrarian economy. The central thesis of the study revolves around the national strategy for salvaging East Punjab's river waters during the process of division of rivers between India and Pakistan on a non-riparian basis in the aftermath of the partition of Punjab. But once full control was established over the rivers Beas and Ravi by combining Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU), Rajasthan and Jammu & Kashmir with Punjab, for claiming on the entire volume of their waters, the same principles continued to be followed, to the disadvantage of the newly geographically diminished Punjab even after its trifurcation in 1966 into Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, and a truncated Punjab, for sharing water between successor states of Punjab and Haryana – the sole cause of Punjab river water dispute (pp. 5 & 20-34). In the first instance, Punjab water was given to Rajasthan (8 MAF) in view of Indian national interest vis-à-vis Pakistan, which eventually became a permanent factor in the distribution of Punjab River waters to its disadvantage since then. Secondly, after re-organisation of Punjab in 1966, its river water (Ravi-Beas) was shared with Haryana, a non-riparian region.

In the first chapter, the author critically examines the constitutional provisions and laws enacted thereupon for allocation of inter-state river waters in India and how far such laws have been adhered to in the case of river water allocation to Punjab. The riparian principle does not find reference in the constitution. However, it is a widely used notion for river water distribution globally and as well as in India. But in the case of Punjab, it has been bypassed repeatedly. While negotiating the Indus Water Treaty with Pakistan non-riparian Rajasthan was strategized as being part of the basin and as a result it got 8 MAF of water allotted. This deprived Punjab of a big amount of water to which it was entitled as a riparian entity. Much damage was done to the interests of Punjab in 1955, although the Akali Dal only took up the matter after the Indira Gandhi Award of 1976.

The book begins with a discussion of developments leading to the culmination of the 1955 agreement and goes on to analyze how the Akali Dal had organized protests against river water allocations by the Centre, with an eye on further expanding its support base among the Punjab peasantry from March 1976 onwards. It also examines how such competitive politics eventually became a bipolar political contest in 2004, and a multi-polar one from 2016 onwards. From thereon, a situation came to exist where all major Punjab based political parties, after having realised how intensely peasants matter in the electoral calculus in the State, began to adhere to a peasant-centric view on the river waters dispute of the State. The author has underlined that this is the principal reason for refusal by successive Punjab governments to adhere to Court rulings asking for digging and completing the Sutlej-Yamuna Link (SYL) canal since 2002. However, as a footnote, it is worth noting that since the

continuing agitation by farmers' unions against certain federal policies of the BJP, the latter appears to have begun courting the state's scheduled caste demographics in preference.

In the second chapter, the author provides a detailed account of how historical legacies of the January 1955 agreement, (signed by the Ministers of Irrigation and Power of Punjab, PEPSU, Jammu & Kashmir, and Rajasthan under the direction of the Union Minister of Irrigation and Power, Gulzari Lal Nanda, to assert claim before visitors of the World Bank, on the entire water of eastern rivers) hinge on the riparian rights of Punjab. The principle of riparian rights were, in turn, arrived at in the context of political partition of the Indus basin in 1947, wherein India found itself in a precarious situation vis-à-vis securing full control on waters of the three (eastern) rivers on the side of India (Ravi, Beas and Sutlej). Despite its limitations, the 'riparian principle' remains the guiding yardstick for river waters allocation in the country, and yet, the author argues, Punjab was not allowed the advantage to which it was entitled in its capacity as riparian to the rivers.

Rooted in common law than in a statute i.e., a written Act of Parliament, riparian 'law' actually refers to the right of states on water bodies whose banks are touching their territories. Etymologically, the word riparian emanates from the Latin word *ripa* meaning riverbank. Thus, a riparian state is one whose territories are touched by the bank of rivers corresponding to a 'littoral state that owns land adjoining a sea or ocean where the tide regularly rises and falls.' Like riparian, littoral is also derived from the Latin word *litus* denoting seashore or coast. However, in common usage, the word riparian is preferred over littoral to refer to river boundaries touching state territories. As the protection to riparian rights comes from common law, the same may be explicitly limited by legislation (Basic Law of Water Boundaries. [<http://www.blm.gov/cadastral/casebook/basicwater.pdf> accessed on March 13, 2025]). Thus, it is in this context that Punjab has been denied the protection it was entitled to as riparian to the three eastern rivers mentioned earlier which came under the full control of India after signing of the Indus Treaty in 1960. It also takes note of how the federal government in its March 1976 notification allocated 'surplus' waters of Ravi-Beas rivers in disregard to the recommendations of the committees constituted by the Central Government. The Award gave more water than what was recommended by these committees. It essentially became the Indira Gandhi Award. Exploring the motives behind the Award, the author goes on to examine the political one-upmanship that ensued between arch-rivals Akali Dal and the Congress on the issue. He also spells out the factors which led both Punjab and Haryana to file cases in the Supreme Court in 1979.

The third chapter meticulously delineates how the water sharing accord reached by the Centre in 1976 was quickly reduced to irrelevance and how the tripartite agreement, signed at the behest of Indira Gandhi, failed too, to cut any ice with the Akali Dal, the main dissenting voice on the issue. The chapter also examines how premature dismissal of the Akali Dal government in 1980 further

deepened political fissures in the state, goading the latter into doubling down on its agitation against the tripartite agreement. The resulting political turmoil in Punjab forced the Centre to reach a settlement with the Akalis, which led to the establishment of the Eradi Tribunal to decide on the river waters dispute. The chapter also spells out the reasons why the Eradi panel not only failed to live up to Akali Dal expectations but also led the Akalis into a dead end as they were left with no viable option to move forward, either legally or politically. This explains why the Akali Dal allowed the issue to gather moss after the verdict and retrieve it only after 2004.

The fourth chapter examines the political compulsions of the Congress government in Punjab arising from the Supreme Court order pronounced in June 2004, directing the Centre to handover SYL work to some federal agency. The judgment triggered the enactment of the Punjab Termination of Agreements Act 2004. This Act terminated all water sharing accords signed by the previous governments because the Chief Minister, Captain Amarinder Singh, never wanted the canal work to start. The major argument put forward by the author here is that in commandeering the river waters dispute of the State, the Chief Minister veered strategically close towards the 'politics of region', which till then was largely an Akali domain and indeed its *raison d'être*. It was a paradigm-shifting decision on the part of Amarinder Singh as no other Congress Chief Minister before him did this kind of region-centered politics. In this process, Amarinder Singh dented the identity politics of the Akali Dal and the Congress party became a serious contender in region-specific politics. The epitaph 'defender of Punjab waters', which he had earned by abrogating the water sharing accords, proved to be of great value in his subsequent political struggles in the state, helping him to become Chief Minister of the State again in 2017.

The fifth chapter examines how, when it was becoming clear to the state that it was likely to get an adverse reaction to the Termination Act, the Punjab Government conceptualized new legislation in the form of Transfer of Property Bill 2016, to once again avoid digging the SYL canal in Punjab. The dominant thinking within the ruling dispensation was that a move like this could help draw peasants to their side. The government, besieged as it was by a series of problems, wanted to take the attention of a key constituency - that of peasants - away from the real issues which had come to grip their minds. At another level, the author argues that following the passing of the Bill, things came to such a pass that every Punjab-based political party was unequivocal in reiterating that Punjab did not have any surplus water to spare for others. With the breakdown of the two-party dominated system, traditionally confined to the Akali Dal and the Congress, new political actors have come on the horizon. In the changed milieu, the new entrant AAP and the state unit of BJP are also vying with Akali Dal and Congress for garnering the support of the peasantry, particularly the dominant Jat Sikh peasantry, though as mentioned above, the enthusiasm of the BJP has reduced somewhat. The river water issue, has thus, naturally become the epicenter of politics in the state, making party competition a truly multi-polar political contest.

Deliberating critically on the historical legacies of the river waters dispute of Punjab, the author, in the concluding chapter, makes a seminal contribution to the field of Punjab Studies, by underlining that these continue to hinge on the riparian rights of Punjab. With key objective of the 1955 river water sharing arrangement having been met after signing of the Indus Treaty in 1960, no attempt has been made thereafter to revisit the agreement to accommodate the legitimate riparian claims of Punjab. Further, coming to competition between the major political parties on the issue and peasant stakes therein, the process in this regard began with Akali Dal protest against the March 1976 notification. This was followed by Akali agitation on the tripartite agreement. However, after the Termination Act 2004, political competition over river waters became multi-polar, with the Congress under the command of Captain Amarinder Singh, Akali Dal under the Badals and arrival of AAP, all vying for 'exclusive ownership' of the issue.

Political parties are cognizant of the fact that Punjab peasants, who had supported the Akali movement wholeheartedly, moved away from it only when they themselves became victims of violence at the peak of Punjab militancy. Militancy came to an end in Punjab when peasants withdrew their tacit support from the movement. Their disappointment with the larger cause of the movement stemmed from the double oppression that they faced both at the hands of police, as well as from so-called militants, who used to draw tacit support from them during their attempt to escape from state administration. During Farmers' protests at the periphery of Delhi, the farmers' organisation did not allow its platform to be used by any political party given their ambivalent stand on river waters dispute. This had also forced Akali Dal to withdraw from its alliance with the BJP, fearing that it may be perceived as supporting the three farm laws and may not get any support from the peasantry in future. As recent events have demonstrated, the river waters dispute, which has been a defining feature of politics of the state for decades, is likely to remain so in the future as well. Written in a lucid and engaging style, this study will be of general interest to students, policy makers and scholars of Punjab Studies. Those with an interest in conflict resolution and lay persons interested in the political dynamics of this borderland state, will also find it a rewarding read.

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