**Punjab without the Punj-Aab**

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A eulogy to the dying rivers along the motorway across the plains of Punjab. Often fascinated by how the hills of Margallas give way to the red, rocky, unwoven Pothohar which then morphs into an infinite expanse of agricultural fields with the notable exception of the lush orchards of Sargodha. In this granary of prospects, I witness the three rivers flowing silently caged by the bridges and tamed by the barrages on their journey to meet with the Indus and finally fall into the Arabian Sea.

They have been through this for millions of years long before the first humans arrived, but the prolonged struggle for its futuristic co-existence is what rattles minds today.

A region whose identity is based on the rivers, but it still behaves with such insolence, such cruelty to them. The region, which we now term Punjab, has always been nurtured by the five rivers. Every grain of fertile soil, upon the fertility of which it prides itself, is derived from these rivers. These rivers are the lifeline of Punjab and Pakistan. The vibrant culture, the rich history, the ancient cities, the gorgeous Punjabi, the world’s largest canal system, the most fertile soils, everything which we pride ourselves on is a boon of the rivers. But witnessing the rotten corpse of Sutlej, the writhing body of Ravi, the dwindling Chenab, the endangered Jhelum, and the shrivelled Indus, the only thought in my head is why? Why such injustice to the rivers? Why such churlishness? Why such cruelty? A hypophora of events, which demand answers.

All of us, not just the governments, are guilty of patricide, of the murder of our own nurtures.

Sutlej once known to the indigenous tribes as “Neeli”, the river of blue waters is now nothing but a dry riverbed. Known in Vedic times as Sutudri, the river with a hundred courses, it now lacks the slightest of ideas of flowing in its lower reaches. Once famed for the speed of its flow, it is now but dead in all aspects with even its grave now being encroached by the approaching, ever-increasing population. Sutlej was once the boundary between the Cholistan desert and the fertile lands of Punjab, acting as a guardian. But now, this protector of the motherland has breathed its last in a completely dishonourable fashion.

And while this literary imagery may deem to

While it is a universal struggle for justice, the idea that minimalist policies are deriving these ever-so crashing conditions of the matter, is conscionable. The Indian Government, through a range of what it calls “agricultural policies” humiliated and shattered any hopes for the rivers and their recovery. Although mutilated posthumously by Pakistan, the blame game is an endless array, which stops at the potential for the future.

Here on its banks, lies the city of Kasur, rumoured to be founded by Kusha, the son of Rama and Sita, and also the burial place of Baba Bulleh Shah. Irrigating the plains of Dipalpur, it flows into Pakpattan, the city of Baba Farid. The name Pakpattan literally translates to “Holy/pure dock” but today neither the river remains nor its purity. Downstream, it used to join the Chenab River before they fell into the Indus together. Ravi, the fickle river, should never be trusted. Such is the reputation of Ravi among its natives for its sudden floods, also obviously now legends of the days long gone. The birthplace of Harappa and also the burial grounds of such a majestic civilization are the banks of Ravi. Hiding many remnants of the Indus valley civilization, this river is now breathing its last. River Ravi or Iravati as it was known to the Vedic people, was named after the elephant of Indra, the king of gods in Hindu mythology. Rich in history, the banks of Ravi are also the place where Rigveda, the oldest extant text in any Indo-European language, was written or rather composed around approximately 1500 B.C. Rising in the mountains of Himachal Pradesh, it flows into Pakistan near Lahore.

There on its banks flourished Lahore, the capital of Punjab province and the heart of Punjabi identity as a whole. Downstream from Lahore, Ravi irrigates Nankana Sahib where it is reputed that Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism practised farming on its banks for 14 years. Onwards on its path, it flows through the ancient cities of Kamalia and Tulamba, which existed well before Alexander the Great’s invasion before finally merging into Chenab. Chenab, the river of love. Known in ancient times as Asikni, the river of dark waters, Chenab gave birth to the cities of Sialkot, Gujrat, Gujranwala, Sargodha and Jhang. Multan, the oldest continuously inhabited city of Pakistan and rumoured to be founded by a grandson of prophet Noah, also arose on an island in the river Chenab before the river distanced itself from the city.

Known to the locals as “the river of love”, its role in numerous folktales of the region, holds extraordinary significance. Ranjha hailing from Takht Hazara on the banks of Chenab travelled down the river to the city of Jhang where he fell in love with Heer, thus giving rise to the greatest epic of Punjabi language immortalized by Waris Shah. While here the river served as a connection between the two lovers, it also served as an antagonist in another tale, the tale of Sohni Mahiwal. Drowning them in its tumultuous waves, it became the grave of two lovers who united in their death.

The only silver lining, being the fact that someday, a Sohni might just walk barefoot on the dry bed of Chenab to meet her Mahiwal, but she will never be eternalized as a symbol of love for what is love without a tragedy Jhelum, the river of white waters. Known in ancient times as Vitastas, it is said to be the manifestation of goddess Parvati, the wife of Shiva after she cleansed Kashmir of all evil.

While it was not traditionally considered one of the five rivers of Punjab, the fifth spot being allotted to River Beas, after partition when Beas completely went to India, Indus became to be known as the fifth river in the land of five rivers. Known historically as Sindhu, it is the namesake of the province of Sindh, Hindus, Hinduism, and Hindustan. Starting at lake Manasarovar, a lake holy to Hindus, at the foot of Mount Kailash, it shares the same source basin as the Brahmaputra River, Sutlej River and a tributary of the Ganges River. The longest river of Pakistan, with untapped hydroelectric potential, wastes the days of its glory waning with the ever-melting snows of Tibet. Engrossed in lamentations over the fate of these rivers, the numerous secrets buried under them, recalling the history and the obvious fate of the five rivers, I ask myself-were we really worthy of this pure land? Do we really deserve the boons of the rivers?

There must be policies in place, there must be laws legislated to make sure prejudice against the environment doesn’t rot the impending for the rivers’ progression.

All of us, not just the governments, are guilty of patricide, of the murder of our own nurtures. This conversation needs to be taken to more places, above the media, and into policy! We must do something before we lose Punjab, for what is Punjab without the Punj-Aab.

*The writer is an environmental activist.*