**[Rivers of Babylon](https://www.dawn.com/news/1692403/rivers-of-babylon)**

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The writer is a poet. His latest publication is a collection of satire essays titled Rindana.

WITHOUT context, ‘Mary Jane does not only have an irregular shape, but is also shallow and surrounded by dikes’ must read like a misogynist statement. Only, Mary Jane is a lake in Florida. It is of ‘irregular shape’ and is only 3.6 metres at its deepest. Despite all of this, she has suitors lining up for her favours. Only the suits are being filed in courts of law.

It is so surreal that the idea of rivers, lakes and trees having natural rights came from someone named Stone. More than 50 years back, a law professor at the UCLA, Christopher Stone sparked this idea. Since then, Whanganui River in New Zealand and the Ganges and Yamuna in India have been declared living entities and ‘persons’, entitled to have their rights protected by law.

Only recently, an animal rights group in Europe called for proprietary rights to leopard spots as they are rampantly appropriated by the fashion industry all over the world — the argument being that a certain portion of profits gained from ‘leopard prints’ as they are called, be earmarked by law for the well-being of this endangered species suffering as much at the hands of fashion houses as the poachers’.

Closer to home, before cities like Karachi started experiencing regular [heatwaves](https://www.dawn.com/news/1688617), and [glacier melts](https://www.dawn.com/news/1687848) in Gilgit-Baltistan began creating lakes, the refrain; ‘the world is dying’, sounded far-fetched. While stepping a little beyond our borders, yet staying tantalisingly close, consider what has happened in Isfahan, Iran, where its life source, the legendary river Zayenda Rood mostly stays dry.

Thousands of citizens of the city and the greater Isfahan region in Iran [protested](https://www.dawn.com/news/1659132) on the streets in November last year, carrying placards that variously read, ‘free the river’, and ‘let the river live’ etc. The protesters believed that in addition to climatic changes, successive governments have so diverted the river’s flow that in the last 20 years it has mostly remained dry except for brief intervals of small trickles.

Why should we care about rivers running dry in other countries?

So, why should we care about a river running dry in another country, some may ask? Well, because we do not ask this question when we mourn a death of a ‘person’ in another part of the world. Rivers are live entities as much as humans or other beings are. It has been endorsed by courts of law that rivers are ‘persons’ and have their own rights in addition to those whose life source they happen to be. In Bangladesh, a supreme court judgement has granted personhood and legal rights to all the rivers in the country.

Another connection behind our emotional attachment to this sad turn of events is that Muhammad Iqbal who is revered in Iran as much as he is in Pakistan, in Javed Nama, his epic Persian poem, named the central character ‘Zinda Rood’, which is a slight variation (in pronunciation) of the river Zayenda Rood of Isfahan. (‘Zinda’ means alive, and ‘zayenda’ life-giver.) Most literary commentators believe that Zinda Rood of Javed Nama is Iqbal himself.

**Read:** [*Don’t hold back the waters*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1690430/dont-hold-back-the-waters)

Report after report continues to [mention](https://www.dawn.com/news/1650596) countries in this region — Iran, Pakistan and India — as amongst the most water-stressed in the world. Climatic degradation and rising oceans due to global warming, longer and frequent cycles of drought and floods, and pollution of rivers, lakes and other sources of freshwater have become everyday occurrences. ‘We the people’ continue to behave as if it is just the governments that are responsible, but we too need to bear responsibility.

Will climate change, water resources development and population management be the central planks of any political party’s manifesto in the next elections? The answer is no. So, what are the constituents going to do about it? Will we continue to compare prime ministerial candidates based on who can do more push-ups and who has run the country (aground) how many times? Or will we insist that bigger and deeper existential questions are addressed by all the ‘saviours’ in their manifestos before we give them the time of day, let alone our precious votes?

In the absence of any effort to manage population growth, we have been feeding our mushrooming populace from irrigation schemes that depend on river diversions. No number of further river diversions or isolated conservation efforts can avoid the unfolding tragedy if the population continues to grow at the present rate.

The Maori of New Zealand have a proverb: ‘I am the river, and the river is me.’ Our own poet Dr Ashu Lal, who recently refused to accept one half of the Kamal-i-Fan (epitome of art) literary award by “a state that represses rights”, has put it beautifully in Seraiki: ‘Darya o’ darya; pani teday doonghey: toon sada piu ma, asan teday poonghey (River O’ River! Deep are your waters; O’ father, O’ mother! We are your tadpoles.” The Zinda Rood needs to be set free.

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