

Pakistan: Freedom for Rivers is Freedom for Life - “Freedom for rivers is one right that we ignore only at peril”

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March invites serious reflection on our stewardship of water: locally, nationally, regionally and globally, for your children and my children must bear the burdens inflicted by the sins of all fathers, and mothers.

Celebrate, we must, the very source of life. Since it sustains life we must also attend to our continuing irresponsibility. If we ever go to war over water then it will be a war within our souls for attempting the unforgivable sin of conquering and enslaving water.

Freed of reckless use, Humanity demands respect for water: calling for the freedom of rivers and oceans. Continuing with selfish obstructions and diversions postpones the inevitable day of reckoning seen so often by so many — in droughts and poisons that decimate sea life; in floods whose fury spares not even children and homes.

So much needs to be done and can be done, but will not be done unless public action focuses on protecting and preserving the very flow of life that rivers represent, replacing capitalist, corporate greed of international finance in exploiting the wealth of rivers.

No less than peasant farmers, foresters and livestock herders, the fisherfolk of Pakistan depend upon rivers for their livelihoods. Wherever it may rain, free rivers are needed to share prosperity. When ground water is extracted somewhere without replenishment then many elsewhere suffer from degraded and diminished water supplies. Not just storage dams but also flow-of-the river hydroelectric projects degrade the ecology of rivers and oceans, robbing them of life which then steals from already meager livelihoods of fisherfolk.

Many in our country take pride in the British-built irrigation system with numerous barrages and hundreds of canals that have disgracefully created rivers of waste. We must persuade them, specially fellow small farmers, to realize the increasing destruction of land and pollution of water caused by a system designed to benefit the state before people.

Much has to be done through sweeping agrarian reforms, including the domination of organic agriculture to grow crops that reduce water needs. But the landless depend upon a secure and productive commons from which no one is excluded. Water is central to such humane sharing of public wealth, denied by artificial irrigation systems.

Only flowing rivers with clean water can deliver food sovereignty for a majority of our people — enabling autonomy in the self-provision of food; escaping hunger and malnourishment caused by a state that is always uncaring and often predatory. Make and Keep Rivers Free must be our motto, repeated with reverence every day of our lives as citizens striving for freedom.

Peasant and fisherfolk, rural and urban resident, must come together to force government to respect

the ecological integrity of water bodies. Dams and barrages and flood bundhs, as well as agriculture and sewage drains, are obvious enemies of rivers, the delta and the sea.

The spate of electricity generating turbines — specially coal and nuclear energy plants — guzzling water and spewing death, promised by government as facilitating development should in fact be seen as the very opposite. Even if it is only once in a hundred years, one cannot ignore the enormity of disaster that will then occur. Must we live in excessive comfort so that our grand-children live in constant fear?

It is easy to see that freedom is indivisible as all rights for all. But we also must reflect on the fact that some freedoms for humans will remain limited unless the rights of nature are protected and promoted. Freedom for rivers is one right that we ignore only at peril.

Fisherfolk are largely outnumbered and overpowered by other users of water. Political and economic marginalization will end only when fisherfolk join labour and environmental and other movements for social justice. But before this fisherfolk must mobilize and organize into a mass, social movement rooted in equity.

Ecological conservation must also be a core of the fisherfolk movement – if they treat water badly then a moral claim will vanish. Even worse, harvesting in accessible coastal waters may vanish when chained rivers starve the coast of not just freshwater but also of silt, and then fisherfolk exacerbate the problem by destroying mangrove forests that act to retain silt.

Water remains a South Asian issue. When all countries protect and promote local livelihoods there will be less reason for people to take cross-border risks of lengthy imprisonment, with cruel impacts on families who lose their breadwinners with boats seized and left to rot. A Water Commons Treaty is needed to replace the obsessive greed embodied in Exclusive Economic Zones and other treaties that serve only to protect the privileges of elites. If rivers are followed to flow freely as nature intended, why would there be any conflict between India and Pakistan? Between Bangladesh and India?

Large-scale commercial and industrial fishing by trawlers is the root of conflicts between fisherfolk purposely divided by ethnicity, nationality or religion. We must reflect, refuse, and resist undemocratic attempts to segregate shared waters. The right to food is so basic that it cannot be left to state elites to prevent autonomy, or peoples sovereignty, through self-provisioning or collective endeavours. Without free rivers, the right to land and water will remain suppressed, leaving the right to food abandoned to the whims and greed of our state elites,

A new paradigm of water must emerge in a Water Lifeline Constitution that promulgates a Water Protection Act to be implemented through decentralized Water Governance Councils. A primary responsibility will be to prevent commercialization of water, including capture by local elites as water lords.

For these dreams to come true, water activists must dedicate themselves to a series of actions, to: build and strengthen networks within local, national, regional and international movements working for protection and restoration of rivers in order to keep rivers free; protect and promote rights of communities that depend on healthy water bodies; build up a wide range of resistance on national level, against the destructive water projects; promote alternative ways of meeting people's needs for water and energy through research, advocacy and lobbying; strive for regeneration of the Indus delta through a flow of freshwater beginning with 35 MAF water downstream of Kotri; realize demand for reparations to people affected by existing dams and barrages in South Asia; organize mass-mobilization for safe drinking water as a fundamental human right; connect upstream and

downstream communities in solidarity.

Severe malnutrition and chronic hunger are shared by fisherfolk with many, many others dependent on water. We are told that this happens because we are a 'water-stressed' country. We must then ask peasants to refuse and reject 'growth policy' which encourages exports that embody millions of gallons of water e.g. in sugar from cane cultivation; in textiles from cotton cultivation.

Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum
