

Epistemologies of water: In search of new approaches to the looming South Asian crisis

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*In December 2014, LSE MSc student **Marielle Veland** attended a workshop which looked at the various ways in which knowledge about water is shaped and communicated. Here she reviews some of the research presented and considers how the discussions can contribute to tackling the looming water crisis in South Asia.*



Water is a prerequisite for life, yet **only 2.5%** of the world's water supply is readily available for consumption, and that percentage is rapidly decreasing due to pressures from population growth, climate change and poor water management. All of those three pressure points converge in South Asia, where some of the fastest-growing populations in the world grapple with melting ice caps, rising sea levels and depleting groundwater, that are further exacerbated by mismanagement from public and private actors. Understanding the various ways in which knowledge about water is shaped and communicated, the so-called epistemologies of water, in the Asian context are essential to tackling the looming water crisis in the region.

Therefore, on December 13, 2014, a group of 18 early career researchers from institutions around the globe gathered in the Karl Jaspers Center of Heidelberg University to discuss this urgent and largely unexplored topic: [the epistemology of water in Asia](#). The workshop, initiated by Dr. Ravi Baghel as part of the interdisciplinary research group "[Waterscapes in Transcultural Perspective](#)" at Heidelberg University's Cluster of Excellence on "Asia and Europe in a Global Context".

Over the course of the weekend, the researchers grappled with large questions surrounding the role of the social scientist in reporting on and finding solutions to Asia's looming water crisis. The participants were equipped with academic backgrounds in geography, philosophy, anthropology, political science, and Indology, and with insights from impressive fieldwork in places ranging from the wells of Varanasi and Rajasthan to the slums of Delhi, and from the Himalayan glaciers to the flooded embankments of Northern Bihar to the Indian Sundarbans.



Workshop attendees, December 2014

The research presented in the workshop emphasised how politics and dialectics are triangulated with water issues. Participants were divided into three groups which focused on discourses, controversies and semantics respectively. Niranjana Ramesh, PhD candidate at UCL, was the first presenter as part of the “Discourses” panel, sharing her comparative [study of desalination plants](#) built the same year in London and in Chennai. This unique comparison acts as a means with which to demonstrate that water mediates a politics of knowledge, and that discourses of sustainability need to be contextualised. Ricki Levi, a philosopher from Tel Aviv University, followed Ramesh in presenting her work on the philosophy of water in Rajasthan, where she is investigating the ancient yet still effective water technology of the [kuin well](#), which extracts water trapped between natural layers of a non-porous element called gypsum. Dr. Vera Lazzaretti, of Università degli Studi di Milano, also conducted [research on wells in India](#) and argued that a supposed religious dispute over a well in Varanasi between Muslims and Hindus is actually a dispute over the power to create an imaginary sacred landscape.

The “Discourses” panel ended with [Lea Stepan of Heidelberg University](#) presenting her fieldwork on rice farming in Bali, and how their view of dualism involves kinaesthetic relationships between people and place, which are mediated by agricultural labour and technologies. This panel was supported by a poster on the role of water in Indian poetry, presented by [Georgie Carroll](#), a PhD candidate at SOAS, University of London.

The second panel, “Controversies”, began with a powerful and thought-provoking presentation by Dr. Heather O’Leary, post-doctoral researcher at McMaster University, on the findings of her 18-month fieldwork in the slums of Delhi. Through her [insightful ethnographic work](#) among slum communities, she was able to examine how meanings of water converge with social inequality, by moving between different social classes. Her findings reveal not only the symbolic currency of water and how it is allocated, but that the factor of time is just as important, if not more so, than factors of water quality and quantity. She observes that, “people are stationary pipes waiting to be temporary conduits”. Dr. Joe Hill presented his multi-sited research on [irrigation techniques across high mountain valleys of Asia](#), completed as part of the [Crossroads Asia programme](#) at University of Bonn.

Finally Aditya Ghosh, Heidelberg University, presented on [controversies surrounding the Indian Sundarbans](#). The sundarbans are the largest area of coastal mangrove forest in the world and one of the last major habitats of tigers.

Ghosh reported that his informants felt that they were 2nd class citizens of this land, and the tigers were the 1st class citizens, prompting questions of how conservation efforts can work with – rather than against – local communities. The embankments that have been built most poignantly exemplify the struggle between man and nature in the Sundarbans, in that they make the delta habitable but simultaneously prevent natural delta formation, which in turn makes the people living in the Sundarbans vulnerable to natural disasters and climate change effects. My own preliminary research on common dichotomies surrounding flooding in Kashmir, was also considered a part of this panel.

In the third, and final, panel on “Semantics”, Luisa Cortesi, PhD candidate at Yale University, also examines the [embodied value of embankments](#), as physical, cultural, and political walls where safety is assumed but never assured. She poses the challenging but urgent question “Does materiality and discursive configurations of technology play a role in the knowledge we have about water?” Posters presented by [Frances Niebuhr](#) (Heidelberg University) on the role of a goddess of water at the time of a flood and by [Amelie Huber](#) (Bogazici University) on socio-political implications of hydropower projects in the eastern Himalayas supported this final panel.

Towards the end of the workshop, we were divided into small groups based on our panel groupings. In the panel on “controversies” we had a lively and thought-provoking discussion that led to a summary of the commonalities between our works, and the complex questions those gave rise to. The first commonality between all our research projects was that management of water is mediated by constructions of boundaries. A second was our attention to future spatial-temporal movements, in the form of imagined spaces, senses of place, and the complex relationship between rural and urban spaces. Thirdly, we felt the need to move beyond the classic trope of fluidity, as we found the idea of false categories overdone. In relation to that, we called for a more nuanced conception of infrastructures, since we agreed that the production of the discourse of water crisis seems to come from experts but actually originates in networks of money.

Routledge has offered to publish a volume of papers that took part in the workshop. The exciting work of these young researchers heralds a bright future for the emerging field of epistemologies of water.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the India at LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author

Marielle Veland is an LSE Masters candidate in Anthropology and Development with a specific interest in water issues in South Asia. Before starting at LSE she spent the summer in Lucknow studying Urdu intensively as a recipient of the U.S. State Department Critical Language Scholarship. She tweets [@mariellewel](#).



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