
Socio-Cultural Factors behind the Illegal withdrawal of Irrigation Water: A case study of CRB Canal in South Punjab, Pakistan

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Abstract:

This paper deals with the social and cultural justification of illegal withdrawal of irrigation water from the canal. The research was conducted in Village Banbhan Tehsil Taunsa Sharif District D. G. Khan in South Punjab. This paper emphasizes on that how social norms and cultural interpretation are attached to the illegal withdrawal of canal water. This paper also deals with how social and cultural values are strong and influence the behavior of the people to do the illegal work. An interesting aspect of this paper is that how people use the socio-cultural values to justify their illegal tasks in the society to escape from social isolation. This paper is useful at the state policy making for the development that how social factors are important to keep in mind to overcome the social issues from micro to macro level. The data presented in this paper has been collected by using qualitative anthropological research techniques.

Key words: Moga, talaqdari, Izzatdar, dera, beizzat, Taqat, haq, Sharika

Introduction

The concept of the legitimacy varies from place to place. The legality and illegality are mostly culturally constituted. This

paper deals with cultural factors which influence the farmers at locale to get water through illegal ways. This illegality is labeled on them by the government authorities while the farmers justify it through social factors, for instance social honor, prestige and power. The illegal withdrawal of canal water is culturally justifiable by the natives and they claim that the poor policies of the government authorities influence them to get canal water through illegal methods. The artificial shortage of the canal water in the tale areas of the certain water distributry influences the farmers of particular water distributary to get canal water through unfair means. So they justify their unfair means through this way.

The interesting aspect of the paper is that the socio-cultural factors behind the illegal withdrawal of canal water also varies from different land owners in the canal zone. The social justification of the landlords in the canal zone is that they consider it as a source of social control over the small landowners. The landlord class of the view that they cannot get canal water through illegal ways for the sake of surplus water, but they want that their enemies came to their house and request them not to stop their water. The landlords of the view that this behavior of their enemies enhances their social power and honor in the society.

The landless group of the farmers of the view that we are always victims of both the government authorities and landlords. The landlords get illegal water to maintain their social control over small land owners or landless class while the government authorities claim that the landlord less class have no water share thus to fulfil their irrigation needs they get illegal canal water. The small landowners and landless class of the view that as it considered that we get illegal water so we are notorious thus we get water through unfair means. This paper not only highlights the illegal means of canal water, but also presents the importance of the socio-cultural behind the justification of social evils.

Locale

The present study conducted in the village Banbhan Tehsil Taunsa Sharif, District D. G. Khan. District D. G. Khan is unique in its feature that it has linked boundaries with other three provinces than that of Punjab like linked Balochistan at Rukni, KP at Ramak D. I. Khan and Sindh at Kasmoor. The village Banbhan also has very important geographical setting in the area because it linked dozen of the village on the right bank of River Indus with Indus highway Peshwar to Karachi. The village Banbhan is situated 21km away from the tehsil Taunsa at Indus highway. The soil of the village is very fruitful for the agriculture because Indus River flow only 3km away from the village, but after the reformation of the irrigation system from tube well irrigation to Canal irrigation, the construction of the Canal has created the a boundary mark in the village geographically as well as socially.

Methodology

The qualitative anthropological methodology which includes methods like Socioeconomic survey, participant observation, key informant interviews and in-depth interviews were used to collect the empirical data. Different sampling techniques were used during the research like purposive sampling, random sampling and snowball sampling. By using these sampling techniques 100 households out of 300 households have selected as a sample of the study. Beside this structured and unstructured questionnaire and in-depth interviews have been used during the study. Modern methodology like photography and recording have also been used during research. The research conducted in four months from February 2012 to June 2012.

Results and Discussion

Legal activity is approved by the state's rules and regulations, while illegal activity is disapproved by the state's laws and rules. The illegal withdrawal of water was the activity in which the role of irrigation department was of discriminating in the process of water flow, when it was on the way to the fields, the water was illegally taken from primary canal and distributed it to fields. The process of illegal withdrawal of water was done according to the situation and in every circumstance in different ways, the water was stolen very secretly. The farmers involved in the illegal activity of stealing water were few in the village, they were small landowners. They used different techniques for the purpose like cutting of main distribution pipe at night when area was and the fear of witnessing their activity was zero, they irrigate their fields before dawn and after that they fill the cut of the pipeline. Another technique that was used by them was by putting one end of a pipe about 10 to 12 inches radius in the distributary and the other end in their files. The level of their fields was usually below the level of distributary. The activity was usually carried out in the late night secretly.

Another activity was to block the flow of water to enhance the water pressure in the Moga. In that way people at the tail get less water, while it also overflow and damage the banks of the distributary. To keep the water below the level of banks, Baildar (a person who watches the flow of water at the head of distributary and measure it) reduce the quantity of water.

One more method used for the illegal withdrawal of water was the enhancement of the size of *Moga* (a specific kind of gauge in circular shape). Its size was fixed which could be different at different places). When someone enhances the size of *Moga*, he gets more water than his actual share reducing other's share.

A new way for the theft of water was adopted by the big land owners and influential farmers that were to cut the main distributary. They were not taking care of the department, the local people and violates the rules and regulations because being influential they were having *talaqdari* with the responsible quarters who provide shelter to them. The size of cut shows the intensity of their influence.

The technical and economic factors have great importance in perennial water pilferage but they only provide a structure to analyze, but without taking concrete measures, it was necessary to visualize the socio-cultural contexts which were influential manipulator of water pilferage and have great importance over economic and technical factors. A precise description of socio-cultural contexts in this chapter will highlight their importance.

Izzat (honor)

For the villagers, *Izzat* was the inevitable concept, people strive hard and they protect it any cost. The question arises that what is *Izzat*? It is a social position of an individual and its status. The society considers them *Izzatdar* who abide by cultural norms and values. The *izzat* is a socially approved phenomena, every person of the society has *izzat* in terms of his social status and maintain it rather enhance it.

The relationship between *izzat* and illegal manipulation of canal irrigation water is very important. A person who has control of water resources legally or illegally is considered *izzatdar*, because he not only protects his right but also has extra control of it. An *izzatdar* (honorable) is in a position to deprive his opponent from his due share. To protect their *izzat* is one of the basic requirements of the human beings.

In the village *Banbhan*, the people were protecting their *izzat* at any cost, damage to opponent's *izzat* was also important and a person does not lose any opportunity which damages the

izzat of his opponents. In that way, water theft was one of the sources through which one could damage the social status of his opponents. The phenomenon of *izzat* has been elaborated in the following case study.

Case study

Hameed Merani, who was an influential landlord of the village ex-member of the local farmer's body who illegally theft the water by cutting the bank of distributary to irrigate his fields and to decrease water supply to his opponent's fields. When the researcher visited his household, he was sitting with his *chelas* (paid terrorists) at his *dera* (house). The researcher with his consent started the session of conversation with him.

He told the researcher that he had drawn the water though he did not need it, but to show his strength to his opponents who during their tenure of membership of farmer's body *beizzat* (dishonor) him and deprived him from getting water for my fields and he has *beizzat* (dishonor) them by, if they have any regard for their *izzat* then reinstate his water. That was the only way of answering his brutal action of stopping his water. He further said that when he was the member of the farmer's body, his opponent came to him with the request of allowing water supply to his fields that was accepted by him and persuaded the whole body to provide him water for his agriculture produce and when he retired, he went to them they flatly refused to remove the blockage of his water and said that they would face any consequences but his water would not be restored. Their illegal act was to destroy his agricultural land to bow his head before them. On the refusal he approached the third party (*Punchait*) where the matter was settled and it was agreed to re-instate his water supply.

The conflict between the parties was the result of tussle between *izzat* and *beizzati*. Every person strives for *izzat* and avoids *beizzati* (dishonor). The concept of *izzat* plays a dominant

role in the local irrigation system and was the source of display of their social status. Izzat was observable in other affairs of life, like occupations, leadership, generosity, and ownership. The phenomenon of *izzat* was directly linked with other concepts which have been explained in the following pages.

Taqat (Power)

The phenomenon of *Taqat* (power) is also related to *izzat*. It is a social occurrence through which a person can fulfill his demands by using other persons and prohibit them from their rights. He can influence relevant persons who accept his *taqat* and they consider him *taqatwar* (powerful). Power is a very vast field, but the researcher's point of view of power is concerned with socially constructed and acceptable power.

The research findings indicate that a person was considered *taqatwar* (powerful) if he withdraws water illegally and deprives his opponents from their due share. The theft of water was not considered a bad thing, as it was the matter of pride for the farmers execrated due to one's access to canal irrigation water for his *dhaak* (influence) over the responsible people.

Economic factors

Economic factor was also very necessary for the inclination towards illegal withdrawal of irrigation water by the landowners of the village. The foremost economic factor was the water shortage due to water leakage, that was the severe problem for the farmers who need it a lot but they get very little quantity of water. Their share was the same throughout the year for every crop. Farmers get the same quantity of canal irrigation water for their paddy crops as they get for the wheat crop. In summer and at the beginning of winter, they required a lot of water when they cultivate wheat. In summer, due to

evaporation lots of water was wasted before reaching the fields. The shortage of water has very bad effects upon the crops and reduction and reduction in per capita income.

Mechanized agriculture also created problem of illegal withdrawal of water. Due to the introduction of machines in any phase of agriculture more area has been added in the cultivable land, farmers used chemical fertilizers and pesticides to enhance their production for which a large quantity of water was required, while the water resource were the same as they were before the mechanized agriculture. To fulfill the requirements of their fields, the farmers have to involve in the illegal theft of water through any available mean.

The Canal water was more fertile than the tube-well water and besides that it was cheaper than any other way of irrigation. The researcher observed that people tried their best to get perennial irrigation water and if they had to get tube-well water they mislead it with canal water and then irrigate the fields. The Canal water was hundred times cheaper than tube-well water because it does not require any machine and fuel.

Socio-cultural factors

Cultural factors are more important than any other factors like economic factor. They not only provide a rational reason for the illegal activity, but it also shows the normative structure of the area and the normative and cognitive structure is very necessary to find out the solution of any societal problem. In this chapter, the researcher has given a brief and short introduction of the cultural factors in term of illegal withdrawal of irrigation water.

The concepts of *izzat* (honor) *haq* (right) and *taqat* (power) has played a dominant role in the process of illegal withdrawal of irrigation water in the village *Banbhan*, all the concepts were socially approved rather than by the laws of the

state. *Izzatdar* (honorable) was very important aspect of the normative structure of the area. Every person strives for his *izzat* and he does not allow any person to damage it and was ready to make any sacrifice which prevents his *izzat* and enhance it.

Izzat and *taqat* were interrelated with each other and reciprocal. A person in the village who has *taqat* (power) to show his authority for the manipulation of irrigation water and other activities was considered *izzatdar* (honorable). The was achieved or created through one's *talaqdari* (influence) which helped him in creating links with concerned institutions for the illegal manipulation of canal irrigation water. The practice of illegal water theft was the everyday matter by the farmers getting insufficient water for their fields.

The illegal manipulation of canal irrigation water shows one's *taqat* (power) in the area for creating *izzat* (honor) in the hearts of other persons for him. The concept of *haq* (right) was also related to the concepts of *izzat* and *taqat*. The people were of the view that canal irrigation water was their *haq* (right) which they were using for a long time, while low status people have no right to dictate them for using the water according to the rules. The researcher could not find any find any terminology which could highlight the government's concept of illegal withdrawal of water or water theft. They used the term *Pani Wadna* (breakage of canal) which was not in line with the government's concept of illegal manipulation of canal irrigation water.

Social factors

The area of research was predominantly agricultural and agriculture was the major source of income of the people. The changing social structure was generating its own norms and values and the norms and values provide social rationale for water theft. The factor of inclination towards theft of water was

the status fight for the acquisition of power, while the social indicators manipulate economic and technical factors in the activity of illegal withdrawal of Canal water.

Status (social position) which could be illustrated through the concept of *Izzat* and *Taqat*, while the value of *Izzat* and *Taqat* determines the social position or status of any person in the society and the concepts like *Izzat* and *Taqat* require its application to control the illegal theft of canal water that was the one of the sources to exert power or *Taqat*. *Taqatwar* (powerful) farmers of the village show their *Taqat* by withdrawing illegal water to fulfill their field's needs and to deprive their opponents from the access of water.

It was right that scarcity of water was the rationale for water theft, but there were many other ways to overcome the water shortage and expenditures of farmers in illegal withdrawal of water were far greater than the expenditure on other ways of irrigation. They bribed the irrigation department, risked the conflict and clash with the villagers and spend a lot on their social status. The research data shows that scarcity of water was only the lame excuse and underlying factor for illegal withdrawal of Canal water was a social not economic and technical problem.

Farmers cut the distributary, block the flow of water not for any technical problem, but their intention was the social contexts. Research data revealed the proposition that farmers withdraw water illegally just as to exert their *Taqat* over their opponents, while the blockage of water of the opponents due to social problem *Sharika* not due to shortage of water.

Social contexts, not only determined economic factor, but also technical factor. The social concepts like *Izzat*, *Taqat*, *Shariks* and *Haq* contributed directly to technical factors in the illegal manipulation of Canal water due to their good social position and *Talaqdari* and *Taqat*. The research data indicated that if the water flow was smoothly towards the fields of

influential farmers the flow of water was better in all the distributaries.

The irrigation department launched different campaigns to stop illegal withdrawal of water and water theft, but all the campaigns failed because of the ignorance of social and normative factors which were more important than any other factor. Irrigation department has a comprehensive administrative staff, but the problem persisted, harsh penalties and punishments also failed to stop water theft.

The above described circumstances illustrated that actual problem lies in normative system. Illegal withdrawal of Canal water has reduced to some extent after the introduction of social mobilization program by PIDA, because of involvement of farmers.

Role of Irrigation Department in illegal manipulation of water

The officials of irrigation department play an effective role in illegal taking of water. As already explained that it was due to contribution of different concepts, the officials were directly or indirectly involved in it at the level of SDO and Overseer and XEN who showed their inability to stop the theft of water due to different reasons, first was the political pressure, *talaqdars* (influential) usually used political pressure for the illegal withdrawal of water.

According to a SDO, when they caught anyone involved in the theft he was bailed out by the influential political leaders because of their links with the higher ranks in the irrigation department, while some of the officers also get bribe in shape of cash and kind. They were given wheat, dates, rice and cotton usually collected by the *Baidar* from the farmers and delivered to the officials.

A key informant told the researcher that in every *dera* (house) of an influential landlord, there were kept some of the cattle for SDO and overseers. The cattle were looked after by the farmers but their milk was sent to the involved officers/officials of the irrigation department, while the *Baidars* were usually acting as the paid agents of *talaqdars*. They give them a specific quantity of grains in every season which they called *seip* (payment) in return of their services, the payment was usually in the shape of kind.

Though the social and economic factors were helping the influential people for getting illegal water but it looks appropriate to describe the triangle dimension of *talaqdari*, *taqat* and *izzat* which were the basic reasons for illegal withdrawal of Canal water.

The triangular concepts act in a reciprocal way, the illegal withdrawal of canal irrigation water was considered a powerful act and those who were involved in the activity were called *taqatwar* (powerful) based on their influence. The persons or groups who were successful in illegal withdrawal of canal irrigation water were considered *izzatdar* (honorable) in the society and for them social honor was more preferable than static honor.

Role of social contexts during water theft

The social factors have been described which play an important role while withdrawing water from the Canal for irrigators. The motivational contexts not only reciprocate with each other, but they also influence operational concepts which were necessary for illegal withdrawal of Canal irrigation water, while the operational contexts act under *Talaqdari*.

A *Talaqdar* uses his *Talaq* (relationships/influence) to withdraw water from the Canal; there was a hierarchical grading in *Talaqdari*, the farmers at the upper hierarchy have more access to draw water than the farmers at a lower

hierarchy but the hierarchical divisions were not permanent and stagnant. There was a fluctuation with relevance to time and location, while *Talaqdari* has its influence within and across the social boundaries.

Talaqdari was not only used in illegal withdrawal of canal water, but also in other matters by the village people, they exert it to escape from the charges of illegal withdrawal of canal water, but continue the illegal activity for their personal gain or to damage the socioeconomic status of their opponents.

There were certain factors which play an important role in the creation of *Talaqdari*, the first was kinship ties. In the village *Banbhan*, the kinship ties were very strong, while kinsmen were obliged from each other and were in practice to help out others, while caste loyalty was another element to generate *Talaqdari*.

The caste bounded people have a great sense of cooperation with their caste fellows. Research findings illustrate that caste distinction has played an important role in getting illegal water. Relationships with the officers of the Irrigation Department was also the major source of *Talaqdari*, while social distinction of family background and membership in local *Punchait* (local council to settle disputes) was also a major element in the acquisition of *Talaqdari*.

Moral justification of water theft

Both of the two factors were justified by the morality standard of the area, the morality standard has relevance to legal morality. The activity of water theft and illegal withdrawal from the canals was not considered a questionable crime. The farmers who were involved in the activity do not guilty because getting of water for their fields was their *Haq* (right) while getting water from the government's sources was not the violation of other rights as the water was provided for them to use.

Moreover, they said that when state is not fulfilling its commitment to facilitate water to the farmers according to their quota, then why we are forced to use less water than our share. Secondly, I observed that Irrigation Department is also involved in the illegal withdrawal of water. Irrigation Department's *bailder* and mates got a fixed share in the crops which they called *seip*. *Seip* is the payment of services to the occupational groups from the farmers. Legally, this *seip* to the irrigation employees is bribe, but both farmers and employees think it right.

Another justification for illegal withdrawal and water theft was explained by the village farmers was that when the construction and cleaning of the Canal was undertaken by the Irrigation Department, the farmer's services were also utilized for the purpose without any payment or incentives, therefore they deserved a required quantity of water to fulfill their agricultural needs without engaging in the unjust way of water distribution. According to the local farmers, the maintenance and cleanliness of the Canal with their participation was reciprocity, they provided services to the Irrigation department and in return they were given the right to use the Canal water for their fields. The phenomena explained, was a triangular network, which was operating in a very complex way.

Conclusion

The legitimacy of any social crime is defined through particular cultural context. This paper deals with how social and cultural factors are important in withdrawal of canal water through unfair means. In local cultural context, there are many reasons behind the illegal withdrawal of canal water. Generally the major reason behind the illegal withdrawal of water is considered the economic benefits, but the case here in the certain locale is quite different which is identified by the researcher during the study conducted. One at locale use unfair

means to get canal water not only for economic benefits, but also for that it will indicate his social power and honor in the society and knee down his enemy. When anybody gets illegal water of other and deprived his enemy from the canal water think that my enemy will come in my house and say in front of village council it will increase my social honor and dishonored his enemy.

The economic reason behind the water theft cannot be ignored. Demands of canal water are increasing because a lot of canal water is wasting due to mismanagement of the canal administration. So when peasants cannot get a proper share of water they do indulge in illegal ways to get water for their crops. Another interesting reason behind the story is that people think that the Government is not fulfilling their needs so we do harm government through the misuse of canal water. Canal officials are not working impartially. They are under the influence of the landlord class and give a maximum share to the landlords which become the social reference for others.

Moral justifications of water theft are a massive reason. People do not consider guilt to get illegal canal water, but they think that it is their social right, which helps them to enhance their social status. Canal authorities have been failed to stop illegal withdrawal of canal water because while they are making policies they ignored the socio-cultural factors. So it is need of time to highly consider the socio-cultural factors while policies are doing to control these issues either at the local or national level.

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