Rethinking Dialogic Narratives in Water Diplomacy

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Abstract: The proposed paper aims to emancipate, critique and broaden the notion of communication associated with diplomacy studies. The purpose is to advance the understanding that conceptualising dialogue as a method, technique and institution can be relevant to the broader discourse on diplomacy studies. Empirically the paper would focus on two narratives- The first is the meta-narrative, which primarily examines the issues, concerns and expectations of the state actors, and the second is the micro-narrative, which examine the impact of these negotiated agreements at local level, thus bringing the ecological, social and cultural concerns upfront. Thus, the objective of this article is to emancipate the understanding of communication challenge in water diplomacy, which is often confronted with competing narratives. By informing the concept of narratives with dialogue, the paper attempts to open conceptual space to engage with Asian epistemological traditions, which often employed dialogic techniques in/between narratives to further communication. The article proceeds in three sections. The first section focuses on the importance of communication on water diplomacy, highlighting the intersections between narratives and dialogue. The second section focus es on Ganges Water Treaty in South Asia (which was a state actor led initiative). Highlighting the limitations of this narrative, limitations of communication in water diplomacy are highlighted. In the third section, South Asian epistemological tradition is revis-

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ited to foreground the importance of dialogue in formulating narratives, which can address the communication challenge in transboundary water cooperation.

Keywords: Water diplomacy, Narratives, Dialogue, Buddhist Thought, Hindu Thought

Introduction

This article probes the centrality of narratives for facilitating water diplomacy. In recent years, terms such as 'water diplomacy', 'transboundary water governance', and 'transboundary water management' have been used interchangeably for examining cooperation over transboundary rivers. Given that there is always a challenge in reconciling ecological and cultural concerns, which emerge from the societal level, and security and economic concerns, which emerge at the statist level, there are two narratives of water diplomacy. The first is the meta-narrative, which primarily examines the issues, concerns, and expectations of the state actors, and the second is the micro-narrative, which examines the impact of these negotiated agreements at local level, thus bringing the ecological, social, and cultural concerns upfront. One of the primary reasons for these different views is the selective treatment given to the understanding and discussions around 'water', where ecological issues are not given due attention.

It is not an exaggeration to say that a lack of engagement between disciplines has led to an overuse of terms such as 'transboundary governance and management', leading to a lack of definitional clarity on what these terms actually mean for a dynamic discipline such as diplomacy studies. While an important corrective has been offered to reflect on the definitional aspects of these terms (Sehring et al. 2022; Keskinen et al. 2021), one can add that a primary reason is also the absence of discussions around research methods and water diplomacy. Methodological clarity makes a researcher aware of certain ontologies and epistemological questions, which in turn influence the direction of research. Given that in recent years a plurality of approaches to studying diplomacy has emerged (Pouliot and Cournet 2015, Dittmer and McConnell 2015), such debates and discussions need further deliberation in the context of transboundary water cooperation. While this article does not aim to address this very important aspect, which requires further research and discussion, for the purpose of this paper, it uses the definition offered by Sehring and Offutt (2022) to endow clarity on the term 'water diplomacy'. Sehring and Offutt define it as, 'deliberative political processes and practices of preventing, mitigating and resolving disputes over transboundary water resources and developing joint water governance arrangements by applying foreign policy means, embedded in bi-and/or multilateral relations beyond the water sector and taking place at different tracks and levels.' While this definition carries the danger of excluding specific non-state actors (non-governmental organisations and international non-governmental organisations) who

could play an important role in socialising state actors through non-linear network-based strategies rather than linear tracks which is evident in multi-track diplomacy, it does capture some critical social, political, ecological, and economic aspects associated with meta- and micro-narratives of water diplomacy. Thus, given the tensions between meta and micro aspects associated with water diplomacy, and to tease out different narratives which emerge from the societal and statist responses, the definition offered by Sehring and Offutt is useful. This is because it looks at water as a function of diplomacy in terms of resolving disputes over transboundary rivers and also engages with efforts made by both countries towards developing joint water governance (more multi-scalar and multi-layered in nature, including river basin organisations) or management institutions (more technical in nature, including treaties with infrastructural solutions which focus on dams and barrages).

The primary purpose behind this article is twofold, first, to identify narratives that have emerged as a reaction to a bilateral treaty negotiated between two countries, and second, to understand the reasons for the success or limitations of this bilateral engagement. As an example, the Ganges Water Treaty (GWT) is studied. The case of the GWT is unique in several ways. First, it illustrates the limits of diplomatic engagement undertaken by state actors on the transboundary river and, second, it brings into focus some of the emergent debates associated with water diplomacy, transboundary water management, and governance, as most of these discussions were at their peak in the 1990s, when the treaty was signed. Significantly, the *post-facto* analysis of the treaty has been informed by some of the normative debates which have marked the broad contours of the international water policy context, which include social and ecological concerns.

Thus, the objective of this article is to emancipate the understanding of communication challenge in water diplomacy, which is often confronted by competing narratives. By informing the concept of narratives with dialogue, the paper attempts to open conceptual space to engage with Asian epistemological traditions, which have often employed dialogic techniques in/between narratives to further communication. The article proceeds in three sections. The first section focuses on the importance of communication in water diplomacy, highlighting the intersections between narratives and dialogue. The second section focuses on the GWT in South Asia (which was a state-actor-led initiative). Highlighting the limitations of these narratives, limitations of communication in water diplomacy are highlighted. In the third section, the South Asian epistemological tradition is revisited to foreground the importance of dialogue in formulating narratives which can address the communication challenge in transboundary water cooperation. This is significant in the case of the GWT, which will expire in 2026, and will require innovative modes of reflection and debate about reconciling multiple narratives.

Communication and Transboundary Water Cooperation

Communication is an important pillar to facilitate transboundary water cooperation. A central building block often considered as a sub-theme to meet the communication challenge is diplomacy. Significantly, communication has been defined as the essence of diplomacy. A scholar notes that, 'communication is to diplomacy as blood is to the human body. Whenever communication ceases, the body of international politics, the process of diplomacy, is dead, and the result is violent conflict' (Trans 1957, 8). However, communication has a rather parochial understanding in diplomatic studies as negotiation techniques are often employed as the primary method to take engagement forward. Thus, even though phrases like 'building trust, understanding, value creation, joint solutions' and so on are often used, negotiations are privileged over a more dialogic understanding. In this regard, Bisht and Ahmed (2021) have argued that dialogue as a technique, as distinct from negotiation, needs to be reckoned with, as dialogue is an effective precursor for negotiations. While the article emphasises the role of cultural performances as a useful means to meet the communication challenge in transboundary water studies, it specifically emphasises dialogic techniques with regard to the framings of water, the notion of community, and the use of multivocality, which can help to engage with the field of water diplomacy in an effective manner (Bisht and Ahmed 2021, 9–13).

This article takes this understanding further by focusing on how narratives can be made more cohesive. Narratives have been employed to understand how persuasion has and can be used in specific areas in international affairs. For instance, focusing on intertwined aspects of projection, rejection, and reception of narratives, Miskimmon et al. (2014) foreground the importance of narratives as a tool of strategic communication by highlighting how 'political actors attempt to create a shared understanding of the world, of other political actors, and of policy through the use of strategic narratives' (Miskimmon et al. 2014, 1). They categorise three types of narratives: narratives about the international system; narratives around the development of state policies; and narratives to rationalise the projection of a given identity. They argue that the actors who are able to align system, policy, and identity have a greater chance of influence. While there has not been much work undertaken on bridging the gap between these narratives, scholars have indeed talked about narrative power. For instance, Hagstrom and Gustafsson while developing the concept of narrative power note that narratives are likely to structure and exercise power over the subsequent discussion of issues as well as the policies adopted to deal with them (Hagstrom and Gustafsson 2019, 388). The relevant question for water diplomacy against this backdrop is how to generate narrative power over issues which are multi-scalar and multi-layered in nature and where the divide between micro- and meta-narrat-

ives is sharp. However, before one examines this question in some detail, it is important to understand the concept of narratives.

Derived from the Latin word *narrare*, which means to speak or tell, narratology is a branch of knowledge dealing with structure of narratives, their purpose, and conventions (Sadriu 2021, 2). Focusing on how stories are told to push political agendas and expand influence, narratology focuses on how specifically articulated causal explanations communicate a specific understanding of the world. While such understanding is useful in identifying the patterns and dominance of certain narratives vis à vis others, it does not focus much on how narratives can be constituted in a creative and inclusive manner. However, some work on narratives and communication has tried to bridge this gap, particularly around the larger theme of climate change (Marshall 2010; Bushell et al. 2016; Bevan et al. 2020). For instance, Bushell takes the argument of strategic narratives further and argues that 'Strategic narratives are the "public face" of strategy – a story, or system of stories that explain a strategy in a persuasive way' (p.7), and that, 'no matter how good a strategy is, in the absence of a narrative it will always struggle to gain traction and be effective' (p.7). Defined as an interface with the public, strategic narratives are purposive in nature and can have the potential to include multiple world views. They are also deliberately designed to have a coordinative and/or persuasive effect on the audience, allowing multiple frames to be a cohesive whole (Bevan 2020). As Jones and Radaeli (2015, 241) note,

> [N]arratives, are thus constituted through four specific criteria – (a) setting – this is the background space, which is informed by some less contested facts, which act as basic information (b) characters – these constitute the heroes (liberators), victims (the harmed) and villains (perpetrators), (c) the relationships between characters which often specify causality of actions and consequences and (d) moral – this refers to the normative ideas embedded in the narrative.

In order to address the problems associated with generalisability of narrative, the notion of content relativity is proposed as it is argued that contents cannot be generalisable across contexts, as culture and ideology (belief systems) play an important role in evoking the symbolic and emotive value of a specific narrative. Based on this, five aspects for constructing narratives are highlighted 1) social construction: narratives need to speak to many worlds, as perceptions and meanings of the world can differ and these meanings play an important role in giving life to public policy; (2) bounded relativity: meanings are often bound by contexts, and values and belief are a precondition for understanding how meanings translate; (3) structures of narratives: policy narratives are often shaped around specific structures reflective of common beliefs and perceptions; (4) simultaneity of levels: narratives are most effective

when they have a continuity across three levels: individuals (micro), groups and co-alitions (meso) and institutions and cultures (macro); and finally (5) the *homo narrans* model of the individual: this mode believes that individuals as boundedly rational beings often seek affirmation in groups, which is most often done in narrative form.

These arguments on strategic narratives are useful and can be insightful for constructing and explaining the power of strategic narratives. However, a question that remains unaddressed is what can make narratives more dialogic and inclusive in nature. This is particularly important, as narratives are often associated with power and an important means of strategic communication. Narratives in the form of water dialogues can play a significant role in formulating the meta-narrative on transboundary water governance. Through the use of narratives, water dialogues can act as a medium for facilitating communication between multiple stakeholders which can reach out not only to expert communities, and government representatives, but also the local stakeholders, who are the riverine communities that depend on the river banks for their immediate survival and livelihood needs. This holistic change not only requires one to refocus on the art of persuasion and communication through narratives, but also forces one to rethink how one would like to approach issues related to transboundary water which sit at the intersection of governance and diplomacy and demand multi-scalar interventions.

Narratives around water diplomacy are important because of the multiple meanings they carry for people situated on multiple scales and thus having different narratives about the water policies. While experts from different disciplines might bring specific insights to negotiated agreements, ordinary people might not understand the technicalities of negotiations between countries. However, they do experience the impact of negotiated agreements in terms of the effects that transboundary water management and governance policies have on their immediate livelihood and well-being. In this regard, dialogue between narratives can play a significant role in formulating the meta-narrative of water diplomacy and help in making the desired shift from transboundary management approaches (technical solutions) to transboundary governance approaches (social, ecological, and institutional solutions). This shift not only requires one to refocus on the art of persuasion and communication through narratives, but also forces one to rethink how one would like to engage with narratives related to transboundary rivers which sit at the intersection of governance and diplomacy, and therefore demand the scaling up and scaling down of the multiple meanings that embody social, economic, ecological, and political concerns. Such approaches not only require conceptual innovation but also methodological intervention. Asian epistemological tradition offers one such approach which is holistic in nature yet gives attention to sub-parts which inform this larger whole. This rela-

tional perspective is important because it is not atomistic in emphasising situated perspectives but instead helps one to focus on processes, that is, aspects related to interconnections and interactions between different constituent parts, which are a part of the larger whole. An example of this approach can be seen in how specific tactics and stratagems were constituted in early India.

Conceptually, to advance the argument on dialogues through narratives, therefore, I take my cue from two South Asian traditions, the Arthashastra tradition belonging to Hinduism and the Mahayana tradition belonging to Buddhism. While the former resorted to the use of 'upayas' (transactional means), the latter resorts to the use of 'upaya kaushal' (skilful means). Significantly, where both traditions employed tactics to persuade, manoeuvre, and transform the other using relational techniques, both of them used a narrative approach to communicate these ideas. It is significant to note the relational understanding in both the traditions is different. While in the former it was confined to relationship building and relationship drifting strategies, as the primary goal was to maintain order or manage conflict and maintain social and political order at the domestic and external level (system of states), in the latter, there is a transformational angularity, where the concept of dependent origination, or how the self-changes when it comes into contact with the other is highlighted. One can also say that while the former can be understood in terms of relational rationality, the latter can be termed as reflexive relationality. Where relational rationality is taking cognition of interdependence and interactions between social, ecological, and political systems, relational reflexivity is to also find an overlapping consensus on the significant insight that each approach has to offer. Before some of these arguments are examined in section three in more detail, it will be useful to look at the meta and micro narratives on the GWT.

Narrative on Transboundary Water Cooperation

The GWT is a water sharing treaty signed between India and Bangladesh in 1996. Since 1996, bilateral relations between both countries have matured and have indeed witnessed a positive trajectory. However, when it comes to water diplomacy discourse, they have remained hostage to structures and patterns which have an enduring impact on state perceptions and interests. One of the primary reasons for this is the historical background of the GWT. In the 1950s, India decided to construct a dam on the Ganges River, which raised concerns for downstream Bangladesh (East Pakistan at that time). While talks were being held between both countries and India had recognised the Ganges River as an international river, formal negotiations started in the 1970s, when Bangladesh became an independent state. Significantly, in the 1970s, both countries had realised that there was not enough water in the Ganges to meet the needs of both countries, and a compromise had to be negotiated.

Against this backdrop, the main issues that dominated the concerns of both countries were exploring ways to augment the water of the Ganges and the allocation of a fixed amount to Bangladesh from the Ganges. There has been no breakthrough on ways to augment the flows of the Ganges to date. However, the countries did find common ground for addressing the second concern. As a result, there are two distinct narratives – the meta-narrative of the state, which considers the Ganges Water Treaty a successful case of negotiations to find a common ground, and an alternative micro-narrative, which believes that the treaty has not been cognisant of ecological and social concerns.

Analysing the Ganges Water Treaty through a narrative approach is useful because it draws attention to the nature of both meta- and micro-narratives on transboundary water cooperation in India-Bangladesh relations. In the last twenty years, published peer- reviewed literature on the GWT, statements of diplomats and ministers, and news coverage in both mainstream and alternate media helps to capture these multiple narratives of the GWT.

Understanding the GWT: Meta and Micro Narratives

India and Bangladesh share fifty-four transboundary rivers. At present, transboundary water cooperation discussions have revolved around three rivers, the Ganges, Teesta and Barak which constitute three major river systems shared by both countries, that is, the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna (both Teesta and Barak are tributaries of Brahmaputra and Meghna respectively). Both countries have been contemplating broadening talks to other rivers, such as Manu, Muhuri, Khowai, Gomti, Dharla, Dudhkumar and Feni, where India and Bangladesh have greater scope for collaboration, particularly on the multiple uses of water.

Communication over the GWT was held against the backdrop of protracted differences over the Farakha barrage, which India was planning to build upstream. The barrage would enable India to divert the water of the Ganges to River Hooghly, to make its Calcutta port navigable. In 1971, when Bangladesh became an independent country, both countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to establish a Joint Water Commission to resolve outstanding water disputes between them. The road to the 1996 treaty was thus not easy, and three *ad hoc* agreements were signed in 1977, 1982 and 1985, prior to the 1996 Agreement. The meta-narrative of the GWT can be understood by looking at the characters and relations between primary negotiators.

For instance, if one looks at the characters, one of the protagonists was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first prime minister of Bangladesh, who intervened to break the deadlock by proposing the idea of an interim agreement. Unfortunately, Rahman

was assassinated three months later, and, as a result, the good will generated by the leaders of both countries was undone. Indian Prime Minister Indra Gandhi, who headed the Congress Party, refused to negotiate with the incumbent prime minister, Zia ur Rehman, who belonged to another party (Bangladesh National Party). It was only in 1979, when the Janata Party came to power in India that Prime Minister Morarji Desai restarted negotiations over the GWT. Two MoUs were signed as part of the broader vision which the Janata Party had of neighbourhood diplomacy. Known as 'beneficial bilateralism', water was considered a sub-part for rejuvenating bilateral ties between India and Bangladesh. The interim agreements signed over the Ganges waters strengthened bilateralism as a key pillar for taking water sharing forward and also introduced a minimum guarantee of 80 percent share of water to Bangladesh under any circumstances. However, this victory was short lived. The Congress Party came to power and under the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi the countries signed a new MoU in 1985. This MoU borrowed all the articles and clauses of the previous treaties except for the 80-percent guarantee clause to Bangladesh. As a result, the treaty lay dormant for the next ten years, with no mutually agreed solution coming forth. Party ideologies thus played an important role in water diplomacy (Hossain 1998; Salman and Uprety 1998; Swain 1993; Nishat and Faisal 2001).

However, apart from party ideologies, relations between individual actors and the party's approach towards neighbourhood policy also played important parts. Water became a sub-set of diplomacy, and social and ecological issues, which can stem from multiple interventions on transboundary rivers, were not taken into consideration. The treaty from the very outset was very issue-focused, where the specific interests of India and Bangladesh were negotiated based on the immediate needs they served. The political leadership emphasised the technical side of negotiations. This pattern was repeated in 1996, when the new prime minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina decided to privilege bilateralism as her primary foreign policy objective. This desire was facilitated by a newly formed United Front government in India too, which was led by Deve Gowda. Further, there was a major shift in diplomatic style as Prime Minister Hasina brought on board Jyoti Basu, the chief minister of West Bengal, which being an upper riparian border state was an important stakeholder in water diplomacy discussions (Pandey 2014, 2012; Hassan 2019; Zeitoun and Mirumachi 2001; and Thomas 2012).

The treaty thus was finally signed for a period of thirty years (1996–2026). Though the treaty was criticised by some quarters for not including a minimum guarantee clause, there are provisions within the treaty that guarantee water between March 1 and March 10, and guarantee 90 percent of the water flow pending review every five years. The treaty also talks about creating a joint committee, consisting of an equal

number of members from each country. This committee is also empowered to settle any difference of opinion on treaty implementation. In case the joint commission fails, issues are to be transferred to the joint commission established in 1972. The mandate of the Joint Rivers Commission is to coordinate on issues related to floods and cyclones. So far thirty-eight meetings have taken place, and issues have broadened to looking at issues of drinking water, supply schemes, protection of river banks through embankments, dredging of rivers, river linking projects, dam projects, and review of Article 1, which calls for assessing the impact of the Ganges Water Treaty. Thus, the GWT reflects a piecemeal issue-centric approach, where one of the primary goals has been augmenting the supply of water. The treaty followed a path-dependent trajectory, where leadership at the highest level played a key role in framing the argument. The official narrative maintains that the treaty is one of the most successful water sharing agreements in South Asia. This narrative has been disputed by some scholars (Rahman et al. 2019; Mirza 2002; Islam et al. 2013).

Micro Narratives

It will be useful to understand the alternative narratives that have emerged in the public domain in the last twenty years. The reason that these have been as termed 'micro-narratives' is that they offer representational concerns from the ecological and social perspective. While the published literature on the GWT reveals both these narratives for explaining and analysing the GWT, in this section societal and ecological narratives have been privileged.

For instance, in the ecological narrative scholars have brought the hydrological focus centre-stage, and the emphasis is on understanding connections in the basin. In this narrative, the focus on the Anthropocene[2] delta and basin becomes an important vantage point of analysis, where integrated development of the basin's biophysical and socio-economic challenges are emphasised. Multiple ways of integrated development have been suggested through the linking of rivers with a cross country barrage complex which can give meaningful direction to a multi-lateral/bilateral approach between basin countries and address issues related to water augmentation and water supply (Colombi and Bradnok 2002). This, as it is argued, could enhance holistic development and help in synergising national interests, people's well-being, and regional prosperity, and ensuring water, food, and energy security in the region (Rasul 2015). Biswas (2008) argues that in the long term the basin-centric approach

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2 'Anthropocene delta' is a term used by Tompkins et al. to emphasise how human interventions have changed the delta and to understand the relationship between humans and physical systems. This term can also be transposed to highlight similar impacts that river basins have witnessed.

could take care of sedimentation, flooding, riverbank soil-erosion, and the supply and demand side of water management, along with developing waterways networks and catchment management.

Similarly, in the social narrative Ahmed (1985) has shed light on state-society relations and has teased out limitations that often accompany participatory approaches under the garb of federalism. In order to illuminate social aspects, scholars have also emphasised a delta-centred approach, which focuses on how flooding, erosion, cyclones, salinisation, and water logging are increasing with changing climate and anthropogenic developments and impacting the lives of the people at the local scale (Rahman et al. 2020). Rasul (2015), for one, acknowledges protection of upstream water resources, forests and soils in mountain areas as primary steps which need attention. He also draws attention to the international guideline of the World Commission of Dams, which has reflected on social, ecological, and economic tensions. Recognising the social and climate risks in Brahmaputra River Basin, Pradhan et al. (2021) offer sustainable management options to deal with the economic and ecological tensions, which they argue can only be achieved through an integrated water resource management approach which recognises the linkages between upstream areas and downstream regions at macro (river basin), meso (catchment), and micro (local) scales. The authors stresss the need for a well-established knowledge network, a coordinated approach to capacity building, the formulation of joint adaptation projects, a mechanism for high-level coordination, and the creation of an adaptation portal. These building blocks, they argue, can be further strengthened by anchoring the modalities of cooperation to the framework Agreement on Cooperation for Development between India and Bangladesh, signed by both countries on September 6, 2011 (Pradhan et al. 2021). The social approach has also found voice through scholars, communities and international, national, and local organisations working on the political ecology of water, who have taken conversations further by focusing on nature-based solutions (Sinha et al. 2018). These studies are important interventions for understanding the ramifications that negotiated water agreements have for ecological and social concerns, which can stem from multiple scales.

Narrative Analysis

What are the reasons for these multiple dichotomies and is there a possibility of having an inclusive narrative of water diplomacy? Taking a cue from Jones and Radaeli (2019), the narrative of the GWT can broadly be analysed under several headings: Social Construction – all narratives get their meaning in the context they are embedded in. Perhaps it is for this reason that that the political narratives have offered the most robust explanation for the GWT; Bounded Relativity, which has pushed the discourse on GWT towards engineering and technocratic solutions, given the

broad mandate of the legal frameworks that govern it. This also means that often ecological and social dimensions are overlooked. Meanwhile the structure of narratives often run in opposite directions, where the official narrative considers the GWT a success story, and the alternative narratives consider it a compromise solution, as it does not pay heed to ecological and social aspects. There is a lack of congruence of narratives at multiple levels, which is often expressed in the criticisms which are directed at the GWT. Finally, the *homo narrans* model suggests that the geopolitical connotations and the stakes it has for different party leaders often means looking at water sharing in a siloed, compartmentalised approach. What comes across is a fractured narrative focusing on a technical approach, bereft of social and ecological sensibilities. This narrative analysis is also instructive of the limitations around discussions on water diplomacy. It neglects discussions on 'water' that have been informed by an ecosystem perspective, which emphasises a holistic rather than a reductionist approach (Bandopadhyay 2018).

Putting Narratives in Perspective – The Dialogic Technique

In order to foreground a holistic approach over a reductionist approach, I draw upon insights from the Arthashastra and Mahayana tradition and explore ways in which narratives have been employed to communicate effectively. The use of narratives in early South Asian religions and philosophical literature was a popular medium through which certain key messages were delivered. However, one of the significant insights that stems from this analysis is the extraordinary ways in which the meta-narratives were braided with other multiple narratives. This not only made the narrative congruent but also showed how dialogic techniques helped to mediate differences between narratives, and how, when, and why this mediation occurred (Black and Patton 2016). A significant analytical tool that has stemmed from this analysis is the use of mirrors, puzzles, and echoes between sub-tales and the main story and between the sub-tales themselves. Significantly, the sub-tales reinforce such echoes through back-and-forth framings and multiple tellings to numerous audiences. From this perspective, use of dialogues between narratives becomes an important device in terms of framing and structuring texts an aspect which has been taken forward by scholars like Laurie Patten and Brian Black (2016). What also comes across through such analysis is the importance of authoritarial frames, inner frames, and outer frames, which are useful in weaving meta-narrative with other narratives. This holistic yet relational approach is an important methodological intervention of the Hindu and Buddhist tradition.

Thus, focusing on ways the narrative approach is employed by Hindu and Buddhist classical texts can be useful in constructing narratives. While the former is known for

texts like Mahabharata, Ramayana, Hitopdesha, and Panchatantra, the latter is known for the famous Jataka stories. Both traditions have a main narrative, which is broken by the recounting of multiple additional stories. These ancillary stories, or sub-tales, reinforce certain echoes through back-and-forth framings and are told to various audiences in multiple ways. Thus, what is important is to understand how different dialogue levels are created and intertwined with the larger frame structure, which is the authoritarial frame. Thus, if one looks at the great Indian epic Mahabharata, there is an outer frame, which is the primary narrative or the first level of the narrative. The second level entails how this main narrative is sustained. The third level takes multiple dips into the outer frame and establishes a direct conversation between the authoritarial frame and the third frame. What comes across through this approach is the importance of a meta-commentary in the narrative form that is indispensable to the narrative architecture. In fact, the meta-commentary also becomes the prime point to direct the congruence of the meta-narrative and micro-narrative. The second level is the main narrative, which in a way sustains and informs the primary narrative. The third is the outer frame, which reveals how the story of the primary frame is heard or felt by the participants. The outermost frame cannot access the actual narrative but is felt with immediacy in relation to the course of narration in the authoritarial and inner frame. In the domain of diplomacy, however, strategic or policy clarity is needed, for applying a narrative approach to specific issue areas. Examples from the traditions would help in understanding this.

For example, such an approach is evident in techniques employed by the narrative style embraced by classical traditions, which emerged in early India. Understanding it using upayas in Arthashastra tradition and upaya kaushal in the Mahayana tradition can become an interesting starting point. Upayas in Arthashastra emerge as a genre speaking to non-verbal communication and can be further classified as a relationship-building strategy and relationship-drifting strategy. Primarily conveyed by sama (reconciliation), dana (gifts), bheda (causing dissent), and danda (use of force), the former two were means to bridge differences, and the latter two were used as a means to accentuate differences and outmanoeuvre the other. While upayas was the authoritarial frame specifying means through which one could create social and political order[3], the inner frame was communicated through the sadgunya theory (six measures of foreign policy), which were also non-verbal relationship-building

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3 For an analysis on the strategic themes in Arthashastra and the importance of order as the philosophical and political base of text, see Bisht 2020.

and relationship-drifting strategies[4]. The outer frame, however, was communicated through the use of stories and taken up in a more elaborate manner in Hitopdesha and Pancatantra, written and composed in a narrative form to communicate strategic wisdom through the use of stories. These messages, however, were informed by the vision of the authoritarial frame, which could resonate with the sensibilities of people in the outer frames.

In the Mahayana tradition (Pye 2003), however, upaya kaushal has been elucidated through the narrative form and can be appropriately understood through the doctrine of skilful means. By skilfully using the authoritarial frame, the inner frame and the outer frame, it sheds light on how constructing narratives by employing dialogic techniques can respond to the communication challenge. In the Jatakas for instance, the authoritarial frame is the larger frame, where Buddha rises from his meditation, ready and confident to share insights on his teaching. The inner frame is the dialogue between Shari Putra (a wise boddhisattava) and Buddha, which reinforces the extraordinariness of skilful means, as it conveys the importance of inner change or change in perceptions to respond to questions of life. The techniques employed here are a primary guide to be more reflective, so that one can adopt a transformational approach. The outer frame are the sravakas and pratekya buddha (ordinary people) who are hearers of the teaching and can attain enlightenment through faith alone. For them, not understanding but belief is important, and this belief is generated by Buddha through the use of narratives, which is also the embodiment of highest wisdom. Clearly trust in the primary protagonist, who is the Buddha, but communication of the trust becomes an important foundation.

Drawing from these insights, how can this methodological innovation help in illuminating ways for not only crafting narratives, but also braiding other multiple narratives? In other words, how can the authoritarial frame, be woven with the inner and outer frames? The policy implications from this philosophical perspective are significant for rethinking and rewriting the meta-narratives of water diplomacy, and raise significant questions related to the nature of framings of the authoritarial frame, which is key in guiding narratives or perspectives which emerge from inner and outer frames. It needs to be mentioned here that the authoritarial frame is not an authoritarian frame, but has legitimacy associated with it. For the authoritarial frame to be legitimate, its resonance with the other narratives that emerge from multiple scales and levels is important. In the current context legitimacy of the authorit-

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4 These included sandhi (creating peace treaties), vigraha (policy of hostility), yana (declaring war), asana (doing nothing), samsraya (taking shelter), and dvaidhibhava (dual policy: war with one and peace with the other). Significantly, the strategic objective of the six measures of foreign policy was also defined as maintaining order or balance in the international system of states.

arial frame cannot be hinged on just technical and political aspects, as social and ecological aspects to form an essential criterion. Based on these insights, the following insights can be helpful for reconciling the statist and societal narratives as they have emerged in GWT.

Narratives and Dialogues Between Frames

Revisiting the GWT through the Authoritarial, Outer and Inner Frames, one feels that if one searches for the relevance of the authoritarial framework, the nature of meta-narrative and the inclusive message it puts forth becomes important. If this is not done, the outcome as the present case reflects, will be a fractured narrative. The Joint River Commission established in 1972 to deliberate on issues of shared transboundary rivers and the GWT of 1996 need to be seen in this context and revisited and made inclusive of the societal and ecological narrative. An inclusive policy framework which can be resonant with the inner and outer frameworks becomes significant for a coherent strategy. The inner frame suggests that conversations, discussions, and debates with expert stakeholders from both countries become important for water diplomacy. Joint fact-finding committees, informal interactions and observations stemming from these joint fact-finding committees will be significant for setting and also informing the context. The interface of policy-science dialogues becomes important here. The third frame, the outer frame, includes the reality check of these discussions by juxtaposing them with the lived problems of communities who share the brunt of water diplomacy. Consultation with civil society, which includes informal groups, formal non-governmental organisations, and international non-governmental organisations, becomes important in this context. Formulating narratives in consultation with community-building organisations and grass-roots organisations can be an elemental and continuous aspect of reviewing and updating treaties. Significantly, in the last few decades, civil society mobilisation in South Asia has opened up space for such narratives and dialogues. However, for all this to happen, the Authoritarial frame needs attention. This takes one back to the definitional aspects of water diplomacy which was mentioned in the introduction.

Conclusion – Revisiting Water Diplomacy

Thus, the link between water diplomacy and transboundary water governance and management is important as it brings together multiple narratives which are associated with transboundary rivers. One can say that water diplomacy is the overarching framework which could shape the direction of treaties either as transboundary water management practices or transboundary water governance practices. The former is more about technical solutions; the latter is about institutional and multi-scalar approaches. What also becomes evident through the above discussion is the import-

ance of rethinking narratives on issues which are multi-scalar and multi-layered in nature. Identifying the authoritarial, outer, and inner frames can help one move from water management to water governance. This is important for having inclusive water diplomacy, which can go a long way in improving diplomatic relations between states.

What one needs, therefore, is to focus and develop a meta-narrative of water diplomacy, which takes cognisance of multiple narratives. Such narratives, when structured around the scale of a river basin, can help in addressing issues of transboundary water cooperation. This is particularly significant in the backdrop of the GWT, which will expire in 2026 and requires contemplation and reflection on how to take bilateral cooperation on shared water resources forward. Dialogic narratives can definitely be a way forward, and social and ecological narratives can play an important role in rethinking the meta-narrative on water diplomacy.

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