



WATER AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

**Jeremy J. Schmidt, Water: Abundance, Scarcity and Security
in the Age of Humanity (New Delhi: Sage, 2018),
pages xxii and 308. Rs.995.**

DR. VIPUL SINGH

Department of History, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Delhi, India.



Article History

Published on : 9 March 2020

Winston Churchill after his visit to Lake Victoria in Africa in 1908 wrote: “So much power running to waste... what fun to make the immemorial Nile begin its journey by diving into a turbine”.¹ His words reflect the predominant attitude of political leaderships towards water in the twentieth century. Jeremy J.Schmidt’s *Water: Abundance, Scarcity and Security in the Age of Humanity* surveys through the thoughts of late nineteenth and early twentieth century water philosophers John Wesley Powell, WJ McGee, David Lilienthal, Gilbert White, and Aldo Leopold. Other than this, his book captured my imagination for two reasons. First, he very skillfully translates regional pattern to global scale. Secondly, he underlines how the very idea of considering water resource as a ‘neutral category’ has allowed water managers and policy makers to orient water use decisions.

Droughts have become recurrent now a days all around the world, and climate scientists look at these unruly behaviours of nature as result of climate change. Jeremy Schmidt begins his book with 1977 California drought, when Luna Leopold, the first chief hydrologist of US was requested to address the issue, and he came up with solution – ‘reverence for rivers’ and ‘water management’. The book takes a diametrically opposite position, and argues that much of the water problems being faced by the world are the outcome of the ‘philosophy of water management’. In order to prove his point, the author traces the idea of governance to early twentieth century when water management and conservation of W.J.McGee became very popular.

CONTACT Dr. Vipul Singh ✉ vipulsingh.history@gmail.com 📍 Department of History, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Delhi, India.



© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Enviro Research Publishers.

This is an Open Access article licensed under a Creative Commons license: Attribution 4.0 International (CC-BY).

Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12944/CRJSSH.3.1.02>

McGee explicitly propagated that water is 'a resource' (79). Gradually, people of the United States were convinced about the need to bring resources under the watch of the state. It all started from the governance of land and forest, and gradually water too began to be quantified and controlled. A general formula for governing water became 'explicit in global water governance a century later' (88). So as opposed to the globally accepted idea among the hydrologists about managing water, this book shows that many of the water problems are the outcome of a philosophy of water management. Schmidt traces the origin of the philosophy of water management to 1885 when it was initially articulated through Charles Lyell's identification of a planetary condition since the last Ice age as the Holocene.

Schmidt's central argument revolves around the twenty first century idea of Anthropocene popularised by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer. The core thesis of Anthropocene is that humans and their activities have affected nature over the last two centuries or so. Although Anthropocene came into existence as a comparative analysis of the geological time scales and to distinguish it from Holocene, wherein humans are also seen as significantly altering the environment, but as a corollary to this new understanding was a gradual push to quantify the impacts of human activity on nature. Thus, the very conceptualizations of Anthropocene had set a narrative of quantification from which the environmental historians could not escape. They have inadvertently got involved into 'interdisciplinary scientific networks' that understood water also as part of the Earth system (12). The narrative of 'normal water' first addressed that water was 'once abundant', has now 'become scarce' because of mismanagement, and that water is now become essential to be managed to avoid interstate conflict, for human development and health (41). While arguing about anthropogenic or human induced changes the Anthropocene theoretically emphasizes that individuals and states owe a collective responsibility for the future of the world. Conceptually, the implicit proposition is that the same force that previously brought about unintended changes in nature could be regulated to create a world for the generations to come. In the same vein, Jeremy Schmidt recounts how water also began to be seen as a resource. Since resources often are considered to be belonging to the state, so water like any other resources is also considered as a thing to be managed. But while we do so, it affects our 'attitudes towards governing people'(12).

The book draws on James Scott's *Seeing Like a State* to suggest that 'high modernism' transformed nature into natural resources. Scott has cautioned at such adoptions and says that it is 'a desire with a fatal flaw'. Pre-modern understanding of water came under the calculating eye of bureaucracy, which instituted 'new forms of accounting based on scientific rationality' (28). Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was the watershed moment of 'high modernism' when construction of dams and the generation of electricity were seen as significant, and 'science of water supply was increasingly aligned with the science of money' (114). Schmidt shows how TVA became a model for adoption in terms of water management all around the world. The model was so influential that it began to be regarded as the blueprint for all the international watershed programmes. The author also writes how TVA presented a model before the world, specially the developing world, that their abundant water could be used as an asset. Its main thrust was on supply-side water management because it would 'provide material corollary' and opportunity to 'international financial backers to extract rents from the loans needed to build them' (114). He says that David Lilienthal travelled to different developing nations to promote this new 'American liberalism'(114). That is why among many other travels in 1951, 'Mr. TVA', as Lilienthal was nicknamed, also visited the Indus Basin that was a bone of contention between India and Pakistan, and he proposed that the TVA model could be applied 'to prevent political crisis' (111). During cold war years, the United States and the Soviet Union were deeply engaged in including more and more developing nations of the world into their league for which dams seemed most fruitful'. The United States promoted TVA model and funded many dam constructions of Asian and South American countries through institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Thus, dams not only allowed international financial backers to extract interests from the loans given to build them, through it attempts were also made to 'outbid all the social ruthlessness of the Communists' (108). Very soon economists, engineers, agronomists, and planners, who had served in the TVA, the U.S. Department

of Agriculture, or the Department of the Treasury moved to the United Nations, the Food and Agriculture Organization, or US aid, bringing their experience and ideas with them. Techne were deployed by the state to suppress metis i.e. the skills and knowledge acquired through many years of practice. The ill effects of dams began to be felt all around the world very soon.

Another significant personality who transformed the understanding of water management in the United States and later other parts of the world is Gilbert F. White, who believed that other than supply side management of water, demand dynamics are also important. With the UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) was 'linked to water scarcity' (155). It became 'hegemonic in global development discourse' (160) and was institutionalised all around the world. It happened as water increasingly became an 'economic good' (150).

In the last section of his book Jeremy Schmidt brings us back to the issue of Anthropocene, and hopes that we forget to see water as a resource. He suggests ways we can change the dominant narrative to tackle today's water problems. He gives example of Aldo Leopold, who saw the resources, conservation and human relationships to the environment differently. For Leopold, the 'land' was not just land in literal sense of the term, but included 'waters, plants and animals', and 'everything assembled within the category of "land"' (216). Leopold thought that we could manage all these systems, but it was also essential that every part of the ecological system from weeds to plants was conserved. Schmidt advocates for Leopold's ecological thinking in which all the species and fauna were 'entitled to share the land with us' (218).

The book emphasises on the line of thought that why social scientists should refuse to think of water as only a resource. Unless they refuse the notion of water as a resource and as a neutral category, there are bound to be propositions of water abundance, scarcity, security and governance (229). Schmidt has used huge variety of source materials and his book is thus very engaging. It will be of interest to scholars working in the area of environmental history, specially water history.