

Imaginative geographies of downstream: Pakistan, India, and the Indus

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This paper analyzes the mutual evolution of rivers and nations/states through the lens of diplomatic history. I engage the imaginative geographies and critical hydropolitics literatures to interpret archival, diplomatic and legal documents related to the Indus river dispute between Pakistan and Indian state elites in the 1950s. My sources are produced by, and revealing of, the socio-geopolitical world inhabited by state elites. “State elites” refers to social groups who implement power through affiliation with the state apparatus; in the case of Pakistan, it refers specifically to the non-elected imperially trained personnel of the Pakistani state apparatus, or what sociologist Hamza Alavi labeled the “military-bureaucratic oligarchy”. I argue that state elites’ imaginative geographies of the downstream condition, or of being-downstream, significantly shaped two vital historical and political ecological processes. These were: the strategic fashioning of an official Pakistani nationalism in geopolitical context, and the engineered hydrology of the Indus river system itself. Following recent historical research into the continuities and ruptures between colonial and postcolonial river development, my analysis demonstrates how Pakistani state elites drew on, reformulated, and rescaled existing imperial-era imaginative geographies in such a way that the Indian state became Pakistan’s relationally defined, hydraulic upstream other.