www.gfprjournal.com
GFPR
GLOBAL FOREIGN POLICIES REVIEW

ISSN-P : 2788-502X
ISSN-E : _2788-5038

GLOBAL FOREIGN POLICY REVIEW (GFPR)

VOL. IX ISSUE II, SPRING (JUNE-2026)

# GFPR

## GLOBAL FOREIGN POLICY REVIEW

HEC-RECOGNIZED CATEGORY-Y

HumanityPublications
sharing research
www.humapub.com
US | UK | Pakistan

DOI (Journal): 10.31703/gfpr
DOI (Volume): 10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX)
DOI (Issue): 10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-II)

Double-blind Peer-review Research Journal
www.gfprjournal.com

Humanity Publications (HumaPub)
www.humapub.com
Doi: https://dx.doi.org/10.31703

# Title: Collective Memory of Rivers and Dispossession: Activism in the Global South

## Abstract

This article analyzes the role of collective memory in shaping mobilization for river protection in Peru and Pakistan. The question around which the discussion revolves is: how do riverine communities remember their past with their rivers when they are diverted, dammed, and polluted? This paper brings two cases from Pakistan-administered Kashmir and *Iquitos*, Peru. In both cases, local and indigenous communities remember their rivers with memories of losses of their interaction with the rivers. Drawing on Halbwachs' work on collective memory and the emerging debate on riverhood, the paper analyzes the data collected through ethnographic fieldwork along the River *Neelum* and the Amazon and *Nanay* Rivers in Peru. The comparison of both case studies shows that reasons to river degradation in both cases varies, but the political function of memory-based resistance is the same and comparable.

**Keywords:** Collective Memory, River Protection, Riverhood, Muzaffarabad, River Neelum, Iquitos, Amazon and Nanay Rivers, Peru

**Authors:**

**Wasif Qayyum:** (Corresponding Author)
Visiting Lecturer, National Institute of Pakistan Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.
(Email: wasifqayyum5@gmail.com )

**Pages:** 66-77
**DOI:**10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-II).08
**DOI link:** https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-II).08
**Article link:** https://gsrjournal.com/article/collective-memory-of-rivers-and-dispossession-activism-in-the-global-south
**Full-text Link:** https://gsrjournal.com/article/collective-memory-of-rivers-and-dispossession-activism-in-the-global-south
**Pdf link:** https://www.gssrjournal.com/jadmin/Auther/31rvIolA2.pdf

**Global Foreign Policies Review**

**p-ISSN**: 2788-502X **e-ISSN:** 2788-5038
**DOI(journal):**10.31703/gfpr
**Volume:** IX (2026)
**DOI (volume):**10.31703/gfpr.2025(IX)
**Issue:** II Spring (June-2026)
**DOI(Issue):** 10.31703/gfpr.2025(IX-II)

**Home Page**
www.gfprjournal.com
**Volume: IX (2026)**
https://www.gfprjournal.com/issue
**Issue: II-Spring (June-2026)**
https://www.gfprjournal.com/issue/9/2/2026
**Scope**
https://www.gfprjournal.com/about-us/scope
**Submission**
https://humaglobe.com/index.php/gfpr/submissions

**Scan the QR to visit us**

Humanity Publications (HumaPub)
www.humapub.com
Doi: https://dx.doi.org/10.31703

## Citing this Article

| | |
|---|---|
| **Article Serial** | 08 |
| **Article Title** | Collective Memory of Rivers and Dispossession: Activism in the Global South |
| **Authors** | Wasif Qayyum |
| **DOI** | 10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-II).08 |
| **Pages** | 66–77 |
| **Year** | 2026 |
| **Volume** | XI |
| **Issue** | II |

### Referencing & Citing Styles

| | |
|---|---|
| **APA** | Qayyum, W. (2026). Collective Memory of Rivers and Dispossession: Activism in the Global South. *Global Foreign Policies Review*, *9*(2), 66-77. https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-II).08 |
| **CHICAGO** | Qayyum, Wasif. 2026. "Collective Memory of Rivers and Dispossession: Activism in the Global South." *Global Foreign Policies Review* 9 (2):66-77. doi: 10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-II).08. |
| **HARVARD** | QAYYUM, W. 2026. Collective Memory of Rivers and Dispossession: Activism in the Global South. *Global Foreign Policies Review,* 9**,** 66-77. |
| **MHRA** | Qayyum, Wasif. 2026. 'Collective Memory of Rivers and Dispossession: Activism in the Global South', *Global Foreign Policies Review*, 9: 66-77. |
| **MLA** | Qayyum, Wasif. "Collective Memory of Rivers and Dispossession: Activism in the Global South." *Global Foreign Policies Review* 9.2 (2026): 66-77. Print. |
| **OXFORD** | Qayyum, Wasif (2026), 'Collective Memory of Rivers and Dispossession: Activism in the Global South', *Global Foreign Policies Review,* 9 (2), 66-77. |
| **TURABIAN** | Qayyum, Wasif. "Collective Memory of Rivers and Dispossession: Activism in the Global South." *Global Foreign Policies Review* 9, no. 2 (2026): 66-77. https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-II).08. |

Global Foreign Policies Review
ISSN-P : 2788-502x | DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-II).07 | ISSN-E : 2788-5038
www.gfprjournal.com

# Collective Memory of Rivers and Dispossession: Activism in the Global South

**Wasif Qayyum** (Corresponding Author)[1]

[1] Visiting Lecturer, National Institute of Pakistan Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.
(Email: wasifqayyum5@gmail.com)

## Abstract

This article analyzes the role of collective memory in shaping mobilization for river protection in Peru and Pakistan. The question around which the discussion revolves is: how do riverine communities remember their past with their rivers when they are diverted, dammed, and polluted? This paper brings two cases from Pakistan-administered Kashmir and *Iquitos*, Peru. In both cases, local and indigenous communities remember their rivers with memories of losses of their interaction with the rivers. Drawing on Halbwachs' work on collective memory and the emerging debate on riverhood, the paper analyzes the data collected through ethnographic fieldwork along the River *Neelum* and the Amazon and *Nanay* Rivers in Peru. The comparison of both case studies shows that reasons to river degradation in both cases varies, but the political function of memory-based resistance is the same and comparable.



**Keywords:** *Collective Memory, River Protection, Riverhood, Muzaffarabad, River Neelum, Iquitos, Amazon and Nanay Rivers, Peru*

## Introduction

Rivers around the world are being exposed to mega developmental projects from the States to meet economic ends at the cost of environmental degradation. These developments include hydel power projects, mining and poultry industries, bridges, reservoirs, etc., that not only deteriorate rivers but are also impacting the communities living along them. Mega infrastructural projects affect landscape change, displacement, and human-river relationships together, not separately. Across the literature, various studies show that dams, diversions, and urban megaprojects reengineer river flows and surrounding land while also disrupting livelihoods, cultural practices, place-based identities, and historical relationships to the rivers (Anderson et al., 2019; Boelens et al., 2023; Winemiller et al., 2016). Therefore, conceptualizing rivers as mere physical or hydrological entities is not enough; rather, they are widely discussed as an important part of social, cultural, ecological, and emotional relations.

For local and indigenous communities living along the rivers, rivers are not just a source of water—they are centers of memory, belonging, spirituality, childhood, livelihood and collective identity (Buenafe et al., 2024; Nowak et al., 2024). For instance, the Ganges in India is revered as sacred, while the Amazon in Latin America is central to the sacred cosmologies of the indigenous communities (Jackson et al., 2022; Kumar, 2017). Whenever rivers are dammed, polluted, or diverted, the loss is not only relevant to the river but also to communities, that lose their past relations, emotions, seasonal rhythms, and social spaces. These communities began experiencing the dual loss of their environment and the historically built cultural and emotional bonds that underpin their attachments to these rivers (Anderson et al., 2019; Jackson, 2021).

Existing scholarship on river defense movements discusses hydropower politics, water justice and indigenous environmental justice and argues that rivers become important sites of contestation between developmental agencies and local ecological relations (Boelens et al., 2023; Fox et al., 2017; Winemiller et al., 2016; Zwarteveen & Boelens, 2017). However, less attention has been paid to how collective memories of rivers

have become a resource through which riverine and indigenous communities narrate environmental loss, construct shared identities, and mobilise for river protection across geographically different contexts. Most studies focus either on single case studies or on the impacts of developments on rivers. This paper addresses this gap by bringing two cases from the Global South: The River *Neelum* in Pakistan and the *Nanay* and Amazon Rivers in Peru.

The comparison does not claim that both contexts are identical. In *Muzaffarabad,* central ecological disruption is related to the hydropower project that diverted the river, whereas in *Iquitos*, the prominent cause of river degradation is illegal mining in the river. This research is exploring how riverine communities have interacted with their rivers over time?. How have developments on and along rivers impacted those relationships? And how are collective memories mobilising communities for river defence? In doing so, the paper's contribution is at three levels. Firstly, it uses collective memory for river activism as a central analytical lens. Secondly, the paper treats 'riverhood' not as limited to river communing but as a phenomenon of lived experiences.. Thirdly, it compares cases from the Global South and shows that collective memories of rivers are not confined to the local, but their political functions are translocal. In these cases, memories are not merely collections of the past; rather, they can be used to name contemporary ecological injustice and to reimagine future river protection struggles in the Global South.

## Theoretical Framework: Collective Memory, Riverhood, and Environmental Justice

This paper uses collective memory as a central theoretical lens. According to Maurice Halbwachs (1992), memory is not something stored in an individual's past; rather, it is organized through the shared experiences of a social group. Riverine communities, when sharing something about the rivers, never share their personal experiences; they narrate a shared past in which river, livelihood, childhood, spirituality, seasonal rhythms, and collective identity are included. That is why river memories hold political importance: they create awareness of what the river used to be, what it has become, and what needs to be restored.



Collective memory is closely linked to place attachment. Place attachment refers to the emotional, cognitive, and social bonds that develop between people and a particular environment. It is fundamentally defined as the cognitive-emotional bond that forms between individuals and their important settings, emerging as a common human experience with significant implications for well-being (Escalera-Reyes, 2020; Scannell & Gifford, 2017; Velasco & Sutton, 2025). With rivers, these attachments are built through repeated everyday practices such as fetching water, sitting along the riverbank, fishing, bathing, travelling, praying, telling stories, and experiencing seasonal changes. When the rivers were degraded, these attachments have also been disturbed. For riverine communities, the disturbances are not merely ecological damages, but a threat to their shared way of life along the rivers.

The concept of riverhood deepens this discussion. According to Boelens et al. (2023), riverhood does not treat rivers as commodities or resources; rather, it provides a framework for understanding rivers as socio-natural entities. Riverhood helps us understand that rivers are embedded in human and non-human relations, their cultural meanings, ecological flows and political struggles. In this paper, riverhood is combined with collective memories, where memories explain how riverine communities live, feel, and remember rivers, whereas riverhood focuses on why rivers cannot be limited to a material being or a water channel.

Building on this, environmental justice, as conceptualized by Schlosberg (2004), extends beyond distributive equity to encompass recognition, contribution, and capabilities. For riverine communities, justice is not limited to access to water or to compensation in the form of land and cash; it is also seeking the recognition of their memories, cultural meanings, and ecological concerns (Chaves & Weißermel, 2024; Katic et al., 2026). In the cases of Pakistan and Peru, the primary demands of local and indigenous communities are not to treat rivers as sites of infrastructure; rather, they must be seen as living social-ecological beings with which people hold long-lasting relations.

## Case Study Context

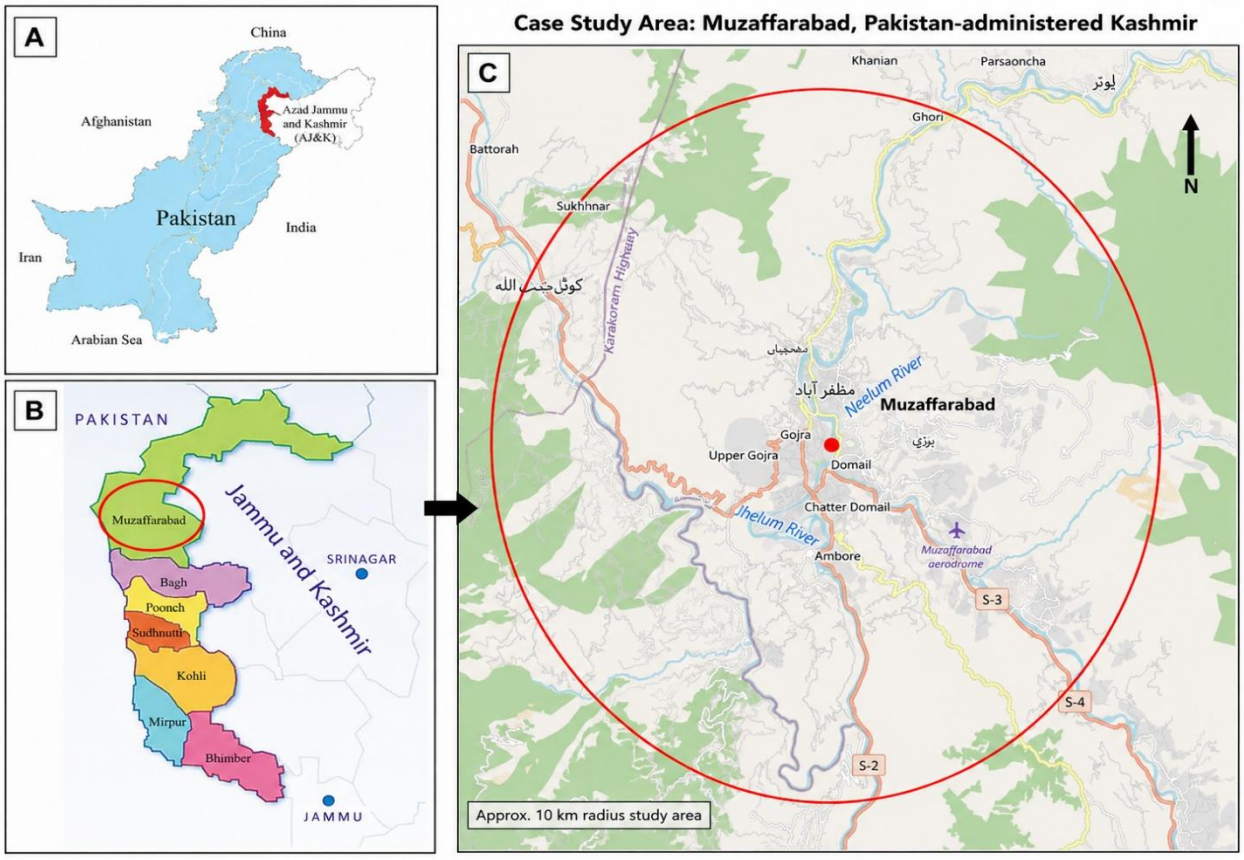
### *Neelum* River in Muzaffarabad

Muzaffarabad is the capital city of Pakistan-administered Kashmir, which is developed around the confluence of the River *Neelum* and the River Jhelum. In the city of Muzaffarabad, the River *Neelum* is the center of local

ecology, a source of pleasant weather, a part of people's social life, and an important part of everyday practices. After the construction of the *Neelum* Jhelum Hydropower Project, the river was diverted through tunnels, resulting in reduced water flow in the stretch that was flowing through Muzaffarabad; springs have dried up, there is a pungent smell, pollution, and disruption to people's daily lives along the river.

**Figure 1**

*Map Illustration of Muzaffarabad, AJ&K*



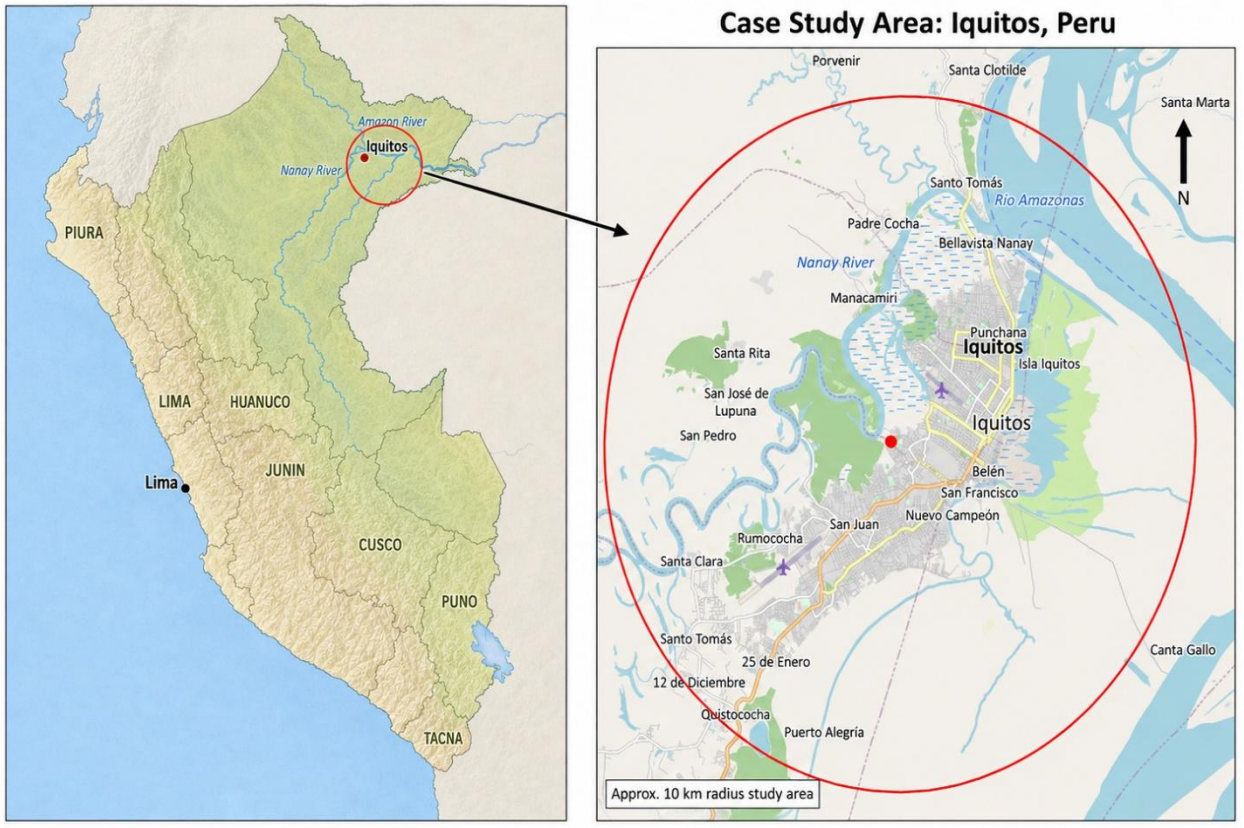

In the case of the *Neelum* River, memory is a central element that reflects the river's flow before diversion, social gatherings, daily water use, and healing practices associated with it. Respondents remember the river as such an entity that used to organise the life of the city and the social life of people living along it. After diversion, a strong sense of loss emerges in their narratives. The river has lost its sound, the water has been contaminated, the springs are dried, and the experiences of gathering along the river have changed forever.

## *Nanay* and Amazon Rivers in *Iquitos*

*Iquitos*, Peru, is the world's largest city without any road access, reachable only by air or boat (Hausmann et al., 2022; Wilson, 2025). *Nanay* River is a source of locals' drinking water, everyday life, mobility, childhood memories and is important for indigenous cosmologies, whereas the Amazon River is also part of the wider ecological and cultural landscapes (Athayde et al., 2025; Dupuis, 2022; Vildosola et al., 2022). The respondents in *Iquitos* remember rivers as sources of drinking water, food, mobility, childhood, family gatherings, and sacred stories. Due to pollution and contamination, anxiety and loss have become elements of river relations.

## Figure 2

*Map Illustration of Iquitos, Peru*






The case of Peru is different from *Neelum's*, as the issue is not diversion but extractive threats, pollution, water contamination, and the disturbance of sacred ecological relations. The respondents' narratives show that *Nanay* and Amazon are not merely ecological systems but lived realities. Rivers are the places of children's playgrounds, family gatherings, stories of sacred beings, and a source of daily drinking water. That is why, when pollution and mining took over the rivers, the lives of the people associated with *Nanay* and the Amazons have shrunk.

## Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative and comparative ethnographic approach. Ethnography deals with the in-depth understanding of lived experiences of individuals and communities, offering insights into the collective memories and place-based attachments that shape environmental activism (Bailey, 2021; Gray, 2002; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The data were collected in *Muzaffarabad*, Azad Jammu & Kashmir and *Iquitos*, Peru. Fieldwork in *Muzaffarabad* was conducted from March to July 2022, whereas in *Iquitos*, it was done from July to September. In both sites, respondents were residents, members of riverine communities, activists, and people related to river protection struggles. In *Muzaffarabad*, the focus of interviews was memories of the people with the River *Neelum*, its reduced flow, dried springs, life along the river and activism for the protection of the river. In *Iquitos*, the focus was people's everyday relations with the *Nanay* and Amazon Rivers, drinking water, pollution, childhood memories, and sacred or ecological imaginaries attached to the rivers.

Participants were identified through purposive and snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is useful in this kind of research because access is sometimes gained through river defense activism and local ecological knowledge. This technique, commonly used in qualitative research, helps us reach hard-to-reach populations by leveraging participants' networks (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Noy, 2008; Valerio et al., 2016). Initial contacts were helpful in reaching the sites of river degradation and community mobilization and in connecting with

people who shared detailed experiences of the rivers. Interviews were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns, including daily dependence on water, childhood and leisure memories, sacred river relations, ecological loss, and activism. The purpose of the analysis is not to prove that both cases are identical, but to understand how, despite the different damages to the rivers, memories are shaping activism for river protection. Importantly, the participants' real names are not used; instead, Participant 1, Participant 2, etc. are used. This anonymization is necessary to uphold research ethics.

## Findings and Analysis: River Memories as Political Resource:

### Rivers as everyday life and embodied dependence

The first dimension of river memories in both cases relates to daily reliance. Rivers are not only natural spaces, but they are also a source of collective memory and culture, deeply rooted in the lives of communities who rely on the river for their life (Brierley, 2020; de Souza et al., 2025; Gaudette & Germain, 2026). Participant 1 said, "Prior to the diversion, local streams and springs were a daily part of our lives, but since the construction of tunnels, these have lost the same significance as before." This is not to suggest here as complaints on the basis of fewer springs or streams. The springs and streams are there because of the river, which was an informal but vital component of people's lives.

Similar responses were observed in *Iquitos* as well. Participant 2 presented the water of the river *Nanay* as drinking water. They did not see the water in the glass on the table as a commodity but as a direct relation with the river. Therefore, if the residents of *Iquitos* say the water of *Nanay* is now contaminated, this is no longer a contamination problem but a problem of trust. The river on which people used to rely has now become the source of anxiety.

This comparison shows that the degrading rivers can take place in different material forms. In the case of River *Neelum*, diversion and reduced flow were the major concerns that came up, whereas in *Iquitos*, the concerns revolve around the issues of water quality and pollution. The common thing is, in both cases, people understood the river as something embedded in their daily lives. Memory played an important role here, which emphasized that river degradation is no longer an abstract change; it is a kind of loss that is directly associated with people's lives. These pathways have not only been depicted in shaping traditions, livelihoods, and resistance; they have shaped the struggle against environmental injustices over generations.



### Childhood, leisure, and social memory

Another way of thinking about river memories is in terms of childhood, leisure, and social memory of belonging. Participant 3 in *Muzaffarabad* mentioned his meeting with his friend, the flow of the stream, the sound of the stream, and experiencing the cool breeze. Here, this memory is not only nostalgia, but it means that the river was a social space where people lived. The people who live along the river lose their shared space when the river is no longer attractive due to smell, low flow, and pollution.

The childhood memories were even more vivid in *Iquitos*. Participant 4 described how the children of *Iquitos* have been playing at the banks of the Amazon and *Nanay* Rivers since their childhood. They are very difficult to keep away from the river. Adults remember their childhood along the rivers and, at the same time, consider the rivers unsafe for their young ones. So, in both cases, riverbanks and river water were the spaces of social reproduction. Families, friends, and children organize their social relations around the rivers. That is why river degradation is not merely ecological change; rather, it is a rupture of social memory and intergenerational continuity. The comparative contribution here translates the river memories of childhood and social belonging into a political language that lays the groundwork for a struggle for river protection.

### Sacred, living, and affective rivers

At both sites, rivers have also been remembered as living or sacred entities. In *Muzaffarabad*, Participant 5 described the sound of the river as a form of sleep therapy. It was uttered as a sensory memory that shows human-river intimacy. When the soothing sound of the river vanished after the diversion of the river, for the participant, it is not only that sound that changes or fades away; it is the affective relation that collapses.

Participant 6 in *Iquitos* shared a story of a pink dolphin to explain the river cosmology. According to their narratives, rivers are not just water flowing around the city but spaces of sacred beings, fear, respect, and spiritual imagination. For outsiders, their stories might be myths, but for the communities living along rivers, the stories of the rivers define the sacredness and moral boundaries of the rivers and their people. In this way, river memory is essential to the registers of both the ecological and spiritual being of the rivers.

This is a strong comparative point, as the quality of life along the *Neelum* River comes through the river's sound and flow, whereas in *Iquitos*, the sacred qualities of rivers live in stories, indigenous cosmologies, and water beings. Both cases do not treat the river as an object, but rather as a relational entity that holds relational memory and a strong presence in the daily lives of the communities living along it.

## Contamination, absence, and the memory of loss

The respondents of the research narrate the river degradation in the language of absence and contamination. In *Muzaffarabad*, the absence means reduced flow, a lack of sound, dry springs, and a decline in life along the riverbank. Participant 7 talked about the healing properties of the river water, which was considered so clean that people even bathed in it to heal. But now, the muddy color and bad smell have become a risk. People are afraid of getting a disease. This is how people interpret the changed river now. This memory is based on past purity and present contamination.

In *Iquitos*, contamination and pollution recurred in the narratives of both Participants 2 and 4. Participant 6 revisited his family gatherings and childhood fun at the riverbanks when they were clean. In this way, pollution, being a material fact, also produces an emotional withdrawal. People have started moving away from the spaces where their memories are tied. Importantly, memory has become environmental evidence. Communities did not talk about the scientific testing of water; rather, they relied on smell, color, taste, sound, physical appearance, and riverbank practices to detect ecological changes. These sensory memories act as moral evidence for activism or struggle for river protection.



## From memory to river defence activism

Collective memories shape activism when riverine communities mobilise their past river relations against today's injustice. In *Muzaffarabad*, the river defence narratives present the *Neelum* River as the centre of environmental and cultural life. The Save River Save *Muzaffarabad* movement not only demanded the revival of water in the River *Neelum* but also the recognition of voices of the people of *Muzaffarabad*. Whereas in *Iquitos*, Participant 2 and Participant 4 stressed river water as core and continuity of their life. Rivers, a socio-natural entity, are part of the sacred world where humans live along with their ecology. The shared memories collectively made the activism for a moral cause as well, along with defending rivers from pollution and threats of destruction. The riverine communities claim not only their rivers back but the relationship they used to have with their rivers. The activism began when that relationship was disrupted, demanding recognition, river flow, clean water, a sense of belonging, and local claims on the rivers.

## Dispossession and Activism: A Comparative Discussion

The argument which this research claims is that the impacts and river degradation in both cities are not similar, but the role of collective memory is comparable. In the case of *Muzaffarabad*, the river is remembered through collective memories of reduced flow of water in the river, clean water springs, increasing city temperature, pungent smell, and loss of river sound. On the other hand, in *Iquitos*, the memories of pollution and contamination, no more bathing and family gathering, and sacred river stories have become the ways to remember the river. In this way, memory does not only explain the river degradation or damage to the environment, but shows the extent of dispossession, belonging, and disturbed human-river relationships.

Critical water scholarship and contemporary debates on human-river interactions incorporate this discussion. Anderson et al. (2019) and Jackson et al. (2022) emphasize that to understand rivers, it is necessary to consider the social relations, relational values, rhythms, and meanings revolving around the rivers. The contribution of this paper is that it adds collective memory explicitly to the relational river debate. Here, along with the river, the relational is not only the present practice but also the remembered past, sensory experience, and intergenerational narratives as well. That is why, whenever there are changes to the river flow, smell, color,

taste, or change, the physical environment does not change solely; rather, their remembered river-world also gets disturbed.

This paper is also an important contribution to the literature of collective memory. According to Halbwachs, memory is organized in the social framework instead of individual recollection. In this research, river memories are working in a similar sense: respondents have shared their personal experiences by connecting with the community narratives. In *Muzaffarabad*, the river sound, cool breeze, springs, and riverbank gatherings are not nostalgic feelings for individuals; they have become collective claims that their social life has been destroyed by the river. In *Iquitos*, the water in *Nanay*, children's fun along riverbanks, pink dolphin stories, and memories of sacred water also shape community identity and river activism.

In the debate on environmental justice, this research contributes by moving beyond distributive justice and drawing attention towards recognition, participation, and cultural ecological loss. Schlosberg (2004) has not remained confined to distributive justice alone, rather made recognition and capabilities also the central elements. Zwarteveen & Boelens (2017) argue that water justice is in the broader historical, cultural, and political relations. Both cases in this paper show that demands of the communities are not just about clean water, flow, or pollution control but also about river relations, memories, cultural meanings, and recognising local knowledge. In this way, collective memory makes environmental justice embodied and historical.

The concept of riverhood is supportive and plays an important analytical role. It has been discussed in the context of socio-natural beings and translocal river defense struggle (Boelens et al., 2023). This research reads riverhood through collective memory, which gives an idea that memories from the past galvanize people's involvement in the struggle for river defense (Adams et al., 2024). Here, riverhood is not only playing the part of unifying platform for the communities, but also a remembered and narrated relation as well. Rivers exist in the memory of local and indigenous communities as living entities, childhood spaces, sacred worlds, and social companions.

The contemporary debates on the New Water Justice Movement also make this comparison relevant. It is pertinent to acknowledge and study NWJMs as they challenge the traditional models of water governance (Boelens et al., 2023). The focus of this paper is to look into the emotional and mnemonic foundations of these movements. It means people participate in the river in these movements because they have a living past with the rivers. Collective memory gives legitimacy to their activism. People understand environmental degradation by comparison with their remembered past, and this comparison creates moral urgency.



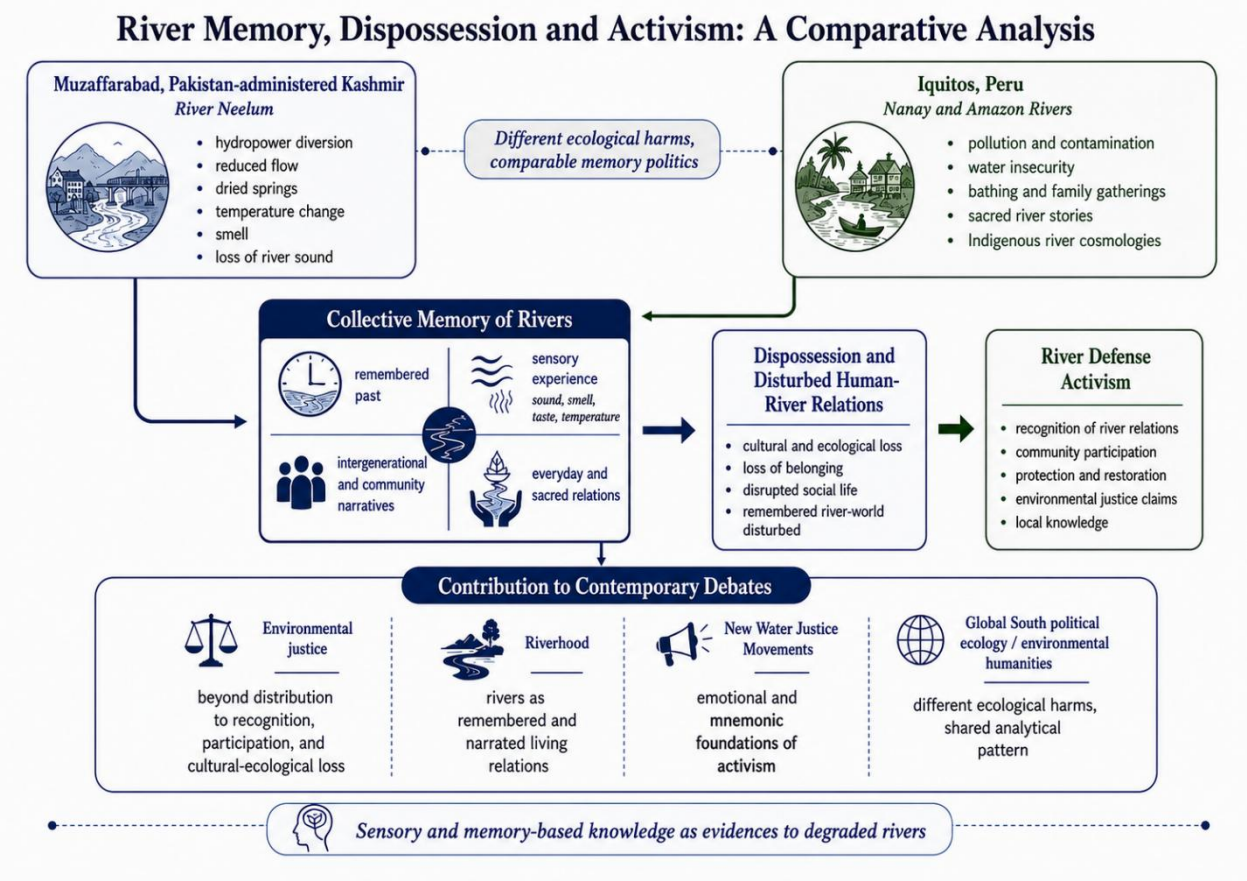
The comparison in this paper also contributes to the debates of political ecology and environmental humanities in the Global South. Both *Muzaffarabad* and *Iquitos* are in the Global South, but they have different ecological pressures and political histories. The case of *Muzaffarabad* is connected to hydropower production, national development, and energy infrastructure, whereas *Iquitos* is more connected to pollution, extractive pressures, Amazonian water dependence, and indigenous river cosmologies. It is not only about the similarity or difference; rather identifies the shared analytical pattern which is river degradation activates memories, and memory activates river defence struggles through the languages of cultural and ecological justice.

Methodologically, the paper argues that environmental change cannot be understood through technical indicators. Communities understand the differences with smell, sound, taste, temperature, riverbank routines, and childhood memory. This sensory and memory-based knowledge is not the replacement of scientific knowledge, but it is complimentary form of environmental evidence. In this way, the paper adds that to understand river degradation, it is important to treat remembered landscapes as serious empirical material.

Overall, from this discussion, this paper comes with its contribution at three levels. Firstly, and theoretically, the paper links collective memory to the debates of riverhood and environmental justice. Secondly, and empirically, this research comparatively frames together two distant cases from the Global South. Thirdly and methodologically, it makes memories, oral histories, and ethnographic narratives so valuable to understand environmental activism. In this way, the research adds that river defense struggles cannot be understood as policy and resource distribution conflicts or protest politics; rather, they should be understood as defense of remembered human-river worlds.

**Figure 3**

*Collective Memory, Dispossession, and Activism in Muzaffarabad and Iquitos*






## Limitations

This research has some limitations as well. Firstly, fieldwork was conducted at different times with a gap of two years in between. Secondly, *Muzaffarabad* and *Iquitos* are present on two different continents of the world, having distinct histories, cultures, and geographies. The purpose of this paper is not to prove similarities, but to use collective memory as an analytical lens. Thirdly, interviews provide qualitative depth but do not claim complete representation of riverine communities. Future research in the area should include extended fieldwork, community workshops, and participatory mapping to deepen the memory-based river relations.

## Conclusion

The research shows the powerful connection between collective memory, cultural identity and resistance to the environment, and it illustrates how memories of the river can be an important political weapon for river protection activism. The River *Neelum* in Pakistan, the *Nanay* River in Peru, and the Amazon River are examples of how rivers are universal and local to communities and identities, livelihoods and histories of resistance. As developmental schemes keep disrupting these systems, the communities are learning about the riverine changes in collective memory and in narrative.

The main argument of the paper is that in such cases, memory does not mean 'nostalgia to the past' but 'a political frame setting agenda'. Memories recount to the communities what has occurred, what is occurring, and how they can interact in the future. The combination of Halbwachs' theory on the collective memory and Boelens 'riverhood' concept emphasises how memories are not just memories, but constructions that

communities can read and respond to in relation to ecological crises. These frameworks underscore river loss as a cultural and existential issue and the need for a holistic river conservation approach.

The study is useful for the existing body of knowledge on environmental justice practices and highlights the importance of recognizing and protecting the cultural and ecological values of rivers.. It requires policies that listen to the voice of local and indigenous communities, prioritizing their memory and attachments in the development process. This study offers a prism through which environmental activism can be understood as a battle for cultural survival and identity, and a battle for the preservation of the environment.

## References

Adams, A. E., Saville, A., & Shriver, T. E. (2024). Folk art, storytelling, and space: Collective memory and pesticide exposure. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, *7*(3), 1299–1317.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Anderson, E. P., Jackson, S., Tharme, R. E., Douglas, M., Flotemersch, J. E., Zwarteveen, M., Lokgariwar, C., Montoya, M., Wali, A., & Tipa, G. T. (2019). Understanding rivers and their social relations: A critical step to advance environmental water management. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Water*, *6*(6), e1381.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Athayde, S., Utsunomiya, R., Victoria-Lacy, L., Beveridge, C., Jenkins, C. N., Laufer, J., Heilpern, S., Olivas, P., & Anderson, E. P. (2025). Interdependencies between Indigenous peoples, local communities, and freshwater systems in a changing Amazon. *Conservation Biology*, *39*(3), e70034.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Atkinson, R., & Flint, J. (2001). Accessing hidden and hard-to-reach populations: Snowball research strategies. *Social Research Update*, *33*(1), 1–4.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Bailey, C. (2021). Exploring lived experience. In *Researching virtual play experiences: Visual methods in education research* (pp. 89–178). Springer.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Boelens, R., Escobar, A., Bakker, K., Hommes, L., Swyngedouw, E., Hogenboom, B., Huijbens, E. H., Jackson, S., Vos, J., Harris, L. M., Joy, K. J., De Castro, F., Duarte-Abadía, B., Tubino De Souza, D., Lotz-Sisitka, H., Hernández-Mora, N., Martínez-Alier, J., Roca-Servat, D., Perreault, T., … Wantzen, K. M. (2023a). Riverhood: Political ecologies of socionature commoning and translocal struggles for water justice. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *50*(3), 1125–1156. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2022.2120810

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Brierley, G. J. (2020). The Socio-ecological River: Socio-economic, Cultural and Environmental Relations to River Systems. In G. J. Brierley, *Finding the Voice of the River* (pp. 29–60). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27068-1_2

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Buenafe, M., Stuart, E., & Telan, W. (2024). Water words guiding water relations: Agta water epistemology informs water security practices. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, *10*, 101124.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Chaves, K. A., & Weißermel, S. (2024). The cosmopolitics of resistance: The Belo Monte Dam and the struggle of riverine communities. *Society & Natural Resources*, *37*(5), 809–825.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

de Souza, D. T., Hommes, L., Wals, A., Hoogesteger, J., Boelens, R., Duarte-Abadía, B., Hidalgo-Bastidas, J. P., Huijbens, E., Harris, L. M., & Suhardiman, D. (2025). River co-learning arenas: Principles and practices for transdisciplinary knowledge co-creation and multi-scalar (inter) action. *Local Environment*, *30*(1), 58–80.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Dupuis, C. (2022). The Smell of Water: A Liquid Witness to Environmental Change in the Amazon. *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, *22*(4), 1–9.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Escalera-Reyes, J. (2020). Place attachment, feeling of belonging and collective identity in socio-ecological systems: Study case of Pegalajar (Andalusia-Spain). *Sustainability*, *12*(8), 3388.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Fox, C. A., Reo, N. J., Turner, D. A., Cook, J., Dituri, F., Fessell, B., Jenkins, J., Johnson, A., Rakena, T. M., & Riley, C. (2017). "The river is us; the river is in our veins": Re-defining river restoration in three Indigenous communities. *Sustainability Science*, *12*(4), 521–533.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Gaudette, M., & Germain, D. (2026). Living with the river: Territorial imaginaries, risk cultures, and everyday adaptation in a flood-prone neighborhood. *Geoforum*, *170*, 104571.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Gray, A. (2002). *Research practice for cultural studies: Ethnographic methods and lived cultures*.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On collective memory*. University of Chicago press.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2019). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9781315146027/ethnography-martyn-hammersley-paul-atkinson

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Hausmann, R., Santos, M. Á., Muci, J., Tudela Pye, J., Grisanti, A., & Lu, J. (2022). *Overcoming remoteness in the Peruvian Amazonia: A growth diagnostic of Loreto*.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Jackson, S. (2021). Rivers and their cultural values: Assessing cultural water requirements. *Oxford Bibliographies in Environmental Science*.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Jackson, S., Anderson, E. P., Piland, N. C., Carriere, S., Java, L., & Jardine, T. D. (2022). River rhythmicity: A conceptual means of understanding and leveraging the relational values of rivers. *People and Nature*, *4*(4), 949–962. https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10335

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Katic, P., Neuhaus, H., Maccera, M. B., Sohns, A., Mutter, E., & Hickey, G. (2026). Inter-epistemic and creative collaborations for water: Indigenous Peoples' Water Justice across three territories. *Water Security*, *27*.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Kumar, D. (2017). River Ganges–historical, cultural and socioeconomic attributes. *Aquatic Ecosystem Health & Management*, *20*(1–2), 8–20.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Nowak, E., Oliveira, J., & Tibaldeo, R. F. (2024). The nomos of the water: Indigenous narrative identity claims to justify granting legal personhood to a river. *Bialostockie Studia Prawnicze*, *29*, 235.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Noy, C. (2008). Sampling knowledge: The hermeneutics of snowball sampling in qualitative research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *11*(4), 327–344.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Scannell, L., & Gifford, R. (2017). The experienced psychological benefits of place attachment. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *51*, 256–269.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Schlosberg, D. (2004). Reconceiving environmental justice: Global movements and political theories. *Environmental Politics*, *13*(3), 517–540.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Valerio, M. A., Rodriguez, N., Winkler, P., Lopez, J., Dennison, M., Liang, Y., & Turner, B. J. (2016). Comparing two sampling methods to engage hard-to-reach communities in research priority setting. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *16*(1), 146.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Velasco, P. F., & Sutton, J. (2025). Collective place memory: Remembering together in place-people ecosystems. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 102225.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Vildosola, G., Alarcona, J., & Andrews, L. (2022). Living on water and land: Challenges and opportunities for the development of amphibious communities in the Peruvian Amazon rainforest. *Environmental Science & Sustainable Development*, *7*(2), 104–110.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext



Wilson, J. (2025). 'MORTAL FEAST': Cannibal Capitalism Meets Covid-19 in the Urban Peruvian Amazon. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *49*(2), 229–245.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Winemiller, K. O., McIntyre, P. B., Castello, L., Fluet-Chouinard, E., Giarrizzo, T., Nam, S., Baird, I. G., Darwall, W., Lujan, N. K., Harrison, I., Stiassny, M. L. J., Silvano, R. A. M., Fitzgerald, D. B., Pelicice, F. M., Agostinho, A. A., Gomes, L. C., Albert, J. S., Baran, E., Petrere, M., … Sáenz, L. (2016). Balancing hydropower and biodiversity in the Amazon, Congo, and Mekong. *Science*, *351*(6269), 128–129. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aac7082

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext

Zwarteveen, M. Z., & Boelens, R. (2017). Defining, researching and struggling for water justice: Some conceptual building blocks for research and action. In *Hydrosocial territories and water equity* (pp. 8–23). Routledge.

Google Scholar Worldcat Fulltext