

INTER-STATE WATER DISPUTES AND NATIONAL POLITICS IN INDIA: A STUDY OF FEDERALISM, RESOURCE GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

Sandeep Kaur

Assistant Professor,
G.S.S.D.G.S. Khalsa College, Patiala

ABSTRACT

One of the biggest threats to India's federal structure, governance systems, and political stability is the country's inter-state water issues. State competition over river water sharing has escalated as a result of growing demands on finite freshwater supplies brought on by urbanization, population increase, agricultural expansion and climate change. Once primarily seen as a natural resource, water is now seen as a strategic political problem that affects center-state relations, regional identities, and electoral politics. Significant disputes like those involving the Cauvery, Krishna, Ravi-Beas and Mahanadi rivers show how water conflicts go beyond the distribution of resources to become tools of regional assertion and political mobilization.

This study looks at how interstate water disputes affect federalism, public policy and political decision-making in India. The study examines the legal and constitutional framework that governs water conflicts, including the Inter-State River Water conflicts Act of 1956, Article 262, tribunals, and judicial interventions. It also looks into how regional interests, political parties, and electoral factors influence how water disputes are handled and resolved.

The study uses secondary data gathered from government papers, tribunal rulings, court records, books and journals. It employs a qualitative and analytical research technique. The paper illustrates the difficulties in striking a balance between regional demands and national objectives by analyzing a few controversies. The paper makes the case that more robust institutional frameworks, cooperative federalism, integrated river basin management and politicization of water administration are necessary for the successful settlement of interstate water disputes. In the end the study advances our knowledge of how democratic politics and natural resource management interact in modern India.

Keywords: 1. Inter-State Water Disputes 2. Cooperative Federalism 3. Water Conflict 4. Constitutional Framework 5. Sustainable Water Management.

INTRODUCTION

India has a vast network of rivers that sustain domestic consumption, industry, agriculture and economic growth. However competition among governments over the use of shared river waters has increased due to the unequal distribution of water resources between areas and rising demand. As a result, one of the most enduring issues facing the Indian federal system is interstate water disputes. Conflicts involving rivers like the Cauvery, Krishna, Ravi-Beas, and Mahanadi show that disputes over water distribution have intricate political, economic, and social aspects in addition to technical or administrative ones. Many disputes go unsolved for extended periods of time, causing tensions between states and impeding cooperative governance, despite the existence of constitutional provisions, tribunals, and legal processes for dispute resolution. Water scarcity has been made worse by population growth,

urbanization, agricultural development, and climate change, making the fair distribution of river flows more challenging and politically delicate.

Understanding how interstate water disputes affect national politics and the dynamics of Indian federalism is the main research challenge of this study. Political parties and regional leaders frequently use water issues as tools of political mobilization to further electoral goals and fortify regional identities. Because of this, political factors often have an impact on water sharing decisions rather than just scientific or legal grounds. The efficacy of current institutional structures, the central government's role in resolving disputes, and the ability of states to work together to manage shared resources are all significant issues raised by this circumstance. Long-term water disputes can also have an impact on public confidence in governance institutions, regional stability, and center-state relations. Thus, the goal of this study is to investigate the political aspects of interstate water disputes and assess their consequences for national integration, democratic governance, and policy-making in modern India.^[1]

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Federalism and resource politics provide a useful framework for understanding the study of inter-state water disputes in India. The constitutional separation of powers between the federal government and the states, which permits both levels of government to engage in governance while retaining some degree of autonomy, is known as federalism. Natural resources, especially water, are typically the focus of political controversy under a federal system like India since rivers commonly cross state borders. The study of resource politics looks at how power dynamics and political relationships are affected by the allocation, control and availability of resources. Conflicts between neighboring states result from states' frequent attempts to maximize their portion of river waters in order to satisfy domestic, industrial, and agricultural demands. Political haggling, regional aspirations, economic interests, and electoral factors are often involved in these disputes rather than being limited to technical issues of water allocation. As a result, political players use water resources as tools to achieve more general objectives pertaining to regional identity, development, and political legitimacy within the federal system.

The Political Ecology Approach, which highlights the relationship between political processes and environmental resources, is another helpful viewpoint for analyzing water problems. According to political ecology, environmental disputes are influenced by social injustices, institutional structures, and power dynamics in addition to physical and ecological issues. In India, conflicting economic priorities, governance systems, and historical claims all have an impact on water scarcity and river-sharing disputes in addition to natural factors like rainfall variability and river flow patterns. This strategy emphasizes how various stakeholders have differing levels of influence over decisions pertaining to water, including state governments, farmers, businesses, and local communities. The unequal distribution of environmental advantages and responsibilities among geographical areas and social groupings is further highlighted by political ecology. This paradigm helps explain why some disputes continue despite technical developments and legal interventions, and why sustainable solutions necessitate both environmental and socio-political concerns. It does this by fusing political analysis with ecological reality.^[2]

The ideas of competitive and cooperative federalism offer a crucial perspective for comprehending Indian public policy and water administration. In order to accomplish shared developmental goals and efficiently manage resources, cooperative federalism places a strong emphasis on cooperation between the federal and state governments. Competitive federalism,

on the other hand, promotes states to compete for resources, investments, and political benefits while also pursuing their own interests. Tensions between these two aspects of federalism are frequently exposed by interstate water issues. Political forces and regional interests often stimulate competitive behavior among nations, despite the efforts of river basin authorities, courts, and constitutional institutions to foster cooperation. Therefore, striking a balance between state authority and collective accountability is necessary for effective water governance. By creating institutional arrangements, legal frameworks, and regulatory processes for water allocation and conflict resolution, public policy plays a critical role in this process. Sound water governance requires stakeholder participation, transparent decision-making, integrated river basin management, and scientific evaluation of water availability. When combined, these ideas offer a thorough theoretical framework for analyzing the institutional and political aspects of India's interstate water disputes.

CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

India's federal structure and the need to strike a balance between state autonomy and national interests are reflected in the constitutional framework managing water resources. The Seventh Schedule of the Constitution, which gives states control over water supply, irrigation, canals, drainage, and water storage, mainly includes water in Entry 17 of the State List. Entry 56 of the Union List, however, gives the federal government the authority to develop and control interstate rivers and river valleys where doing so is deemed to be in the public interest. This dual structure acknowledges that rivers frequently cross state lines and need to be managed in concert. Thus, the Constitution aims to strike a balance between local authority and more extensive government supervision. However, conflicting state demands for water have sometimes led to disagreements over distribution and use. These disputes show how difficult it is to manage shared natural resources in a federal government and emphasize the significance of constitutional provisions intended to promote collaboration and settle disputes between states.^[3]

The foundation of the legal framework for settling interstate river water disputes is Article 262 of the Indian Constitution. It gives Parliament the authority to pass legislation to resolve disagreements over the usage, distribution, and management of water from interstate rivers and river valleys. Crucially, if a particular statute provides for alternative adjudication methods, Article 262 also allows Parliament to exclude the Supreme Court's and other courts' jurisdiction in cases pertaining to such conflicts. This clause's goal is to guarantee the expert and effective settlement of technically challenging water disputes. The goal of water governance under Article 262 is to encourage institutional dispute resolution through expert bodies and avoid protracted political conflict. However, despite these constitutional guarantees, a number of issues have endured for decades because of political disagreements, implementation difficulties, and adjudication delays. As a result, Article 262 continues to be a noteworthy constitutional innovation and a topic of discussion about how well it ensures prompt and fair water governance.^[4]

Parliament passed the Inter-State River Water Disputes Act, 1956, to put Article 262 into effect. The Act offers a legislative framework for the creation of tribunals to settle disputes in the event that talks between relevant states are unsuccessful. A tribunal may be established to review the dispute and render a decision if a state formally asks assistance and the central government finds that negotiations are failing. For significant issues involving rivers like the Cauvery, Krishna, Godavari, Ravi-Beas, and Narmada, tribunals have been established over time. To decide on water-sharing arrangements, these tribunals depend on hydrological data, legal principles, past agreements, and expert opinions. The Act has been criticized for its

protracted hearings and delays in putting tribunal rulings into effect, even though it has offered a systematic framework for resolving disputes. However, it continues to be the major statutory tool for resolving river disputes between states and preserving stability in India's federal structure.^[5]

India's water dispute resolution mechanism has been greatly influenced by the judiciary and numerous tribunals. The Supreme Court has frequently been involved in issues pertaining to the interpretation, application, and enforcement of tribunal rulings, despite Article 262 permitting the exclusion of judicial authority. Legal uncertainties have been clarified and constitutional values have been upheld thanks to judicial involvement. The government has implemented changes in recent years with the goal of enhancing the effectiveness of dispute settlement procedures. Proposed changes to the Inter-State River Water Disputes framework aim to improve data-sharing methods between states, promote pre-adjudication consultations, cut down on delays, and create a permanent tribunal system. Growing awareness that conventional methods are inadequate to manage modern issues including climate change, rising water demands, and environmental degradation is reflected in these improvements. Therefore, attaining sustainable and successful water dispute settlement in India requires bolstering institutional capacity, encouraging cooperative federalism, and guaranteeing transparent governance.

INTER-STATE WATER DISPUTES IN INDIA

India's geographical diversity and federal political system are intimately related to the country's history of interstate water disputes. Rivers have been essential to agriculture, trade, and human settlements since prehistoric times. However, when state borders were redrawn and conflicting claims over shared rivers intensified following independence, the contemporary form of water conflicts evolved. States sought more control over river resources as economic development quickened in order to facilitate urbanization, industrial growth, and irrigation projects. These conflicts were exacerbated by the unequal distribution of water supplies and differences in rainfall patterns. As states questioned their applicability to shifting socioeconomic realities, historical agreements formed during the colonial era frequently became issues of contention. As a result, river water disputes developed into significant political and judicial issues from administrative disputes. Despite the introduction of tribunals, judicial interventions, and the constitutional framework to resolve these disputes, many disagreements persisted for decades. The difficulty of striking a balance between regional demands and national interests is demonstrated by the continuation of such confrontations. Water disputes have grown to be a significant feature of Indian federalism over time, reflecting more general concerns about resource distribution, governance, and interstate relations.

The Cauvery dispute is still one of the most well-known and politically delicate of India's major river water disputes. Kerala and Puducherry are also involved in the fight, however Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are the main parties involved. The disagreement over the sharing of the Cauvery River's waters for drinking and irrigation stems from agreements made during the colonial era. Karnataka has lobbied for a higher share to satisfy its expanding developmental demands, while Tamil Nadu, which has historically relied on Cauvery waters for agriculture, has sought to maintain the current water allotment. The dispute resulted in several Supreme Court interventions as well as the creation of the Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal. Tensions between the states have increased due to recurring droughts and variations in rainfall. The conflict has often been accompanied by public demonstrations, political mobilization, and election rhetoric, turning it into a symbol of state rights and regional

identity. The Cauvery case serves as an example of how water disputes become intricately entwined with political factors, public opinion, and federal government in addition to technical issues of resource management. It also draws attention to the difficulties in carrying out tribunal rulings and guaranteeing state collaboration.^[6]

Other instances of the intricate character of interstate water disputes in India are the Krishna and Ravi-Beas disputes. Maharashtra, Karnataka, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh—all of which rely significantly on the Krishna River for irrigation, drinking water, and the production of hydroelectric power—are involved in the Krishna River dispute. The dynamics of water sharing have frequently changed due to the formation of new states and shifting development agendas. In a similar vein, one of the most politically divisive water disputes in northern India is the Ravi-Beas issue, which mainly involves Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan. The Satluj-Yamuna Link Canal, regional autonomy, agricultural needs, and past agreements are all strongly related to the issue. Protracted legal proceedings, judicial interventions, and political clashes have all occurred in these issues. Compromise is challenging because state governments frequently take strong stances to defend local interests. These disagreements highlight how political calculations and electoral concerns can impact water allocation. When faced with conflicting developmental agendas and strong regional sentiments, they also highlight the shortcomings of the current dispute settlement procedures.^[7]

In a time of growing resource constraint, the Mahanadi and Yamuna disputes shed light on the new issues surrounding water governance. Concerns over dam development and upstream water use have led to disputes about downstream water supply in the Mahanadi dispute between Odisha and Chhattisgarh. While Chhattisgarh highlights its right to use river resources for development, Odisha has contended that upstream projects impact irrigation, ecological sustainability, and water security within the state. Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, and the National Capital Territory of Delhi are all involved in the Yamuna conflict, which centers on the fair allocation of water among many parties with various needs. The river is under additional stress due to rapid urbanization, population development, and industrial expansion, which has made water-sharing agreements more controversial. These conflicts show how environmental issues, climate change, and sustainable resource management are becoming increasingly important in today's water politics. They also highlight the necessity of more cooperative federalism, scientific planning, and institutional coordination. The settlement of these conflicts will continue to be essential for preserving regional stability, economic growth, and Indian national integration as water demand rises.^[8]

WATER DISPUTES AND NATIONAL POLITICS

In India, interstate water disputes are more than just resource distribution issues; they have become ingrained in the political fabric of the nation. Election politics are often impacted by water-related disputes, especially in places where river water is crucial to agriculture. Water conflicts are frequently used by political parties as campaign concerns to rally supporters and show their dedication to defending local interests. Politicians frequently take strong stances on water-sharing arrangements during elections in an effort to win over the public, making compromise challenging. As a result, electoral concerns frequently cause issues that might otherwise be settled through negotiation to drag on. Access to river waters is associated with views of historical rights, economic security, and cultural identity, which is another way that water issues fuel the growth of regionalism and identity politics. State governments are under more pressure to protect local interests because citizens frequently see water allocation

decisions through a regional lens. As a result, water disputes become emblems of political resistance and regional pride, influencing public opinion and political behavior in all impacted states.^[9]

Water disputes have political ramifications that go beyond state politics and have a direct impact on national coalition dynamics and center-state relations. The central government is sometimes put in a challenging position when trying to resolve disputes because many of them include several states run by various political parties. Federal cooperation may be hampered by decisions made by the Union government that are perceived as favoring one state over another. Regional parties may utilize water-related demands as a negotiating tool in coalition governments to influence national policy decisions or obtain political concessions. Additionally, water disputes are sometimes used as tools for political mobilization, with public campaigns, rallies, and demonstrations planned to exert pressure on governments and shape policy outcomes. To increase their political legitimacy among the local populace, political leaders may present water conflicts as battles for justice, development, or state rights. This politicization of water control frequently makes resolving disputes more difficult and emphasizes how closely natural resource management, federal politics, and democratic competition are related in India.^[10]

CHALLENGES AND EMERGING ISSUES

Water scarcity and climate change have become major issues for India's water administration. The availability and distribution of freshwater resources have been greatly impacted by rising global temperatures, shifting rainfall patterns, frequent droughts, and extreme weather events. Seasonal variations in many river basins make managing water resources more challenging for local populations and governments. Interstate disputes are more likely as a result of increased competition among states for scarce water resources brought on by climate-induced variations in river flows. Natural factors are no longer the only cause of water scarcity; excessive use, ineffective management techniques, and rising developmental needs are also contributing factors. In areas that rely significantly on agriculture and monsoon rains, the effects of climate change are more severe. Existing water-sharing arrangements are under additional pressure as freshwater availability decreases and uncertainty rises. These trends underscore the critical need for stronger institutional frameworks, better conservation measures, and adaptive water management techniques that can handle the political and environmental effects of climate-related water stress.^[11]

Future water administration in India will face significant issues due to population increase, rapid urbanization, rising agricultural water demand, and environmental sustainability concerns. Growing cities put tremendous strain on the current water infrastructure, and a growing population necessitates larger amounts of water for drinking, sanitation, industrial output, and energy generation. With irrigation making up a sizable portion of overall water use, agriculture continues to be the biggest user of freshwater resources. The strain on rivers, groundwater supplies, and irrigation systems is predicted to worsen as food demand rises. The long-term health of aquatic ecosystems is also threatened by unsustainable water extraction, river pollution, wetland loss, and ecological deterioration. In order to achieve environmental sustainability, economic growth must be balanced with the preservation of ecological integrity and natural resources. As a result, policymakers need to support groundwater conservation, integrated water resource management, effective irrigation technology, and ecosystem restoration. In order to guarantee water security, sustainable growth, and social stability in the upcoming decades, it is imperative that these interrelated issues be addressed.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A thorough river basin perspective that views rivers as integrated natural systems rather than dispersed administrative units is necessary for the effective management of interstate water disputes. Coordinated planning, fair water distribution, and sustainable resource use across states can be made easier by bolstering river basin management organizations. Regular communication, consultation, and consensus-building among stakeholders should be used to advance cooperative federalism. To handle conflicting demands and guarantee that water-sharing agreements are founded on mutual trust and scientific evaluations, the Union and State governments must cooperate. In a federal system, this kind of collaboration can lower political tensions, enhance resource stewardship, and establish a more reliable framework for settling conflicts.

Improving the effectiveness and legitimacy of water governance processes requires institutional reforms. To cut down on delays and enhance the application of tribunal rulings, current dispute resolution procedures should be streamlined. Transparency and well-informed decision-making can be enhanced by the use of contemporary technology, such as satellite surveillance, geographic information systems, and real-time hydrological data gathering. To reduce mistrust and knowledge asymmetry, states should strengthen their data-sharing agreements. Additionally, it is important to institutionalize conflict prevention strategies like early warning systems, mediation platforms, and stakeholder participation. These steps can assist in spotting possible issues early on and promote mediated resolutions before disagreements turn into protracted legal and political battles.^[12]

CONCLUSION

The study comes to the conclusion that interstate water disputes in India are closely related to federal government, political rivalry, regional ambitions, and public policy rather than just being disagreements about the allocation of river flows. The main conclusions show that conflicts like those involving the Cauvery, Krishna, Ravi-Beas, Mahanadi, and Yamuna rivers have had a considerable impact on relations between the Center and the States and frequently become topics of regional and electoral politics. Effective solutions are still hampered by political intervention and implementation delays, despite the institutional structures for dispute resolution given by constitutional provisions, tribunals, and legal systems. By illustrating how natural resources influence political behavior, federal dynamics, and state-level mobilization, the study advances the subject of political science. By emphasizing the necessity of cooperative federalism, integrated water governance, and evidence-based decision-making, it also advances public policy. The effects of climate change on river water sharing, the function of new technologies in water management, comparative analyses of international river disputes, and the success of recent institutional reforms in fostering peaceful and sustainable water governance in India could all be the subject of future research.

REFERENCES:

1. Iyer, R. R., (2003) *Water: Perspectives, Issues, Concerns*, New Delhi: SAGE Publications.
2. Perreault, T. et. al (Eds.), (2015) *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*, Routledge

3. Jain, A. Inter-State River Water Dispute: Analysis of Constitutional and Legal Mechanisms in India. National Law University and Judicial Academy, Assam.
4. Sharma, A. (2025) “Judicial Exclusion under Article 262 in inter-state River Water Disputes in India”, SSRN Electronic Journal.
5. Richards, A., & Singh, N., (2002) “Inter-state Water Disputes in India: Institutions and Policies”, International Journal of Water Resources Development, 18(4), 611–625.
6. Kumar, A., & Kumar, P., (2025) “The Cauvery River Water Dispute: A Human Rights Perspective”, Journal of Public Policy and Administration, 9(1), 15–28.
7. The Inter-State River Water Disputes Act, 1956 (Act No. 33 of 1956). Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India.
8. Dikshant IAS, (2024), Inter-State Water Disputes in India: A Challenge to Cooperative Federalism. Retrieved from <https://www.dikshantias.com/current-affairs/view/inter-state-water-disputes-in-india-a-challenge-to-cooperative-federalism>
9. Shah, T, (2009) Taming the Anarchy: Groundwater Governance in India, Resources for the Future Press.
10. Mollinga, P. P., (2008) “Water, Politics and Development: Framing a Political Sociology of Water Resources Management”, Water Alternatives, 1(1), 7–23.
11. Goswami, B. N., et al., (2018) “Impact of Climate Change on Water Resources in India”, Journal of the Geological Society of India, 101(6), 974–985
12. OECD, (2015) “Water Resources Governance: Integrated Approaches for Sustainable Management”, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264230149-en>