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WATER DISPUTE

A tale of two sparring states and a river: Understanding the Mahadayi row

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Goa and Karnataka lock horns again over Mahadayi water sharing. How long will it go on before a consensus is reached?



Image credit: Pixabay

The small town of Navalgund of Dharwad district in Karnataka with a population of 25,000 has been the epicentre of farmers' protest demanding water from the west-flowing river, Mahadayi. On July 30, the state of Karnataka woke up to the shocking news of police brutality against farmers, including women and children, who had gathered to demand their share of water.

For decades, Goa and Karnataka have been dependent on each other for their economic and social growth. But in the last few years, these states have been locking horns over the sharing of water from the Mahadayi river.

The long-pending water-sharing dispute has now taken a political twist with all the parties getting involved in the blame game. But the real sufferers are the poor farmers of North Karnataka and the

sensitive Western Ghats.

What is the dispute?

The Mahadayi river, also called Mandovi in Goa is essentially a rain-fed river that is shared by Karnataka and Goa for their water needs. The river flows 35 km through Karnataka and then 52 km through Goa, before flowing into the Arabian Sea.

Goa, considering its geographical location, has an upper hand on its water. The river is a mere cluster of spring at its origin, Bhimgad in Karnataka. It forms into a river at Degaon village in Khanapur taluk of the state's Belagavi district. The regions of Northern Karnataka, along with the bordering areas of Maharashtra and Goa, have been depending on the Mahadayi river basin for all their water needs.

The Mahadayi water diversion was first planned in 1970 by engineer SG Balekundri. The plan was to feed Malaprabha river and store the water in Navilatirtha dam in Karnataka's Dharwad district. This dam, built in the 1970s, has not been filled to its capacity, barring three or four times.

Hence, the Karnataka government was keen on diverting the water from Mahadayi to be stored here. Thanks to the increasing water scarcity during the summer months followed by unpredictable monsoon year after year, the water needs of people in North Karnataka could no longer be met with the water the state is currently getting. That is when Karnataka started demanding diversion of the river.



The proposed water diversion from the river may affect the sensitive Western Ghats, through which it flows.

The present controversy around the Mahadayi river has Karnataka wanting to divert **a meagre 7.56 tmcft water** from its contribution to the Mahadayi basin to Malaprabha dam to take care of the acute water shortage of Hubballi and Dharwad and about 180 villages near the dam. After necessary approval from the water resources ministry in 2002, Karnataka announced its plans to build two barrages on Mahadayi's tributaries, Kalasa and Banduri.

Goa, however, **objected to the plan** and approached the Supreme Court in the same year to put a stop to it. Goa believes the proposed water diversion would not only affect the water needs of the people, it would also affect the sensitive ecology of the Western Ghats. Mahadevi Water Dispute Tribunal was **set up** in 2010 to look into the issue. The recent flare up in North Karnataka was triggered by the tribunal's rejection of Karnataka's request to divert the water.

The water situation now

The construction work of the barrages at Kalasa-Banduri site for water diversion has affected the catchment area of river Malaprabha in Khanapur taluk. It has been reported that the wells around the birthplace of the Malaprabha river are going dry. This can also be attributed to the prolonged

drought in the region which has aggravated the farmers' agitation.



Construction work in the catchment area has affected the river.

For the last one year, four districts of north Karnataka – Dharwad, Gadag, Belagavi and Haveri – have been affected by repeated strikes called by the agitating farmers and pro-Kannada activist groups. Besides huge economic loss, the protests help only to frame a wrong picture about Karnataka before the Tribunal, feel the experts in the region.

Goa's nature concerns

On the other hand, Goa is backed by a strong group of ecologists who have come under the banner – Mahadayi Bachov Andolan – and been opposing any kind of diversion of the river.

Ravendra Kumar Saini, one of the petitioners from Belagavi, points out that about 43% of drinking water needs of Goa are met by the Mahadayi river and any change in the river system of Mahadayi or Kalasa, which is the major tributary of the river, will affect the drinking water needs of the state.



The wildlife sanctuary is a protected area in Goa and falls within the river basin.

"Apart from drinking and irrigation, it plays a big role in the fishing industry," he said. "The construction of a dam upstream will change the salinity of the river near its estuary. Even minor variations in the salinity will affect the unique aquatic bio-diversity."

Regarding Karnataka's idea of diverting the water and storing it in the dam, he said: "Water availability in Kalasa, Banduri or Haltara tributaries is very less. So, how much water can actually reach the dam? The construction of 100-foot-deep canals at these sites has already destroyed the ecosystem of Malaprabha river at its very origin."

The Goa government has also pointed out that the economy of Goa depends on the tourism and water scarcity will affect the tourism adversely. According to the government, the project will also affect the wildlife sanctuary of Bhimgad, where over 700 hectares of forest will be submerged and about 60,000 trees destroyed.

Karnataka asks for its share

Vikas Soppin, convener of Kalasa-Banduri Horata Samanvaya Samithi, an organisation that has been

holding protests against the decision, disputed the claims of Goa and the ecologists.

"The project is not demanding large scale forest destruction," he said. "Both the tributaries which need to be joined with Malaprabha are located few miles (6-8 km) away from the river and with gravitation alone, the water can reach Malaprabha. The Malaprabha dam was constructed in 1972, but till today some of the villages on the borders of Belagavi and Dharwad district do not have drinking water. Tankers supply water in many villagers throughout the year."

He said that no studies have been conducted to prove that the diversion of these tributaries will have an adverse effect on Mahadayi.

"The Goa government says the tributaries are water deficit and cannot be diverted, which was rejected by the Tribunal," he explained. "We demand that the share of water which is rightly ours must be spared. Meanwhile, the state government must create a situation to convey the water scarcity situation in north Karnataka. The dialogues can be initiated with the Goa government so that a solution can be found out of the court. People are losing hope over Tribunal as Krishna and Cauvery water disputes are continuing for many years with never-ending legal battles."



Catchment area destruction can cause the rivers and wetlands to dry.

Dr TV Ramachandra, head of Energy and Wetland Research Group, Indian Institute of Science, cautions that the river catchments are essential to ensure water flow throughout the season or most part of the year.

“The rich tree cover and the panoramic landscape hold the rain water beneath it which is used during the drier seasons,” he said. “And once the catchment area at the river’s origin is destroyed, it’s difficult to restore it. As it is, the catchments of Kalasa and Banduri are in bad shape due to afforestation and the implementation of projects with no consideration for the environment.”

Destruction of catchments can cause the rivers and wetlands to dry. “Several perennial streams feeding the Sharavati river were going dry before the summer season, but later it was found out that the streams were being diverted for agricultural needs,” he said.

Ramachandra further said that instead of thinking of quick-fix measures to pacify the agitating farmers, the government must protect its natural wealth so that water is available for future generation, too.

This is not the first time that the states in India are fighting for water. Equally contested are the waters of Krishna and Cauvery. If these water disputes are not solved at the earliest, the situation could turn ugly in the near future.

This article first appeared on [India Water Portal](#).

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