

THE RIVER MHADEI: THE SCIENCE AND POLITICS OF DIVERSION

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OF DIVERSION

EDITORS

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The River Mhadei

The Science and Politics of Diversion

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*To
the people
of the Mhadei*

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5. The Political Economy of the Mhadei Dispute: Intersecting the Domains of Politics, Institutions, and Interests

Rahul Tripathi

Abstract: *The Mhadei River water dispute between the states of Goa, Karnataka and Maharashtra has reached a significant point of transition with the creation of the Mhadei Progressive River Water Authority for Welfare and Harmony (Mhadei-PRAWAH), expected to oversee the implementation of the verdict of the Mhadei Water Disputes Tribunal, even though the contentious issues between the two major stakeholders still remain unresolved. The debate around the proposed diversion by Karnataka, which appears a fait accompli after the verdict, has involved a variety of stakeholders on both the sides, including farmers, environmentalists, civil society actors, and political parties. The manner in which popular discourse has been shaped in both states is often an outcome of the leverage specific groups have had within and outside the respective states. The chapter examines the contours of the popular debate on Mhadei primarily in Goa by looking at the intersection of politics, institutions, and interests to see whether they had an eventual bearing on the policies of the state.*

Political Economy of Inter-State Water Disputes

I NTER-STATE river water disputes reflect a complex interplay of actors, processes, and institutions, which taken together dictate how intractable the dispute will be. The complexities increase depending on the spatial and the temporal dimensions of the dispute. The propensity to find solutions to a particular problem also depends on the contexts in which different actors are pitted against each other. For example, it may be much easier to resolve a dispute of a trans-boundary character that involves two nation-states with a clear chain of command and authority. At the same time, it may be more difficult to resolve an issue within a nation-state since it involves competing sub-national governments with their own domestic political constituents and dynamics.

At the core of any inter-state river water dispute are the issues pertaining to access and distribution of river waters that have a trans-boundary dimension. Such disputes have immediate economic resonance given the utility of the waters to the local economy and ecology and the accompanying sense of deprivation and loss that is associated with a potential diversion. Around this central element are intervening variables of competing interest groups affected directly or indirectly by diversion, the relative bargaining power they have, the respective institutional machineries of the states that seek to achieve appropriate outcomes, and the legal-political processes encompassing all interested parties that play out in shaping the eventual resolution.

Seen in the international context, water disputes have generated much discussion over the cooperative and conflictual relationships they induce among riparian nations. There have been assertions of “water wars” that may erupt due to scarcity of the resource across the planet. However, careful analysis of some longstanding international disputes over water has shown that such disagreements are more likely to induce cooperative behaviour among contesting states even if they may be in conflict over other issues. Cooperative water regimes, once established are shown to have a greater propensity to last (Wolf 1998). The Indus River Water Treaty between India and Pakistan, signed in 1960 with mediation by the World Bank, largely stood the test of time even when relations among the two neighbours were not the best. Until the Pahalgam terrorist attack of April 2025, following which the Indian government put the treaty in abeyance as a punitive measure against Pakistan, the World Bank’s “limited and procedural” role on matters pertaining to disputes has been generally acceptable to the two parties (World Bank 2018). The institutional dimension of river water management across the states therefore becomes very pertinent as it involves adherence to a set of prescribed norms by all the parties concerned, who see merit in not violating the agreement. It includes issues of water scarcity, water management and interdependence, nature and level of economic development (Stinnett and Tir 2009).

Interestingly, however, water disputes within the national context often prove to be more intractable despite there being a common national framework to address such disputes. The Cauvery Water Tribunal in India, which gave its interim judgement in 1991 and a final one in 2007 still runs into rough waters and the judgment is seen as being subjective, full of biases, and resulting in inequitable distribution (Garg and Azad 2019). The Mhadei issue, on which the present chapter reflects, is already three decades old

and despite the formation of the Mahadayi Water Disputes Tribunal and its eventual judgment on sharing, the differences between parties on the relative distribution continue to be the subject of litigation.

Given the complexity of the inter-state river water issues, a multiplicity of actors, agents and processes are bound to get involved. The state becomes the central as well as the intervening variable, being the repository of power and authority which is expected to put at the forefront the interests of the people who are likely to be affected by any potential diversion or distribution. The state, through its various institutional mechanisms, formulates the policies and positions that articulate these concerns. The state also mediates and negotiates in the midst of competing interest groups such as consumers, farmers, environmentalists and industrialists, who may be potential stakeholders in the conflict. Political parties, depending on whether they are part of the ruling coalition or the opposition, become the conscience keeper and keep the decibels high, particularly when disputes are part of the electoral calculus. As some instances from the Mhadei issue show, such political parties are not always consistent with their approach; they largely go by what is politically expedient at any given point in time. When there are different political parties in power across the states and centre, the contrast and the contradiction in positions becomes all the more obvious.

Non-state actors are the more stable and consistent interlocutors in many cases of inter-state water disputes, as they have their eyes and ears on the ground, are better informed of the issues directly affecting people, and have the potential for mass mobilization and agenda setting, thereby making themselves indispensable partners in the larger debate. There are occasions when such actors are seen in partnership with the state (particularly in case of depositions during legal hearings) but can also be seen as adversaries when they highlight inaction or the lack of action by the state in pushing forward the agenda. Depending on their strength and power of mobilization, governments are often forced not to ignore the vital role that such actors play. The basis on which non-state actors mobilize may vary depending on their core constituencies. They could include environmental groups, cultural and religious associations, farmers' groups, civil society academics, think tanks etc., each playing their respective roles.

Finally, one cannot ignore the fundamental issue in the context of any river water dispute, which is the issue of allocation or distribution on well-defined scientific as well as economic principles. Water is indeed a scarce commodity and any action that disturbs the natural flow has the potential to disturb the ecology, economy, hydrography, and the habitat around it. At the same

time, given the nature of trans-boundary water flows, it is imperative that an appropriate model be worked out which factors in all the variables and constituents and ensures the fairest possible allocation. The solution has to be integrated and holistic rather than being based purely on technical calculations. Inter-state river water tribunals that have primarily relied on technocentric data have not provided the best of options.

A comprehensive political economy frame of analysing any inter-state river water dispute in general and the Mhadei issue in particular, must draw upon the above variables at distinct points of time, with an objective of providing a more comprehensive understanding of the issue and some future directions. The following sections approach the thematic by first looking at the genesis of the dispute, the phases and trajectories that it went through along with its various stakeholders and the eventual verdict of the Mhadei Water Disputes Tribunal leading to its subsequent contestation. In doing so, the chapter tries to follow an intersectional approach where the role of actors and the eventual outcomes are analysed simultaneously with the hope of providing the larger picture at the end.

Intervening Actors and the Genesis of the Mhadei Issue

In 1980, farmers in the Dharwad and Gadag districts of Karnataka launched a movement to demand drinking water from the state government. The movement was in protest of the government's failure to provide water despite collecting a betterment levy. In response to the agitation, then Chief Minister Gundu Rao appointed a committee headed by opposition leader S.R. Bommai to address the issue. The Bommai Committee subsequently recommended the linking of the Mahadayi to Malaprabha. However, no progress was made on the recommendation until 1989, when S.R. Bommai became the Chief Minister of Karnataka. He signed a memorandum of understanding with the Goa government to construct a dam near the Kalasa in Karnataka. This project also did not move forward due to the brief duration of the Bommai government.

The original plan for the Kalasa-Banduri project was to divert water from the Mahadayi river to the Malaprabha river and store it in the Navilatirtha dam in Dharwad. The project was proposed in the 1980s, but faced opposition from the state of Goa, which argued that it would cause ecological damage. In 2002, the Karnataka government, under then Chief Minister S.M. Krishna, decided to revive the project for which it received clearance from the Union government. However, the Goa government, under then Chief Minister Manohar Parrikar, approached the Union government and requested the establishment of the Mahadayi Water Dispute Tribunal to assess the sit-

uation and allocate water to the three states involved in the dispute, that is, Goa, Karnataka, and Maharashtra. The clearance for the project was then put on hold by the Union government. Thereafter, Goa's positioning on the Mhadei issue was shaped by two parallel trajectories. The first was led by the Mhadei Bachao Abhiyan or MBA (Save Mhadei Campaign), which campaigned for greater sensitization on the damage that would be caused to environment and ecology in case of diversion and the litigation route, and the second by the Government of Goa, which pushed for the creation of a Mhadei River Water Tribunal, seeing it as a potential way to protect Goa's case. From the Karnataka side, a number of farmers' groups based in Dharwad as well as Bangalore acted as major proponents of the diversion through multiple agitations and rallies.

The Government of Karnataka, like its Goa counterpart, argued its case in the Supreme Court through a battery of lawyers, projecting the legality of its case and making a strong pitch before the Central Government through its elected representatives. The Mhadei Water Disputes Tribunal, constituted in 2010, came up with its final judgment in 2018 about the allocation of water among the three parties, but has been challenged by all three. Meanwhile the Centre has also created the Mhadei PRAWAH (Progressive River Authority for Welfare and Harmony) in 2023 to oversee the implementation of the award. As of now, the final verdict on the Tribunal's judgment is yet to come up in the Supreme Court and the PRAWAH has initiated its field visits to the concerned sites. The following section closely looks at the actors and institutions that have been part of the larger trajectory of the Mhadei issue and the key intersections within.

State: The Key Arbiter

The state has played a central role in shaping and influencing the Mhadei issue right at the time of its inception. In the conventional sense of the term, the state, through its lawmaking and enforcement power, is expected to initiate policies that benefit the people and to negotiate the pressures that are associated with this task. Perhaps keeping this factor in mind, the then Goa government led by Pratapsingh Rane signed the memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Karnataka S.R Bommai government as the two state governments saw a certain mutual benefit in the proposal. As per the MOU, Karnataka was to receive 45 TMC of water and Goa was to receive power generated through the construction of a hydel project. Apparently the state government saw some perceived benefits emerging out of the arrangement and did not give due thought to the potential opposition that could—

and did—emerge subsequently.¹

The state's nonchalance about the issue might have continued had the Mhadei Bachao Abhiyan not spearheaded the movement against proposed diversion. When the Congress led S.M. Krishna Government in Karnataka managed to get in-principle clearance for the diversion of 7.5 TMC water from the Mhadei in 2002 from the Central Water Commission of the NDA-led Central Government, the government of Goa for the first time acted proactively and managed to keep the permission in abeyance. The then Chief Minister of Goa, Manohar Parrikar, led an all-party delegation to the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and managed to get the decision stalled. Thereafter, he pitched for the creation of a tribunal to adjudicate the issue through a cabinet decision and, in the process, made a "neighbourly fight into an inter-state river water dispute" (The Goan 2023b). It is not clear if Goa was cajoled into pitching for a tribunal by the Central Government in lieu of the withdrawal of the in-principle clearance, or whether it was a move by the state government itself for buying time or if it was based on an anticipation of getting a more favourable outcome in the long run. Whatever the case may be, the decision to go for a tribunal has not left Goa with any satisfactory outcomes as the current stalemate shows.

Inter-state river water tribunals under the Inter-State River Water Dispute Act, 1956 (ISWDA), by their very mandate, are mechanisms to determine allocation and distribution of water between states when the two sides cannot resolve the issue by negotiations and one of the state parties therefore requests the constitution of a tribunal (India Code 2025). Though the findings of such a tribunal are seen as binding and Article 262 of the ISWDA bars the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court in such matters, tribunal findings have often been subject to the reference by the Supreme Courts, particularly when parties are not satisfied with the findings. This has only ended up prolonging the eventual resolution of the disputes. It was in this context that Goa's pitching for a tribunal appeared more of a tactic that would help it seek more time, instead of pitching a strong argument for non-diversion, as tribunals are supposed to decide the formula for sharing and not find a rationale for not diverting. One therefore notices a certain inconsistency in Goa's position on "protecting Goa's interests by not allowing diversion" on one hand and strongly arguing for the creation of a tribunal on the other. The Mhadei Bachao Abhiyan for this reason, had been opposing the tribunal route right

¹ Pratapsingh Rane, however, denied that he was properly briefed about the project by his engineering officials at a public meeting held at the International Centre, Goa to sensitize the public about the issue. His statement perhaps came against the rising opposition to the proposed diversion as the Tribunal proceedings reached their final stage.

from the beginning. Besides, the members of the tribunal in general are always from a judicial/non-technical background and often rely upon the advice of external experts to arrive at a formula for allocation and distribution, which has more than “quantitative” implications. The social and economic costs are often bound to go missing if due consideration is not given to them.

Nevertheless, based on Goa’s request, the Central Government constituted the Mhadei Water Disputes Tribunal by a notification dated 16 November 2010. The MWDT went through a series of deliberations, inspections, assessments and cross-examinations of various parties before finally submitting its report to the Central Government on 14 August 2018. Goa was allotted 24 TMC, Karnataka 13.5 TMC and Maharashtra 1.3 TMC. All three states expressed their dissatisfaction with the findings of the tribunal and filed a Special Leave Petition in the Supreme Court against the report-cum-final-decision. Based on the directions by the Supreme Court, the Central Government has published the award through its Gazette Notification dated 27 February 2020. The term of the tribunal has been extended even as the matter still remains in the Supreme Court.

Two significant agencies of the state which have been deeply engaged in the issue have been the Department of Water Resources, headed by the Chief Engineer, and the Office of the Advocate General Goa led by the Advocate General. The former has the prime mandate to “Harness, Utilise, Protect and Regulate the water resources in the State of Goa so as to make optimal use of the same and also save this precious resource for posterity” (Water Resource Department 2020). Formerly known as the Irrigation Department, it was designated as the Water Resource Department in 2000, enhancing the scope of its operations beyond irrigation and flood management to watershed development and water conservation. While the Chief Engineer and his colleagues have been part of the team that would depose before the Tribunal and present Goa’s hydrological arguments, they have also initiated studies which looked at the issue in sync with the MWDT requirements. For example, a study group steered by the WRD, Goa analysed the two Draft Project Reports (DPRs) by Karnataka in 2023, found that “the project, for augmentation of the State of Karnataka, has not undertaken fresh planning and development of schemes by preparing a holistic Master Plan for the diversion of water from the source to storage, i.e., the Malaprabha dam, by identifying priorities and justification, but merely prepared a diversion scheme of Mhadei water” (The Goan 2024a). The WRD has also been the nodal agency for briefing the elected representatives on various aspects of the issue, as and when required by the Assembly.

The Office of the Advocate General Goa has spearheaded the legal team which has put across Goa's case before the MWDT as well as the Supreme Court. As the seniormost law officer of the state, the AG represents the legal position of the state which is supposed to reflect continuity across political dispensations. Consistency of position in turn strengthens the argument of the state in the adjudication process. In this regard, while one does find consistency in the legal position that the state has taken, even when political regimes have changed, the approaches of respective legal officers have been different when it comes to engaging with public debates and civil society fora. In the initial phases of Goa's positioning, the office often focussed on legal arguments alone. In recent years, however, particularly post-MWDT verdict, the office engages more with the public and civil society, underscoring the need for greater collaboration between academia and the government on understanding the implications of the Mhadei issue from a futuristic perspective. The state Advocate General, at a seminar, for instance, mentioned that there was a need for more studies on the Mhadei issue to address the existing gaps and create a holistic understanding among the public at large (Times of India 2023c).

Political parties act as major influencers of public opinion and public debate on a politically volatile issue and the same applies to the Mhadei in the context of political parties in Goa. The Mhadei has always been a source of contestation between the ruling party and the opposition. A second layer is added depending on the party which is in power in Karnataka, as that gives further ammunition to both the ruling party and the opposition on the Goa side. Electoral politics also contribute to political parties and leaders coming up with propositions that seem opportunistic at best. As a case in point, erstwhile Chief Minister of Goa Manohar Parrikar wrote a letter to the BJP opposition leader in Karnataka B.S Yeddyurappa that Goa would not be averse to sharing Mhadei river water with Karnataka for drinking purposes (Indian Express 2017). This was widely seen as pre-election political posturing, aimed at wooing the voters of the Hubli-Dharwad region to vote for the BJP in the coming elections. It also led to a political slugfest in both states. In Karnataka, the ruling Congress questioned the wisdom of the CM of a state writing to the leader of opposition of another state rather than a constitutionally elected government, whereas the Goa Forward Party, an ally of the BJP in Goa, warned the party of any such "sellout" of Goa's interests.

The latest addition to the state machinery, also mandated by the MWDT award is the creation of the inter-state river management authority, which has been christened as the Mhadei PRAWAH, expected to oversee the imple-

mentation of the recommendations of the tribunal and look at the issues of allocation and distribution in a mutually beneficial manner.

The PRAWAH is to be headquartered in Panjim, headed by a full time chairman, who should be a serving officer from the Central Water Engineering Services, Higher Administrative Grade, with a term of three years, or a member of the Central Water Commission. The other members include experts from hydrology, environment, monitoring and appraisal, and finance alongside representatives from the respective states, usually Secretary, Water Resources (Goa Legislative Assembly 2024). Being an agency set up by the Central Government, it is expected to be fair and neutral in its assessment and positioning and has a more technical role to play. However, it has the potential to look at the issues closely in an integrated way and also build greater trust and transparency between constituent states. However, the political context in which the PRAWAH is likely to function cannot be ignored. Both the state governments of Goa and Karnataka welcomed the notification of PRAWAH, stating that it would help them strengthen their respective positions on non-diversion/diversion, thereby implying that each wishes to interpret the role of the Authority through their respective lenses (The Goan 2023a). Interestingly, former Chief Engineer, Water Resources Department, Goa is on the record saying that the constitution of PRAWAH may actually be detrimental to Goa's interest as it will be geared more towards implementation of the MWDT award rather than protecting Goa's case, especially since a majority of the members are from the Centre (Times of India 2023b).

Non-State Actors: Silent Yet Powerful

On an issue which has deep implications for people's basic needs, livelihoods, and immediate environments, civil society actors have a greater ability to understand, influence and galvanize public opinion than do state institutions. Such groups can not only act as conscience-keepers of the state and society, but as force multipliers and as a uniform positioning on matters of mutual concern. Non-governmental organizations, civil society groups, and professional bodies can create together a powerful ecosystem which can put pressure on the state or mould public opinion in its favour. The Mhadei issue has seen such actors on both sides, with each playing a crucial role in their respective domain, not always rising above controversy, yet remaining an important voice in the overall unfolding of the Mhadei issue on both sides of the border. A brief account of such actors and their interventions is listed in the following sections.

Goa

The Mhadei Bachao Abhiyan (MBA) has been the most consistent, focussed

and lasting voice of civil society on the Mhadei issue from Goa's perspective. Spearheaded by Rajendra Kerkar as its secretary, the MBA is today seen not only as the voice from the inner reaches and depth of Mhadei in Goa, but is also seen as a significant platform for conservation and protection of the Mhadei basin in the national sphere. 1997 marked the launch of two very significant initiatives, the Goa River Conservation Network (GORICON) and the Mhadei Bachao Abhiyan (TERI 2018) both of which were involved with river conservation and environmental protection across Goa's riverine culture and ecology in general and the Mhadei basin in particular.

The MBA has followed a two-pronged approach towards Mhadei advocacy. First, it has engaged in larger sensitization and outreach regarding the importance of the Mhadei basin for the cultural ecology and economic sustenance of Goa through workshops, news reports, and nature camps, with the purpose of making people aware on an issue which often did not find resonance among the broader civil society in Goa in its initial stages. Second, it has been an active petitioner in the Supreme Court on the issue of Karnataka's carrying out work on the Kalasa-Banduri project without any environmental clearances under the Forest Conservation Act (1980) and other related clearances from the Ministry of Forest, Environment, and Climate Change. It won a major victory in 2017 when the Supreme Court disposed of its petition after Karnataka's assurance that there would be no further construction with regard to the project (The Goan 2017). Another recent intervention of the MBA has been its push for the Mhadei basin to be declared as a tiger reserve, in tune with the directions of the Goa Bench of the Bombay High Court and recommendations of the National Tiger Conservation Authority. The MBA has asserted that declaration of the tiger reserve would act as a major boost towards preventing diversion of water.

The MBA has been supported in its advocacy and outreach by some other significant non-governmental organizations. Goa Foundation, the leading environmental NGO in Goa, has been the lead petitioner in the tiger reserve case and continues to raise issues of concern, particularly those relating to mining and deforestation, not just in ecologically sensitive areas in the Sattari area but the entire Western Ghats (Goa Foundation 2025). The Mhadei Research Centre has deeply engaged with the issues of inter-state conservation, research, and educational training of volunteers interested in conservation issues (Mhadei Research Centre 2025). There have also been episodic groups such as Save Mhadei Save Goa, which have mobilized popular opinion on the Mhadei issue on particular occasions, but have not really been able to sustain the movement in a definite direction. Similarly, the Mhadei

Bachao Andolan (not to be confused with Mhadei Bachao Abhiyan) erupted in late 2019 as a spontaneous movement to protect the Mhadei, claiming to consist of 137 NGOs and civil society groups and a couple of political outfits such as the Goa Suraksha Manch and Aam Admi Party (Navhind Times 2019). It outlined a clear action plan consisting of agitation across all the talukas in Goa to seek withdrawal of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change letter permitting Karnataka to go ahead with the diversion project. However, one did not hear of any other initiative by the group subsequently, implicating its unwieldy composition. The Save Mhadei Save Goa Campaign too, after a promising start with the launch of human chain and corner meetings across the river stretches, did not sustain itself beyond a few meetings. The Archdiocese of Goa and Daman, the premier Church body has lent its support to the Mhadei movement through its communication wing and Council for Social Justice and Peace, encouraging people to join Mhadei advocacy and treating Mhadei as a human rights concern (Archdiocesan News 2023). Academic initiatives on the Mhadei such as the Multidisciplinary Cluster on Mhadei, proposed at Goa University is in a very incipient stage and is yet to play a proactive role apart from organizing workshops and seminars. One of the major initiatives it took up was a workshop across various stakeholders from the perspective of understanding the issue and exploring the possibilities of a dialogue across the states on the issue from a future perspective.

In essence, the MBA has been the face of Mhadei mobilization in Goa, known for its sustained campaigning and constant prodding of the government to do a lot more on the Mhadei issue, often to the discomfort of the latter. It has also been a witness during the MWDT hearings, representing the civil society perspective. While the movement has not been without its share of trials and tribulations within, its persistent efforts for the cause of Mhadei stand out.

MBA and other civil society groups' major points of contention may be summarized as follows:

- The Mhadei issue should be seen in its entirety as affecting the larger ecology of the Western Ghats and not just the area around diversion.
- Goa is not a water-surplus state and needs an uninterrupted supply of Mhadei waters for its own consumption and sustenance.
- Unhindered flow of Mhadei is crucial to the flora, fauna, agriculture, fisheries, and navigation, which are likely to be affected if diversion takes place.

- There is an entire cultural ecology that flows alongside the river and represents the larger position that the river has in the cultural imagination of the people who live near it.
- Karnataka is likely to use the waters of the Mhadei not so much for drinking water purposes but to meet the irrigation requirements of sugarcane lobby, whose demand could have been met if the waters of the Malprabha had been utilized in a proper way.

Karnataka

In sharp contrast to Goa, the civil society, non-governmental, and interest-based groups that are concerned about the Mhadei issue in Karnataka are much more diversified and visible and have shown the capacity to put greater pressure on the government to seek a solution in their favour with regard to the Kalasa-Banduri scheme. A brief account of the institutions and their activities is listed below:

The Central Committee of Kannada Organizations in Belagavi has been opposing the visit of the Mhadei PRAWAH, stating that it will be used by Goa to push its case further and accusing it of bias.

The Federation of Karnataka State Farmers Association spearheaded by President Kurbur Shantakumar (also President of State Sugarcane Farmers Association) protested against MPs' offices for their failure to push for Karnataka's interests on the Mahadayi and Kaveri.

The Malprabha-Mahadayi-Kalasa-Banduri Raita Horata Samiti, Navalgund has protested frequently in Hubli and petitioned Prahlad Joshi, MP. It has pointed out that the state government has not done enough to get the Kalasa-Banduri project implemented despite the MWDT award, also stating that the issue has not received as much attention in northern Karnataka as the Kaveri issue has in southern Karnataka, putting the onus on north Karnataka MLAs (Times of India 2023a).

The Rait Sena is at the forefront of the struggle for Mahadayi and General Secretary Hanumanth Madiwalar blamed all political parties of playing politics over Mahadayi. The organization fielded its own candidate Veeresh Sobardhmath in the Nargund constituent assembly seat in the 2023 elections. He stood third among the contesting candidates after the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress, winning 1.1 percent of the vote and bettering the performance of established parties such as Janata Dal (Secular), Bahujan Samaj Party, and Aam Admi Party (Election Commission of India 2023).

The Karnataka Rajya Raita Sangha, a farmers' association, held a three-year protest, and the state even observed a *bandh*, demanding the project's implementation.

Academic Institutions/Think Tanks

The Centre for Multidisciplinary Development Research (CMMDR), Dharwad hosted a workshop for stakeholders from Karnataka in 2015, including farmers, social activists, officials, environmental scientists, legal experts, and journalists, just as the MWDT had been created. While the preponderant opinion emerged in favour of expediting the diversion to meet drinking water needs and agriculture, it was interesting to note that the scientific argument emphasized development of the watershed of the river basin, including forest cover, as a way to maintain the water levels rather than diversion. The CMDR workshop did speak of acting as a facilitator for dialogue across the states and stakeholders but this path wasn't taken up further. (CMDR 2016)

It is equally pertinent to mention that there are civil society groups based in Belgaum district whose opinion on the issue of proposed diversion has been at odds with those of other groups based in Hubli and Dharwad region, primarily on account of their location and position as the proximate parties concerned. It is the contention of such groups that any diversion would have damaging impact on the flora and fauna of the Malaprabha/Mhadei basin falling under the Khanapur taluka of Belgaum district, the ground zero of the Kalasa-Banduri project. They assert that the entire region should be seen as an integrated ecosystem and any deforestation or disturbance of the natural flow of the river will have its own impact on the rainfall patterns in the area, thereby turning the region into desert. Such groups include Paryavarni, Parivartan, Jagruthi Mahileyara Vakkuta, Lt. Gen. Sardeshpande Memorial Sahyadri Conservation Interpretation Centre, GRAKOOS, and members of Parisarakaagi Naavu Belagavi District Chapter (The Goan 2024b).

Conclusion

The Mhadei issue as seen from the perspective presented above has witnessed an interplay of a number of actors and processes, which in their own way have contributed to the evolution and present state of the dispute. The early phase of the issue began with an apparent understanding on the part of Goa and Karnataka that there would be mutual benefit to both sides. Yet over the years the political positioning diverged and the larger civil society thrust created conditions where it was seen more as a zero sum game. In the process, options and possibilities for a mutually agreeable outcome were lost as the positions became more polarized. Opting to resolve the issue by

means of a tribunal route and the MWDT's eventual verdict finally created an outcome which pleased no one. Politics and law intersected in such a manner that the zero sum nature of the contestation remains till date, with all actors, state and non-state, continuing to position themselves the way they had been throughout without compromise, which had an eventual bearing on the policies/positions that were put in place.

However, the tribunal's verdict should not be seen as the end of the matter. There is still enormous scope for actors within and across the states to engage with one another to understand one other's positions. This would not only lead to a greater appreciation of the ground reality on both the sides, but also build confidence and encourage the finding of solutions that involve mutual accommodation and give-and-take, a much needed virtue in the context of India's inter-state politics.

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