

Against the flow

Goa Chief Minister Manohar Parikkar's letter to his party's CM face in Karnataka, B.S. Yeddyurappa, last month, has given a new twist to a more than three-decade long river-water dispute. Goa will not oppose "in principle" sharing the waters of Mahadayi river with Karnataka for drinking purposes, Parikkar wrote.

The letter provoked angry responses in Parikkar's home state, including from Goa's water resources minister, Vinoda Paliencar. Karnataka CM, Siddaramaiah, dismissed the letter as an election gimmick.

Last week after the state's claims over the Mahadayi's water were raised during a day-long bandh in Karnataka, the Goa CM sought to underplay his letter and said the water dispute will be fought before the Mahadayi Water Disputes Tribunal. Parikkar had referred to the tribunal in his letter to Yeddyurappa as well. But the CM's missive on a fraught issue to his party leadership, when the correct course of action would have been to keep the constitutionally-elected government of Karnataka in the loop, raises serious questions of propriety.

Mahadayi water sharing is a boiling issue in over 30 constituencies in North Karnataka. Farmers in Hubballi, Dharwad, Gadag and Belagavi were on protest for almost all of 2016 demanding the implementation of the Kalasa-Banduri water project to divert Mahadayi's water for drinking purposes. But while there is no denying the water crisis in North Karnataka, the diversion of the Mahadayi poses a threat to Goa's ecology.

After originating in Karnataka's Belagavi district, the river spends more than two-thirds of its journey in Goa, giving life to the state's mangroves and providing people their staple, fish. So, when in the early 1990s, Karnataka designed a chain of dams and canals to channel the Mahadayi's water to the Malaprabha, a tributary of the Krishna, Goa protested, claiming that the upper riparian state's moves would result in an ingress of saltwater in the river. Ecologists said the dams would disturb Goa's ecological balance.

The matter went to the Supreme Court in 2006 when all attempts at a negotiated settlement between the two states failed. The Mahadayi Water Disputes Tribunal was set up in 2010. Going by the experiences of other river-water disputes, such tribunals can be long-drawn out and their decisions, mostly contentious.

The country has not found a mechanism to sort out river-water disputes to the satisfaction of all stakeholders. But with Karnataka slated to go to polls this year, Parrikar's letter to his BJP colleague in a state that his party covets, has given a dimension to the Mahadayi conflict that could result in more harm than good.

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