

MHADEI RIVER DIVERSION SCHEME: A POINTER TO ECOLOGICAL DISASTER IN GOA

Dr. Pradip Narayan Maske
Reader in Political Science
GVM's GGPR College of Commerce & economics, Ponda, Goa 403401
Mobile: 9423314925; Email: pnmaske@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The intra-state or inter-state rivalries over sharing of the river water become a tool to mobilize the masses at political plane. The intensity of conflict multiplies when different parties rule the states. Or, a dispute turns out to be a weapon to confront the Centre. The adjoining State of Karnataka share historical, cultural, ecological, and trade links with the State of Goa. The former Mysore State leaders asserted the cross-cultural exchanges during early 1960s. Since 1970s, Goa has become a hub of business activity. Goa is the second home for people from the adjoining states of Karnataka. Over three lakh Kannada-origin people reside in Goa. The people form a strong bond between Goa and Karnataka. The Madhei river issue is yet to support the indigenous people of Goa.

A section of Karnataka leaders have adopted an inflexible stand over the Kalsa-Bhandura Project ignoring the legitimate concerns raised by Goa Government and violating the laws and the court order. Government of Goa is yet to convene a special assembly session over the serious issue. The all-party delegation formula is yet to yield results. The environmental groups are seeking the intervention of the high and mighty in the corridors of power. The industrialization of Goa has put pressure on water resource on the one hand and depletion of water bodies on the other. The Mhadei diversion plans catering to demands of the urban pockets of Hubballi-Dharwar-Belgavi areas would be an ecologically insensitive course. Both the states have to explore the alternative routes to tide over the water scarcity in the future. The judicial or political intervention may yield results when the issue is decided on the ecologies of scale rather than on short term political or

economic gains. In 2023, the Madhei issue is pending in the court of law and decision of the apex court will be binding on the three states— Goa, Karnataka and Maharashtra.

Introduction

Goa Government passed resolution in January, 2023 to urge the Union Government to withdraw the Detailed Project Report (DPR) sanctioned by the Central Water Commission for diversion of water from Madhei basin. The Save Madhei, Save Goa Front a non-political environmental group is spearheading agitation to mobilise support to oppose the DPR and save Madhei River—the lifeline of Goa. The Madhei or Mahadayi or Mandovi or Gomati is the major rivers of Goa. Out of total geographical area of 3702 square kilometre, Madhei basin occupies 1580 square kilometre or 42.68 % of total geographical area of the State of Goa.

The Mhadei river originates at Degao in Khanapur taluka in Belgavi district of the State of Karnataka. Madhei river sustains ecology, forest, wildlife, agriculture and socio-cultural life of the people of Goa. The other rivers of Goa are Zuari river, Chapora river, Sal river, Talpon, Terekhola, Galgibag and other ecological sensitive water bodies. The Madhei basin nourishes, the four talukas of Sattari, Sanguem, Tiswadi, Bardez in North Goa and two talukas of Ponda and Sanguem in South Goa. Out of the total length of 117 kms of Mhadei river, 35 kms fall in Karnataka and 81 kms in Goa and 1 km in Maharashtra.

In 1980s, Karnataka started to construct canals, dams to divert the water to Malaprabha, a tributary of Krishna river. In 2010, the Mahadayi Water Disputes Tribunal to resolve the sharing of river water involving Karnataka, Goa and Maharashtra. Mhadei Bachao Andolan is agitating against diversion of 56 tmc of diversion of water by Karnataka. The Andolan was led by environmentalist Rajendra Kerkar, Nirmala Sawant and others in Goa. The Save Madhei, Save Goa Front is mobilising the public opinion to reverse the Diversion Project Report ratified by the Union Government. Home Minister Amit Shah assured the people of Goa that the Madhei issue will be settled amicably in the wake of Karnataka state election in 2023. The top-leaders of the

Congress party supported Goans over the Madhei river tangle before the Karnataka state elections in 2023. Out of the total 14.58 lakh population of Goa in 2011 of which 18.5 are migrant population from other states. The six lakh Kannadigas are scattered in 12 talukas of Goa in 2023. The DPR will affect not only the indigenous people, but also the migrant population.

The Union Government notified the Mahadayi (Madhei) PRAVAH (Progressive River Authority for Welfare and Harmony or the Madhei Water Management Authority on May 22, 2023 to give effect to the decisions of of Mahadayi Water Dispute Tribunal dated August 2018. The Union Government approved the DPR submitted by Karnataka on its plan to construct dams on the Kalsa and the Bhanduri tributaries of the Madhei river.

Madhei River & Wildlife in Goa

Mhadei river is a part of the Western Ghats, which is included is in the UNESCO heritage list. The habitat of wildlife will be destroyed if the diversion scheme is implemented lock-stockand-barrel. The project is located just within 300 meters of protected areas of Mhadei Wildlife Sanctuary. The diversion of water would cause water scarcity in Goa. The diversion of water violates the Wildlife Protection Act 1975. Goa is the tiniest State of Union of India. Geographical area of Goa is 3702 sq kms. Goa has 65 per cent green cover as per Annual Plan, Government of Goa 2013-14. Forest cover as per H. Y. Karapurkar Committee 2002 is 1364.39 sq km out of total area of 3702 sq km which accounts for 36.85 per cent. There is additional plantation forest of 791 sq km which makes up 2155 sq. km or (58.22 per cent) vegetation cover in Goa. The entire Western Ghats stretch in Goa is lying on the eastern side of Goa. The forest of Goa is demarcated into six Wildlife Sanctuaries, including one National Park.

These are: -

- (i) Mhadei Wildlife Sanctuary (208.48 sq. kms) in Sattari,
- (ii) Bondla Wildlife Sanctuary (8 sq. kms) in Ponda,
- (iii) Bhagwan Mahaveer Wildlife Sanctuary (133 sq. kms) in Sanguem taluka,

- (iv) Molem National Park (107 sq. kms) in Sanguem,
- v) Netravali Wildlife Sanctuary (211.05 sq. kms) in Sanguem,
- (vi) Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary (85.65 sq. kms) in Canacona, and
- (vii) Dr. Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary (1.78 sq. kms) in Tiswadi.

The Madhei diversion scheme will pose disaster to the fragile wildlife which falls in the western ghats of India.

Madhei River Diversion Scheme: Ecological Fallout

The diversion of Madhei river water will pose the ecological disaster in Goa. The saline water in the Arabian Sea will rush into the Madhei basin when water table falls due to ecologically insensitive diversion scheme at the mouth of the Madhei river in Karnataka. The salinity in the Madhei basin will affect forest, wildlife, ecology, agriculture, waterbodies and land resource. Karnataka Government has made provision in the Budget of Rs. 800 crore to expand Supa Dam water storage, too. Government of Karnataka defends the diversion plan in the name of meeting the acute scarcity of drinking water in Belgavi, Hubballi and Dharawar areas of Karnataka. In fact, the diversion plan will boost the commercial, industrial demands for water in the region. The scientists have warned against the reckless diversion plan on the dangerous of increase in salinity of Madhei in Goa.

Conclusion

The Madhei river diversion plan is threat to wildlife, ecology, agriculture, forest and convert Madhei river into a saline lake in Goa. The Madhei river diversion plan has become the electoral battle between political parties in Goa, Karnataka and Maharashtra. The State of Karnataka is flexing its muscle to downplay the real issue of threat to ecology and pursue the vested interests. It is pity that the environmental issue hardly become electoral issue in Goa or India. It fails to move the masses on the political plane in the market economy.

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