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A river runs through it

Centre, Karnataka must listen to Goa's concerns about Mandovi diversion

RIVER MANDOWI IN Goa, known as Mhadei in its upper reaches, symbolises different things to different people. For the tourist, a cruise on the Mandovi is a must. The hour-long cruise takes him to a different time and space, where he becomes a part of Goa, grooving to its traditional as well as Portuguese dances before the performances turn to Bollywood numbers. For urban India's neo-rich, the visit is incomplete without splurging at one of the half a dozen casinos floating on the river. For the VIPs on an official visit to Goa, the Mandovi is now a fleeting moment en route to the state secretariat via the Atal Setu.

But for ordinary Goans, Mandovi provides a cultural, economic and political context. The lifeline of Goa, Mandovi is a river goddess that gives birth, sustains and nurtures a variety of flora and fauna. It sustains agriculture, fisheries and tourism, the latter two being the mainstay of Goa's economy. On May 20, thousands of Goans will form a human chain along the river, for the river.

Goans are worried that following the Central Water Commission (CWC) approving the Detailed Project Report (DPR), neighbouring Karnataka will construct the Kalasa Bhandura canal to divert water from the upper reaches of Mhadei to the Malaprabha basin. Though Goa sought interim relief from the Supreme Court on the matter, the latter said that Karnataka has to obtain en-

vironmental and wildlife clearances first and the same has been listed for a final hearing in July. This comes even as the Mhadei Water Disputes Tribunal (MWDT) Award 2018 on the allocation of water between three states (including Maharashtra) has been questioned in the Supreme Court by all the parties. The issue has brought together ordinary people, civil society and the political class, across party lines.

Chief Minister Pramod Sawant and his colleagues recently met the Union home minister and the jal shakti minister to discuss the issue and the legislative assembly passed a resolution demanding the withdrawal of approval to DPR and the constitution of the Mhadei Water Management Authority. Senior Union ministers have been mum on the issue since Karnataka was having elections. The Union home minister even claimed credit for ensuring water for Karnataka farmers.

Matters of inter-state resource allocation disputes, principles of equity and justice for small states surrounded by bigger states, cannot be dealt with on the same lines as that for big states. That is what the MWDT Award has failed to address. The Supreme Court is set to hear the final arguments soon. But there is a lot that the Centre needs to do to protect Goa's legitimate concerns, irrespective of the final verdict.

On paper, the award looks good, as Goa

appears to have got a major share of the water. But this was natural as 79 per cent of the total catchment area falls in the small state. But the tribunal itself noted with concern that all three states have failed to provide adequate scientific data to support their arguments. The tribunal should have invoked its mandate and put the final judgment on hold pending the states providing more reliable data. Moreover, the undue haste shown by the CWC in granting the recent approval for the DPR to Karnataka, even as the matter is pending in the Supreme Court is inexplicable. It is almost a *déjà-vu* moment for Goa, which had successfully contested an in-principle clearance given by the Ministry of Water to Karnataka to divert 7.56 TMC of water in 2002.

Political stakes have always been loaded heavily against Goa. Only an act of political statesmanship at the highest level can perhaps help. The central leadership should not look at the issue through the prism of party politics. It was natural for Karnataka leaders to prioritise the diversion of Mhadei to meet the drinking water needs of Hubli-Dharwad region, especially in the electoral season. Karnataka politicians made light of the Goa assembly resolution and the inability of Panjim to make its case heard in Delhi. They have chosen to ignore the fact that pockets within Karnataka, lying in the catchment area of

Mhadei, are opposed to diversion as their concerns are similar to that of Goa.

Goa has a history of activism against mining and mega projects. The outrage this time against the diversion of Mhadei is similar to the protests in 2006 when the Goa Bachao Abhiyan brought people together to successfully oppose the Regional Plan 2011, which had threatened to convert a major part of Goa's green belt into a settlement area. The Mhadei Bachao Abhiyan, a two-decade-old movement led by the gritty Rajendra Kerkar, has been bolstered with the Save Goa Save Mhadei campaign that brings together environmentalists, professionals, writers, students and ordinary residents of the state, both Goan and non-Goan. It has been suggested that Goa should reach out to the civil society in Karnataka and apprise it of Goa's concerns.

Prime Minister Modi, during one of his election visits in 2014, had marvelled at the rootedness of Goans, who were striving for special status, not for material gains, but to protect their cultural identity. The demand for special status remained a non-starter due to its vagueness. But the demand for protecting Mhadei is a clear and coherent call for protecting Goa's survival and identity. New Delhi must acknowledge it.

The writer teaches Political Science at Goa University. Views are personal