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Rule curves: TS writes to KRMB

STATE BUREAU
Hyderabad

The Telangana government has requested the Krishna River Management Board (KRMB) to formulate Rule Curves for Srisailam and Nagarjuna Sagar reservoirs.

In a letter to the chairman of the river board on Saturday, Telangana Engineer-in-Chief (Irrigation) C Muralidhar stated that the KRMB was not recognising the gross violation of the Bachawat Tribunal Award. He stated that the Telangana had requested the KRMB and the Centre to furnish data utilised in the formulation of Rule Curves for Srisailam and Nagarjuna Sagar reservoirs, but it was not done. He urged the authorities to revise Rule Curves as per the request made by the Telangana government.

Stating that though no flows were needed from NSP to Krishna Delta in lieu of the diversion of Godavari water from Polavaram to Krishna as per the Godavari Water Disputes Tribunal, the Rule Curve by the CWC contain the release from NSP to Krishna delta.

Similarly, Telangana has been requesting KRMB to modify Rule Curves providing power generation at Srisailam to be done by AP and Telangana in proposition to in-basin requirements from NSP, but so far it has not been done, he stated.

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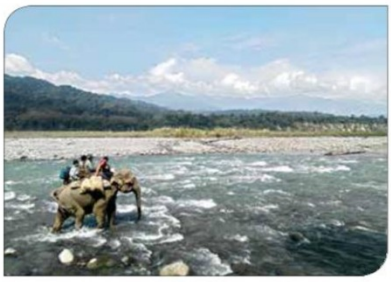

Harmonising the flowing borders

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By maximising economic benefits without compromising on ecosystem's sustainability, IWRM can accommodate differences in riparian rights perspective over transboundary river waters in the Northeast

The political ramifications of the decades-old colonial practice of creating inter-state borders by using natural markers like rivers, found predominantly in India's Northeast, remains significant till present day. Such boundaries are not just mere markers; they also condition power relations among the modern-day Westphalian states (based upon the aspects of territory, recognition, population and authority) in the Northeast.

While drawing state boundaries, the geographic, economic and political considerations must be kept in mind. If any of these aspects are overlooked, border disputes among states become all the more imminent. Matters get further complicated in the context of open river borders since more often than not, they are already mired in perception differences from both sides.

Water as a state subject

The emergence of water as a state subject can be attributed to the fact that the Centre hardly ever exercised powers granted to it under Entry 56. The legislative competence of state governments with regard to Entry 17 has remained unfettered given the vacuum left behind by the Parliament due to its non-usage of powers granted under Entry 56. As water governance has come to be perceived and practiced as a states' exclusive domain, a reductionist and fragmented approach is noticeable in water governance. Given how transboundary rivers flow from one state to the other and, in this case, even act as demarcations between them, with time, they have emerged as sites of political controversies around the issues of flood management, territorial claims, dam projects and social exclusion.

Deficiencies in dam planning

The proposed Kulsi dam project has faced massive opposition from the local Garo, Khasi and the Rabha communities in Meghalaya, who fear their villages being inundated upon the dam's completion. While Meghalaya CM Conrad Sangma went on to contend that he did not issue a No Objection Certificate (NOC) to the Brahmaputra Board in Assam, he was challenged by the Opposition for the project's impacts. The politicisation of the issue was further seen in the views of Opposition leader Mukul Sangma, who opposed the Kulsi dam project since it falls under the areas of difference between the states. Apart from issues of forced displacements and territorial sovereignty, building the dam can drastically reduce the Kulsi's flow in downstream Meghalaya – something Assam and Arunachal as co-riparian states must consider.

Issues of territorial delimitation

In 2009 for instance, a vast tract of fertile land in Manipur fell into Assamese territory after the Jiri altered its course following large-scale erosion which takes place every monsoon (and this is not something new) — atleast 22 acres of fertile land in Kamranga, located in the Jiribam district of Manipur, had come to be merged with Assamese territory in the past. If adequate measures are not taken up in time by concerned authorities, then it is likely that there will be further loss of fertile land to the Assam side of the border — creating issues of territorial delimitation between Assam and Manipur. Given how territorial disputes in the Northeast go on to recur, as they range from being dormant to active, it is only a matter of time before this unresolved issue creates territorial disputes between the peaceful neighbours.

Resource politics

The National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) considers several areas falling within the state of Assam to be the rightful home of the Nagas. In its quest to create the 'Greater Nagalim', it has called for the redrawing of its inter-state boundaries with its neighbours for bounding together all 'Naga-inhabited areas' by geographical contiguity. Under this Disputed Area Belt (DAB), Dhansiri is seen to fall under Sector C. With Nagaland as the upstream riparian and Assam as the downstream riparian in case of Dhansiri, sovereignty interests for the conflicting states would entail having territorial claim over Dhansiri. Since sovereignty remains a primary issue for Assam and Nagaland, the control of water resources, too, become central in their sovereignty concerns.

Ineffective flood management

The Noa Dehing's strong tendency to meander from its cartographically assigned position simply adds to the complexities between the conflicting neighbours. With time, rivers have emerged from being water bodies that support life to becoming newer arenas for policy-making, just as land territories, for fulfilling the vested interests of individual states. The construction of structural interventions in the form of embankments, spurs and dykes on the Noa Dehing, on both sides of the border, is a clear case of varying delineations of user rights by Assam and Arunachal as co-riparian states. Further, the use of such inadequately planned structural interventions on the river channels also reflect how long-term sustainability concerns are compromised for accruing short-term economic benefits.

'Land bias' in water disputes

Political narratives surrounding river disputes are found to be subsumed in questions of regional rights, where water sharing is viewed as an infringement on a state's regional autonomy and its interests. While looking at states in the Northeast, territorial concerns remain the greatest priority in the agendas of conflicting neighbours. Such perceptions remain widely entrenched among the Mizos, Nagas and other inhabitants of the Northeast. Thus, a land bias is seen to prevail even in issues concerning river boundaries among co-riparian states. It is imperative to move beyond this land factor that has come to be noticeable in the realm of transboundary water politics among the modern-day Westphalian states of the Northeast.

> Integrated Water Resources Management is an approach to managing water resources within the wider context of sustainable development

Can the Thalweg principle work?

Since courses of rivers in the Himalayan region keep changing, what are the implications of having these rivers as political boundaries? Given how territorial loss would pose a greater risk than access to the water bodies concerned, employing the 'Thalweg principle' — which is a rule of international law that aims at resolving water boundary disputes by considering the boundary line along the middle of the river (or the deepest part of the channel) and other usual considerations of state property law (wherein land that had moved as a result of avulsion belongs to the original owner rather than the land of another to whom it has been transferred to given the river's changing course) — stands redundant when it comes to resolving issues that could emanate from river boundaries in the region.

River basins as units of governance

Since rivers that shift avulsively along their courses have come to serve as borderlines between the states, ensuring the states' compliance to international law when it comes to resolving river boundary disputes in the near future emerges as an area of challenge in the Northeast. Also, state governments have failed to view water resources through the lens of economic integrity, which goes on to measure environmental impacts and ecological consequences of development models. A narrow focus on only the cost-benefit analysis, which takes place within decision-making context, overlooks the integral relationships that exist between a river and the ecological and social processes that are dependent on it. It has, thus, become a necessity to make a shift towards river basins — a natural and, hence, more pragmatic and viable unit for water governance.

Why is an IWRM-based approach essential?

Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) is an approach to managing water resources within the wider context of sustainable development. It promotes the maximization of economic benefits without compromising on the sustainability concerns of ecosystems. Employing the IWRM approach for water governance at the river basin level can go a long way in effectively governing the river borders of the Northeast, as a knowledge gap is seen to dominate the water governance in the region. There is a growing need to engage in more ecologically-informed decision-making before cropping up more river infrastructures in the near future, and this is where IWRM has a crucial role to play.

Working towards a sustainable future

IWRM would accommodate competing demands by the Northeastern states over common water resources emanating from their differential perspectives, in terms of the riparian rights that they hold over transboundary river waters, and also take into account a river basin's ecosystemic needs. Further, it would consider the various dimensions (historic, geographic, cultural etc.) of its stakeholders' needs and interests, when riparian water policy decisions on matters such as water resource allocation are being taken up. It will also ensure better ecologically informed decisions that a reductionist colonial river engineering mindset — highly prevalent in the Northeastern region over the past few decades — has failed to tap into.

Views expressed are personal