

Interstate water disputes and dialectics of democratization

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Do disputes destabilize democracies? How do contests over shared resources impact democratic nation-states? Do politics over transboundary resources create conflicts or cement cooperation? These are some central concerns of my research about interstate water disputes in India. *The Economist's* recent report tells only one part of the story – about battles over water resources *between* nation-states. Politics of resource struggles *within* nation-states and how they shape the state and the spaces of democracy, has received far less attention. My research aims to pursue this understudied perspective by examining the politics of interstate water disputes and their resolution in India.

The Government of India's grand proposal to interlink rivers in 2002 was little concerned with the project's potential to exacerbate conflicts due to proposed changes in the existing regimes of water distribution. This obliviousness in the face of India's long standing history of interstate water disputes was puzzling. I am intrigued by this lack of attention to potential conflicts and their implications for the nation. Further, the recent body of literature about India's vibrant democracy and its federal stability pays little or no attention to the politics of resource sharing and contestations between the states. My research addresses this important gap by approaching the problem of interstate water disputes as a transboundary conflict. The political ecology of interstate water disputes emerges from the asymmetrical relationship between the upstream state and the downstream state, when a natural river course intersects state boundaries. This problem is compounded by postcolonial reorganization of state boundaries, which in turn have a confounding effect on the pre-colonial water sharing agreements. Overlapping these structural issues in boundary formation, various political actors actively engage in social boundary constructions of 'us' versus 'them' that lead to continued recurrence of disputes, and, sometimes in their resolution.

Earlier scholars described interstate water dispute resolution mechanisms in India as opaque, ambiguous and allow continued disagreements. Formal resolution of disputes is addressed through separately created tribunals under the Interstate Water Disputes Act of 1956. However, disputes are often resolved informally through active participation of several non-state actors: political parties, NGOs, community groups and networks. The availability of political spaces for mitigating disputes, while evading violent and secessionist tendencies, provide opportunities to explore the expanding democratic spaces in India.

In exploring the problem from this perspective, my research addresses several key questions. What are the practices and processes through which the state and non-state actors animate and resolve interstate water disputes? How do the disputes and their outcomes relate to historical boundary formations and, the overlapping boundary constructions by political actors? How do the multi-scalar and intersecting political processes in the formal and informal spaces of resolution produce and reproduce the transboundary political spaces of interstate water disputes? How do these politics transform and shape the state and democracy in India? To pursue these questions, I propose to study how the local inequities

and asymmetries of resource sharing between states are escalated and mediated in the political spaces at higher scales. The mundane, repeated practices of contestations, discourses and deliberations in the transboundary political spaces of interstate water disputes generate will be of central interest to this research. By studying these, I draw implications for the state and reproduction of democratic politics in India. I build upon a combination of methods to pursue this research: multi-sited ethnography, interviews, and secondary source based case studies. The ethnographic component of research will focus on one of the current disputes – the Krishna water dispute. Narmada water dispute is the other case study and will draw upon secondary sources.