



Political Dimensions of Water Resource Management in Telangana- A Study

Dr. Challoyu Jyothsna
Assistant Professor, Govt. Degree College, Sadasivpet, Sangareddy District

Abstract: Water has been a crucial factor in the political and developmental trajectory of Telangana. Historically, the region faced inadequate irrigation facilities, recurring droughts, and perceived inequalities in the distribution of Krishna and Godavari river waters, which became important issues in the Telangana statehood movement. Following the formation of Telangana in 2014, the government prioritized water resource management through major initiatives such as Mission Kakatiya, Mission Bhagiratha, and the Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Project. This study examines the political dimensions of water governance in Telangana and its impact on state-building, welfare politics, inter-state relations, and electoral outcomes. Based on secondary data from government reports, policy documents, and academic literature, the study finds that water projects have functioned not only as developmental interventions but also as instruments of political legitimacy and regional identity. The study concludes that water governance has played a significant role in shaping development, democratic politics, and socio-economic transformation in Telangana.

Keywords: Water Governance, Telangana, Water Politics, Mission Kakatiya, Mission Bhagiratha, Kaleshwaram Project, Electoral Politics.

Introduction

Water is one of the most important resources for the people of Telangana. It plays a vital role in agriculture, drinking water supply, economic development, and the overall well-being of society. Historically, Telangana faced many water-related problems such as droughts, insufficient irrigation facilities, declining groundwater levels, and lack of proper utilization of river waters. During the period of united Andhra Pradesh, many people in Telangana felt that the region did not receive a fair share of the Krishna and Godavari river waters. As a result, water became an important issue in the Telangana movement and was closely linked to demands for regional development and social justice. After the formation of Telangana State on 2 June 2014, the government gave high priority to water resource management. Several major programmes such as Mission Kakatiya, Mission Bhagiratha, and the Kaleshwaram Lift

Irrigation Project were launched to improve irrigation facilities, provide safe drinking water, and support agricultural development. These initiatives aimed to solve long-standing water problems and improve the lives of farmers and rural communities.

Water in Telangana is not only a development issue but also a political issue. Government policies and projects related to water have influenced public opinion, electoral politics, and regional identity. Water projects have become symbols of development and government performance. Therefore, understanding the political dimensions of water resource management is important for analysing governance, public policy, and development in Telangana.

This study examines the relationship between water resource management and politics in Telangana. It focuses on how water-related policies and projects have influenced development, governance, and political processes in the state.



Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the political significance of water resource management in Telangana.
2. To analyze major water initiatives and their developmental outcomes.
3. To assess the role of water projects in electoral politics and state-building.
4. To evaluate inter-state water disputes and their political implications.
5. To identify challenges in sustainable water governance.

Research Methodology

The study is descriptive and analytical in nature. It is based entirely on secondary data collected from Telangana Socio-Economic Outlook reports, government publications, Mission Kakatiya and Mission Bhagiratha documents, academic journals, policy reports, and published literature. Data relating to irrigation, drinking water coverage, and project implementation were analysed using descriptive interpretation and political analysis.

Historical Context of Water Politics

The issue of water has been one of the most important factors in the political history of Telangana. During the period of united Andhra Pradesh (1956–2014), many people in Telangana believed that the region did not receive a fair share of river waters, irrigation projects, and government investments. Although Telangana is geographically rich in water resources, the benefits of irrigation development were perceived to be concentrated in other regions. This perception became a major source of regional dissatisfaction and contributed significantly to the Telangana statehood movement.

Telangana is located in the basins of the two major rivers of South India the Krishna and the Godavari. About 69% of the Krishna River catchment area and nearly 79%

of the Godavari River catchment area lie within Telangana. Furthermore, around 56% of Telangana geographical area falls under the Godavari basin and 43% under the Krishna basin, indicating the state's natural advantage in water resources. However, supporters of the Telangana movement argued that the region did not receive irrigation benefits proportional to its geographical share.

Studies and reports on regional disparities highlighted that while Telangana possessed a large share of river catchment areas, irrigation development remained comparatively low. According to arguments presented during the Telangana movement, nearly 74.25% of canal irrigation benefits from major projects went to Coastal Andhra, while Telangana received only about 18.20%. Similarly, in the Krishna basin, Telangana accounted for around 69% of the catchment area but received only about 35% of the allocated river water. The Telangana Ideologue Prof. Jayashankar pointed out that while Andhra Pradesh had been allocated about 1480 TMC of Godavari water, a significant portion remained unutilized in Telangana. He argued that more than 12 lakh acres in Coastal Andhra benefited from Godavari irrigation, whereas less than 5 lakh acres in Telangana received similar benefits. He therefore demanded greater utilization of Godavari waters for Telangana development.

The decline of traditional tank irrigation further aggravated the problem. Telangana historically depended on thousands of tanks constructed during the Kakatiya and Nizam periods. However, inadequate maintenance led to a sharp decline in tank irrigation. The share of net irrigated area under tanks in Telangana decreased from 64.4% in 1955–56 to only 12.7% in 2008–09. As tank irrigation declined, farmers increasingly depended on borewells and groundwater, making agriculture



vulnerable to drought and rainfall fluctuations. Agricultural statistics also reveal significant disparities. Around the time of Andhra Pradesh's formation in 1956, Telangana's irrigation intensity was only 17.2%, compared to 44.7% in Coastal Andhra. This lower irrigation coverage affected agricultural productivity and rural livelihoods across many Telangana districts.

As a result, water became more than a developmental issue; it evolved into a symbol of regional inequality, economic deprivation, and political identity. During the Telangana movement, leaders repeatedly argued that a separate state would enable better utilization of Krishna and Godavari waters, expansion of irrigation facilities, and greater public investment in the region. Thus, the demand for Telangana statehood was closely linked with demands for equitable water distribution, irrigation development, and regional justice. Water emerged as a powerful political issue that united farmers, activists, students, and political leaders in the struggle for a separate Telangana state.

Water, Federalism and Inter-State Relations

Water disputes in Telangana are not limited to Andhra Pradesh alone; they also involve neighbouring states such as Maharashtra and Karnataka. Since the formation of Telangana in 2014, the sharing of Krishna and Godavari river waters has become an important issue in inter-state relations and federal politics. Water allocation, reservoir management, and construction of irrigation projects have frequently generated political debates and negotiations among these states.

Telangana–Andhra Pradesh Water Disputes

The most significant disputes have occurred between Telangana and Andhra Pradesh over the sharing of Krishna and Godavari river waters. After bifurcation, both states claimed a larger share of Krishna

waters for irrigation and drinking water needs. Disagreements emerged regarding the operation of major reservoirs such as Nagarjuna Sagar and Srisailem. Telangana argued that historical water allocations were not equitable and demanded a fresh distribution based on basin area, cultivable land, and developmental needs. Andhra Pradesh, on the other hand, sought to protect its existing water usage and irrigation systems. The Krishna River Management Board (KRMB) was established under the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014 to oversee water sharing between the two states. However, conflicts regarding reservoir releases and project approvals continued, making water a recurring political issue in both states.

Telangana–Maharashtra Water Relations

Telangana also shares the Godavari River basin with Maharashtra. Unlike the disputes with Andhra Pradesh, Telangana's relationship with Maharashtra has generally been more cooperative. The two states signed several agreements to utilize Godavari waters through joint projects and barrages. A notable example is the agreement on the Tummidihetti Barrage and other Godavari-based projects. In 2016, Telangana and Maharashtra signed Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) to facilitate the construction of irrigation projects and optimize water utilization. These agreements enabled Telangana to redesign parts of the Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Project and improve access to Godavari waters. The cooperation between Telangana and Maharashtra is often cited as an example of cooperative federalism, where states work together to achieve mutual benefits rather than engage in prolonged disputes.

Telangana–Karnataka and Krishna Waters

Telangana is also affected by Karnataka's utilization of Krishna River waters.



As an upper riparian state, Karnataka's irrigation projects influence the availability of water downstream in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Decisions regarding dams, reservoirs, and water releases in Karnataka often have implications for Telangana's agricultural and drinking water requirements. Water disputes and agreements have strengthened regional identities and influenced political discourse in Telangana. Political leaders frequently emphasize the protection of Telangana's water rights and present successful negotiations or project approvals as achievements of the government. At the same time, disputes over river waters are used to mobilize public opinion and demonstrate commitment to regional interests.

From a federal perspective, these issues highlight the importance of institutions such as the Krishna River Management Board (KRMB), the Godavari River Management Board (GRMB), and various river water tribunals in resolving conflicts and ensuring equitable distribution of water resources. Therefore, water functions not only as a developmental resource but also as a strategic political instrument shaping inter-state relations, federal governance, and regional politics in Telangana.

Mission Kakatiya and Political Decentralization

Mission Kakatiya was launched in 2014 to restore 46,531 irrigation tanks across Telangana. The programme aimed to increase water storage capacity, improve groundwater recharge, and revive traditional tank irrigation systems. Before the scheme, only about 9–10 lakh acres were irrigated despite a potential of nearly 20 lakh acres. The restoration of tanks improved water availability and agricultural productivity in rural areas. Politically, the programme strengthened the government's connection with farmers and

village communities. By reviving the historic tank system of the Kakatiya rulers, Mission Kakatiya became a symbol of Telangana's heritage, rural development, and decentralized water governance.

Mission Bhagiratha and Welfare Politics

Mission Bhagiratha was launched to provide safe drinking water to every household in Telangana. The programme covered around 25,000 villages and habitations and benefited nearly 2.7 crore people through an extensive pipeline network. It addressed drinking water shortages and fluoride contamination in many rural areas. Politically, the scheme transformed drinking water into a universal welfare service rather than a subsidy-based programme. Household tap connections became visible indicators of government performance. The initiative improved public health; reduced hardships faced by women, and strengthened the government's image as a welfare-oriented administration committed to inclusive development.

Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Project

The Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Project (KLIP) became Telangana's flagship irrigation project after state formation. Designed to utilize Godavari river waters, it aimed to irrigate about 18.25 lakh acres and provide drinking and industrial water across the state. The project demonstrated Telangana's ambition to achieve agricultural growth and water security through large-scale infrastructure development. Politically, Kaleshwaram symbolized state capacity, modernization, and the fulfillment of promises made during the Telangana movement. While supporters viewed it as transformative, critics questioned its financial costs and environmental impact, making it a major topic of political debate and public discussion.



Water and Electoral Politics

Water projects played a crucial role in shaping electoral politics in Telangana, particularly during the 2018 Assembly Elections. The TRS government highlighted the achievements of Mission Kakatiya, Mission Bhagiratha, and the Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Project as evidence of its commitment to development and farmer welfare. By 2018, Mission Kakatiya had restored over 27,000 tanks, helping to stabilize irrigation in about 14 lakh acres. Similarly, Mission Bhagiratha provided drinking water connectivity to more than 23,000 rural habitations and over 55 lakh households. The Kaleshwaram Project was projected to irrigate nearly 18.25 lakh acres and support drinking and industrial water needs. These initiatives generated visible benefits for rural communities, particularly farmers who constitute a significant portion of Telangana's electorate. The TRS won 88 out of 119 Assembly seats in the 2018 elections with approximately 47% of the vote share, reflecting strong public support for its development-oriented policies. Political analysts observed that irrigation expansion, drinking water security, and farmer-focused programmes strengthened the government's image and contributed significantly to its electoral success. Thus, water governance became not only a developmental strategy but also an effective political tool influencing voter behaviour and electoral outcomes in Telangana.

Discussion

The Telangana experience demonstrates that water is not merely a natural resource but a powerful political instrument that shapes governance, development, regional identity, and electoral outcomes. The politics of water in Telangana must be understood within the broader context of historical grievances, state

formation, and the struggle for equitable resource distribution. During the Telangana movement, issues related to the Krishna and Godavari rivers were consistently presented as evidence of regional discrimination. Consequently, after the formation of the state in 2014, water management became a central component of the government's political and developmental agenda.

The first major political dimension of water governance in Telangana is its role in state-building and political legitimacy. Newly formed states often face the challenge of demonstrating their administrative effectiveness and fulfilling the aspirations of their citizens. The Telangana government used large-scale initiatives such as Mission Kakatiya, Mission Bhagiratha, and the Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Project to showcase its commitment to development and regional empowerment. These projects were not simply infrastructure programmes; they became symbols of Telangana's capacity to manage its own resources and address long-standing developmental deficits. By linking water projects to the goals of the Telangana movement, the government transformed water infrastructure into a tool for strengthening state legitimacy and reinforcing regional identity.

The second dimension relates to welfare politics and social inclusion. Access to irrigation and drinking water directly affects agricultural productivity, livelihoods, health, and quality of life. Programmes such as Mission Bhagiratha brought visible improvements to rural communities by providing household drinking water connections, while Mission Kakatiya improved groundwater recharge and irrigation potential through tank restoration. Unlike traditional welfare programmes that provide financial assistance, these initiatives delivered long-term public assets and services. As a result,



citizens experienced the benefits of development in their daily lives, which enhanced trust in government institutions and strengthened political support among rural populations. This demonstrates how infrastructure development can function as a form of welfare politics by creating tangible and widely distributed benefits.

The third dimension is the relationship between water governance and electoral politics. In Telangana, water projects became powerful political narratives that shaped public perceptions of government performance. During the 2018 Assembly Elections, the ruling TRS government presented irrigation expansion, drinking water provision, and farmer welfare as evidence of successful governance. The electoral success of the party reflected the political value of visible development projects. Voters often evaluate governments based on their ability to deliver public goods, and water-related programmes provided concrete examples of state intervention. Thus, water infrastructure became an important electoral resource that influenced voting behaviour and political legitimacy.

At the same time, Telangana's water policies also reveal the complexities and contradictions of development politics. While projects such as Kaleshwaram were celebrated as engineering achievements, they also attracted criticism regarding financial sustainability, environmental impacts, and cost escalations. The project became a subject of intense political debate between the ruling party and opposition groups. This illustrates that large-scale infrastructure projects are not politically neutral; they often become arenas of contestation where competing visions of development, resource allocation, and public accountability are debated.

Another important aspect is the role of water in inter-state relations and federal

politics. Disputes with Andhra Pradesh over Krishna river waters, reservoir management, and projects such as Pothireddypadu highlighted the political nature of resource allocation in a federal system. Water rights became closely linked with regional identity and state interests, reinforcing the perception that control over water resources is essential for economic and political autonomy. These conflicts demonstrate that water governance in India extends beyond technical management and involves negotiations over power, representation, and resource justice.

The Telangana case clearly shows that water management cannot be separated from politics. Decisions regarding river water allocation, irrigation infrastructure, drinking water supply, and project implementation are shaped by political priorities, electoral considerations, and regional aspirations. Water has functioned simultaneously as a developmental resource, a welfare instrument, a symbol of statehood, and a tool of political mobilization. The Telangana experience provides a significant example of how natural resources can influence governance, democratic legitimacy, and socio-economic transformation in contemporary India.

Conclusion

Water resource management emerged as one of the defining features of Telangana's development strategy. Water projects addressed historical grievances, expanded irrigation, improved drinking water access, and strengthened regional identity. At the same time, they became important instruments of political legitimacy and electoral mobilization. Telangana's experience illustrates how natural resources can shape governance, public policy, and democratic politics. The case demonstrates that effective water governance is not merely a technical challenge but also a political process involving



questions of equity, representation, development, and state capacity. Water resource management has played a crucial role in shaping the political, economic, and developmental landscape of Telangana. Historically, concerns over unequal distribution of Krishna and Godavari river waters contributed to regional grievances and became an important factor in the Telangana statehood movement. After the formation of the state in 2014, the government launched major initiatives such as Mission Kakatiya, Mission Bhagiratha, and the Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Project to improve irrigation, drinking water supply, and agricultural development. These programmes not only addressed water-related challenges but also strengthened regional identity and public trust in government. Water projects became significant instruments of welfare politics, state-building, and electoral mobilization. At the same time, inter-state water disputes highlighted the continuing importance of cooperative federalism and equitable resource sharing. Overall, the Telangana experience demonstrates that effective water governance is essential for sustainable development, social justice, agricultural prosperity, and democratic legitimacy.

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