



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

SUTLEJ-YAMUNA LINK CANAL DISPUTE: A CONSTITUTIONAL AND FEDERAL ANALYSIS OF INTERSTATE WATER CONFLICT IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Sutlej-Yamuna Link (SYL) Canal dispute represents one of the most complex and prolonged interstate river water conflicts in India. Originating after the reorganization of Punjab in 1966 and the creation of Haryana, the dispute revolves around the allocation and sharing of Ravi-Beas river waters between Punjab and Haryana. The proposed 214-kilometer SYL Canal was intended to facilitate the transfer of water from the Sutlej River to the Yamuna basin, enabling Haryana to access its allocated share. However, political resistance, regional identity, environmental concerns, constitutional debates, and judicial intervention transformed the issue into a major challenge to Indian federalism. This research paper critically examines the historical evolution, constitutional framework, judicial pronouncements, political dimensions, and environmental implications of the dispute. The paper also evaluates the role of the Supreme Court, the Union Government, and interstate tribunals in resolving river water conflicts. Further, it analyzes contemporary developments and suggests policy measures for sustainable water governance and cooperative federalism. The study concludes that the SYL dispute is not merely a legal disagreement over water sharing but a broader reflection of India's evolving federal structure, ecological crisis, and regional politics.

Keywords: Sutlej-Yamuna Link Canal, interstate water dispute, Punjab, Haryana, federalism, river water sharing, Supreme Court, Ravi-Beas waters, constitutional law, cooperative federalism.

INTRODUCTION

Water disputes among states have emerged as one of the most sensitive issues in Indian federal politics. Rivers in India are often shared among multiple states, making equitable distribution essential for agriculture, industry, and human survival. The Sutlej-Yamuna Link (SYL) Canal dispute between Punjab and Haryana remains one of the longest unresolved interstate river disputes in independent India.

The conflict began after the reorganization of Punjab in 1966, when Haryana was carved out as a separate state. Haryana demanded a share in the waters of the Ravi and Beas rivers, arguing that as a successor state, it was entitled to equitable distribution. Punjab, however, opposed the sharing arrangement by invoking the riparian principle, according to which river waters belong primarily to the states through which the rivers flow.

The proposed SYL Canal was designed to connect the Sutlej River with the Yamuna River to transfer Haryana's allocated water share. Although Haryana completed construction within its territory, Punjab repeatedly resisted construction on its side due to political, environmental, and economic concerns. Over time, the dispute escalated into a constitutional and political crisis involving parliamentary legislation, Supreme Court intervention, presidential references, and interstate tensions.

The dispute highlights the challenges faced by India's federal system in balancing regional interests with national integration. It also raises important questions regarding judicial enforcement, water scarcity, environmental sustainability, and constitutional governance.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE SYL CANAL DISPUTE

The roots of the dispute can be traced to the allocation of waters from the Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej rivers after independence. Under the 1955 agreement, water from these rivers was distributed among Punjab, Rajasthan, and Jammu & Kashmir. Later, the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960 between India and Pakistan granted India unrestricted use of the eastern rivers — Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej.

In 1966, Punjab was reorganized and Haryana was formed as a separate state. Haryana claimed a share in Punjab's river waters because many irrigated areas became part of the new state. To facilitate the transfer of water, the idea of constructing the Sutlej-Yamuna Link Canal emerged.

In 1976, the Union Government allocated 3.5 million acre-feet (MAF) of water to Haryana through a central notification. Punjab opposed this allocation and challenged the arrangement politically and legally. In 1981, an agreement among Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan revised water allocations and paved the way for the construction of the canal. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi formally launched the SYL project in 1982 at Kapoori village in Punjab.

The issue soon became politically sensitive in Punjab. Many political groups argued that Punjab itself faced water scarcity and could not spare additional water for Haryana. During the militancy period in Punjab in the 1980s, the canal project became a symbol of regional resistance. Construction activities stopped in 1990 after militants killed engineers associated with the project.

The dispute remained unresolved for decades despite judicial orders and central intervention. Haryana repeatedly approached the Supreme Court demanding completion of the canal, while Punjab enacted laws to terminate earlier water-sharing agreements.

CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The Indian Constitution contains several provisions regarding interstate river disputes. Article 262 empowers Parliament to legislate on adjudication of interstate water disputes and allows exclusion of judicial jurisdiction in such matters. Parliament enacted the Interstate River Water Disputes Act, 1956 to establish tribunals for resolving such conflicts.

Water falls under the State List in the Seventh Schedule, but interstate rivers and river valleys fall within the Union List, enabling Parliament to regulate and develop interstate water systems.

The SYL dispute involves complex constitutional questions concerning federalism, legislative competence, and judicial authority. Punjab relied heavily on the riparian principle, arguing that non-riparian states should not claim rights over river waters. Haryana, however, argued that the Union Government possessed constitutional authority to allocate interstate river waters equitably.

One of the most significant constitutional developments occurred in 2004 when the Punjab Legislative Assembly enacted the Punjab Termination of Agreements Act, 2004. This legislation sought to terminate all previous agreements regarding river water sharing with neighboring states. The President referred the matter to the Supreme Court under Article 143 for advisory opinion.

In 2016, the Supreme Court declared Punjab's legislation unconstitutional, holding that a state cannot unilaterally terminate agreements involving interstate river waters. The Court emphasized that such agreements are binding and cannot be overridden through state legislation.

This judgment reaffirmed constitutional supremacy and the principle of cooperative federalism. It also highlighted the judiciary's role in maintaining balance between state autonomy and national interests.

JUDICIAL INTERVENTION AND SUPREME COURT DECISIONS

The judiciary has played a central role in the SYL dispute. Haryana approached the Supreme Court multiple times seeking implementation of water-sharing agreements and completion of the canal.

In 2002, the Supreme Court directed Punjab to complete construction of the canal within one year. Punjab failed to comply, prompting further judicial proceedings. In 2004, the Court directed the Union Government to complete the canal through a central agency.

The constitutional validity of the Punjab Termination of Agreements Act, 2004 became the central issue before the Court. In its 2016 advisory opinion, the Supreme Court held that Punjab's unilateral withdrawal from agreements violated constitutional principles and federal obligations.

The Court emphasized that river water disputes must be resolved through constitutional mechanisms rather than political confrontation. It reiterated that judgments and agreements regarding interstate waters are legally binding upon states.

Recent developments indicate continued judicial monitoring. In 2025, the Supreme Court directed Punjab and Haryana to cooperate with the Union Government to find an amicable resolution. The Court criticized Punjab's non-cooperation and stressed the need for compliance with judicial directives.

Judicial intervention has therefore ensured that the dispute remains within constitutional boundaries, although enforcement of judgments continues to face political resistance.

POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE DISPUTE

The SYL issue is deeply intertwined with regional politics and identity. In Punjab, opposition to the canal became associated with protection of Punjab's natural resources and agricultural interests. Political parties across ideological lines often opposed the canal to gain electoral support.

Punjab leaders argued that the state faces severe groundwater depletion and declining water availability. Many farmers believe that sharing additional water would worsen Punjab's agrarian crisis.

In Haryana, political parties have consistently demanded completion of the canal, claiming that Haryana has been denied its legitimate share of water for decades. Farmers in Haryana argue that water scarcity affects irrigation and agricultural productivity.

The dispute also became emotionally charged during the militancy period in Punjab. Militants targeted canal workers and engineers, viewing the project as exploitation of Punjab's resources. This transformed the canal from a developmental project into a symbol of regional nationalism.

Popular culture also reflected the political sensitivity of the issue. The controversial song “SYL” by Punjabi singer Sidhu Moose Wala highlighted the emotional and political dimensions of the conflict.

Contemporary political debates continue to revolve around environmental sustainability, federal autonomy, and regional rights.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECOLOGICAL CONCERNS

Environmental concerns constitute a major dimension of the dispute. Punjab argues that it no longer possesses surplus water due to excessive agricultural consumption, groundwater depletion, and climate change.

Punjab’s economy heavily depends on water-intensive crops such as rice and wheat. Continuous extraction of groundwater has significantly reduced water tables across the state. Experts warn that Punjab faces severe ecological stress and possible desertification in some regions.

Punjab leaders argue that water-sharing arrangements formulated decades ago no longer reflect present realities. They contend that declining river flows and increasing demand require reassessment of interstate allocations.

Haryana, however, maintains that legal agreements and tribunal awards must be honored regardless of changing circumstances. Haryana argues that equitable distribution of interstate resources is essential for regional balance and agricultural development.

Climate change further complicates the issue. Irregular monsoon patterns, rising temperatures, and declining river flows are increasing pressure on water resources across northern India. This makes interstate cooperation more necessary than ever.

Environmental sustainability therefore remains central to any long-term resolution of the dispute.

FEDERALISM AND INTERSTATE RELATIONS

The SYL dispute reveals both strengths and weaknesses within Indian federalism. Interstate water conflicts test the ability of constitutional institutions to manage competing regional interests peacefully.

India’s federal system seeks to balance state autonomy with national unity. However, when states perceive resource allocation as unfair, political tensions intensify. The SYL issue demonstrates how regional identity and political mobilization can challenge cooperative governance.

The Union Government has attempted mediation several times, but political considerations often limited its effectiveness. Successive central governments struggled to enforce judicial orders due to fear of political backlash in Punjab.

The dispute also highlights limitations in existing institutional mechanisms for water governance. Tribunals often take years to deliver decisions, while enforcement remains weak. Judicial pronouncements alone cannot resolve disputes without political cooperation.

The concept of cooperative federalism requires states to prioritize national interest while protecting regional concerns. The SYL conflict shows that constitutional mechanisms must be accompanied by political dialogue, scientific assessment, and equitable resource management.

CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS

The dispute continues to remain unresolved despite repeated judicial and political efforts. In recent years, the Supreme Court has encouraged dialogue between Punjab, Haryana, and the Union Government.

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann proposed alternative solutions, including diversion of Chenab waters, instead of constructing the SYL Canal. Punjab leaders continue to argue that the state lacks surplus water for sharing.

At the same time, Haryana continues to insist on implementation of earlier agreements and court judgments. The central government has repeatedly emphasized negotiation and amicable settlement.

The issue has also expanded into broader debates concerning the Bhakra Beas Management Board (BBMB), water governance, and federal authority.

Recent Supreme Court observations indicate increasing judicial frustration over non-compliance with court orders. Nevertheless, political compromise remains essential for any durable solution.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Several measures can help resolve the SYL dispute effectively:

1. **Scientific Reassessment of Water Availability:** Independent hydrological studies should reassess current water availability considering climate change and groundwater depletion.
2. **Cooperative Federal Dialogue:** Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and the Union Government should establish permanent negotiation mechanisms for interstate water governance.
3. **Strengthening River Water Tribunals:** Interstate water dispute tribunals should function more efficiently with strict timelines for decisions and implementation.
4. **Sustainable Agricultural Policies:**
5. Punjab should diversify crops and reduce dependence on water-intensive agriculture through policy incentives.
6. **Integrated Water Resource Management:** India needs a comprehensive national water policy emphasizing conservation, recycling, and equitable distribution.

7. **Judicial Enforcement Mechanisms:** Constitutional mechanisms should ensure effective implementation of Supreme Court decisions in interstate disputes.
8. **Public Awareness and Depoliticization:** Political parties should avoid using water disputes for electoral mobilization and promote evidence-based policymaking.

CONCLUSION

The Sutlej-Yamuna Link Canal dispute is one of the most significant examples of interstate water conflict in India. What began as a disagreement over river water allocation evolved into a constitutional, political, ecological, and federal challenge.

The dispute highlights the tensions between regional identity and national integration, state autonomy and constitutional obligations, developmental needs and environmental sustainability. Judicial intervention has reinforced constitutional principles, but political consensus remains essential for implementation.

The SYL dispute demonstrates that interstate water conflicts cannot be resolved solely through litigation. Sustainable solutions require cooperative federalism, scientific planning, ecological conservation, and political dialogue.

As climate change intensifies water scarcity across India, the lessons from the SYL dispute become increasingly important. Effective management of shared water resources will determine not only agricultural and economic stability but also the future of India's federal democracy.

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