

“Centre-State Controversies in Karnataka's Drought Management 2023: A Critical Analysis”

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Abstract-- The 2023 drought in Karnataka highlighted significant conflicts between the state and central governments over relief funds and irrigation projects. Delays in the release of drought relief were attributed to the Election Commission's restrictions, which hindered the meeting of a high-level committee for fund allocation. While the central government, led by Nirmala Sitharaman, cited legal constraints under NDRF guidelines, the state government accused the center of neglect. In addition to relief issues, key irrigation projects such as the Mahadayi, Krishna, and Mokedatu schemes faced bureaucratic delays, further intensifying the crisis. The state's demand for immediate approval of these projects, critical for water supply and agricultural support, remained unresolved. Following prolonged political and legal disputes, including the state's court intervention, the Supreme Court ordered the release of relief funds, offering a legal victory for Karnataka. This analysis critically examines the political, administrative, and inter-governmental challenges surrounding disaster relief and irrigation projects in Karnataka, stressing the need for more effective federal coordination in addressing drought crises.

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2023, Karnataka faced a severe drought that not only devastated agricultural production but also exposed deep-rooted tensions between the state and central governments. The state's struggle to secure timely relief funds, coupled with long-standing disputes over major irrigation projects, created a complex political and administrative landscape. The central government's delays in releasing drought relief funds were initially attributed to the restrictions imposed by the Election Commission, which prevented the convening of crucial meetings for fund approval. Additionally, while the central government maintained that the National Disaster Relief Fund (NDRF) guidelines did not permit the provision of aid for drought conditions, the state government argued that this was an intentional delay.

At the heart of Karnataka's drought management crisis were critical irrigation projects, including the Mahadayi, Krishna, and Mokedatu schemes. These projects were vital for ensuring long-term water security and agricultural sustainability in the state.

However, bureaucratic hurdles and inter-state political disputes impeded their timely implementation. The Mahadayi project, in particular, became a contentious issue between Karnataka and Goa, while the Krishna and Mokedatu projects faced delays in national recognition and approval, despite their importance for drought relief.

This paper critically analyzes the ongoing political conflicts and administrative inefficiencies that shaped Karnataka's drought management in 2023. By examining the delays in relief fund allocation, the contentious irrigation projects, and the broader political discourse, the paper seeks to highlight the need for improved federal-state cooperation and more effective governance mechanisms in disaster management. It explores how these intergovernmental disputes have hindered timely responses to the state's drought crisis and proposes recommendations for overcoming such challenges in future disaster management efforts.

II. KARNATAKA'S DROUGHT PROFILE

Karnataka's geographical diversity makes it prone to varying degrees of drought severity. Over 60% of its arable land relies on rain-fed agriculture, making it highly vulnerable to erratic monsoon patterns. The 2023 drought was further exacerbated by delayed and deficient rainfall, severely impacting major crops and depleting water reservoirs. Despite existing preparedness mechanisms, the state's response was hindered by institutional bottlenecks and political friction.

In 2023, the Karnataka government officially declared a total of 223 taluks as drought-affected, following the standards outlined in the Central Government's Drought Management Handbook 2020 for drought declaration. During the Kharif season, the state issued orders identifying drought-affected taluks across its 31 districts. Of the 236 taluks in the state, 195 taluks were declared drought-affected with effect from September 13, 2023.

Additionally, 21 taluks were added to the list with effect from October 12, 2023, and 7 more taluks were included with effect from November 4, 2023.

The below table provides a detailed analysis of Karnataka's rainfall in 2023, highlighting a significant deviation from normal levels and resulting in severe drought conditions.

The key points from this analysis are crucial to understanding the broader context of controversies surrounding Karnataka's drought management strategies.

Rainfall distribution during different seasons of 2023 in different met divisions of the State is as below:

Region/ State	Pre-Monsoon			South-West			North -East			Annual		
	Normal (mm)	Actual (mm)	Dep (%)	Normal (mm)	Actual (mm)	Dep (%)	Normal (mm)	Actual (mm)	Dep (%)	Normal (mm)	Actual (mm)	Dep (%)
1.SIK	143	163.5	14	369	271	-26	202	139	-32	714	572	-20
2.NIK	83	95.4	15	479	386	-19	140	43	-70	702	524	-25
3.MALNAD	168	132.2	-21	1556	956	-39	226	191	-15	1950	1275	-35
4.COASTAL	158	62.2	-61	3101	2514	-19	259	272	6	3518	2848	-19
STATE	120	117.4	-2	852	642	-25	182	114	-38	1153	872	-24

*KSNDMC.ORG/kn/Reports

Annual Rainfall Deficit:

The state experienced a 24% rainfall deficit in 2023. The pre-monsoon, South-West Monsoon, and North-East Monsoon seasons all recorded below-average rainfall, with

notable deficits of -2%, -25%, and -38%, respectively. This deficit highlights the challenge of managing agricultural and water resources in the face of insufficient rainfall.

The comparison of the Zone-wise rainfall pattern during Annual 2023 with the rainfall of the last 4 years is as follows:

Region/State	Normal (mm)	2019		2020		2021		2022		2023	
		Actual (mm)	Dep (%)	Actual (mm)	Dep (%)	Actual (mm)	Dep (%)	Actual (mm)	Dep (%)	Actual (mm)	Dep (%)
SIK	714	828	16	869	22	1050	47	1246	75	572	-20
2.NIK	702	746	6	882	26	780	11	915	30	524	-25
3.MALNAD	1950	2302	18	1827	-6	2100	8	2303	18	1275	-35
4.COASTAL	3518	4359	24	3936	12	3784	8	3672	4	2848	-19
State	1153	1337	16	1307	13	1337	16	1474	28	872	-24

*KSNDMC.ORG/kn/Reports

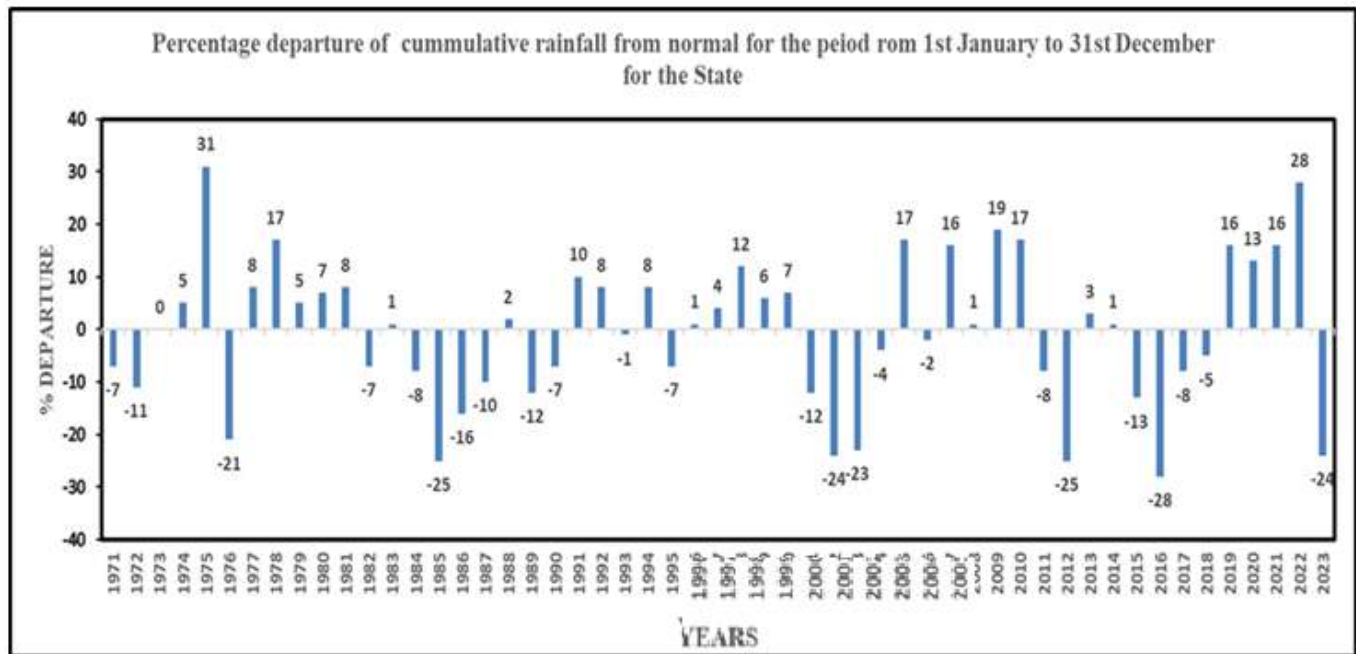
The percentage departure of rainfall from Normal during 2023 is (-) **24%** which is **bad** when compared to the rainfall of the last year.

Region-Wise Disparities:

Southern Interior Karnataka (SIK) experienced a 20% annual deficit, while Northern Interior Karnataka (NIK) and the Malnad region saw deficits of 25% and 35%,

respectively. The Coastal region, usually resilient to droughts, faced a 19% deficit, underscoring the widespread impact of rainfall irregularities across the state.

The percentage departure of Annual rainfall from Normal for the State as a whole since 1971 is given in the following



*KSNDMC.ORG/kn/Reports

Figure 1.1:

The above figure shows that the percentage departure of Annual rainfall for the State since 1971. The Rainfall recorded during 2023 is (-) 24% which is less than the corresponding period of the last year.

Comparison with Previous Years:

Data from 2019 to 2022 shows fluctuating rainfall patterns, with 2023 representing one of the sharpest deficits in recent years. This decline indicates a worsening trend in rainfall reliability, likely influenced by climate change, and amplifies the necessity for adaptive strategies.

Long-Term Trends:

The percentage departure of rainfall from normal since 1971 is shown in a bar chart, with 2023 standing out as a significant negative anomaly. Such long-term data provide a basis for arguing the need for enhanced predictive tools and proactive measures.

Implications for Policy and Management:

These statistics emphasize the urgency for effective drought management strategies. Delays or inefficiencies in fund allocation and policy implementation exacerbate the crisis for vulnerable populations. The controversies between Karnataka and the central government can be partly attributed to disagreements over the interpretation and application of such data for relief measures. Centre-State Dynamics in Drought Management.

The News Article, "Irrigation for vote thirst", Rajesh Rai Chatla, Prajavani Kannada Daily News Paper April 1 2024. The article discusses the significant irrigation and water management projects in Karnataka, including the Bhadravathi Upper Dam, Krishna Upper Dam, Mahadayi Kalasa-Banduri, and Mekedatu projects.

These projects are designed to alleviate the state's water scarcity issues and improve agricultural irrigation, but they have been hindered by political disputes, legal challenges, and delays in central government approvals.

Bhadravathi Upper Dam Project: This project, with a capacity of 29.90 TMC, is critical for irrigating 2,25,515 hectares of agricultural land. However, despite its national importance, the project has faced delays due to lack of necessary permissions from central authorities and delayed fund releases.

Krishna Upper Dam Project: The third phase of this project seeks to provide 130 TMC of water to northern Karnataka's drought-prone areas. The central government's failure to issue the required notifications has delayed its implementation, despite the project's potential to benefit 9.94 lakh hectares of agricultural land.

Mahadayi Kalasa-Banduri Project: This project aims to supply drinking water to 13 towns and over 100 villages in Karnataka. Although approved in 2002, it has been delayed by ongoing legal disputes and the need for environmental clearances from the central government.

Mekedatu Project: The Mekedatu project aims to create a reservoir with a capacity of 67.2 TMC, benefiting Bengaluru and surrounding areas with additional water for irrigation and drinking. However, opposition from Tamil Nadu and lack of approval from the central environmental department have stalled its progress.

Despite the potential of these projects to address Karnataka's water crisis, their implementation has been slow, mainly due to political conflicts and bureaucratic delays. These projects remain critical for addressing the state's long-standing water issues, but the ongoing political manoeuvring, legal complications, and central government inaction have left many farmers and residents in uncertainty.

Federal Relations and Political Tensions:

Political dynamics, with different parties ruling the center and the state, influenced the discourse around drought management. Allegations of partisanship in fund allocation deepened mistrust. Public protests and media debates further polarized opinions, complicating collaborative efforts.

The ongoing political tension between the Karnataka state government and the central government over drought management and financial aid has come under intense scrutiny.

The critical issue revolves around delays in the disbursement of relief funds to the state, exacerbating the suffering of farmers and citizens affected by severe drought conditions. The controversy underscores systemic issues, including bureaucratic red tape, legal challenges, and political maneuvering that have delayed effective disaster relief and water management in Karnataka.

The Delay in Relief Fund Disbursement: Central Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman recently defended the delay in releasing funds for drought relief in Karnataka, asserting that it was not intentional. She explained that the delay was due to the Election Commission's restrictions, which prevented a high-level committee from convening to discuss and approve the funds. This has led to the perception in the state that the central government is being unresponsive to the urgency of the situation. Sitharaman further clarified that the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) guidelines do not permit direct relief distribution for drought under certain circumstances.

The Legal and Institutional Gridlock: The central government's reluctance to approve the release of drought relief funds has also been tied to institutional and legal hurdles. According to Sitharaman, the Ministry of Home Affairs was required to assess the situation and approve aid but faced delays in receiving the necessary permissions. In Karnataka's case, an additional complication was that the state did not make its official drought declaration in a timely manner, which further delayed the response from both the state and the central government.

Political Allegations and Accusations: The issue has spiraled into a political debate, with the Congress-led Karnataka government accusing the BJP central government of neglecting the state, and the ruling BJP defending its stance. Karnataka's opposition leader, R. Ashok, blamed the state government for the delay, alleging that its failure to declare drought conditions early enough hindered central assistance. Meanwhile, the state government has consistently argued that the central government, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, has been discriminatory in its handling of drought relief.

Public and Judicial Pressure: Amidst these political accusations, the state government's frustration reached a peak, prompting them to seek judicial intervention. The Karnataka government had to approach the Supreme Court after repeated appeals for central aid went unanswered. In response, the central government assured the court that the necessary relief funds would be released within a week, signifying a legal victory for the state.

This development highlights the role of the judiciary in ensuring accountability and fairness in the management of disaster relief.

The Financial Implications and Future Prospects: Karnataka's government has been demanding significant financial aid from the central government, with an estimated ₹12,577.9 crore needed to support affected families. However, this situation reflects broader issues of fiscal federalism, where the state government feels increasingly sidelined in its attempts to secure timely financial resources for disaster management. The delay in the approval and release of these funds not only undermines the state's drought management efforts but also raises concerns about the effectiveness of existing disaster management frameworks and the central government's approach to federal cooperation.

The drought relief crisis in Karnataka has highlighted deepening tensions between the state and central governments. While the central government defends its actions within the context of procedural constraints, the Karnataka government's ongoing struggle for timely relief showcases the challenges of managing disaster aid in a politically charged environment. As the state continues to battle its drought crisis, both political cooperation and institutional reforms will be crucial to ensuring that the state's citizens do not continue to suffer from bureaucratic delays and political impasses.

III. GROUND REALITIES AND IMPACTS

The controversies had tangible repercussions on affected communities:

- Farmers reported delayed access to relief measures, such as crop insurance pay-outs and fodder supply.
- Migration from rural areas surged as agricultural incomes plummeted.
- Long-term developmental projects, including water conservation and irrigation infrastructure, were sidelined due to immediate crisis management.

IV. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The Karnataka drought management controversy of 2023 underscores systemic flaws in India's disaster governance framework. While the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction emphasizes decentralization and stakeholder participation, the Indian context remains hindered by centralization and intergovernmental friction. The rigidity in relief frameworks and the lack of context-specific strategies exacerbated the crisis.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Revising Relief Frameworks:
- Update the Drought Management Manual to incorporate localized parameters and modern assessment tools.
- Enhance the flexibility of NDRF guidelines to address state-specific challenges.
- Strengthening Federal Collaboration:
- Establish a neutral, technocratic body to mediate disputes over disaster relief.
- Promote joint decision-making platforms involving central and state representatives.
- Community-Centric Approaches:
- Empower local bodies to play a more significant role in planning and implementing drought relief measures.
- Ensure greater transparency and accountability in fund utilization to rebuild trust among stakeholders.

The Centre-State controversies in Karnataka's drought management during 2023 reflect deep-rooted challenges in governance, policy coordination, and resource allocation. The delay in financial relief from the central government, coupled with the procedural bottlenecks in approving and implementing critical irrigation projects, has exacerbated the state's vulnerability to recurring droughts. These issues highlight the urgent need for enhanced intergovernmental coordination, transparent and timely relief mechanisms, and the prompt declaration of drought conditions.

Karnataka's ongoing irrigation projects, such as the Mahadayi, Krishna, and Mekedatu initiatives, are vital to mitigating water scarcity in the region, but they continue to face delays due to political and legal disputes. Addressing these conflicts and expediting project approvals will not only ensure a sustainable water supply but also enhance the state's ability to withstand future droughts.

The study underscores the importance of decentralized disaster management, where local governments and communities play an active role in drought preparedness and response. Furthermore, a comprehensive, integrated approach to disaster management that combines immediate relief with long-term recovery strategies is essential for building resilience in drought-prone areas.

Ultimately, effective drought management requires a shift in the way central and state governments collaborate, emphasizing a unified approach that prioritizes the needs of affected communities.



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By overcoming political and bureaucratic hurdles and focusing on sustainable water management, Karnataka can improve its preparedness for future droughts and ensure that relief reaches those in need without unnecessary delays.

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