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**EDITORIAL ANALYSIS**

# The Mekedatu Furore: Cauvery's Trust Deficit and the Fraying of Cooperative Federalism

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# The Mekedatu Furore: Cauvery's Trust Deficit and the Fraying of Cooperative Federalism

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Source: [ujyari.com](https://ujyari.com) — researched, fact-checked & UPSC-mapped



## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"If both the Constitution and a Supreme Court verdict say no State owns a river, why does every inter-State water project still collapse into a contest of ownership rather than sharing?"*

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## THE FURORE IN BRIEF

In June 2026, the Tamil Nadu Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution opposing Karnataka's proposed Mekedatu balancing reservoir on the Cauvery, demanding that the Union government intervene and that the project not proceed without inter-State adjudication. Karnataka, in turn, insists the roughly Rs 9,000-crore reservoir near Kanakapura in Ramanagara district is a drinking-water-cum-balancing project well within its rights, sited some four kilometres before the Tamil Nadu border near the Cauvery-Arkavathi confluence (<https://ujyari.com/vocab/confluence/>). The Supreme Court, having earlier termed Tamil Nadu's challenge premature, declined to entertain a review.

The surface dispute is about water. The deeper editorial is about trust. The Cauvery, more than any other Indian river, has become the place where the promise of cooperative federalism (<https://ujyari.com/terms/cooperative-federalism/>) goes to be tested, and where it keeps failing.

## HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS ISSUE

The instinct of most aspirants is to narrate the Cauvery dispute as a timeline of tribunal awards and court orders. That is necessary background, but it is not the argument. The sharper way to think is to ask a structural question: India built an entire constitutional and statutory (<https://ujyari.com/vocab/statutory/>) architecture specifically to keep river disputes out of the courts, yet litigation has become the default. Why?

The answer is that the architecture was designed to settle volumes, not to manufacture trust. A formula tells two States how much water each gets in a normal year. It does not tell them how to behave toward each other when a new project appears, or how to share pain in a drought year. Mekedatu is a stress test of exactly the thing the architecture never built: a working relationship.

So read Mekedatu less as a hydrology problem and more as a **federalism** (<https://ujiyari.com/terms/federalism/>) problem. The water can, in principle, be apportioned. The trust cannot be apportioned by a court.

## THE CONSTITUTIONAL AND STATUTORY FRAME

### Article 262 and the 1956 Act

Article 262 of the Constitution empowers Parliament to provide for the adjudication of disputes relating to the waters of inter-State rivers and river valleys, and crucially permits Parliament to bar the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court and other courts in such matters. Acting on this, Parliament enacted the Inter-State River Water Disputes Act, 1956, under which the Union government constitutes a tribunal when a State complains that its interests are being prejudiced.

The design intent was elegant: technical, basin-specific tribunals would resolve disputes on **equitable** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/equitable/>) principles, insulated from the adversarial generalism of ordinary courts. The reality has been the opposite. Tribunals take decades, their awards are litigated regardless of the Article 262 bar, and the Supreme Court has effectively retained a supervisory role.

### The Cauvery Sequence

The Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal was constituted in 1990. It issued an interim order in 1991 and its final award in 2007, allocating water among Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala and Puducherry. On 16 February 2018, the Supreme Court delivered its verdict, allocating 404.25 tmcft to Tamil Nadu and 284.75 tmcft to Karnataka, and articulating the foundational principle that no State can claim exclusive ownership of a river: the Cauvery is a national asset, and its waters must be shared on **equitable apportionment** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/apportionment/>), not historic priority.

To implement this, the Union government created the Cauvery Water Management Authority (CWMA) on 1 June 2018, supported by the Cauvery Water Regulation Committee. The CWMA was meant to be the standing, trusted referee. Mekedatu reveals what it has actually become.

## THE TRUST DEFICIT: THE REAL EDITORIAL

### A Referee Without a Whistle for New Projects

The CWMA today functions largely as a monthly accountant. It tabulates inflows, monitors releases at Biligundlu, and issues directions on volumes already promised. What it does not do, and was never empowered to do credibly, is jointly assess and clear new infrastructure. When Karnataka proposes Mekedatu,

there is no neutral, data-rich forum within which Tamil Nadu's downstream concern can be tested against Karnataka's drinking-water claim. So both States retreat to their corners: Karnataka to its territorial right, Tamil Nadu to the courtroom and the Assembly resolution.

## Two Reasonable Fears, No Trusted Mediator

Tamil Nadu's fear is not irrational. As the lowermost major user, it depends on assured flows precisely in the distress years when upstream storage is most tempting to retain. The 2018 verdict allocated normal-year volumes but did not fully resolve how shortfalls are shared in deficit years, the exact moment when trust matters most.

Karnataka's claim is also reasonable: a balancing reservoir that captures monsoon surplus can, in theory, regulate flows and even stabilise downstream supply, and a State cannot be permanently forbidden from building drinking-water infrastructure on its own soil simply because the river is shared. The tragedy is that two reasonable positions cannot be reconciled because there is no institution both sides trust to weigh them.

### DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Picture the Cauvery basin as a single pipe shared by two households. The Constitution (Article 262) and the 1956 Act installed a meter. The 2018 verdict set the dial: 404.25 to the lower household, 284.75 to the upper. The CWMA was meant to be the building manager who reads the meter and settles disputes. But when the upper household wants to install a new tank (Mekedatu), there is no rule for the manager to approve or reject it jointly, so the lower household calls a lawyer. The pipe works; the relationship does not.

### THE COUNTER-VIEW, TAKEN SERIOUSLY

A serious answer must concede Karnataka's strongest point. If Mekedatu genuinely captures only flood-season surplus that would otherwise flow wastefully to the sea, and if its operation is bound by a transparent, telemetry-verified release schedule, then it could be a net positive for the whole basin, including Tamil Nadu's farmers, by smoothing seasonal volatility (<https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/volatility/>). The objection collapses if, and only if, the operating rules are credible and externally verified. The problem is therefore not the dam in the abstract but the absence of a trust mechanism to govern it.

### WAY FORWARD

- **Empower** (<https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/empower/>) **the CWMA to plan, not merely measure.** Convert it from a release-accounting body into a genuine basin authority with statutory power to appraise and clear new projects against agreed impact criteria, so disputes are resolved before construction, not after.

- **Institutionalise real-time telemetry.** A publicly accessible, automated flow-measurement network at key points removes the recurring quarrel over whether releases actually happened, which is the daily fuel of distrust.
- **Codify** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/codify/>) **a distress-sharing formula.** The single largest gap in the 2018 settlement is the rule for deficit years. A pre-agreed, proportionate distress-sharing schedule would defuse the crisis years that produce the worst confrontations.
- **Revive political negotiation through the Inter-State Council.** Article 263 institutions exist precisely to let States negotiate before they litigate. Reviving the Inter-State Council and basin-level coordination would let federal trust be rebuilt politically rather than imposed judicially.

## PYQ LINKAGE

This editorial maps directly onto recurring UPSC themes. The Mains GS2 question on whether inter-State water disputes reflect a failure of cooperative federalism, and the standing demand to evaluate the role of inter-State institutions under Articles 262 and 263, both find their living example here. Prelims aspirants should fix the precise anchors: Article 262, the Inter-State River Water Disputes Act of 1956, the 1990 Tribunal, the 2018 Supreme Court allocation (404.25 tmcft to Tamil Nadu, 284.75 tmcft to Karnataka), and the CWMA created on 1 June 2018. The Mokedatu furore is not merely a Karnataka-Tamil Nadu quarrel; it is a case study in why India's federalism on shared rivers remains a deficit of trust rather than a shortage of water.

Source: The Mokedatu Furore: Cauvery's Trust Deficit and the Fraying of Cooperative Federalism — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

**KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE**

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**The Mokedatu dispute is not fundamentally about water volumes; it is a symptom of a deeper trust deficit in cooperative federalism, where shared rivers are treated as zonal property rather than common national assets to be co-managed.**


**SUPPORTING**

- The constitutional and statutory framework, Article 262 and the Inter-State River Water Disputes Act, 1956, was designed to keep river disputes out of the courts, but adjudication has become the default rather than the exception.
- The Cauvery Water Management Authority, created in 2018 to operationalise the sharing formula, has been reduced to a technical accountant of monthly releases rather than a forum for trust-building and joint planning of new projects like Mokedatu.
- Tamil Nadu's objection rests on a genuine downstream anxiety that any upstream storage, however framed as drinking-water supply, alters the assured flow during distress years, the very scenario the 2018 verdict failed to settle conclusively.


**COUNTER**

Karnataka argues, with some merit, that a balancing reservoir which regulates flood-season surplus could actually stabilise downstream supply, and that a State cannot be permanently barred from drinking-water infrastructure within its own territory on a national-asset river.


**WAY FORWARD**

Shift the CWMA from a release-accounting body to a genuine basin authority empowered to vet and jointly plan new projects; institutionalise real-time telemetry and a transparent distress-sharing formula; and revive the inter-State council mechanism so disputes are negotiated politically before they harden into litigation.


**MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK**

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**QUESTION**

*Inter-State river water disputes in India are increasingly resolved through litigation and political resolutions rather than institutional cooperation. In the light of the Mokedatu controversy on the Cauvery, examine why the constitutional and statutory machinery for sharing river waters has failed to build inter-State trust. Critically evaluate the role of the Cauvery Water Management Authority and suggest reforms to strengthen cooperative federalism in the management of shared rivers. (250 words)*

**INTRODUCTION**

The Mokedatu controversy, where Karnataka's Rs 9,000-crore reservoir has drawn a unanimous resolution of opposition from the Tamil Nadu Assembly, illustrates how India's framework for sharing river waters has degenerated from cooperation into a recurring trust deficit.

**BODY**

Article 262 empowers Parliament to provide for adjudication of inter-State river disputes and to bar the jurisdiction of courts, and the Inter-State River Water Disputes Act, 1956 was meant to make tribunals the primary forum. In practice, the Cauvery dispute travelled from the 1990 Tribunal to its 2007 award and finally to the Supreme Court's 2018 verdict, which allocated 404.25 tmcft to Tamil Nadu and 284.75 tmcft to Karnataka and declared the river a national asset owned by no State.

The Cauvery Water Management Authority was created in June 2018 to implement this formula, yet it functions as an accountant of monthly releases rather than a planner of the basin. Mokedatu exposes the gap: a lawful upstream project becomes a sovereignty contest because there is no trusted institutional channel to assess its downstream impact jointly.

Tamil Nadu's distress-year anxiety and Karnataka's drinking-water claim are both reasonable, but the absence of a credible, data-driven forum forces both into adjudication and political theatre.

**CONCLUSION**

Cooperative federalism on rivers will revive only when institutions like the CWMA are empowered to plan, not merely measure, and when distress-sharing is governed by transparent telemetry rather than mutual suspicion. The Mokedatu furore is a warning that the next dispute will be harder unless trust is rebuilt.


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