

Bhakhra Beas Management Board (BBMB) and Indian Federalism: An Analysis of Centre–State Relations of Punjab

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ABSTRACT

Political systems are of two types, for example, federal and unitary. Federal systems are favored by larger nations, while unitary systems suit smaller ones. In a federal polity, dual governments share responsibilities, often leading to tensions. This paper focuses on the Bhakhra Beas Management dispute between the central and Punjab state government, arising from historical territorial reorganization post-1947 partition. The formation of Punjab and subsequent issues related to territory, river water management, and administrative autonomy have generated conflict over control and representation, particularly concerning the Bhakhra Beas Management Board (BBMB). This research paper examines the BBMB issue in the contemporary Centre-State relations of Punjab, highlighting constitutional provisions, institutional structures, political conflicts, and recent disputes. The study concludes that while BBMB was initially a model of cooperative federalism, it has increasingly become a site of conflict due to centralization, inter-state competition, and political tensions.

Keywords: Federalism, Centre-State Relations, BBMB, Punjab, Constitution.

INTRODUCTION

There are two types of political systems, such as federal and unitary systems. While federal systems are preferred by states with large populations, unitary systems are seen to be appropriate for smaller nations. Two sets of governments must carry out their separate responsibilities in relation to the same people while operating concurrently and directly upon them in a federal polity. It is ideal for both the federal government and each state government to have independent authority over the financial resources necessary to carry out their specific duties. [Wheare, K.C, 1967, p-93] Because federal Polity divides powers and resources between the two sets of government, so conflicts and tensions are inevitable between the two. Almost all the federations are suffering from this problem throughout the world and India is no exception. The scope of this research paper is to study the Bhakhra Beas Management issue between the central and the state government of Punjab.

In 1947, when India was partitioned, Punjab was also divided into two parts. Thirteen districts of United Punjab created the new state of Punjab in the Indian Union, while sixteen districts were incorporated into the new state of Pakistan. Patiala and other East Punjab States were combined with the Princely States to form a new Indian state known as PEPSU. The PEPSU territories were later combined with Punjab after the extensive state reorganization. On November 1st, 1966, Punjab saw yet another reorganization when the adjacent Hindi-speaking regions of Punjab southeast of the Ghagar River were combined to create the new Hindi-speaking state of Haryana. To create the larger state of Himachal Pradesh, some steep regions, including Kullu, Kangra, and Shimla, were removed. [Singh, Devinder, 1993, p-13] A number of issues pertaining to territory, river water, trade, administrative autonomy, etc. have arisen as a result of the state's reorganization due to political and historical factors. Bhakra Beas Management Board (BBMB) is one of the main points of contention in Punjab's current centre-state ties. This issue occupies a central place because it directly concerns Punjab's natural resources and political rights. The deployment of central security personnel at strategic locations, the control of river waters, and the diminution of Punjab's historic representation are the main points of contention in this issue. This research paper throws a light on constitutional provisions, institutional structures, political conflicts, and recent disputes over BBMB.

Constitutional and legal provisions regarding water and related issues

There are certain provisions on water and related matters in the Indian Constitution. In order to resolve transboundary river water issues, Parliament has also passed legislation. Below are some of these laws and provisions.

Article 262 of the Indian Constitution: According to Article 262(1) of the Indian Constitution, Parliament may enact laws pertaining to conflicts involving transboundary rivers. Additionally, it gives Parliament the power to enact laws that can restrict the Supreme Court's jurisdiction over such conflicts under Article 262(2). This clause suggests that Parliament has the authority to enact pertinent laws; if no laws are passed, the issue may be submitted to a higher court. Notably, other constitutional clauses, such as Article 131, which normally covers conflicts between States, are superseded by Article 262(2).

Seventh Schedule - List II (State List): The government's power to enact laws pertaining to transnational rivers is highlighted by Entry 17 of Schedule II, which covers issues with water sources, irrigation, canals, drainage, reservoirs, and hydropower. Article 56 of Schedule I, which gives Parliament the authority to control river development as long as it serves the public interest, is a prerequisite for this jurisdiction. The laws made by Parliament under Article 56 have precedence over any laws made by the government. Although water resources are administered nationwide, Article 246 of the Constitution upholds Parliament's exclusive legislative authority over matters in List I, confirming that Parliament has substantial legislative power that can supersede conflicting regional laws.

Articles 131 and 136 of the Indian Constitution: Articles 131 and 136 of the Indian Constitution are invoked in cross-border river basin disputes, exemplified by Tamil Nadu's 2001 complaint about inadequate interim measures and the joint application by Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala after the 2007 Cauvery Water Dispute Tribunal decision.

Inter-State River Water Disputes Act, 1956: The central government is greatly empowered by the Inter-State River Water Disputes Act of 1956, which was passed under Article 262. It permits the establishment of water tribunals and mandates reports from the Civil Service Tribunal. According to Section 11, the central government maintains a hierarchy over state governments in resolving river water conflicts, and the Act's decisions published in the official gazette have the same weight as Supreme Court orders.

River Boards Act, 1956: Despite not creating any river basins, the River Boards Act of 1956 is essential to understanding the role of the federal government in interstate river disputes. Section 2 highlights the central government's discretionary power by giving it responsibility over transnational rivers and allowing it to form river councils upon request from regional governments. Strong central oversight is demonstrated by the fact that the council's funds and operations are also subject to central government approval. The Act challenges the idea that water disputes are exclusively within the states' authority by demonstrating that, despite the appearance of state jurisdiction over such issues, the central government plays a key role in resolving such problems.

Thus, the Indian Constitution and related laws provide a strong framework for managing water resources and resolving interstate river disputes. Articles 262, 131, and 136, along with the Seventh Schedule, define the powers of Parliament and States regarding water matters. The Inter-State River Water Disputes Act, 1956 and the River Boards Act, 1956 strengthen the role of the Central Government in dispute resolution and river management. Together, these constitutional and legal provisions aim to ensure cooperation, balanced development, and peaceful settlement of water-related conflicts among states.

BBMB: Formation, Structure and Functions

The Indus Water Treaty, which India and Pakistan signed in 1960, gave India exclusive use of the waters of three eastern rivers—the Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej while Pakistan was given the Indus, Chenab, and Jhelum rivers. This treaty is the source of BBMB. A comprehensive plan was created in India to utilize these rivers' potential for reliable irrigation, electricity production, and flood control. A significant portion of this plan consists of the Bhakra and Beas projects, which were founded as a cooperative effort between the then-undivided Punjab and Rajasthan. The Bhakra Management Board (BMB) was established on October 1, 1967, under Section-79 of the

Punjab Re-organisation Act 1966 to oversee the Bhakra Nangal Project [Punjab Reorganisation Act, 1966]. Following the completion of the Beas Project, BMB was renamed the Bhakra Beas Management Board (BBMB) on May 15, 1976. BBMB functions as an interstate organization involving Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Himachal Pradesh, managing the utilization and regulation of waters from the Sutlej, Beas, and Ravi rivers related to the Bhakra-Nangal and Beas Projects. [<https://bbmb.gov.in/formation-of-bbmb.htm>]

The management, upkeep, and operation of the dam are under the jurisdiction of the Bhakra Management Board (BMB). Established in 1966, the administrative body began operations on October 1st, 1967. The Indian government, as well as the states of Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Delhi, and Chandigarh, appoint the board members. The Dehar hydroelectricity project, Pong dam, Ganguwal, Kotla power station, and Bhakra dam are all governed and run by the BBMB. [<https://www.indiatoday.in>] BBMB is led by a full-time chairman and two full-time members, Member (Irrigation) and Member (Power), who oversee the organization's irrigation and power wings, respectively. The Finance & Accounts Wing of BBMB is led by the Financial Adviser & CAO. [<https://bbmb.gov.in/the-board.htm>] The board is tasked with the following duties:

1. Management, operations, and upkeep for Bhakra-Beas Project.
2. Control the water supply to the states of Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan from Bhakra-Beas Projects.
3. Control of the power supply to the states of Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, and U.T. Chandigarh from Bhakra-Beas Projects.
4. Any other duties that the Central Government may designate following consultation with the governments of Rajasthan, Punjab, and Haryana. [https://bbmb.gov.in/writereaddata/Portal/Reports/30_1_BBMB_ANNUAL_REPORT_2024-25.pdf]

Centre- State Conflicts and Disputes

Due to its advantageous location, Punjab was first heavily represented in water management; nevertheless, political disputes over its rights to river flows eventually emerged. In the current centre-state relations between Punjab and the Union government, the BBMB issue is a major flashpoint, with tensions peaking in 2025. The deployment of central security personnel at strategic locations, the control of river waters, and the diminution of Punjab's historic representation are the main points of contention. The key aspects of the BBMB issue are:

Loss of Representation & Rule Changes: The Government of India amended the BBMB Rules 1974 on February 23, 2022, altering the selection criteria for whole-time members of the Board to require technical qualifications and allowing appointments from across India, rather than limiting them to Punjab and Haryana. Objections have emerged from engineers, farmers, and political parties in Punjab, with opposition parties calling it an attack on federalism. These 2022 changes were further refined in April 2026. [<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>]

2025 Water Sharing Dispute: In May 2025, the BBMB approved the release of an additional 4,500 cusecs of water to Haryana, overriding objections from Punjab. Punjab is against (BBMB) plan to provide Haryana with an extra water. In the meantime, Haryana has escalated a decades old disagreement over sharing the water of Bhakra Nangal Dam by threatening to take the matter to the Supreme Court in order to guarantee its share. Haryana requested 8,500 cusecs from the Bhakra Nangal project, which is 4,500 more than what is already allotted Punjab argued that Haryana had already overdrawn its quota and that the state had no surplus water. When Punjab refused, the BBMB had to step in. Delhi, Rajasthan, and Haryana voted in favour of releasing more water during a BBMB meeting.

With the ultimate goal of forcibly stopping the BBMB from supplying water to Haryana, Punjab used a significant number of police officers to seize control of the Control Rooms' management and operations. The BBMB filed a complaint with the High Court accusing the Punjab government of controlling the Nangal Dam and preventing the delivery of 8,500 cusecs of water to Haryana by stationing police at the Lohan Control Room.

The State of Punjab and its police were prohibited by the Punjab and Haryana High Court from meddling with the regular management and control of the Control Rooms. [<https://www.sconline.com>]

Disputes of Central Security Forces: The Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) was sent by the Centre in May 2025 to oversee security at the Bhakra-Nangal dams amid the water conflict. The Bhakra Beas Management Board has been instructed by the Centre to finance the Rs 8.58 crore and manage all logistical arrangements for the deployment of 296 members of the central armed forces at Nangal Dam. Punjab saw this as the Centre taking over its assets directly. [<https://www.indiatoday.in>]

Amendment of Appointment Rules (April 2026): The earlier reservation for officers from Punjab and Haryana was eliminated in April 2026 when the Centre changed the qualifying requirements for the important senior positions of Member (Power) and Member (Irrigation) in the Bhakra Beas Management Board (BBMB). With immediate effect, a degree in electrical or mechanical engineering and 20 years of experience, including senior level positions and specialized operational knowledge, are now prerequisites for the Member (Power) position. In a similar vein, the Member (Irrigation) position requires a degree in civil or mechanical engineering as well as pertinent expertise with large-scale irrigation systems. The Centre contends that the changes will increase competitiveness and guarantee that qualified candidates are chosen, regardless of their state of origin, while the Punjab Government has opposed them, seeing them as a loss of local representation. Political figures in Punjab have expressed strong opposition to these new regulations. Along with the Congress and SAD, the AAP in Punjab denounced the Centre for changing the BBMB regulations to allow candidates from non-stakeholder states to hold senior positions. In contrast to the longstanding tradition of appointing officers from Punjab and Haryana this move permits broader eligibility requirements. In the midst of ongoing conflicts affecting regional ties, this decision intensifies tensions over water control among Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Himachal Pradesh. [<https://www.newindianexpress.com>]

Expansion of Board Members (April 2026):

Recently, the Union Government's proposal to increase BBMB membership from two to four members has sparked controversy. The Union Ministry of Power aims to amend the Punjab Reorganisation Act to add representatives from Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh. The Punjab government strongly opposes this, arguing it's unnecessary and legally untenable, as Rajasthan is not a successor state and lacks a legitimate claim to membership. Punjab emphasizes its significant financial contribution to BBMB and asserts that existing two-member representation is adequate for management. Additionally, it raises legal concerns since the validity of related sections of the Act is under Supreme Court review. This proposal is perceived by Punjab as an attempt to dilute their voting power and overall control over the management of river systems. Punjab urges the Union government to retain the current structure and refrain amendments. [<https://www.tribuneindia.com>] Although Indian federalism places a strong emphasis on cooperative federalism, yet disagreements like BBMB show how cooperation can turn into political strife when states are thought to be interfering too much. Amendments to the 1974 regulations, which the Punjab Legislative Assembly opposes further water sharing and demands restructuring, have increased tensions over BBMB since they are perceived by Punjab as an assault on state rights and federal principles. Punjab places more emphasis on regional rights and federal principles than the Centre does on national cooperation and administrative effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

In terms of water management, the Union government has significant power even though water is classified as a state responsibility. In order to facilitate the cooperative management of water and power resources among Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Himachal Pradesh, the BBMB was established. However, its original collaborative function has been undermined by recent modifications, rule amendments, and disagreements that have exacerbated political contestation and centralization. After a 2022 change, the BBMB, shows a move towards centralization, reducing Punjab's involvement. Political discontent has resulted from Punjab's bargaining leverage being diminished by the BBMB's withdrawal of fixed representation. Parties are using water disputes to their advantage in elections, making them more politicized. Furthermore, BBMB's efficacy is undermined by its reliance on central authority and absence of robust conflict resolution procedures. Conflicts are further intensified by interstate competition for scarce water resources, and federal tensions are demonstrated by the deployment of central forces, which indicates a lack of confidence. Current frameworks continue to primarily ignore environmental issues, especially ecological balance and sustainable management. Punjab's worries about autonomy, representation, and water constraint underscore the need for a more equitable federal strategy. To

resolve these disputes, cooperative federalism must be strengthened, transparency must be maintained, and sustainable water use be encouraged. Besides it, legal reforms and political consideration of regional goals within the context of constitutional federalism are necessary to resolve the BBMB problem.

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