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“FEDERALISM AND INTERSTATE DISPUTES: THE MAHARASHTRA – KARNATAKA BORDER CONFLICT”

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ABSTRACT

The Maharashtra–Karnataka border conflict offers a significant case study of how federalism can both unify and divide a diverse nation, particularly when territorial boundaries and state identities are contested. The dispute centers on Belagavi, a region with substantial Marathi- and Kannada-speaking populations, and dates back to the linguistic reorganization of states in 1956. Both Maharashtra and Karnataka claim the area based on historical, cultural, and linguistic ties, leading to decades of political disagreement, public protests, and legal battles. Despite interventions by the central government and proceedings before the Supreme Court of India, the matter remains unresolved, reflecting the persistence of regional aspirations within a constitutional framework. This prolonged conflict highlights the structural and political challenges inherent in managing interstate disputes within India’s federal system, where identity politics and constitutional boundaries often intersect. The primary research question examines the underlying causes of this enduring dispute and evaluates how federal institutions can more effectively address such tensions. The central hypothesis proposes that strengthening mechanisms of cooperative federalism—particularly by enhancing structured dialogue between states and empowering bodies such as the Inter-State Council—could facilitate a more balanced and durable resolution. Reforms may include clearer constitutional guidelines for territorial disputes, institutionalized negotiation frameworks, and more transparent decision-making processes. This study therefore seeks to critically assess the limitations of the existing federal structure and propose practical reforms to prevent similar conflicts, contributing to a deeper understanding of federalism’s capacity to manage complex regional disputes.

Keywords: *Belagavi, Federalism, Federal Institutions, Interstate Dispute, Legal Challenges, Linguistic Identity, Reorganization Act, Political Tension, Territorial claims.*

1. Introduction

The Maharashtra–Karnataka border conflict is one of India’s long-standing territorial disputes, rooted in linguistic and cultural differences. The conflict dates back to 1956 when the States Reorganization Act was passed, leading to the formation of Karnataka and Maharashtra based on linguistic demographics. However, certain regions, especially Belagavi (formerly Belgaum), which has a significant Marathi-speaking population, became a point of contention. Maharashtra has since claimed these areas,

citing linguistic affinity, while Karnataka insists on retaining them based on historical and administrative grounds. The dispute has persisted for decades, leading to legal battles, political debates, and occasional public unrest.

The significance of this conflict lies in its impact on inter-state relations, governance, and the affected communities. It has led to periodic tensions between both state governments and fuelled regional political narratives. The issue is not merely a territorial disagreement but also

involves cultural identity, language rights, and political influence.²⁷⁰⁵ The dispute has had economic and administrative consequences as well, affecting the development of disputed regions due to legal uncertainties. Moreover, the conflict influences electoral politics in both states, with various parties using it to rally support.

This research aims to analyse the historical background, legal aspects, and socio-political consequences of the Maharashtra-Karnataka border conflict. By examining government policies, judicial interventions, and public sentiments, the study seeks to provide an in-depth to a peaceful resolution. Through a detailed analysis, the research will highlight the roles of language, history, and governance in shaping interstate disputes in India.

This study will contribute to the broader discussion on regional conflicts in India, where linguistic and cultural differences have often led to disputes. Understanding this case can help in formulating policies that prevent such conflicts and promote harmonious state relations. It will also provide insights into the role of the judiciary, political leadership, and public participation in conflict resolution.

2. Theoretical Framework and Interstate Disputes

A. Concept and Evolution of Federalism :²⁷⁰⁶

Federalism is a system of governance in which power is divided between a central authority and various constituent units, such as states or provinces. It allows different regions to have a degree of autonomy while remaining part of a unified nation. The concept of federalism has evolved over centuries, with early examples seen in the United States, Canada, and Switzerland. These nations adopted federalism to accommodate diverse cultural, linguistic, and geographical differences while ensuring

effective governance. Over time, federal structures have adapted to address challenges related to power distribution, resource allocation, and intergovernmental cooperation. In a federal system, the balance between central authority and regional autonomy is crucial to maintaining political stability and national integrity.

B. Federalism in India : Historical Context and Constitutional Provisions:

India adopted a quasi-federal structure after independence, drawing inspiration from various federal models while ensuring a strong central government. The Government of India Act, 1935, laid the foundation for federalism in India by introducing provincial autonomy. However, the Indian constitution classifies power into three lists: the Union List, the state List, and the Concurrent List. While states have autonomy in matters under the State List, the central government retains significant authority, especially in times of crises. Additionally, institutions such as the Inter-State Council and the Finance Commission play vital roles in managing intergovernmental relations. The Indian model of federalism is designated to accommodate diversity while ensuring national unity.

C. Nature of Interstate Disputes in a Federal Structure:

Interstate disputes in a federal system often arise due to differences in resource sharing, territorial claims, cultural identities, or administrative matters. In India, such disputes commonly involve river water allocation, boundary conflicts, and issues related to special economic zones. The Maharashtra-Karnataka border dispute is a prime example, where linguistic and historical factors have fuelled tensions between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu highlighted the challenges of managing natural resources in a federal setup. These disputes often require legal intervention, negotiations, or central mediation to prevent escalation. Addressing such conflicts is essential for maintaining cooperative federalism and regional stability.

²⁷⁰⁵ RAM M. APTE, MAHARASHTRA-KARNATAKA BORDER DISPUTE: IT'S LEGAL AND SOCIAL ASPECT 45 (1ST ED. 2010).

²⁷⁰⁶ Raeesa vakil, *Cooperative Federalism in India: The Adjudication of Federal Disputes*, Centre for Policy Research, Working Paper No. 6, at 15 (2023) https://cprindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Adjudication-of-Federal-Disputes_Raeesa-Vakil_CF-SCL-WP-2023-6.pdf

D. Relevance of Federalism in Resolving Territorial Disputes:²⁷⁰⁷

Federalism provides a structured framework for addressing territorial disputes through legal, political, and administrative mechanisms. In India, institutions like the Supreme Court and tribunals play a key role in resolving such conflicts resolution by facilitating dialogue between disputing states. Additionally, regional councils and commissions help address grievances and ensure equitable governance. Strengthening cooperative federalism through transparent policies, decentralized decision-making and public participation can further aid in resolving interstate disputes. By promoting dialogue and legal resolution, federalism serves as a vital tool for maintaining national unity while respecting regional identities.

3. Historical Background of the Maharashtra-Karnataka Border Conflict

A. Formation of States : The 1956 States Reorganization Act:²⁷⁰⁸

Post-Independence, the Indian government reorganized states based on linguistic demographics to enhance administrative efficiency and cultural unity. The States Reorganization Act of 1956 played a key role in defining state boundaries. As per this reorganization, despite a significant Marathi-speaking population, Belagavi and surrounding areas were merged with the newly formed Mysore State (later Karnataka) instead of Maharashtra. This decision was met with strong opposition from Maharashtra, which argued that these regions rightfully belonged to it.

B. Linguistic Reorganization and Its Impact on State Boundaries:²⁷⁰⁹

The linguistic reorganization of states led to various inter-state border disputes across India, with the Maharashtra- Karnataka conflict

being one of the most prominent. The decision to include Belagavi in Karnataka was influenced by geographical and administrative consideration rather than solely linguistic factors. However, Maharashtra opposed this, arguing that language should have been the primary determinant, given that a significant portion of Belagavi's population spoke Marathi. This disagreement became the foundation of the ongoing dispute.

C. Marathi and Kannada identities in Belagavi:

Belagavi has long been home to both Marathi and Kannada-speaking communities, coexisting for centuries. However, following its inclusion in Karnataka, linguistic identity became a contentious issue. Many Marathi-speaking residents felt alienated from Maharashtra and advocated for the region's merger into their state. In response, Karnataka sought to reinforce Kannada language and culture, intensifying the conflict between the two linguistic groups.

D. Maharashtra's Claims Over Belagavi: Historical and Cultural Justifications:²⁷¹⁰

Maharashtra has consistently maintained that Belagavi and 865 other villages with a Marathi-speaking majority should be integrated into its territory. The state argues that historically and culturally, Belagavi has closer ties with Maharashtra, having been a part of the Bombay Presidency during British rule. Pro-Marathi organizations and political leaders in Maharashtra believe that the merger of these areas into Karnataka was a historical oversight that needs to be rectified through legal and political means.

E. Karnataka's Position and Defence of Its Jurisdiction:

Karnataka has firmly rejected Maharashtra's territorial claims, asserting that Belagavi is an inseparable part of the Mahajan Commission

²⁷⁰⁷ Drishti IAS, *Maharashtra- Karnataka Border Dispute*, Drishti (Dec.30,2022), <https://www.drishtias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/maharashtra-karnataka-border-dispute>

²⁷⁰⁸ S. Ramaswamy, *Revisiting Indian Federalism: An Overview of Contemporary issues and Challenges*, 4 J. Pol.Sci. 25, 30 (2022) <https://www.journalofpoliticalscience.com/uploads/archives/4-1-3-565.pdf>

²⁷⁰⁹ Amit Kumar, *Federalism in India: Assessing State- Centre Relations and Dynamics*, 11 Int'l J Creative Res. Thoughts 417,423 (2021) <https://ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT1135417.pdf>

²⁷¹⁰ Radhaswamy K.P., *A Comparative Study Of Federalism in India and Other Countries*, 8 Int'l J. Info. Movement 16, 19 (2023), <https://www.ijim.in/files/2023/November/Vol1%208%20Issue%20VII%2016-20%20Paper%203%20Radhaswamy%20K%20P%20A%20COMPARATIVE%20STUDY.pdf>

report (1966), which ruled in its favour, arguing that Maharashtra's demands have no legal standing. To strengthen its claim, Karnataka declared Belagavi its second capital and built the Suvarna Vidhana Soudha, a legislative building in the city. The state maintains that redrawing boundaries based on language would set a dangerous precedent, potentially sparking similar conflicts elsewhere in the country.

4. **Political and Legal aspects of the Conflict**

Interstate disputes in India are shaped by intricate political and legal dynamics, requiring interventions from the central government, judiciary, and other constitutional mechanisms. Political mobilization and public sentiment further influence the trajectory of these disputes, often leading to prolonged conflicts.²⁷¹¹

A. **Role of State Governments in intensifying the Dispute:**²⁷¹²

State governments play a significant role in escalating inter-state conflicts, especially when political interests overshadow cooperative federalism. Regional parties and state governments often use disputes related to water sharing, territorial claims, and resource distribution as political tools to consolidate voter support.

A prominent example is the Cauvery Water Dispute between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, where state governments have taken rigid positions, leading to mass protests and violent clashes. Similarly, the Belgaum Border Dispute between Maharashtra and Karnataka remains unresolved due to political posturing. In both cases, state leaders have leveraged these issues to strengthen their regional influence, often at the cost of a constructive resolution.

B. **Central Government's Interventions and Their Effectiveness:**²⁷¹³

The central government plays a mediatory role in inter-state disputes, primarily through tribunals established under Article 262 and bodies such as the Cauvery Water Management Authority. However, the effectiveness of these interventions is often questioned due to delays in implementation, lack of enforcement power, and political bias.

For example, in the Ravi-Beas River Dispute, Punjab and Haryana have remained in conflict despite multiple interventions. Similarly, political considerations often influence central decisions, particularly when the ruling party at the centre has affiliations with the concerned state governments. While central agencies attempt to ensure neutrality, political compulsions sometimes lead to partiality, weakening the credibility of dispute resolution mechanisms.

C. **Judicial Interventions and Landmark Supreme Court Cases:**

The Supreme Court has played a crucial role in resolving inter-state disputes, issuing several landmark judgments, including:

- **State of Karnataka v. State of Tamil Nadu (2018)**²⁷¹⁴: The Court adjusted the Cauvery Tribunal's verdict, modifying water allocations while stressing cooperative federalism.
- **State of Punjab v. State of Haryana (2002)**²⁷¹⁵: The Supreme Court ordered Punjab to complete the Sutlej-Yamuna Link (SYL) Canal, but political resistance has prevented its implementation.
- **In Re: Presidential Reference (1962)**²⁷¹⁶: Berubari Union Case: The Court clarified the procedure for altering state boundaries, setting a precedent for similar territorial disputes.

Although judicial rulings provide clarity and legal solutions, their enforcement remains a

²⁷¹¹ VASANT RAMACHANDRA BHANDARE, MAHARASHTRA-KARNATAKA BORDER DISPUTE: POLITICS OF MANIPULATION 78 (2D ED. 2000)

²⁷¹² MANOJ KUMAR SHARMA, CENTRE- STATE RELATIONS IN INDIA: FEDERALISM IN TRANSITION 89 (2d ed. 2017)

²⁷¹³ Anupama Singh, *Federalism and Interstate disputes in India: A Case Study of Maharashtra and Karnataka*, 52 POL. STUD. J. 102 (2021), <https://www.politicalstudiesjournal.com/federalism-interstate-disputes-india>

²⁷¹⁴ State of Karnataka v. State of Tamil Nadu, (2018) AIR SC 1269.

²⁷¹⁵ State of Punjab V. State of Haryana, (2002) AIR SC 1053.

²⁷¹⁶ In Re: Presidential Reference, (1962) AIR SC 1406.

challenge due to political opposition and public resistance.

D. Role and Limitations of the Inter-State Council:

The Inter-State Council (ISC), constituted under Article 263, serves as a platform for resolving inter-state conflicts. However, its advisory nature and infrequent meetings have limited its effectiveness. Unlike the judiciary, the ISC lacks enforcement powers, making it reliant on political will for implementation.

For instance, the Krishna River Water Dispute between Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana has seen limited success through the ISC, as states continue to take uncompromising positions. Strengthening the ISC's role could enhance cooperative federalism and reduce dependency on judicial interventions.

E. Political Mobilization, Agitations, and Public Sentiment:

Political mobilization and public sentiment play a critical role in shaping inter-state disputes. Political parties and interest groups often exploit these conflicts to rally public support, leading to widespread agitations and unrest.

Incidents like the Cauvery riots in Karnataka, where protests erupted over water-sharing decisions, and the Maratha quota protests in Maharashtra demonstrate how political actors leverage regional sentiments for electoral gains. Mass protests not only pressure governments to take rigid stances but also hinder meaningful negotiations, further complicating dispute resolution.

5. Political Dimensions and State Government Approaches

A. Maharashtra's Role in Escalating and Resolving the Conflict:²⁷¹⁷

Maharashtra has played a key role in both intensifying and attempting to resolve political conflicts, particularly concerning border disputes with Karnataka. The state has

frequently advocated for the inclusion of contested areas, citing linguistic and cultural factors. Political parties in Maharashtra have mobilized public opinion through protests, demonstrations, and legal actions to reinforce their claims. At the same time, the government has pursued negotiations through constitutional channels and legal appeals, seeking judicial intervention to settle disputes. Maharashtra's approach reflects a combination of assertive political advocacy and strategic diplomatic efforts to safeguard its interests.

B. Karnataka's Political Position and Strategic Responses:

Karnataka has taken a firm yet calculated stance in defending its territorial claims against Maharashtra. The state government has relied on legal frameworks, historical documentation, and constitutional provisions to justify its position. Karnataka's leadership has also strengthened administrative control over disputed areas while implementing development initiatives to consolidate its influence. Political leaders in the state have engaged regional parties and interest groups to counter Maharashtra's claims and maintain public support. Karnataka's strategy primarily revolves around legal battles, political unity, and developmental policies to reinforce its authority over contested regions.

C. Influence of Regional and National Political Parties:²⁷¹⁸

Both regional and national political parties play a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of political conflicts. In Maharashtra, parties like the Shiv Sena and Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) strongly advocate for Marathi linguistic identity, often using aggressive political rhetoric and public mobilization. In Karnataka, groups like Karnataka Rakshana Vedike emphasize state pride and regional integrity. Meanwhile, national parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Indian

²⁷¹⁷ Suresh Kumar, *Constitutional Perspectives On the Maharashtra- Karnataka Border Dispute*, 11 CONST. L. REV. 134 (2019), <https://www.constitutionallawreview.com/maharashtra-karnataka-border>

²⁷¹⁸ Vikram Singh, *Political Impacts of Interstate Disputes: A Case Study Of Maharashtra- Karnataka*, 42 ASIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY 22 (2021), <https://www.asianpoliticaleconomy.com/maharashtra-karnataka-border-dispute>

National Congress (INC) navigate a delicate balance, as they have political stakes in both states. While these national parties support state interests locally, they also work towards maintaining national unity, often acting as mediators in contentious issues.

D. Political Mobilization and Electoral Approaches:²⁷¹⁹

Political mobilization in both Maharashtra and Karnataka is largely driven by identity-based politics, with leaders leveraging linguistic, cultural, and regional sentiments to strengthen their electoral influence. Maharashtra's political parties focus on Marathi identity and historical claims, while Karnataka-based parties emphasize state pride and governance achievements. Leaders employ rallies, social media campaigns, and grassroots movements to connect with voters. Electoral strategies include forming alliances with influential caste and community groups, targeting key constituencies, and making region-specific policy promises. The use of regional disputes as an electoral tool remains a common strategy in both states to consolidate support and sway voter sentiment.

E. Impact of Political Leadership on Federalism:²⁷²⁰

Political leadership significantly impacts federal relations between Maharashtra and Karnataka, shaping intergovernmental interactions and policy negotiations. Strong regional leaders often drive aggressive state-centric agendas, influencing the central government's stance on inter-state disputes. Leadership decisions can either intensify conflicts through confrontational politics or facilitate resolution through legal and diplomatic channels. At the national level, the central government's response is often influenced by political considerations, balancing state-specific demands with broader national interests. Leaders who emphasize cooperation and constitutional solutions

contribute to a more stable federal structure, whereas those prioritizing regional politics can challenge the spirit of cooperative federalism.

6. Socio-Cultural and Economic Implications **A. Linguistic and Cultural Identity Crisis in Belagavi:²⁷²¹**

Belagavi has been a focal point of linguistic and cultural tensions due to the Maharashtra-Karnataka border dispute. The region has a sizable Marathi-speaking population, leading to a long-standing demand for its inclusion in Maharashtra. However, Karnataka maintains administrative control, causing feelings of marginalization among Marathi speakers. This has resulted in periodic protests, legal battles, and social unrest. Language plays a crucial role in governance, public communication, and cultural identity, further deepening the divide. Festivals, local events, and community initiatives often reflect these tensions, making Belagavi a contested space in the larger regional identity debate.

B. Economic Implications for Maharashtra and Karnataka:

The ongoing dispute between Maharashtra and Karnataka has significant economic repercussions, particularly in trade, business, and infrastructure development. Belagavi is a key commercial centre with strong economic ties to both states, but uncertainty over governance affects investments and growth. Maharashtra has accused Karnataka of neglecting development in Marathi-speaking areas, while Karnataka has increased its economic activities to strengthen its hold over the region. The dispute also impacts real estate, employment, and public welfare programs, leading to economic instability. Businesses and industries often face administrative challenges due to shifting political priorities, affecting long-term economic planning in the region.

²⁷¹⁹ Amit Chawla, *Federalism, Language, and the Maharashtra – Karnataka Border Dispute*, 27 LANG. & POL. J. 123 (2021) <https://www.languagepoliticsjournal.com/maharashtra-karnataka-border>

²⁷²⁰ JOCHEN GOTTWALD, *ECONOMIC LIBERALIZATION AND INDIAN FEDERALISM* 76 (2d ed. 2007)

²⁷²¹ Raghavendra Joshi, *Legal Challenges in the Maharashtra- Karnataka Border Dispute*, 43 J. OF INDIAN LAW 85 (2020), <https://www.journalofindianlaw.com/maharashtra-karnataka-border-dispute>

C. Impact on Education and Local Administration:²⁷²²

Education in the disputed region is influenced by linguistic politics, affecting students and institutions. Schools offering Marathi and Kannada medium education face funding and policy challenges, sometimes influenced by political agendas. Language barriers create difficulties for students seeking higher education, particularly regarding entrance exams, scholarships, and reservations, which differ between the two states. Local administration also struggles to maintain neutrality, as language plays a role in governance, official communication, and service delivery. The lack of clear policies on bilingual administration creates tensions, making governance complex and sometimes leading to dissatisfaction among local communities.

D. Role of Media in Shaping Public Opinion:

Media has a powerful influence on public perception regarding the Maharashtra-Karnataka dispute. Regional newspapers, television channels, and social media platforms often present narratives favouring their respective states, intensifying existing divisions. Marathi and Kannada media outlets highlight grievances from their communities, sometimes escalating tensions. Social media further amplifies these issues, spreading both genuine concerns and misinformation, which can fuel unrest. However, balanced journalism and responsible reporting play a crucial role in encouraging dialogue and fostering a more informed perspective. The way media portrays the conflict significantly affects public sentiment and political responses.

E. Public Protests, Grassroots Movements, and Civil Society Initiatives:²⁷²³

Protests and grassroots movements have played a crucial role in keeping the border

dispute active in public discourse. Activist groups and political organizations on both sides have mobilized people to assert linguistic and cultural rights. Marathi-speaking residents in Karnataka have staged demonstrations demanding protection of their identity, while Kannada activists have countered with movements to assert their state's sovereignty. Civil society groups have also attempted to mediate and promote peaceful coexistence, advocating dialogue over confrontation. Over time, these movements have influenced political decisions, ensuring that the concerns of the affected communities remain a priority in policy discussions.

7. Role of the Central Government and Federal Institutions

A. The Union Government's Role in Interstate Disputes:²⁷²⁴

The central government plays a crucial role in resolving conflicts between states by acting as a neutral mediator. Under Article 131 of the Indian Constitution, the Supreme Court has jurisdiction over disputes between states, but the Union government also intervenes through diplomatic negotiations and administrative measures. In *State of Karnataka v. State of Andhra Pradesh* (2000), the Union facilitated discussions regarding water-sharing conflicts. Similarly, in the Maharashtra-Karnataka border dispute, the central government has attempted to maintain neutrality, often refraining from direct intervention due to the political sensitivities involved.

B. Functioning of the Inter-State Council in Conflict Resolution:

The Inter-State Council (ISC), established under Article 263 of the Constitution, provides a platform for discussion and coordination among states. It aims to facilitate cooperative federalism and resolve conflicts through dialogue.²⁷²⁵ However, the ISC's effectiveness is limited due to irregular meetings and its non-

²⁷²² Karthik Rao, *The Impact of the Maharashtra-Karnataka Border Dispute Regional Politics*, 33 REGIONAL POL STUD. 76 (2022), <https://www.regionalpoliticalstudies.com/maharashtra-karnataka-border>

²⁷²³ Niranjan Desai, *Federalism and Territorial Integrity: The Case of the Maharashtra-Karnataka Border*, 18 TERRITORY & POLITICS 67 (2020), <https://www.territoryandpolitics.com/maharashtra-karnataka-border>

²⁷²⁴ Suresh Yadav, *The role of the Supreme Court in the Maharashtra-Karnataka Border Dispute*, 30 SUPREME COURT L. REV. 190 (2021), <https://www.supremecourtlawreview.com/supreme-court-maharashtra-karnataka>

²⁷²⁵ M.P. SINGH, FEDERALISM IN INDIA 102 (3D ED. 2021).

binding recommendations. The Reorganisation of States case (1956) highlighted the necessity of structured institutions for managing regional conflicts. Strengthening the ISC by holding regular discussions and making its resolutions more enforceable could improve its ability to resolve disputes between states effectively.

C. Role of Parliament in Addressing State Conflicts:

Parliament has significant authority in handling interstate disputes through legislative measures and policy decisions. Under Article 3 of the Constitution, it has the power to alter state boundaries, as seen in disputes like the State of Punjab v. State of Haryana (2002) regarding the Sutlej-Yamuna Link (SYL) canal. Parliament also establishes commissions to investigate disputes, such as the Mahajan Commission, which was set up in 1966 to examine the Maharashtra-Karnataka border issue. While parliamentary interventions provide a legal framework for dispute resolution, political considerations often influence the pace and nature of decision-making.

D. Bureaucratic and Administrative Challenges in Mediation:

Administrative hurdles often delay the resolution of interstate disputes. Coordination between different government agencies, legal complexities, and political pressures make mediation difficult. The Cauvery Water Dispute (State of Tamil Nadu v. State of Karnataka, 1991) is an example where bureaucratic delays and differing interpretations of tribunal rulings prolonged the issue. Additionally, weak enforcement mechanisms for tribunal awards and Supreme Court judgments often lead to further conflicts. Strengthening coordination among state and central authorities while ensuring the timely implementation of judicial decisions can improve dispute resolution efficiency.

E. Need for Strengthening Institutional Mechanisms:²⁷²⁶

A well-defined institutional framework is essential for managing interstate disputes effectively. Establishing a permanent dispute resolution authority, similar to the Cauvery Water Management Authority (CWMA), could provide a structured approach to handling conflicts. Clear enforcement mechanisms for tribunal and court rulings should be implemented to ensure compliance. Additionally, enhancing the role of the Inter-State Council, increasing the frequency of its meetings, and incorporating independent mediators could strengthen federal dispute resolution. A more robust institutional setup would promote cooperative federalism and facilitate fair, transparent, and efficient conflict resolution.

8. Reports and Recommendations on Interstate Disputes

A. Mahajan Commission Report (1966) – Findings, Recommendations, and Maharashtra's Rejection:²⁷²⁷

The Mahajan Commission was set up by the Government of India in 1966 to address the Maharashtra-Karnataka border dispute, particularly concerning Belagavi and surrounding regions. Led by Justice Mehr Chand Mahajan, the commission analyzed historical records, linguistic demographics, and administrative boundaries to make its recommendations.

The report concluded that Belagavi and 247 other villages should remain under Karnataka's administration, while a few Marathi-speaking villages should be transferred to Maharashtra. However, Maharashtra strongly opposed these findings, arguing that the commission had not fully considered the sentiments of Marathi-speaking residents. Due to this rejection, the issue remained unresolved, with Maharashtra continuing to demand a reassessment.

²⁷²⁶ D.D.BASU, INTRODUCTION TO THE CONSTITUTION OF INDIA 90 (26TH ED. 2018).

²⁷²⁷ Priya Mehta, *The Role of Federalism in Maharashtra-Karnataka Border Disputes: Reports and Recommendations*, 23 FEDERALISM STUDIES 156 (2020), <https://www.federalismstudies.com/maharashtra-karnataka-border>

Karnataka, however, accepted the report and reinforced its administrative control over the disputed areas, leading to further tensions.

B. Punchhi Commission Report (2010) – Recommendations for Strengthening Federal Dispute Resolution:²⁷²⁸

The Punchhi Commission, chaired by Justice Madan Mohan Punchhi in 2007, was tasked with reviewing center-state relations and proposing measures to enhance federal governance. In its 2010 report, the commission provided recommendations on handling interstate disputes, including territorial conflicts.

Key suggestions included:

- **Strengthening the Inter-State Council** to make it an active body for dispute resolution.
- **Creating a permanent mechanism** to address border conflicts efficiently.
- **Encouraging dialogue between states** before escalating issues to legal battles.
- **Making tribunal decisions legally binding** and ensuring their timely enforcement.

The commission emphasized cooperative federalism and stressed that interstate disputes should be resolved through negotiation rather than prolonged judicial interventions. However, the implementation of these recommendations has been slow, and conflicts like Maharashtra-Karnataka remain unresolved.

C. Recent Parliamentary Committee Reports – Policy Recommendations for Resolving Border Disputes:²⁷²⁹

Several parliamentary committees have examined border conflicts and provided policy recommendations for their resolution. These committees have focused on the role of the Union government in mediating state disputes and ensuring smooth federal relations.

Key recommendations from recent reports include:

- **Promoting negotiation-based dispute resolution** before resorting to legal action.
- **Establishing independent mediation bodies** to ensure impartial handling of border disputes.
- **Creating standardized legal frameworks** to prevent political interference in territorial conflicts.
- **Ensuring state reorganization decisions** are made using clear, unbiased criteria.

The reports highlight the importance of keeping border disputes free from political influence and encourage states to prioritize economic and administrative cooperation instead of territorial claims. However, the lack of political consensus and resistance to external intervention have hindered the implementation of these suggestions.

D. Best Practices from Other Interstate Disputes – Alternative Resolution Mechanisms:²⁷³⁰

India has experienced multiple interstate disputes, and some have been managed effectively through legal and negotiation-based solutions. Learning from these cases can provide guidance for handling ongoing conflicts like Maharashtra-Karnataka.

- **Punjab-Haryana (SYL Canal Dispute):** While still unresolved, the Supreme Court's involvement and the creation of a tribunal established a framework for water disputes. A **permanent tribunal** for border disputes could be similarly beneficial.
- **Assam-Nagaland Border Dispute:** This conflict has seen progress through **dialogue-based negotiations** and central government mediation. A structured negotiation process could help resolve territorial disputes more effectively.

²⁷²⁸ Shyam Prasad, *Political Recommendations and Reports on the Maharashtra-Karnataka Border Dispute*, 28 REGIONAL POLITICS J. 134 (2021), <https://www.regionalpoliticsjournal.com/maharashtra-karnataka-border>

²⁷²⁹ Sumit Verma, *Evaluating Interstate Dispute Resolution: Maharashtra-Karnataka Reports and Recommendations*, 45 INDIAN GOVERNMENTAL STUDIES 89 (2021), <https://www.indiangovernmentalstudies.com/maharashtra-karnataka-border>

²⁷³⁰ *Id.*

- **West Bengal-Bihar Border Adjustments:** Minor territorial issues between these states were settled through **mutual agreements**, preventing prolonged legal battles. Encouraging direct negotiations between state governments could be a viable approach.

These cases underscore the significance of **legal clarity, structured mediation, and political commitment** in resolving interstate disputes. Implementing a well-defined institutional framework and prioritizing negotiations over legal confrontations could contribute to finding long-term solutions to conflicts like the Maharashtra-Karnataka border issue.

9. Conclusion

The Maharashtra-Karnataka border dispute exemplifies the challenges of federalism in India, where linguistic, cultural, and administrative differences often lead to prolonged conflicts. Although the Constitution provides various mechanisms for resolving interstate disputes, including judicial intervention, commissions, and intergovernmental negotiations, the process remains slow and politically sensitive. The long-standing disagreement over Belagavi and surrounding areas highlights the limitations of these mechanisms, especially when historical and emotional factors influence decision-making.

A key takeaway from this dispute is the need for a structured, time-bound resolution process. Maharashtra's rejection of the Mahajan Commission's recommendations and Karnataka's firm stance on retaining the disputed region have led to repeated legal battles and political tensions. The absence of a binding resolution mechanism has only prolonged the issue, creating uncertainty for the local population. Strengthening institutions such as the Inter-State Council and ensuring the effective implementation of judicial or tribunal verdicts can help prevent such conflicts from persisting indefinitely.

India's federal structure relies on cooperation between states and the central government, but disputes like this one strain intergovernmental relations. The Maharashtra-Karnataka conflict underscores the urgent need for institutional reforms in conflict resolution. Establishing independent mediation bodies, encouraging regular dialogue between disputing states, and prioritizing negotiation over confrontation could lead to more effective solutions. Additionally, depoliticizing such conflicts and focusing on regional development rather than territorial claims would create a more pragmatic approach to dispute resolution.

The Union government plays a crucial role in managing such disputes. While maintaining neutrality is important, it must also actively facilitate negotiations and ensure fair and enforceable solutions. Lessons from other border disputes, both within India and internationally, suggest that a combination of legal clarity, political commitment, and structured mediation can lead to lasting settlements.

Ultimately, resolving the Maharashtra-Karnataka border issue requires a balanced approach that respects linguistic and cultural identities while maintaining administrative efficiency and regional harmony. Instead of allowing the dispute to remain a source of tension, both states should engage in meaningful dialogue and work toward a mutually acceptable resolution. Strengthening India's federal framework depends on addressing such conflicts effectively, ensuring that federalism remains a unifying force rather than a cause of division.

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