

River Governance and Accountability in Local Self-Government: A Case Study of Mahananda and Phuleswari Rivers in Siliguri Subdivision

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Abstract

This study explores the concept of river governance, focusing on internal socio-political issues such as land encroachment, political involvement, and the role of local self-government, rather than traditional concerns like disaster management, pollution, and agriculture. Using the Mahananda and Phuleswari rivers in Siliguri as case studies, the research highlights the significance of local perspectives, the challenges posed by urbanization, and the need for proactive governance. The study aims to bridge the gap between the people and authorities, advocating for a bottom-to-top approach to governance.

I. Introduction

Rivers have historically been central to human civilization, serving as sources of sustenance, transportation, and development. In contemporary times, rivers continue to play a critical role in urban planning, environmental sustainability, and socio-economic development. However, the governance of rivers often focuses on environmental and technical aspects, neglecting the socio-political dimensions that directly impact local communities. In Siliguri, the Mahananda and Phuleswari rivers are integral to the city's identity and development. Despite their importance, these rivers face challenges such as land encroachment, pollution, and inadequate infrastructure. This study seeks to address these issues by examining the role of local self-government, the perspectives of land-owning and landless dwellers, and the socio-political dynamics surrounding river governance.

II. Literature Review

River Governance in India

River governance in India is shaped by the federal structure of the Constitution, which grants states autonomy in managing water resources (Drishti IAS, n.d.). However, this decentralized approach often leads to fragmented policies and limited coordination between local, state, and national authorities. Studies such as "Managing Rivers for Multiple Benefits" (Frontiers in Science, n.d.) emphasize the need for integrated governance frameworks that balance environmental, social, and economic priorities.

Socio-Political Dimensions of River Governance

Ahmed (2004) explores the cultural politics of emotion, highlighting how social relationships are influenced by cultural and political contexts. Nussbaum (2013) underscores the importance of political emotions in fostering justice and collective action. These perspectives are crucial in understanding the socio-political dynamics of river governance, particularly in urban areas like Siliguri.

Urbanization and River Governance

Urbanization poses significant challenges to river governance, including land encroachment, pollution, and infrastructure development. Mandal and Bedhas (2012) analyzed landforms and land potential problems in Sikkim, providing insights into the impact of urbanization on natural resources. The Sixth Report of the Second Administrative Reforms Commission (2007) discussed local governance but lacked emphasis on the socio-political aspects of river management.

III. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods. Primary data is collected through structured questionnaires distributed to residents of the Mahananda and Phuleswari river areas, including both land-owning and landless dwellers. Secondary data is sourced from government reports, scholarly articles, and media publications. Field visits to municipal offices, land revenue offices, and NGOs are conducted to gather additional insights.

IV. Findings

Beautification and Infrastructure Development

The Mahananda River, flowing through the heart of Siliguri, requires beautification projects to enhance its aesthetic appeal and utility. Limited land availability along the rivers necessitates infrastructure development for optimal land utilization.

Population Growth and Urbanization

The growing population of Siliguri has led to slum dwellings near the Mahananda and high-rise buildings near the Phuleswari. These developments pose challenges to river governance, including land encroachment and environmental degradation.

Local Authority and Government Intervention

The study highlights the lack of proactive involvement by local authorities in river governance. Higher-level government projects and schemes are essential for the sustainable development of these rivers.

Individual Perspectives

Land-owning and landless dwellers have differing views on land encroachment and displacement. Landowners are often resistant to displacement, while landless dwellers face greater vulnerability. These perspectives are influenced by political dynamics and the level of government intervention.

V. Discussion

Socio-Political Dynamics

River governance extends beyond environmental concerns to include socio-political issues such as land encroachment, urbanization, and political involvement. The study reveals that local self-government plays a crucial role in addressing these challenges, but its efforts are often hindered by limited resources and political interference.

Role of NGOs and Environmentalists

NGOs and environmentalists play a vital role in advocating for sustainable river governance. Their involvement can complement government efforts by raising awareness, mobilizing resources, and promoting community participation.

VI. Conclusion

Rivers are natural assets that require sustainable governance to ensure their survival and utility. This study advocates for a socio-political approach to river governance, emphasizing the role of local self-government, NGOs, and environmentalists. By addressing land encroachment, infrastructure development, and individual perspectives, the research aims to promote the sanctity and beautification of the Mahananda and Phuleswari rivers.

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