

Water Governance, Political Leadership, and Enduring Legacy: A Critical Review of Sudhakar Rao Naik's Contributions to Maharashtra's Sustainable Development Initiatives Reforms

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Abstract

Maharashtra has long faced persistent water scarcity due to climatic variability, uneven rainfall distribution, and intensive groundwater exploitation, resulting in recurring droughts and livelihood insecurity. This study examines the evolution of water governance in Maharashtra with particular attention to the leadership of Sudhakar Rao Naik during his tenure as Chief Minister (1991–1993). Drawing on academic literature, government reports, and policy evaluations, the paper situates Naik's role within broader institutional and policy transformations rather than attributing outcomes solely to individual leadership. The review highlights how pre-existing mechanisms, such as the Employment Guarantee Scheme and groundwater monitoring institutions, laid the groundwork for decentralized conservation approaches. Naik's contribution is analyzed primarily as an agenda-setting intervention that elevated water conservation from a technical concern to a political and administrative priority. The subsequent institutionalization of this agenda through the Maharashtra Water Conservation Corporation Act (2000) marked a significant shift toward watershed-based management and integration of employment generation with ecological restoration. Empirical studies of watershed development and employment-linked conservation programs indicate improvements in groundwater recharge, soil health, and agricultural productivity, while also revealing persistent challenges related to equity and maintenance. The findings suggest that Maharashtra's water governance trajectory reflects the interaction of leadership, institutional capacity, and community participation. By foregrounding the role of political agenda-setting

alongside structural policy reforms, this paper contributes to a nuanced understanding of how conservation priorities become embedded within state-level governance frameworks in water-scarce regions.

Keywords: Water Conservation, Maharashtra, Sudhakar Rao Naik, Drought Management, Watershed Development, Institutional Reforms, Policy Legacy

1. Introduction: Leadership in a Time of Water Crisis

Water scarcity has persistently influenced the socio-economic and ecological conditions of Maharashtra. Extensive areas of the state are classified as drought-prone, and fluctuations in rainfall patterns routinely disrupt agricultural productivity, groundwater recharge, and rural livelihoods (Todmal, 2019). Within this challenging context, the tenure of Chief Minister Sudhakar Rao Naik (1991–1993) is frequently recalled for bringing sustained political attention to water conservation. Although his term in office was brief, Naik is often regarded as a transformative figure in Maharashtra's governance history, earning recognition as the state's "waterman leader" (ThePrint, 2018).

This literature review critically synthesizes academic scholarship, policy documents, and evaluative studies to situate Naik's leadership within broader water governance reforms and to examine the institutional trajectories that followed his premiership.

2. Water Governance in Maharashtra before Naik

Before Naik's administration, water resource governance in Maharashtra was predominantly shaped by irrigation-oriented institutions and large infrastructure projects. The Soil and Water Conservation Department, active since the mid-twentieth century, concentrated on measures such as contour bunding, afforestation, and erosion control (1986, 2001). In parallel, the Groundwater Surveys and Development Agency (GSDA), established in 1972, was entrusted with groundwater assessment and regulation (Phadtare, 1988). A significant institutional innovation during this period was the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS), legislated in 1977. The EGS linked drought relief with the creation of productive assets, many of which were related to soil and water

conservation. Scholars have noted that the scheme laid the foundation for watershed-based development by integrating rural employment generation with ecological restoration.

Despite these advances, Maharashtra continued to experience recurring droughts by the late 1980s, and the state faced criticism for prioritising large-scale irrigation projects at the expense of decentralised and community-driven conservation approaches.

2.1 Institutional Foundations

The institutional framework for water management in Maharashtra evolved around groundwater assessment, soil conservation, and irrigation development. Government reports document sustained efforts to improve soil moisture retention through bunding, trenching, and afforestation (1986, 2001). Simultaneously, GSDA's hydrogeological surveys provided a scientific basis for understanding aquifer conditions and groundwater stress (Phadtare, 1988).

2.1.1 Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS)

The EGS represented an early attempt to integrate social welfare objectives with environmental management. Shah (1998) describes the scheme as a pioneering model for decentralized water conservation, while evaluations by (Amita Shah, 2008) demonstrate that watershed structures such as check dams and percolation tanks constituted a substantial share of EGS works. Nonetheless, the overall governance approach remained dominated by centralized irrigation planning.

2. Naik's Leadership and Conservation Agenda

Sudhakar Rao Naik's leadership marked a perceptible shift in the political framing of water issues in Maharashtra. During his tenure, water conservation emerged as a distinct governance priority rather than a subsidiary component of irrigation policy. Contemporary accounts highlight Naik's advocacy for decentralized, watershed-based solutions and his emphasis on protecting groundwater and rainwater resources (ThePrint, 2018). While detailed records of specific programs initiated during his term are limited, Naik's primary contribution lies in agenda-setting—bringing conservation into the mainstream of political discourse and administrative focus.

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4. Institutionalization of Conservation: (The Maharashtra Water Conservation Corporation Act, 2000)

The conservation agenda championed during Naik's tenure was formally institutionalized through the Maharashtra Water Conservation Corporation Act, 2000 (**The Maharashtra Water Conservation Corporation Act, 2000**). The Act established a statutory body responsible for planning, financing, and implementing water conservation and watershed development projects across the state . Key objectives included the development of small and medium irrigation facilities, construction of recharge structures, and coordination with employment programs. Although the legislation was enacted after Naik's term, its conceptual origins are frequently traced to the conservation priorities he articulated, underscoring his catalytic role in shaping long-term policy direction.

5. Assessing Impact: Watershed Development and Employment

Empirical evaluations provide important insights into the outcomes of Maharashtra's conservation-oriented initiatives. (**Kerr, 2002**) found that watershed development projects improved groundwater availability, reduced soil erosion, and enhanced agricultural incomes, though benefits varied across regions and social groups. Studies of the EGS further reveal that soil and water conservation works consistently accounted for a large share of expenditures, reinforcing the linkage between rural employment and ecological sustainability (**Bagchee, 1984; Gaiha, 2003**). At the same time, researchers have identified persistent challenges, including uneven benefit distribution and inadequate maintenance of structures.

6. Evolution of Maharashtra's Water Policy

Maharashtra's water policy has gradually evolved into a comprehensive framework that integrates legislation, environmental stewardship, and community participation. The MWCC Act placed watershed development at the core of the state water strategy, particularly for drought-prone rural

areas (**The Maharashtra Water Conservation Corporation Act, 2000**). Evidence suggests that these initiatives have improved soil health, enhanced biodiversity, and contributed to poverty alleviation (**Kerr, 2002**). The broader policy emphasis on conservation has also been recognized in public discourse (Hindustan Times, 2016).

7. Groundwater Governance and Employment Linkages

Groundwater management remains a critical concern due to increasing extraction pressures for agricultural and domestic use. GSDA's role in monitoring aquifers has been particularly significant in drought-affected regions. The integration of groundwater management with employment programs such as the EGS has been highlighted as an innovative strategy for strengthening rural resilience, if implementation is supported by community participation and administrative capacity (**Bagchee, 1984; Gaiha, 2003**).

8. Community Participation and Institutional Learning

Watershed development programs in Maharashtra increasingly emphasize community involvement and capacity building as prerequisites for sustainability (**Joy, 2004**). While institutional learning has led to notable successes, challenges related to equity, coordination, and integrated planning persist (**Kale, 2002**). The Maharashtra experience thus offers valuable lessons for water-scarce regions elsewhere in India.

9. Leadership, Memory, and Policy Continuity

Groundwater depletion and climate variability continue to pose complex governance challenges. In this context, the leadership of Sudhakarrao Naik is remembered less for specific policy instruments and more for redefining conservation as a political and administrative priority (**ThePrint, 2018**). His emphasis on public awareness and community stewardship contributed to a broader cultural shift toward conservation.

10. Conclusion and Critical Reflection

Although Sudhakar Rao Naik's tenure as Chief Minister was short, his influence on Maharashtra's water governance is evident in the institutional and policy developments that followed. The limited availability of program-specific documentation necessitates caution in attributing outcomes to individual leadership alone. Nevertheless, Naik's agenda-setting role, translating technical conservation knowledge into political visibility represents a significant contribution.

Overall, Maharashtra's experience illustrates that sustainable water governance emerges from the interaction of leadership, institutional frameworks, community participation, and long-term policy continuity. Naik's legacy lies not in isolated initiatives but in embedding water conservation within the state's governance imagination.

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