

Mekedatu project: Need for riparian justice



V. Jeevakumar, advocate and farmers' rights activist. For contact: vjeeva63@gmail.com

A year that has to be celebrated with much fanfare and fervour is now looked forward to on a note of sadness and confusion on the Cauvery riverbanks.

Way back in 1924, an agreement was made between the Madras Presidency and the Mysore princely state for constructing the Mettur dam.

The main function of rivers is to keep the environment cool, But the Cauvery has been travelling amid fiery outbursts. What are the reasons for it?

History of Cauvery

The origin of the Cauvery is Coorg Province which was annexed to Karnataka only in 1956. Before the annexation, Mysore spoke vehemently against Coorg's use of the Cauvery water. After the

reorganization of states, Karnataka's dispute with Tamil Nadu intensified. If Tamil Nadu's use of Cauvery water is about 2000 years old, Karnataka started using the water for irrigation only after 1800s, according to the recorded history. During the period of monarchy, small irrigational schemes were drawn up. In the period of 1831-81 the British rule was established in Mysore. It was only in 1881 that the Whites struck a peace deal with Divans and then the monarchy was restored.

When Mysore expanded the irrigational space, the lower riparian Madras Presidency was affected. The bilateral talks were held in Udthagamandalam in 1890 where an agreement was signed mandating that Mysore should not any longer expand its irrigational area. In 1900 Madras Presidency consented to the proposal for building a hydel power project at Kolar Gold Fields. Even then Mysore government did not put forward a new proposal for irrigational schemes.

In 1910 Mysore formulated Kannambadi dam project, triggering a dispute between the two regions. Consequently, the first Cauvery tribunal was set up in 1913, which delivered a verdict favourable to the Mysore government in 1914. Challenging this verdict, the Madras Presidency preferred an appeal before the Indian government's secretary in London and attained a partial success.

In 1924 yet another agreement was clinched. This was the starting point of the Mettur dam about which there is an interesting anecdote. Then the Mettur dam's irrigational region was envisaged not only as the composite Thanjavur and Tiruchi districts but also the areas belonging to the Bhavani river. However, the plains irrigation formed through Grand Anaikut (Kallanai) built by Chozha emperor Karikalan caught the attention of British engineers such as Thomas Higham and W. M. Ellis. As a result, the Cauvery was made a river flowing towards the Poompuhar sea.

Appeals from both sides

For the third consecutive time, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K.Stalin opened the Mettur dam on June 12. Former Chief Minister Jayalalithaa had already attained this distinction (1991-92, 1992-93 and 1993-94).

However, this year is unlike the last one. In 2022-23 the Mettur dam was brimming with water consecutively for 340 days. But this year, after June 18, the Mettur dam level witnessed a fall. The irrigational areas of Cauvery, Vennar and GA canal get only a quarter of water.

Now the Karnataka government has started saying that it will not release to Tamil Nadu the monthly quantity of water fixed after a long-drawn-out dispute arbitrated by the Cauvery tribunal and the Supreme Court. The letters shot off by both state governments keep piling up in Delhi. The leaders of both states are camping in the Capital with their own appeals. The Union Jal Sakthi Ministry and the Cauvery Management Board are involved in the arbitration exercise, keeping fingers crossed.

For the past three years, the kuruvai cultivation has touched a few milestones in Tamil Nadu. For instance, in Thanjavur district alone, the cultivation area expanded to 94,793 acres in 2019-20, 1,44,370 acres in 2020-21 and 1,66,135 in 2022-23.

Now the kuruvai cultivation in Tamil Nadu faces the sword of Damocles over its head. The voices pleading water scarcity are heard from Karnataka. The list of the quantities of water to be shared when water is in excess, when it is sufficient and when it is in deficit has been finalized by the tribunal and the court. But Karnataka argues adamantly that it will release water only when it has excess water.

It is Karnataka' stance that it will discharge water to Tamil Nadu only when all of its dams are overflowing thanks to heavy rains. Hence it refuses to comply with the court order on the amount of water to be shared during kuruvai, samba and thaladi periods. Karnataka takes the Tamil Nadu farmers for a ride, releasing

within six months the yearly quantity of 18 tmc according to its own whims and fancies.

Perennial cup of plenty turns a begging bowl

Geographically Makedatu is an area situated on the Tamil Nadu-Karnataka border. So, from the Makedatu dam, Karnataka cannot get new irrigational facility. However, it has created some fictional needs.

At the same time, Karnataka complains that Tamil Nadu is implementing the second Hogenakkal combined drinking water scheme. This place comes under Biligundlu, an inter-state border village which is home to a water measuring station. It is an individual right or option to store

water in cans, pots and vessels in his/her house. So, Karnataka need not cry foul over Hogenakkal scheme on the Tamil Nadu border.

But it is miserable that both union government and Cauvery Management Board look the other way over the Makedatu issue.

The UN has voiced grave concern over food security in jeopardy owing to the problems of the Kakhovka dam built across the Dnipro river in Ukraine. The same kind of concern may arise in future over Makedatu.

The Tamil Nadu government which is quite active with kuruvai special package scheme assistance announcements, is lethargic in getting the state's due quantity of water from Karnataka.

If it is true that both DMK and Congress ruling Tamil Nadu and Karnataka respectively are set to enter into the mega anti-BJP alliance to be stitched together by opposition parties, the DMK should pressure its electoral ally Congress to relax its rigidity and show the bond of fraternity by respecting Tamil Nadu's rights in connection to the Makedatu dam issue.

Now nurseries and planted fields are drying up in Tamil Nadu. The state water resource officials went to Delhi in July to demand release of water due for June. Even then they did not get properly accurate assurance.

For the past three months, the kuruvai crop insurance scheme has become something like fishing in the mirage.

Meanwhile red-tapism has been plaguing the case filed by the Tamil Nadu government in the Supreme Court on November 11, 2018, seeking a stay on the Mokedatu dam construction. Despite the possibility of getting justice, the Tamil Nadu government is yet to knock at the doors of the National Green Tribunal.

It is a bitter ground reality that a perennial cup of plenty is set to change into a begging bowl. This threat stares blankly in the face of the Cauvery riverbed.

Translated by V. Mariappan.