# MULLAPERIYAR: GENESIS OF A DISPUTE

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The colonial-era Mullaperiyar dam has again become a source of friction between Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Though the original dispute was over the appropriateness of the dam's water level, Kerala, already reeling under severe adverse impact of floods, sprang a surprise by accusing Tamil Nadu of having carried out "sudden releases" of water. This, Kerala says, forced it to discharge more water from the downstream Idukki reservoir, about 40 km away from Mullaperiyar, which has been cited as one of the causes for the "deluge". In Kerala's assessment, Tamil Nadu should have heeded its request immediately and lowered the water level in Mullaperiyar to 139 ft to moderate the floods.

# 'Far less'

Tamil Nadu, on its part, has defended its position and stated that, well before shutters of the Mullaperiyar were opened in the early hours of Independence Day (August 15), excess water was being discharged through the flood gates of several dams in Kerala.

Besides, compared to about 36 thousand million cubic feet (tmc) of water released from the Idukki and Idamalayar dams in the Periyar basin from August 14-19, the amount of water released from Mullaperiyar at the same time was hardly 6.65 tmc, which was "far less" than the quantities of water that flowed from the other two dams. Mullaperiyar, the safety of which was confirmed by experts on several occasions, had enough provision to handle flood flows: this is how Tamil Nadu justified its stand, and denied the charge made by its neighbour.

The history of the Mullaperiyar issue goes back a long way: the dam, located in the Idukki district of Kerala, is operated and maintained by Tamil Nadu to meet the drinking water and irrigation requirements of five of its southern districts. As a sequel to an agreement signed between the then Travancore and Madras governments in October 1886, about 8,000 acres was leased by the former to the latter for the dam project. The dam was built over the period from 1887 to 1895.

# **Troubles begin**

Everything went smoothly for nearly 80 years. But, in 1979, a row erupted over the safety of the dam. Consequently, in November 1979, a tripartite meeting chaired by the then head of the Central Water Commission, K.C. Thomas, decided that water level had to be brought down from the full reservoir level of 152 ft to 136 ft, in order to enable Tamil Nadu to carry out dam strengthening work. By mid-1990, Tamil Nadu started demanding restoration of the water level in the Mullaperiyar as it had completed the task assigned to it. When no consensus was reached through negotiations, the Supreme Court was approached. In two separate judgements, in 2006 and 2014, the apex court held that the water level be raised to 142 ft.

It is against this background that the latest controversy has to be viewed. An element of uneasiness has entered the ties between Tamil Nadu and Kerala on the subject of water.

The equation between the two States is far more complex than that of Tamil Nadu with Karnataka. With Kerala, Tamil Nadu has issues over several river projects, such as Parambikulam-Aliyar, Siruvani of the Bhavani sub-basin, Neyyar, and the proposal to link the Pamba and Achankovil rivers of Kerala with Vaippar of Tamil Nadu. But, in the case of

Karnataka, Cauvery is the only river at issue.

As for events concerning the present Kerala floods, there has been criticism in certain quarters that the authorities in the State delayed the release of surplus water until the end.

Officials of Tamil Nadu, too, are of the view that it was their counterpart that had "mismanaged" the release of water from its reservoirs, and only a "negligible amount" of water flowed from the Mullaperiyar to Kerala.

# A strong monsoon

What is being overlooked is that Kerala, after a gap of five years, is experiencing a bountiful southwest monsoon (June-September). In fact, between 2010 and 2017, there was only one excess monsoon — in 2013. There were three deficit years (2012, 2015 and 2016), while the remaining four years had a 'normal monsoon'. Even in the 'normal' years, two years recorded a negative value of departure for rainfall. So, Kerala's water managers were under enormous pressure to store as much water as possible. This could have possibly come in the way of their judgement in commencing the release of water even at the beginning of August, when the storage in two important dams — Idukki and Idamalayar — was a little more than 90% of their capacity. According to an August 19 report by the Meteorological Department, in all of 35-odd major reservoirs in Kerala, storage was close to the full reservoir level (FRL) by the end of July, and there was no buffer storage left to accommodate the heavy inflows from August 10.

# Tendency to store

The tendency to store water to almost the full level is becoming the norm among water managers across States. In mid-July, Karnataka, too, started releasing surplus waters from the Kabini and Krishnaraja Sagar dams on the Cauvery system only when it knew that it could not hold any more water. The Mettur dam in Salem district of Tamil Nadu is big enough to accommodate all the flood flows. For the last one month, Mettur, too, has been releasing excess water.

In December 2015, Tamil Nadu faced criticism for delaying the release of surplus water from the Chembarampakkam tank, causing floods in Chennai.

In the current battle over Mullaperiyar, the Supreme Court has come Kerala's rescue by telling Tamil Nadu to keep the water level in the dam at 139 ft till August end.

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