

## Not enough water in stressed Cauvery to fulfill SC verdict

At the meeting point of a major tributary of the Cauvery with the Bay of Bengal in the beautiful region of Nagapattinam in the southern tip of the Tamil Nadu delta lies a village that once grew a range of crops on its farms, including coconuts. The crops were fed by the river which brought mineral-rich sediments in its wake before it met the sea. But all that the harangued community in Mudaliyappan Kandi village, on the banks of the Harischandra river, is left with today are shrimp ponds on large tracts of land that look devastatingly barren. Last year, around this time, I watched them deal with a terrible drought. They struggled for drinking water, every day.

Mudaliyappan Kandi is one among scores of villages in the Cauvery Delta on the Tamil Nadu coast that deals with the distress of temporary drought – fresh drinking water is available once a week, or fortnight. What is far more problematic is the incursion by the sea which has turned their lands saline, as a result of which big shrimp companies have come knocking at farmers' doors, pushing them to sell. The want to convert those lands into shrimp farms – shrimp is becoming a much sought-after ingredient in city menus and returns were high.

Mudaliyappan Kandi villagers sold their lands for paltry sums. With the land gone, the youth migrated to the cities for work. Only the old were left in the villages and they lived off the remittances sent by their children. Across the coastline, meanwhile, the green cover had vanished.

Cut to Friday's Supreme Court verdict on the long-standing [Cauvery dispute](#) between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, which reduced Tamil Nadu's share by nearly 15 thousand million cubic (TMC) feet and increased that of Karnataka by as much.

Truth is that a major take-away of the order – the setting up of a Cauvery Management Board – might ensure a judicious use of water, but it may not alter the man-made and new climatic realities that have set in the Cauvery delta.

As it is, Karnataka had been finding it difficult to ensure the mandatory release of water for Tamil Nadu because of successive years of drought, growing water demands, and significantly depleted base river flows.

But the fact that the court verdict doesn't even take into account the Cauvery delta's existential crisis or suggest remedies on how to ensure the equitable distribution of water is a big blow to the people living on the delta.

It's been decades, villagers say, since they have seen the fresh waters of the Cauvery flow into the ocean. In fact, the ocean has now gushed into the dry bed to meet the river. All along the Cauvery and her major tributaries, the ground water table is falling alarmingly. Droughts and flash floods have wrecked the traditional water distribution systems. Across the delta, you sense the rising nervousness as the Cauvery dries up.

Last year, retired professor of the Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS) S Janakarajan said that the Cauvery delta, widely regarded as the granary of Tamil Nadu, had shrunk by over 20 per cent, with cultivable lands deteriorating into waste lands thirteen-fold.

In his study, titled 'Cauvery Delta: Wastelands, Food Security and Livelihood Resilience', Janakarajan said that more and more cultivable agricultural land was coming under sea water and the soil was turning saline. Due to sea water ingress, there had been a substantial rise in shrimp farming along the coast, which was detrimental to agricultural practice – something I had found in Nagapattinam. Sediment deposit had reduced by as much as 80 per cent over the last

century.

Problem is, the Supreme Court's verdict on the Cauvery dispute rests on favourable conditions – that is, if the rains don't fail, the river flows remain robust, the availability of water fits presumptive calculations, i.e. cumulative 750-plus TMC, and if the people allow the waters to flow downstream.

But in the upper catchment areas of Karnataka, new dams and barrages have been built so as to irrigate arid fields – which means that the downstream Cauvery delta in Tamil Nadu hardly gets as much water as it used to.

In 2016-17, other factors kicked in. The rains failed miserably in both the upper and lower catchments; feeding tributaries dried up; water availability tanked; domestic, commercial and agricultural demands far exceeded the availability of water in the entire Cauvery journey.

Truth is, since the 1970s, no one has made any calculations on the actual water flow in the Cauvery or her tributaries, or any other major perennial river in India. We are still going by the presumptions of data from fifty years ago.

Of course, much has changed. New anthropogenic factors clubbed with climatic aberrations means that the people living on the Delta are in the middle of a prolonged water crisis. It is clear that the apex court verdict has not factored in the newer ground realities. But it has suggested to Tamil Nadu that it should exploit its already over-exploited ground water at the tail end of the river.

On the other hand, the Supreme Court doesn't suggest the much-needed course correction in national river management. States have been trying to manage parts of rivers based on their political economies. The rivers have, in the process, suffered ecologically. There is not a single river in India that is not in a crisis.

The Cauvery draws water in the upper tracts from heavy rains in the Western Ghats from the dependable south-west monsoon. The delta gets the uncertain north-east or the receding monsoonal rains.

Until the 1950s, the river brought excess waters into the Delta during the south-west monsoon. From October to November, the region harvested in its tanks and reservoirs the rainwater that it got in the receding monsoon. But over the last few decades, the Cauvery delta has had to face a double whammy: Karnataka's impounding of water in the upper regions has restricted the flow of waters from the south-west monsoon, while climatic aberrations impact north-east monsoon rains.

The overall result has been that the several tributaries, branch-canal and innumerable channels that form a complex web of distribution in the delta, satiating 15 lakh hectares of farm land and providing drinking water to several small and big towns, are all falling silent. The system is fast running out of water.

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