

Cauvery dispute: Don't allow water wars to fester

The Supreme Court on Tuesday indicated that it would deliver within four weeks its verdict on the decades- old Cauvery water dispute between the riparian states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, saying enough confusion has been created on it for over two decades. In September, the court's order directing Karnataka to release water to Tamil Nadu saw violence across the state. Those few days showed how inflammable the issue could be, especially if it is in short supply. Over the years, Cauvery-related violence has occurred especially when the monsoon fails. The lack of an amicable settlement has allowed the dispute to fester and be associated with regional pride. The Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal was set up on June 2, 1990; 27 years later, the matter is yet to be resolved. Such delay is unacceptable.

The apex court's decision comes at an interesting time. With impending elections, Karnataka is seeing brisk political action and the verdict is likely to be a topic of debate. Tamil Nadu, with a feeble government in place, is in political turmoil. A verdict not in Tamil Nadu's favour would further affect the volatile political scenario. Further, Tamil film actor Rajinikanth, a Maratha born in Karnataka, has thrown his hat into Tamil Nadu's political arena now. No prizes for guessing what he'd have to say in four weeks.

The Cauvery dispute is just one of the many 'water wars' across India. The strike observed in northern Karnataka on December 27 was the latest in the ongoing dispute between Karnataka and Goa over sharing water from Mahadayi river. Chhattisgarh and Odisha are at loggerheads over Mahanadi; Andhra Pradesh and Telangana over Krishna and Godavari; Punjab, Haryana and Delhi over the Sutlej-Yamuna canal; and Tamil Nadu and Kerala over the Mullaiperiyar dam.

All these point to the need for a national tribunal to address water disputes between states in a time-bound manner. The introduction of the Inter-State River Water Disputes (Amendment) Bill, 2017, is a move in this direction.

The need for such a national-level body is immediate because the effects of climate change and related water stress are set to increase in the years to come. According to EJOLT, a global project that catalogues and analyses ecological distribution conflicts, a high number of conflicts in India are caused by ecological disputes and the scarcity of basic resources such as water and forests.

This move by the apex court will be welcomed by many fed up with the protracted wrangling over the issue, and the violence and animosity that has led to between the two states.

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