

THE DAM OF CONTENTION

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The Mullaperiyar dam located in the highland Idukki district of Kerala bordering Southern Tamil Nadu has already become a stormy issue between these two southernmost States. The issue as such is not new at all. The dam itself is more than 110 years old which means the technology behind the construction of the dam, chronologically speaking, is archaic. The controversies concerning the height of the dam (which decides the storage capacity) had erupted now and again and the case had gone up to the highest court. The Supreme Court ruled that the dam is safe enough to increase the height by six feet but in a subsequent ruling asked the two States to settle the differences through discussions in an amicable manner. It is in this background that strong demands are aired by all the political parties in Tamil Nadu that Kerala must abide by the earlier Supreme Court ruling about increasing the height of the dam. The plea of the Kerala government all through was that raising the height of this dam will be a major security threat to the lives and property of the people in three heavily populated districts of the State.

The situation has now reached the stage of road and rail blockades of the routes leading to Kerala from Tamil Nadu. Even while discussions are slated in the near future between the two States under the mediation of the central government in Delhi the tones of all the political parties in Tamil Nadu have become more and more acrimonious and strident, giving a not very congenial atmosphere for amicable settlement of the issue.

Interesting side information to this water dispute is that Tamil Nadu is now embroiled in water disputes with all the three neighbors—Kerala, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh with the Cauvery dispute with Karnataka remaining an ever ticking bomb. This dispute had already led to several riots in the two States. Being a water scarce State and its agriculture being crucially dependent on irrigation water and vast areas being drought prone and rain shadow ones it is easy enough to understand how and why the water issue is a highly emotional issue in Tamil Nadu. The common man in Tamil Nadu firmly believes that Kerala is a water and electricity surplus State and when they are objecting to increasing dam height they are deliberately obstructing the progress of Tamil Nadu and Tamils. The veracity of this belief is certainly subject to serious contention. That Tamil Nadu needs more water is indisputable but how this water can be obtained is the pertinent question.

It is certainly possible that Kerala is underutilizing its water resources and much of this precious resource may be going waste. But so is the case with Tamil Nadu and all other States in the country. Water management in the entire subcontinent is shabby and unscientific and this is exemplified by the perennial droughts and floods.

Kerala agriculture has over a period of the last several decades, shifted its focus from food production to cash crops and it is now crucially dependent on the neighboring States and the central pool for the day to day food requirements. Kerala is particularly dependent on Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra for staples as well as vegetables and meat. It is probably this dependency that made the political parties of Tamil Nadu call for blockade of roads. There is no doubt that if such a blockade is sustained, Kerala will witness massive price rises of essential commodities like vegetables, rice and meat and even absolute scarcity may result. But to see a dam dispute from this angle is a one-sided approach which can only be characterized as belonging to a brand of competitive politicking which is probably the result of the existing political party dynamics of the State.

If Kerala is dependent on Tamil Nadu for a significant part of its food requirement the Tamil Nadu farmers and farm workers are equally dependent on the Kerala market as a dependable and sure outlet for their farm products. If the Kerala workers are looking at the Gulf countries for lucrative employment, a large number of Tamil workers, especially from the border districts, are looking to Kerala as their Gulf. The plantation sector in Idukki is marked by almost 100% Tamil migrant workers. The construction sector also is heavily loaded with Tamil workers. The main reason for such massive migrations is the differential wage rates, the same as between the Gulf countries and Kerala. This is the ground level situation devoid of political rhetoric.

The Tamil Nadu angle is a legalistic and populist angle, the only anchor of which is the earlier Supreme Court judgment based on some sort of an "expert report". The Kerala angle is based on a conjectural conclusion on the safety of an old dam, but if both the States stick to their positions it is very clear that there is no point in discussing the issue. How expert was the "experts report" is something that can be re-examined. This is especially so because it has been proved within the last one decade that the Idukki mountain zone is a seismically unstable plate. Within the last ten years two series of quakes have occurred in the region. Keeping in view this single factor the advisability of large dams in the region has to be re-examined. The argument from the Kerala side that instead of the 110 years old present one a new dam can be constructed is not really valid in the long run. What is really needed is the construction of several small dams in full agreement with Tamil Nadu on the share of water to each partner. There is absolutely no reason why Kerala should not share water with the immediate neighbor who is contributing a significant share of the food needs of the State.

River water disputes are there in the entire sub-continent. There are disputes between India and Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, and in the not so distant future they are bound to erupt between India and China because the major rivers passing through the Indo-Gangetic plain originate in Tibet, now part of China. There are numerous disputes between States within the country out of which the Cauvery dispute in peninsular India and the Sutlej-Beas dispute in northwestern India are very prominent. Relatively speaking the Mullaperiyar is a small dispute and can be easily solved. What the resolution

needs in the first place is a comprehensive study of the present state of the dam itself. This by no means should be an impressionistic study but a proper scientific study. Once the study is done and discussed at all possible levels appropriate decisions can be made and implemented. This is not such a big task and there is little real space for raking up a ruckus. A ruckus may serve the sectarian interests of political parties in both the States but will only negatively serve the interests of the peoples of both the States.

Actually, there is a real political angle too, and this refers to the federal rights of States to decide on matters that pertain to them alone. Why the centre has to come and preside over as arbitrator in a dispute that concerns only Kerala and Tamil Nadu is inexplicable. Who will be the gainers if bad blood is created between two neighbors who have very, very long historical, cultural, linguistic and geographic ties, is anybody's guess. Who gained from the Punjab tangle on river waters is well known. It is advocates of unitary India that politically gained there. It will be sad if in the interests of short term political gains the actors concerned lose sight of this vital political implication.