

# Cauveri on Fire

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Once again, after a gap of 5 years, River Cauveri, the life line of Karnataka is on fire, thanks to the orders of the Cauveri Water Dispute Tribunal, which delivered its final verdict after 16 years of long wait, on the 5th of February 2007. The long wait of the farmers of Karnataka and Tamilnadu (TN), has not seen a fruitful outcome as the farming community and people who indirectly depend on agriculture from Karnataka are up in arms against the tribunal award and also against the Union government. For one week entire southern Karnataka was on fire, as protagonists of Kannada and farmers associations raised a hue and cry over the injustice meted out to Karnataka in the final orders. The fact that the orders are favorable to TN and the TN ruling party being a partner in the UPA government at the centre, has added fuel to fire, casting doubts on the role of central government in the final outcome. The bundh observed on 12th of February throughout the state is a testimony to the fact that the people of Karnataka are not going to rest, unless justice is done.

River Cauveri has been considered a life line of Karnataka, as it is the major river of the state not only for irrigation but also for drinking water purposes. More than its intrinsic value, the river Cauveri has more cultural and emotional values for the people of Karnataka, which has been duly nurtured and kept alive by protagonists of Kannada over the years. Without going into the rights or wrongs of these sentiments, one can say that there is no writer, poet, dramatist in Kannada literature, who is not influenced by the aura of river Cauveri.

The river Cauveri takes its birth in the lush and hilly location of Coorg district and travels along three states for 802 km, covering the distance of 381 km in Karnataka, 357 km in TN and 64 km in Kerala. It has several tributaries like Hemavathi, Kabini, Bhavani, Amaravathi, Kapila, Shimsha, Suvarnamukhi, Arkavathi and 10 others. Apart from Cauveri Karnataka has seven other rivers viz, Krishna, Godavari, Mahadevi, Netravathi, Pennar and Palar rivers. Out of a geographical area of 1, 91, 791 sq.kms, i.e., 190, 49,836 hectares of land, Karnataka has 106, 08,912 hectares of agricultural lands and out of which 80, 49,315 hectares are irrigated and the rest rain fed. The total area in the Cauveri river basin is 87,900 sq.km out of which Karnataka has 36, 240 sq.km; TN has 48,581 sq.km. Kerala 2930 sq.km. and Pondichery 149 sq.km.

One aspect glossed over by many in Karnataka is the depleting rainfall in Coorg, where the river Cauveri originates and flows for 80 km. In Coorg a large tract of forest lands called BANE forests are made available for cultivation. 2.74 lacs acres of these forests are allowed to be cultivated, without felling the trees and without damaging the forest wealth. But over the years the forest cover of the locality has come down by more than 50 thousand acres, as indiscriminate felling of trees has become a norm to grow Coffee, Rubber, Pepper and other commercial crops, in the early 50's the flow of water from Coorg river basin was 211 tmcft, which has come down to 149 tmcft by 1990's. This depleted forest cover and rainfall has dealt a heavy blow to the irrigation potential of all the four riparian states, but ignored by the authorities.

The fact that Southern Karnataka, the districts of Mysore, Mandya, Hassan, Tumkur and Chamaraja-nagar depend solely on river Cauveri for irrigation and also drinking water cannot be glossed over apart from the fact that the growing urban population in Mysore, Mandya, and Bangalore requires more water for drinking purposes, for which Cauveri is the only source. The average rainfall of the state is

estimated at 1138 mm in 55 rain days and two thirds of the area receives rain less than 850 mm. The total water availability of Karnataka from its 7 major rivers is 3475 tmcft out of which 2396 tmcft is available for usage, 1695 tmcft being for agriculture.

One of the ironies facing the farmers and the rest of Cauveri basin is that people who are nearer to the river basin are deprived of Cauveri water. The classic example is Coorg district itself, where river Cauveri begins its journey. While constructing the KRS dam, several villages were submerged and one such was Kannambadi village and in popular language the dam is called Kannam-badi dam. The people of new Kannambadi village, those displaced at the time of dam construction, are not getting a drop of Cauveri water. In K D Kote, where Kabini reservoir supplies water for irrigation, a part of the taluk does not receive the river water. Such stories galore and there are some animosity between the people of Mandya, Mysore and Bangalore over the supply of water.

## **BACKGROUND**

The history of Cauveri dispute dates back to 1807, 2 centuries to be precise. During the British rule, Karnataka was under Madras presidency and any irrigation project taken up by the state was to obtain permission from the former. But at the same time any irrigation works under Madras presidency went on unhindered. The Mysore Kings interested in taking up irrigation works in 1807, faced many obstacles from the erstwhile British authorities but still continued with irrigation projects in 1899 and 1904. It is said that Chicka-devaraja Odeyar had built a check dam in late 17th century across river Cauveri which was washed away by floods. Later Kantirava Narasaraja Odeyar built Bangaru canal in the early 18th century, which still exists.

It was in 1891 an agreement was arrived at between the two provinces about the usage of water, according to which Mysore state was not supposed to take up any irrigation project without a prior application to the Madras presidency. It was in this background that the Dewan of Mysore, applied for irrigation facilities on 10th of June 1890, which was responded after 2 years, which eventually led to the 1892 agreement between the two states, which, it is said, favored TN more than Mysore, as many restrictions were placed for Karnataka to implement its irrigation projects. In the course of this tussle, the Mysore rulers went to Government of India demanding justice in its irrigation projects and got decisions in its favor. It was here that M Vishweshwariah, who was the Chief Engineer at that time, decided to build a dam across river Cauveri, for increasing irrigation potential of Mysore state. This move was challenged by Madras in 1910 and finally the matter was referred to a tribunal. In the course of time the Government of India passed orders in favor of Mysore in 1914 and approved the dam in 1917, which was duly contested by Madras, which ultimately led to the historic 1924 agreement.

The 1924 agreement, otherwise considered a sacred document by the two states for more than 8 decades, was nothing but an agreement on sharing of water between the two states. While under the agreement Karnataka was allowed to build a dam across river Cauveri at Kannambadi, impounding 44.8 tmcft of water and TN was to have dams at Mettur impounding 93.5 tmcft of water. Malabar, then a part of Madras presidency, was later appended to Kerala and which became a part of the dispute since then. The agreement was valid for 50 years and during this period Mysore state was supposed to obtain consent from Madras for any irrigation project across river Cauveri.

It was in the early 70s the real dispute arose between the two states and it took chauvinistic course in both the states. The river water dispute confined to the farming community on both sides was more or less appropriated by the linguistic groups and soon sentiments took the center stage. The divine status accorded to rivers in the Hindu culture came in handy for these linguistic groups to arouse sentiments around the same. Several appeals by the government of Karnataka to TN, with regard to its various irrigation projects, culminated in an agreement charted out by the central government in the year 1976, basing mainly on the findings of a fact finding committee of 1972. According to this agreement the 671 tmcft of water available in the Cauveri basin was to be shared by three states as under:

Karnataka 177 tmcft, TN 489 tmcft, and Kerala 5 tmcft.

It was also stipulated that the first two states should, during the next 15 years, save 25 and 100 tmcft of water, which should be shared between the three states in the ratio of 87, 4 and 34 tmcft respectively. But this agreement was rejected in the parliament., as TN was under President Rule at that time. Further discussions between the two states, were fruitless, as political egos occupied the center stage.

The TN government's request, in 1986, for establishing a tribunal under inter-state water disputes act (ISWD Act) was rejected by the Central Government and meanwhile the TN government started pressurizing the government of Karnataka to release water, by filing a petition in the Supreme Court and a tribunal was formed in 1990.

In 1991 the government of TN filed a petition before the tribunal, pleading for instructions to Karnataka to release a minimum quantity of water every year, which was rejected by the tribunal, but later it was considered on the orders of Supreme Court. The tribunal arrived at a formula, studying the average rain pattern during the period 1980-90 and passed its orders instructing Karnataka to release 205 tmcft of water every year. Though the government opposed the verdict and appealed to the Supreme Court, the latter upheld the tribunal's order, making it mandatory for Karnataka to release 205 tmcft of water to TN, except in distress situations.

It was this interim order of the tribunal that became the focal point of animosity between the two states, and the chauvinist groups in Karnataka as well as in TN, was successful in giving it a sub-nationalist color. Karnataka saw its worst phase of anti-Tamil riots in the state with the whole of southern Karnataka burning and local Tamils were targeted and several were killed in the mayhem. The same problem arose in 2002 when the pro-Kannada groups and farmers were on the streets for more than 40 days opposing release of water to TN. From then on it was a long wait for the final verdict of the tribunal. Meanwhile due to copious rains in the Cauveri basin, no dispute arose in the intervening years.

### **THE AWARD AND ITS EFFECTS**

In Karnataka the very formation of the Tribunal is viewed as pressure politics of TN. The fact that the tribunal was formed by V P Singh government in 1990, when it was dependant on DMK for its survival, might be the reason for such formulations. With this background even the present final verdict of the tribunal is being viewed as pro-TN and the Union Government is accused of having succumbed to the pressure tactics of TN politics.

Whatever be the nuances of petty politics, that the present verdict of the tribunal has not satisfied the people of Karnataka has been established by the overwhelming support for the agitation from across the state. The award says that Karnataka should

release a minimum of 192 tmcft of water every year to TN and out of 740 tmcft of available water, the distribution is 419 is for TN, 270 for Karnataka, 30 to Kerala and 7 to Pondichery. The total availability is calculated on 50% dependability which means to say that every second year so much water would be available and other year will be one of distress or surplus.

Karnataka is supposed to release 192 tmcft from Biligundu which means another 25 tmcft is added to the quantum bringing it to 217 tmcft, which is more than the interim order of 205 tmcft. The tribunal has also quantified the monthly release of water starting from June and farmers in Karnataka feel aggrieved over release of water in summer and pre- monsoon months as per the tribunal's award (Table 1).

Table 1

Comparison of monthly schedule for water release from Karnataka to Tamilnadu as per Tribunal award

Month	Interim Order (tmcft)	Final order (tmcft)
June	10.16	10.0
July	42.76	34.0
August	54.72	50.0
September	29.36	40.0
October	30.17	22.0
November	16.05	15.0
December	10.37	08.0
January	02.51	03.0
February	02.17	02.5
March	02.40	02.5
April	02.32	02.5
May	02.01	02.5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>205.00</b>	<b>192.00</b>

The other grievance is the tribunal has considered the irrigated area of Karnataka at 18.85 lac acres, where as it is around 24 lac acres in the Cauveri basin. Though the restrictions on increase in irrigated area are lifted and the state can proceed with further irrigation in future as per the present award, it is argued by experts that 270 tmcft of water is insufficient for irrigation and drinking water supply to Mysore, Bangalore, Mandya and other towns. The minimum requirement of the state works out to be 405 tmcft, which Karnataka had demanded.

Apart from expanding the irrigation potential, Karnataka would suffer severe hindrance in taking up new projects across river Kabini and Hemavathi. The long cherished dream of the farmers of the Kabini river basin, who were expecting a 1233 crore life irrigation project supposed to irrigate 1.23 lac hectares of land utilizing 65 tmcft of Cauveri water, would be doomed as an effect of this award. This would also affect progress of several minor irrigation projects like the Kabini second stage, Lokapavani and Purigali lift irrigation projects using 25 tmcft of water irrigating more than 3 lac acres. "As the tribunal award has allocated 270 tmcft of water against the state's demand of 407 tmcft, no water would be available for this project."

The tribunal has allegedly erred in considering the available ground-water level in TN, which the state has declared as 150 tmcft. The tribunal has considered only 45

tmcft. The ground-water level of the state is 485 tmcft and 72 taluks suffer from shortage of ground-water, whereas 43 taluks are under-utilizing the available groundwater. 23 taluks are utilizing more than their requirement. In the 72 taluks facing shortage of groundwater, more than 4 lac bore wells are dug irrigating approximately 7.5 lac hectares which in turn have dried up 31 lac open wells. This mismanagement of groundwater is a major cause of worry for the farmers of the state.

In this background the tribunal has failed to consider the realities of ground water availability, especially in the upper riparian states of Karnataka and Kerala. Over 90% of rural and 50% of urban water supply would be depending on the ground water. Severe problems would arise in the summer months when there will be increased water consumption in Bangalore and a depleted supply in the river. Bangalore requires a minimum of 30 tmcft annually for drinking purpose and the present award may create a rift between the farmers of the Cauveri delta and the residents of Bangalore.

### **POLITICS OF IRRIGATION**

Well-known commentator S Guhan has noted, "The Cauvery dispute is somewhat different from other water disputes like the Narmada and Godavari in the sense that Cauvery is already an overdeveloped basin, where the dispute is because of the seeming distress caused due to over-development. It is precisely for this reason that the issues of efficiency, technology, equity and science should be even more relevant for the Cauvery case."

In a sense this is true. The farmers of irrigated belt of Cauveri basin on both sides of the border are facing distress due to many factors like globalization policies of the governments, costly inputs, marketing and support price problems and so on. The crisis in agriculture in the state of Karnataka has reached its zenith with more than ten thousand farmers committing suicide across the state. The crisis has spread to commercial crops like Coffee and Rubber and Coconut. The recent proposed amendments to APMC act and the New agriculture policy of Karnataka has also met with heavy resistance from the farmers and an APMC bundh was observed successfully recently.

The slow pace of completion of irrigation projects has also deprived the farmers the benefits of irrigation. Many projects launched on the Cauveri, Krishna and Tungabhadra Rivers are moving at snail's pace. Though Karnataka has availability of 3475 tmcft of water, the state has utilized only 1695 tmcft and an amount of 14,267 crores are being invested in heavy and small irrigation projects. Large scale corruption, delay in implementation of projects, sub-standard works are the bane of irrigation of the state. While this delay has deprived the farmers of water, it has also escalated the cost of projects taxing the exchequer.

The frustrations of the farmers also arise from the fact that the government has done little to address their grievances. The state government's promise to waive loans availed from co-operative banks, which is yet to materialize may not solve the crisis, as the small and medium peasants are suffering from deep debt trap and lack of marketing facilities. In the northern part of the state, most of the irrigated lands have been usurped by rich farmers from Andhra Pradesh and many of local landlords have become agricultural labors. The advent of IT sector and SEZs have also dented the confidence of the farmers, as large tracts of agricultural lands are being acquired by KIADB, for industrial purpose at throwaway prices. The growing real estate market and construction of ring roads around major cities, have grabbed much of the

agricultural lands in and around the Cauveri belt. The cost of one acre of land in Cauveri belt is around 40 lacs and the real estate mafia has started minting money.

The much divided Farmers' association in the state has now made some efforts to unite the farmers across the state and fight unitedly against the onslaught of globalization policies of the state government and the central government. There is a grouse amongst the farming community in other parts of the state that the farmers of Cauveri belt, being rich and powerful, are not responsive to the problems faced by the people of other parts of the state. Even on 12th February when the whole state observed bundh, the farmers of Bidar, Raichur and other Hyderabad Karnataka region did not support the bundh, the reason being that the former did not respond positively when the farmers of Krishna river basin went on agitation over the Almatti issue. Even Udupi and Mangalore did not respond positively to the bundh call.

### **AGITATION**

The agitation over the Tribunal award is widespread this time around compared to 1991 and 2002 but it is more or less peaceful. Fortunately local Tamils were not attacked and as a positive gesture the local Tamil population voluntarily participated in the protests. Though banning Tamil Movies, TV Channels were not welcome measures; the agitation has not turned into communal clash. The statewide bundh observed on 12th February was by and large peaceful. But blocking of roads and rail tracks has created much discomfiture to the public over the past 10 days.

The focal point of agitation lies in quantification of mandatory release of water to TN which is more than the interim order. The interim order had fixed 205 tmcft measured at Mettur whereas the present award has fixed 192 tmcft measured at Biligundlu, which means TN would get an additional 25 tmcft which comes to 217 tmcft. The real dispute arises only in the months of distress, when the monsoon fails.

**Table 2**

Annual releases as reported from Biligundlu and Mettur from 1991

YEAR	BILIGUNDLU (tmcft)	METTUR (tmcft)				
1991-92	340.00	334.96	1992-93	358.61	351.69	1993-94
	230.39	223.37	1994-95	394.00	373.16	1995-96
	195.51	183.09	1996-97	245.75	244.05	1997-98
	277.06	268.05	1998-99	260.40	237.27	1999-2000
	273.68	268.60	2000-2001	319.26	306.20	2001-2002
	189.94	162.74	2002-2003	109.45	94.87	2003-2004
	75.87	65.16	2004-2005	185.55	163.96	2005-2006
	383.91	399.22				

Table 2 shows that since the Interim award was declared, only in 4 water years Karnataka has released less than 192 tmcft water, measured at Biligundlu. This means to say that the whole problem arises when the monsoon fails, and the present award has not suggested any institutional mechanism, except for the CRA, to deal with such situations.

As said earlier, the river Cauveri has more sentimental value in the state of Karnataka and the protagonists of Kannada have always raised their voice against the injustice meted out to Karnataka in the Cauveri water dispute. The rising unemployment, deprivation of job opportunities, rising prices, lack of living space in major cities, large scale presence of outsiders in major cities like Bangalore, Mysore, Hubli, Davangere etc., confiscation of agricultural lands in the name of industrial

development, large scale migration of the rural population to the cities in search of livelihood, economic and social crisis in the rural side, all these factors have created a kind of frustration amongst the youth.

The pro-Kannada organizations, facing severe crisis of identity and survival due to internal rivalry are harping upon this frustration amongst the youth to vent their ire against the establishment, which manifests itself in situations like the present one. The *Karnataka Rakshna Vedike*, which is split into two or three groups have mobilized maximum number of youth and have also resorted to suicide attempts, signature in blood campaign, swarming of Airports and Railway stations and other forms of struggles. It is here that the linguistic chauvinists make their presence felt. These groups have no sympathies for the farming community, as they were nowhere to be seen when the farmers were fighting against the new Agriculture policy and amended APMC act. Never in the past had these groups supported genuine movements of farmers. But the sentimental values of river Cauveri have come in handy for these groups to be more vociferous than the farmers in fighting against the tribunal's award.

This is manifested in the attack on Girish Karnad, a renowned dramatist and a Jnanapita award winner. Mr Karnad's statement that the government of Karnataka, after having agreed to abide by the verdict of the tribunal in 1990, has to accept the verdict and implement it. Though Mr Karnad could have abstained from the statement considering the turbulent atmosphere, his freedom of speech and expression cannot be questioned. But the pro-Kannada activists have hounded him from the day one forcing the government to provide security to the dramatist. Such chauvinistic elements are bringing disrepute to the whole agitation going on in the state, which otherwise can be termed as peaceful and democratic.

But these developments should not be a smoke screen to gloss over the sense of deprivation amongst the farming community, especially those farmers who are awaiting new irrigation projects. The powerful irrigation lobby of the Cauveri belt may hinder the ongoing projects across the state, taking tribunal orders as an excuse. It is this fear which has drawn large number of farmers from Kabini, Kapila and other river basins into the agitation. The slogan of the 70s "Cauveri for Mandya, Kapila for Mysore" which reverberated in this area, when Cauveri water was released to Mysore, may once again crop up in the present context. Of late the people of Coorg also are demanding a share in the Cauveri waters.

With 70 % of the country's population still dependant on agriculture, the capital investment in agricultural activity is falling drastically and whatever the investment made is from the above in the form of Bank loans, which has pushed the farmers to the brink of disaster and debt trap. *More than 100,000 farmers have committed suicide over the past decade* and the governments have done little to solve the crisis. Indeed the crisis is deepening. The entire Cauveri dispute should be viewed from this angle for a lasting solution. ~~████~~