

# Cauvery: Is govt. really concerned?



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The current fasli year (July 2023 – June 2024) is set to end soon, leaving behind unprecedented weird things, miracles, and woes in the Cauvery basin. By the way, fasli means an agricultural year.

In the first week of January, 2024 I happened to see a bovine herd lying supinely on the sands of the Vennar at Kalancheri, a village situated to the east of Thanjavur. Normally buffaloes do not lie down on the wet soil. But the sands of Vennar, a tributary of the Cauvery, were parched in heaps. It is peculiar that ahead of the Pongal festival, the Cauvery presents such a dreary sight. Usually, at least some water flows steadily on the fringes of the river till the middle of February.

**How miserable!**

The Cauvery and its tributaries dried up as the Mettur dam was closed on October 10 itself in this fasli year ahead of its usual closure date of January 28. Water will be required for samba and the subsequent thaladi for three weeks more. The crisis triggered by the need for irrigation water is at its highest in the tail-end of the Vennar. A woefully quixotic situation has prevailed in the Cauvery basin in which the farmers have announced an agitation demanding opening of the dam when it has to be closed duly. Had the government monitored when and what was the cultivation space of samba and thaladi crops, it could have avoided its belated embarrassment. Particularly, there was a need for it to keenly watch this year's ground reality.

Meanwhile, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. K. Stalin has ordered the discharge of two tmc water. Had he done it three weeks earlier, the farmers' plight could have been averted. The water discharged which will reach the tail-end areas in a week will not cover the paddy fields fully as a normal river irrigation does. It may be diverted among the rivers in the Grand Anicut. But massive efforts are required to take the water to the crops standing in patches in villages according to their locations. The normal benefits that the Cauvery gives as a river may become scarce when it degenerates into an irrigation canal.

### **River that changes into irrigation canal**

One may ask how my differentiation between a river and an irrigation canal helps in understanding the Cauvery.

Villages get water from the irrigation canal, whenever they need it, from the running river. That is the water administration happening at the village-level. But what's happening now is what naturally happens when the Cauvery is changed into an irrigation canal and the village-level water administration is shifted to the Mettur dam. The current water administration model will only augment the farmers' miseries. In the first four months till September, we may have to struggle with the upper riparian state of Karnataka. In the next four months, we may have to keep pleading or fighting with our

government. If this is the state of farmers today, what will be the state of the Cauvery?

Till the first week of October, the Cauvery remained a river irrigation canal. Thereafter, owing to the heavy rains, we let the Cauvery be a draining basin. So, the Cauvery is an irrigation canal in the first half of the fasli year and a draining channel in the second half. But the government is least bothered about the Cauvery perennially running as a river only.

The Cauvery flows, cascades, springs forth, and spreads through fountains, running through a network of tributaries, rivulets, channels, virgin water-bodies, and streams, creating and maintaining a huge natural environment of which agriculture is a massive part. We should, therefore, think about what will happen to the Cauvery environment if the river is kept artificially dry for eight months a year.

### **Govt. contribution to imbroglio**

The yearly requirement of irrigation water in the Cauvery Delta is 330 tmc. This year, the water discharged till the Mettur dam was closed on Oct. 10 was only 92 tmc. Hence, it is inferred that the farmers were forced to make do with underground water and rainwater by way of making up for the shortage of 238 tmc. Yet there was a hope that at least, three-quarter of the usual samba yield would be possible – a miracle of this year. Yet all the same, it is a tragedy that pinning hopes on the miracle despite the closure of the dam, the government, for its part, remained supine. Overcoming the odds, the farmers somehow pulled off a successful cultivation in this fasli year. At some places, the samba lands had to be left fallow. Several cultivators of kuruvai gave up on thaladi. Some switched over to short-term paddy cultivation. But the paddy crops, once sprayed, got damaged for want of water and though sprayed again, they relapsed into getting damaged. The farmers bought saplings with their own money and planted them. Till the middle of the Tamil month ‘Karthigai’, the planting of samba and thaaldi seedlings happened, depending on the timing of rains. The farmers drew water from the

river, spending on diesel. As the sprouted crops went waste owing to drought, they bought saplings and planted them.

### **Whither is the solution?**

It is a matter of grave concern that the farmers have to fight for opening of the Mettur dam though the dam has a favourable water level. Why do the water needs of the ayacut not reach the ears of the rulers?

There must be some principles for the intra-party distribution of the Cauvery water in Tamil Nadu. There must also be a permanent mechanism to determine the water discharge based on the principles and its quantity as well. In today's situation, it is not appropriate to depend on the respective district administrations' recommendations in this regard. It will hardly be a solution to just set up ad-hoc committees now and then for making decisions. Should water management become water imperialism?

The present troubles are unprecedented. In the past, there were no such problems because not only the Cauvery flowed incessantly then but also the choices of crop varieties and cultivation climates in the ayacut were almost consistent. The past system is needed now. The present-day necessity for opening the Mettur dam in February and the farmer's agitation pressing the need and demand are the factors that emphasize the restoration of the past system. Don't they?

**Translated by V. Mariappan**