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Rampant land conversion in Kodagu leads to reduced flow of water in Cauvery

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BENGALURU: With 2,800 acres of land converted for commercial purposes in the last decade in Kodagu district, environmentalists decry the continuing change in land use and say it has decreased the annual flow of water in the Cauvery.

Kodagu district is the major watershed and catchment for the Cauvery and has witnessed rampant conversion of not just forest land but also wetlands and coffee plantations.

The statistics revealed by the district authorities are shocking as between 2005 and 2015, more than 2,800 acres of paddy field, coffee plantations and highlands were converted to residential layouts, sites, commercial complexes and resorts.

Col C P Muthanna, president, Coorg Wildlife Society said, "We have received this data from the district authorities as a reply to our RTI application. This is a matter of grave concern as the tiny district is the lifeline of not only south Karnataka but also Tamil Nadu. The river's catchment areas have made way for buildings ... the district has also been losing its tree cover to infrastructure projects, high tension power lines and railway lines."

The Coorg Wildlife Society has met the district authorities in this regard and submitted a memorandum highlighting how large scale conversion of wetlands/highlands without even getting a NoC from the gram panchayats have

Water flowing from a dam across the Cauvery river. (File | EPS)

taken off and legalised later by paying bribes. They have requested the authorities concerned to carry out a site inspection in the three taluks and a proper assessment on conversions. Col Muthanna adds, "The DC has tentatively agreed to our request. Further, we have requested for a study on carrying capacity of tourism in Kodagu that may finally result in policy measures for sustainable tourism."

Environmental activist Sundar Muthanna, who has started an online petition 'Stop the two railway tracks to Kodagu and Save Cauvery River' and addressed it to PM and 14 others says, "Implementing the two railway lines will involve cutting of lakhs of trees in the catchment region. Kodagu has already lost 54,000 trees for a high tension power line to Kerala and now hundreds of fresh applications for conversions are pending with the department. Land conversion seems to be the government term for 'ecological suicide'."

Railways and highways are being planned to promote tourism and business. "When tree-holding agricultural land is converted for commercial purposes, the trees are cut for construction activities. In river catchment area, less trees is ... simply put ... less river. The Cauvery went completely dry in Kodagu in March this year ... we don't seem capable of understanding the many warnings that nature is giving us," Muthanna says.

Environmentalists say a study done by researchers of Indian Institute of Science has already revealed the decreasing water flows to the Cauvery from the catchment areas of the district. Prof T V Ramachandra, head of Wetland and Energy Research Group, IISc headed this study — Modelling Hydrologic Regime of Lakshmanthirtha Watershed, River Cauvery. The study outlines how change in land use in Kodagu has decreased the flows into Cauvery. The assessment showed that out of five watersheds, four had high deficiency of water for over three months.

Kodagu DC was not available for her comments.

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