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With water bodies gone, 60% of Bengalureans depend on Cauvery river

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A lot has changed since 1964 when Bengaluru's water footprint stretched outward to source water from river Cauvery, over a distance of about 100 km. It has been 52 years now and a burgeoning Bengaluru's dependency on Cauvery has only increased, so much so that nearly 60% of the tech capital's thirst is quenched by this river.

"Not just Bengaluru city, even Mysuru and Mandya along with 48 towns and about 600 villages are dependent on the Cauvery for drinking water," says Karnataka CM Siddaramaiah. That was his meaculpa this time for not releasing water to Tamil Nadu.

A senior IAS officer explained: Cauvery, which originates in Kodagu, has been the lifeline of the farmers flanking it for several centuries. This has been the only river in the country that has clocked the highest water utilisation rate even during the British days; agricultural audits for 1875-76 had shown a rate of return of 81% in the Cauvery irrigation system. The Cauvery catchment area in Karnataka is 34,273 sq km and, of late, there has been an increase in exploitation of water by the farmers because of sugarcane and paddy cultivation, both being waterintensive crops.

But more than irrigation, the galloping demographic growth and the changes in land use have attained significance. A recent hydrological study by researcher T V Ramachandra from Centre for Ecological Sciences (IISc) on the Lakshmanathirtha watershed in Cauvery pointed to a 5.8% increase in population density in the river basin in a decade.

In Bengaluru, the spread of water bodies has reduced by nearly 80% in the last four decades while its population has seen a 47% growth. Currently, Bengaluru draws 23.10 tmcft of water per year from Cauvery and the demand is only increasing. S Krishnappa, former engineer-in-chief of Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB), said: "The number of people coming from outside Karnataka and settling permanently in Bengaluru is on the rise. About 200-400 such families come to Bengaluru every day and their requirement is drinking water. Though BWSSB is supplying 1,700 mld every day, the demand is over 2,000 mld. Where will the water come from?" This is precisely why the Karnataka government mooted a balancing river across the Cauvery at Mekedatu, a project opposed by TN.

What has complicated the situation is falling groundwater table and low-rainfall being recorded in Kodagu, the river's birthplace, because of reckless destruction of fragile ecology. Retd Col Muthanna of Save River Cauvery Foundation, an activist group, said: "If more trees are felled for road and power projects, the river will bear the brunt."

The most powerful and poignant commentary on the boiling Cauvery cauldron came from India's waterman Rajendra Singh when he said: "The real threat is to Cauvery river itself. It has been treated as a commodity."