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Kolaveri over farmers' use of Cauvery

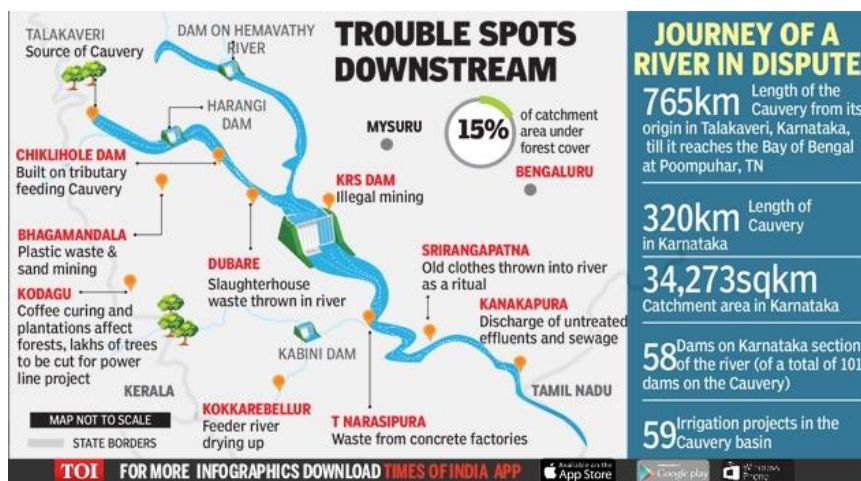
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BENGALURU: A month ago, Karnataka chief minister Siddaramaiah said he would release Cauvery water from all four dams, but with a condition: The water was primarily for drinking. "Under no circumstances should it be used for agriculture," he said. Siddaramaiah followed it up with an appeal to farmers to stop growing paddy and sugarcane, and switch to semi-arid crops such as ragi and millet. "We've had the lowest rainfall in 46 years, and have water available only for drinking," he said.

Last month, Karnataka was staring at the possibility of drought—rain seemed to have failed, legal compulsions limited the amount of Cauvery water the state could use, dams in partnership with had hit dead storage, and farmers were enraged. Recently though, it has rained enough for water in Krishnarajasagar dam to cross 100 ft. Now, farmers want government to let them sow one paddy or sugarcane crop. But the state is hesitant to yield. "We are trying to promote crop diversity with millets, pulses, jowar and maize in the Cauvery basin for long-term water stability," says agriculture minister K B Gowda.

This is happening because the Cauvery has about 40% less water than it did 50 years ago. A 765-km-long river originating in Talakaveri in Kodagu district, deforestation, dams, hydroelectric and agricultural projects, and sewage discharge have reduced its size and altered its course over the years.



One of the main reasons for its decline is loss of forest along its course, says professor of T V Ramachandra from IISc's Centre for Ecological Sciences who is leading a study on the basin. "Just 15% of its 34,000sqkm catchment area in Karnataka is forested against the required 33%," he says. He gives the example of Lakshmi Anantirtha, a tributary, and says the study proved that feeder streams with more vegetation have water throughout the year. "At places where forest cover has been degraded for agriculture and plantations, streams dry up during non-monsoon months," he says.

The other reason is exploitation. When rain was plentiful, many dams and irrigation projects were built and areas that traditionally grew millet switched to paddy and sugarcane. Ramachandra says it is time to introduce curbs on sugarcane and paddy cultivation. "Only that need less water crops must be allowed," he adds. Downstream, tributaries are all but dead under an onslaught of untreated sewage and industrial effluents. University of Mysore researchers found lead, cadmium

and magnesium in the river bed this year. They categorised the river as 'yellow', which means the water can turn toxic if corrective measures are not taken. If discharge of effluents and unviable agricultural practices were not enough, coffee curing in Kodagu is adding to pollution.

The construction of three dams --Harangi on the Mysuru-Kodagu border, Hemavathi in Hassan and Chiklihole in Kodagu--has also submerged vast tracts of forest, affecting rainfall in catchment areas."Habitat manipulation in the name of development, including expansion of agricultural practices, has reduced rainfall and inflow in the Cauvery," says P M Muthanna of Wildlife First.

A former forester says the shift from agriculture to tourism has also hit water levels."Kodagu has 32% forest cover but the Cauvery catchment area is mainly private and revenue lands. In many places, revenue department is allowing conversion from agricultural to commercial use without control.This should be stopped to save the Cauvery ," he says.

Water sharing or water dividing?

The Karnataka government along with Isha Foundation will plant 25 crore saplings on river banks across the state, chief minister Siddaramaiah announced at an event held in Bengaluru on Saturday as part of spiritual guru Sadhguru's Rally for Rivers. At a similar event in Mysuru on Friday, Sadhguru met farmers from Karnataka and Tamil Nadu caught in a four decade-long dispute over sharing of Cauvery waters."I need water and you need water and therefore dividing water for use is not justice. But nourishing water resources is true justice for water," he said. On Sunday, the rally reached Chennai, where Sadhguru met TN chief minister Edappadi K Palaniswami.

Bengaluru has 3 rivers but no water in them

The Vrishabhavathi, which runs through south Bengaluru, supplied a third of the city's drinking water till a decade ago. Today , a third of the city's sewage flows into it every day . Bengaluru's river is now popularly known as Kengeri mori (Kengeri's gutter).Waste and effluents combine to cause occasional frothing in it.

Three rivers served as water sources for Bengaluru, but the burgeoning city has consumed them all. Vrishabhavathi, Arkavathi and Kumudvathi, no longer have water. Bengaluru depends solely on the Cauvery .