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What does the Kaveri delta's new protected special agricultural zone mean for livelihoods?

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- *The new act passed by Tamil Nadu assembly during February last week declaring Kaveri delta region as a Protected Special Agriculture Zone (PSAZ) aims at stopping all livelihood-harming extraction projects planned for the future in the area.*
 - *Farmers who oppose the act say it lacks powers to act against ongoing and approved hydrocarbon extraction projects piloted by private sector Vedanta and public sector ONGC in the delta.*
 - *The act excludes some crucial areas of Kaveri delta and remains silent on large scale oil extraction and mining projects proposed in Nagapattinam and Cuddalore districts.*

Octogenarian farmer Mannargudi S. Ranganathan is all praise for the bill passed by Tamil Nadu assembly, declaring the Kaveri delta region in the state as a Protected Special Agriculture Zone (PSAZ). While many of his fellow farmers remain sceptical about its effectiveness, Ranganathan is all praise for Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami for the landmark [legislation](#) which he believes will stop all livelihood-harming extraction projects of the area.

“We are quite surprised. It took hardly ten days for the chief minister to move the bill in the assembly and make it a law, from the time of its announcement at a public meeting in Salem. Our worries about the fate of agriculture in the delta region are over now. The Chief Minister is a man of action and this bill will help the delta survive for more than a thousand years,” said Ranganathan, general secretary of Kaveri delta Farmers’ Association.

Ranganathan and his association are now organising a reception for the chief minister to the delta region as gratitude.

Meanwhile, many other farmers, not part of this association, continue to believe that the law lacks teeth to deal with the central government-supported hydrocarbon extraction projects, which pose a threat to the very existence of the delta region and its time-tested agricultural legacy.

Kaveri Urimai Meetpu Kuzhu (Kaveri Rights Retrieval Committee) coordinator P. Maniarasan says that he and hundreds of other farmers are sceptical not about the spirit of the bill but about its efficacy to address the emerging threats.

“The bill itself agrees that it would not have powers to eclipse ongoing and approved projects. Private sector company Vedanta and the public sector’s ONGC have already been given permission by the union government to extract hydrocarbon from the Kaveri delta. Attempts are also on from the part of union government to revive the coal-bed methane project shelved following intervention by the then Chief Minister J. Jayalalithaa. If the bill lacks powers to stop all these, there is no meaning to the declaration of the delta as an agricultural zone,” he said.

According to him, the bill was drafted in haste without seeking

expert opinions and it excluded Musiri, Lalgudi and Pullambadi blocks in Trichy district, Thirumanur in Ariyalur district, Chidamabaram in Cuddalore district and Kulithalai in Karur district. However, supporters of the bill say certain tactical omissions were made in it to pass it using provisions in the list and to avoid collision with central government powers. They say modifications can be made at any time based on consensus.

“The [already-initiated extraction](#) works have turned the groundwater more saline. The new law would help revive the groundwater level,” says Ranganathan terming the counter opinions as ill-motivated and lacking objectivity.

Sources in the government have said the bill has many strategic provisions which would help the state government to effectively prevent unilateral implementation of the extraction projects.

“Right To Information (RTI) replies from Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) have revealed that a number of hydrocarbon extraction projects in the delta region planned by Vedanta and ONGC are pending clearance from the state government. The state can consider them as new projects and deny permission under the new law,” said a senior civil service officer who helped draft the legislation.

“An expert committee constituted six months ago to go into the proposals is still verifying the documents. As none of them got any permission so far, they can be considered as new projects. The law is clearly preventing hydrocarbon exploration extraction and extraction in the delta area. The law also has clauses enabling it to add or exclude any neighbouring area into its ambit,” said the official.





An agricultural land under Kaveri delta in Nagapattinam. Photo by K.A. Shaji.

On its part, the state government has already [made it public](#) that applications to obtain licenses for petroleum exploration and petroleum mining in the Kaveri delta would be considered as new projects.

Vedant and ONGC, however, received the central government's nod to extract hydrocarbon from the delta almost five years ago and the local community, comprising mainly paddy farmers had vehemently opposed the project. Massive farmers' [agitations](#) were held in places like Neduvasal, Kathiramangalam and Nagapattinam. As per the existing plan, Vedanta and ONGC have decided to drill over 300 hydrocarbon exploration wells onshore and offshore in the delta region.

“It must be the duty of the state government to bring clarity on the provisions of the bill. In his Salem speech, the Chief Minister had spoken of the interests and concerns of nine districts in the delta

region. However, the bill excludes major parts of Tiruchirappalli, Ariyalur and Karur districts and parts of Cuddalore and Pudukottai regions from its ambit. It also lacks clarity on existing industrial and oil extraction projects in the region,” said R. Sundarajan of environmental organisation Poovulagin Nanbargal.

Can the new law protect the interests of farmers?

Interestingly, the bill was passed in the assembly a month after the union government decided to exempt hydrocarbon projects from public consultations by amending the Environment Impact Assessment Notification. One of the salient features of this bill is it prohibits the setting up of zinc, copper and aluminium smelter plants, iron and steel processing industries, industries which process animal bones, horns etc, leather processing industries, oil and coal-based exploration projects for hydrocarbon, methane and natural gases and shipbreaking industries in the protected zone.

However, it specifically states that it will not affect the infrastructure works in the region such as developing harbours, laying pipelines, roads, telecommunications, electricity and water distribution works. “The government may add or omit any areas in the future,” states the bill.

According to Sundarajan, the bill necessitates clarity from the government on the future of certain large scale projects piloted by the state government itself. It was only recently, the state government had signed an MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) with Chennai Petroleum Corporation Limited (CPCL) to set up a greenfield refinery at Nagapattinam, a crucial part of the delta

region.

The Nagapattinam refinery project is worth Rs. 274 billion (Rs. 27,400 crores) and it is in conflict with the just-passed law. In addition, several private companies have agreed to investments in the region, for example, Haldia Petrochemicals has committed to invest Rs. 500 billion (Rs. 50,000 crores) to set up a mega petrochemical complex in Cuddalore, which also falls under the delta region.

The bill is also silent on the future of the proposed Petroleum, Chemicals and Petrochemicals Investment Region (PCPIR) in Cuddalore and Nagapattinam areas. The PCPIR, proposed by the Union Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilisers as a joint venture with the Tamil Nadu state government aims to cover 23,000 hectares of agricultural land spread across 45 villages in the Cuddalore region and aims to be a hub to promote the manufacture of petroleum, chemicals and petrochemicals.



A farm land at Cuddalore which was identified later for carbon mining. Photo by K.A. Shaji.

The notification in 2017 delineated PCPIR area in the Cuddalore and Nagapattinam Districts as a local planning area. As a whole, the delta region covers 1.47 million (14.7 lakh) hectares of farmlands and contributes about 45 per cent of the state's rice production. Due to water shortage caused by Kaveri water conflict, a [water-sharing dispute](#) between involved states, farmers have started moving away from paddy cultivation to cash crops in recent years.

The bill has evoked resentment among trade and industry as they feel it would badly affect oil and gas production in the country, which is already under some degree of pressure with domestic production declining continuously since 2012. Industry sources say disallowing hydrocarbon exploration in the Kaveri delta belt will impact the country severely in the years to come.

The Tamil Nadu Governor has given his assent to the legislation facilitating its early implementation.

“The bill has proposed the constitution of an authority for the safekeep of the delta agricultural zone with the chief minister as the head. Beyond party politics, the authority must comprise an adequate number of farmers and agricultural experts,” said K. Balakrishnan, state secretary of Communist Party of India (Marxist) and a farmer from Chidambaram in Cuddalore district. He also stresses the need for enhancing the Kaveri irrigation network and the river modernisation project.

According to the state government, the proposed authority overseeing the delta region will propose recommendations for

developing agricultural infrastructure to achieve food security apart from recommending schemes for irrigation and flood management. It will also facilitate promotion of agro-based and allied industries and evolve measures for augmenting water resources, efficient water use in agriculture including micro-irrigation. For agricultural workers and their families, the authority will formulate measures to create sustainable employment opportunities.

Meanwhile, farmers and environmentalists are also in demand for large scale initiatives to breathe a new life into river Kaveri. Only by regaining vibrancy of the river ecosystem, the delta can be protected as an agricultural zone, they feel.

Banner image: River Kaveri, view from Sreerangam island near Trichy in Tamil Nadu. Photo by K.A. Shaji.

