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## Mekedatu: Don't kill the forest for the water

Our future contemplated plans for forest 'Aposhna' appear too rosy for some and disastrous for the environment and society



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A view of the site where the proposed Mekedatu project may come up. Credit: DH File Photo

Mekedatu balancing reservoir and drinking water project envisages the construction of a dam across the River Cauvery at Mekedatu that submerges 53 sq km of the rich forest area of Cauvery Sanctuary. The project's objective is to provide drinking water to Bengaluru city and adjoining areas, regulate the flow of water to Tamil Nadu and simultaneously generate 400 MW of power.

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Series of Protected Areas of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu starting from Bannerghatta National Park and all along Cauvery Sanctuary, MM Hills Sanctuary, BRT Sanctuary,

connectivity goes further northwards all along the western Ghats and the coast of Karnataka right up to Kali Tiger Reserve in Uttara Kannada district and beyond.

Cauvery Sanctuary is the important constituent of the connectivity necessary for the movement for long-ranging animals starting from Mahsheer fish (T Rama Devi) to elephants and tigers; the schedule-I species under Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. The question often asked by those in favour of the project is, why not sacrifice some more forests for another project when the forests have already been diverted for several projects in the long chain of Protected Areas (PAs). Some others ask, how can conservation of forests and wildlife take precedence over the need of the human being?

We have already lost 14,000 hectares of forests in Saravathi Linganmakki submersion, 6,800 hectares for the Varahi project, 1,000 hectares for Talkalale reservoir, 1,880 hectares for Chakra dam, 2,000 hectares for Karnataka Power Corporation Township, 800 hectares for Saravathy tailrace project, 800 hectares for KPTCL projects and several thousand hectares for rehabilitation of evacuees from these projects.

Our future contemplated plans for forest 'Aposhna' appear too rosy for some and disastrous for the environment and society. The author who belongs to an era of pre-independence to post-independence was enamoured by the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, the charismatic Prime Minister who announced that our projects are 'Modern temples'. I am one of those who cleared Sharavathy, Kali, with great vigour and enthusiasm. By the time I came down to the felling of trees for the Harangi project in 1973, my conscience started pinching me.

In 1976, I published a booklet in Kannada Karnataka Vanya Sampatthu, in which I projected that the frenzy felling and neglected afforestation will drag us to a doom's day. After studies, I projected that by 2002, we have to face the scarcity of firewood followed by other forest products and announced that the existing scarcity conditions prevailing in 76 taluks will increase. There were many who did not accept my recommendations and among them were a few foresters who felt our forests were immense and like 'Akshayanatra' lasting forever

stressed in his speeches that "if you continue to fell the trees in this indiscriminate way, we have to go and commit suicide in the Arabian sea", how prophetic he was. Now farmers are ending lives, the scarcity taluks have increased to a shocking 135. There was another statesman politician K H Patil, who was willing to surrender his ministership when his conservation efforts started losing their grip.

I hope that there will be Devaraja Urs' and K H Patils among the present politicians, who will help implement Mekedatu and other such projects after rectifying the mistakes committed by us in the name of ill-conceived development. Let us not dig our own graves. There are many options available through which we can find practical solutions.

*(The writer is former Environment Secretary to Govt of Karnataka)*

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