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Climate change will aggravate ongoing river dispute, Govt needs to approach this scientifically: IISc research expert

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Chandra Prabhu | NT

Bengaluru: With the monsoon failing last August, farmers in Karnataka have found it difficult to sustain themselves, as 195 taluks have declared themselves to be drought hit.

The decision to release Cauvery water to its neighbouring state has flared protests and shutdowns, with farmers getting increasingly frustrated with the government.

Experts said that the Climate Change, which is widely debated in public discourses, will further put weight on an already heavy issue. Several activists have criticised politicians of politicising the Cauvery Water sharing issue.

In a conversation with News Trail, TV Ramachandra, the co-ordinator of the Energy and Wetlands Research groups explained the situation, with an appeal for a scientific approach to the issue.

"Bringing climate change only when the river disputes comes up is not the way. The problem needs a long term plan, with an established system," the activist said.

TV Ramachandra, who has researched on the rivers flowing from the Western Ghats, opined that the issue is being mismanaged.

"With an increase in cultivation of crops, forest cover in the river basin has decreased by 45%," he said while adding that these forests also help in storing groundwater, therefore maintaining the water flow in the river for the entire year.

"When they are converted to mono-culture plantations the water only flows for 6 months, and when these areas degrade, their catchment degrades by 30% and water only flows in the monsoon," he said.

The interesting part here is the correlation with the livelihood of the farmers. "The ones who cultivate near the forest areas earn around a lakh per acre per year, and the ones who cultivate in the degraded area only earn Rs. 32,000 per acre per year," he explained.

The farmers who cultivate at the degraded areas, receive less water because the capability to retain water is lost. Pollinators like Bees and butterflies are found mostly in forests and therefore increase in yield, according to Ramachandra.

With these forest covers being fragmented, A change in rainfall is predicted in a study conducted by Ramachandra and his team.

"With the Cauvery river in mind, both the rainfall and the number of rainy days will decrease, but the intensity of rain will increase, leading to floods," he remarked.

This will hurt the farmers from the degraded areas more, as their crops are vulnerable to washouts.

"With forests being fragmented, the river water only rushes to drain in the oceans. This is why the river looks dry post the monsoon rains. Ramachandra also stated that the irresponsibility and greed of politicians has affected the river.

"Their decision making with regards to the crops has hurt the river more than anything has," he said.

Demand for water has ever increased as years passed, as water intensive crops like paddy and sugarcane are being grown thrice a year. Ramachandra has also hit out at their unrealistic project ideas, especially the Mekedatu Project.

"If this project materialises, around 5,000 hectares of forest cover will be submerged. It would be stupid to lose 100 thousand million cubic feet (TMCs) of natural catchment for 65 TMCs of artificial catchment," he elucidated.

Ramachandra also stated, "The day these politicians are thrown out of the Cauvery, is the day when problems get solved."

This statement, which comes from a person who has intricately researched the river, the lifeline of the state for three decades indicated how badly the river is being managed, irrespective of governments and the bureaucrats involved.