

Mekedatu project threatens to submerge chunks of Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary

by K.A. Shaji on 10 September 2019

- *Mekedatu Balancing Reservoir is a proposed gravity dam in Karnataka which aims to store 67 tmc water, a part of which will be pumped to water-starved Bengaluru and Kanakapura.*
- *The project however is estimated to submerge over 7800 acres of Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary and over 4500 acres of the adjoining reserve forests.*
- *Neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu fears the project would further deplete its meagre share of Cauvery water, which is crucial for cultivation of paddy fields in the Thanjavur-Nagapattinam-Trichy delta region.*

Located around 90 kilometres away from Karnataka's capital Bengaluru, Mekedatu is a scenic site where south India's mighty river Cauvery dives into an amazing gorge, facilitating the creation of a complex riverine forest. The word *mekedatu*, roughly translated from native Kannada language, means "goat's leap". According to coracle operators in this emerging eco-tourism location, the legend goes that the name was given to the riverside village by the local tribal people as it was the place where rock formations on both sides of the Cauvery remain so close that a goat could leap across to reach the other side.

Mekedatu, an integral part of the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary, also connects the Biligiri Ranga Hills National Park and the emerging tiger reserve, Male Mahadeshwara Hills.

In recent months, this tranquil forest village has become the bone of contention between neighbouring states Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, after Karnataka started the process for constructing a mega drinking water project in the village, presumably to quench the thirst of Bengaluru and its satellite town, Kanakapura. Tamil Nadu fears that the project, if executed, would further reduce its meagre share of Cauvery river water, which remains crucial for cultivating the vast stretches of paddy fields in the Thanjavur-Nagapattinam-Trichy region.

Drinking water is a major concern in Bengaluru where massive urbanisation has caused large scale depletion of water resources, and the Karnataka government feels that only the proposed Mekedatu Balancing Reservoir Project can bail out the city from the present crisis. The proposed project envisages storing 67 tmc of water and generating 400 MW of electricity by building a gravity dam in the forest village. The project has invited strong opposition from the people of Tamil Nadu, especially those from the river delta areas which depend solely on Cauvery water for paddy cultivation and other agricultural activities. All the major political parties in Tamil Nadu are against the project, saying it would spell doom for the farming community in the state.

Drinking water project that could submerge Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary

If the projected statistics are any indication, the Mekedatu project, once implemented, could be an environmental disaster. The project that can pump 4.5 tmc of drinking water to Bengaluru and

Kanakapura, will lead to the submergence of 7,862.64 acres of the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary and 4619.63 acres of the adjoining reserve forests, confirmed Karnataka officials.

Though an expert committee which reviewed the project had advised the state government to abandon it and look for alternatives in view of the huge cost to the environment, Karnataka is still hopeful of winning the Union government's approval for going ahead with it. The project which is estimated to cost Rs 90 billion (Rs 9,000 crore) when executed, would result in the submergence of the core areas of the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary. The cost includes the construction of a 99-m high concrete gravity dam, 318-m long spillways and three underground power units for which at least 2,000 tonnes of explosives would have to be used. The rock and sand deposits inside the sanctuary would also be utilised for the project.



River Cauvery at Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary. Photo by Aparna K.

According to sources in the Karnataka government, a 15-member expert appraisal committee (EAC) that went into the intricacies of the project had raised several key questions about its feasibility, which include the disastrous impact on the environment and the socio-economic consequences. Though the report is not available in

the public domain, it is learnt that it has advised the state government to look for alternative projects. But Karnataka's new BJP government has already made it clear that it would abide by the decision taken by the previous Janata Dal (Secular)-Congress government to go ahead with the project. The pressure from the industry in Bengaluru, which is presently battling an unprecedented water crisis, is also heavy on the government.

Karnataka government claims the project if implemented would help increase surface water, boost groundwater table and ensure drinking water for wildlife, especially for elephants in their crucial migratory path between Eastern and Western Ghats.

"Whatever be the claims of the pro-dam lobby, the diversion of 12,345 acres of forest land is unimaginable, and the environmental cost would be too high. The Karnataka government is now armed with a recent Supreme Court verdict allocating additional Cauvery water to the state, and it feels the Mokedatu project to be the best option to utilise the water. We have to be cautious against another environmental doom of huge proportions," says K. Mohanraj of Tamil Nadu Green Movement which is trying to persuade Karnataka's green organisations to strongly oppose the project.

Major threat to flora and fauna

Karnataka forest officials, who preferred anonymity, said the Cauvery sanctuary, which is home to a number of endemic and endangered species, was also one of the key elephant corridors. The submergence of forest land would result in cutting off of many wildlife and elephant migratory routes. The species that would be affected include the near-threatened grizzled giant squirrels, honey badgers, Deccan Mahseer fish and the smooth-coated otters.

According to officials in the Karnataka Water Resources Department, the controversial project would require acquisition of land beginning from the watchtower of the Mugguru Forest up to the outer regions of the Hanur Forest near Kollegal in Mysuru district, an old Veerappan lair. The Mugguru Forest is located in the border area between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu and is located hardly 9.1 km away from Mokedatu.

Officials admit that the 67 TMC capacity reservoir will submerge Sangama, a tourist spot close to Mokedatu, which attracts almost 2,000 visitors daily. A minimum of 10,000 trees would have to be

axed, it has been estimated. The direct human cost would also be high as tribal villages of Bommasundra, Galebore, Makivala, Kogge Doddi, Nelluru Doddi and Sampatagere Doddi would be submerged. At present, Bengaluru receives 1,350 million litres per day (MLD) of Cauvery water. The proposed project promises to meet all the water requirements of the city at least till 2030. As per government statistics, Bengaluru would need 2,285 MLD of water by 2030, which can be met if the Mekedatu project is successfully implemented. According to conservation biologist Sanjay Gubbi, who conducted extensive field work in the region, the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary hosts unique and endangered wildlife species, and their habitats must not be marred by any kind of constructions. For the tiger population in BR Hills and MM Hills, the Cauvery sanctuary is also a roaming ground that acts as a shock absorber, easing human-tiger conflicts, says Sanjay Gubbi.

R. Subramanian, chairman of Cauvery Technical Cell of Tamil Nadu government, said his state was totally opposed to the project as, if implemented, it would further reduce the quantum of water that Tamil Nadu receives. "The damage to wildlife is an additional problem the project would create," he said.



Karnataka is planning a mega drinking water project in Makedatu, which Tamil Nadu fears would further reduce its share of Cauvery river water. Photo by A. M. Shudhagar.

According to Himanshu Thakkar of the Delhi-based South Asian Network on Dams, River and People (SANDRP), the project is unnecessary, costly and destructive. "It will further destroy the already battered Cauvery River. In the context of climate change, the appropriateness of such a project has further diminished," he said.

In the meanwhile, experts are proposing several other options to deal with the water crisis in Bengaluru which include alternative smaller projects in other parts of the Cauvery region.

The new hurdles faced by the project have been making the farmers of Cauvery delta region of Tamil Nadu happy. There is a sense of temporary relief in the region. P. R. Pandian, president of All Farmers Associations' Coordination Committee in Cauvery Delta, said the efforts put in by the farming community by organizing various protests ever since Karnataka announced the project had started showing results. They had even organised a protest in Delhi. But the indications from Karnataka are that the reprieve would only be temporary. The state government has started lobbying in Delhi for getting Union environmental ministry's clearance claiming it had no other way to meet the drinking water demands of Bengaluru city. In the daily political discourses in the state, as can be expected, drinking water has priority over environmental concerns.

Banner image: An upcoming drinking water project in Makedatu is a bone of contention between neighbouring states Karnataka and Tamil Nadu which share waters of the river Cauvery. Photo by A. M. Shudhagar.

Article published by Aditi Tandon



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