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IN PERSPECTIVE

Cauvery: Beyond sharing of water

By Praveen Bhargav

It would be disastrous to Karnataka if Cauvery catchments are not protected.

IN PERSPECTIVE The sharing of the Cauvery waters is a highly emotive issue and the underlying reasons are too obvious to state. The tribunal award has evoked strong protests and various interests are rallying around to fight for the cause of water in a charged atmosphere.

Unfortunately, the same sense of public outrage is not on display when the very source of Karnataka's major rivers in the Western Ghats is threatened by mining, timber logging and forces of forest destruction. However, some civil society initiatives have focussed on ensuring protection of the forested catchments of the Cauvery and Bhadra River in the Western Ghats.

Karnataka is blessed with some of the finest rain forests in the Western Ghats, which have been globally recognised as one of the world's eight "Hottest Hotspots" of biological diversity. This mountain range runs parallel to the western coast and acts as a crucial barrier that intercepts the southwest monsoon winds. The Western Ghats thus play an extremely crucial role in influencing monsoon patterns which in turn has far reaching implications on water availability in peninsular India.

The dense natural forests act as huge "green sponges" that efficiently absorb and release water. Protecting these areas is therefore extremely crucial in order to maintain the quality and availability of surface as well as ground water.

Neglect

Despite scientific studies documenting the role of the Western Ghats in water security, successive governments have adopted a rather lackadaisical approach bereft of a long term vision to ensure protection of the mountains.

Since 2003, conservation organisations have been campaigning for protecting the Cauvery catchments in Kodagu district. A presentation on the idea of notifying around 800 sq km as the Greater Talacauvery Wildlife made to the then chief minister

had evoked a positive response.

A visionary decision on this would have ensured protection of the fragile rain forests which receive up to 6,000 mm of rain and where several perennial rivers and streams including important east flowing rivers of Cauvery, Kabini, Hemavathi, Ramathirtha and Lakshmanathirtha originate. Neither did this involve any major financial implication nor would it have affected the legitimate rights of local people. Yet, petty local political interests and some forest officials acting as henchmen of timber contractors repeatedly stalled these efforts.

Cauvery is not the only river which has suffered from such blinkered vision and bureaucratic bungling. For over 25 years the Bhadra was ravaged by open cast mining of iron ore in the rain forests of Kudremukh. The mining company succeeded in misleading most political leaders and the public for several years by generating reports from paid consultants that suppressed the extent of sedimentation and damage to the catchments and river systems.

The truth

Ultimately, this was exposed by independent scientific studies which established that a staggering 100-150 lakh tonnes of sediment had entered the Bhadra river and reservoir since mining started. Thankfully, mining at Kudremukh stopped after the Supreme Court ordered the company to close down by December 2005. The arduous process of restoration has slowly begun.

These civil society interventions have been valuable. The two campaigns backed by scientific data have played a major role in highlighting the need to protect forested catchments in order to secure the state's water interests. The government must immediately initiate appropriate action to protect the forested catchments of Cauvery by notifying the Greater Talacauvery Wildlife Sanctuary. The Western Ghats hotspot too must be protected and managed by adopting a scientific land use policy involving experts in landscape ecology. This is a critical moment since global warming and its hugely worrisome impacts of climate change are upon us. Any amount of flag waving or political chicanery cannot prevent the deleterious consequences that may follow. If we do not act now, no democratically elected government, a tribunal or even a court will later have the power to ensure water in our rivers.

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