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Explained | Why is the Cauvery water sharing issue flaring up again?

What prompted the Tamil Nadu government to move the apex Court? How has the Karnataka CM reacted?

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The river Cauvery flows near Srirangapatna. | Photo Credit: BHAGYA PRAKASH. K

The story so far: On August 14, the Tamil Nadu government sought the Supreme Court's intervention to make Karnataka immediately release 24,000 cubic feet per second (cusecs) from its reservoirs and ensure the availability of the specified quantity of water at Biligundlu on the inter-State border for the remainder of the month. It also urged the Court to direct Karnataka to ensure the release of 36.76 TMC (thousand million cubic feet) stipulated for September 2023 as per the Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal (CWDT)'s final award of February 2007 that was modified by the SC in 2018.

How is the water being shared?

A monthly schedule is in place for Karnataka, the upper riparian State of the Cauvery basin, to release water to Tamil Nadu. As per the schedule, Karnataka is to make available to Tamil Nadu at Biligundlu a total quantity of 177.25 TMC in a "normal" water year (June to May). Of this quantity, 123.14 TMC is to be given during the period from June to September, also marking the season of the southwest monsoon. Invariably, it is during this period that the Cauvery issue gets flared up, when the monsoon yields lower rainfall than anticipated. After the SC gave its judgment in February 2018 on the CWDT's 2007 award, the Cauvery Water Management Authority (CWMA) and Cauvery Water Regulation Committee (CWRC) were established four months later to ensure the implementation of the judgment. Since then, the two bodies have been holding meetings to take stock of the situation.

Why has T.N. approached the SC?

The CWMA, at its meeting on August 11, wanted Karnataka to manage its releases in such a way that 10,000 cusecs of water was realised at Biligundlu for the next 15 days, starting from August 12. In other words, Karnataka would have to provide 0.86 TMC a day or 12.9 TMC totally in the 15 days. The Authority also decided that based on future rainfall, there would be a re-evaluation of the quantity to be released. But, what apparently irked Tamil Nadu was the refusal of Karnataka during the meeting to abide by the quantity that was agreed upon at the meeting of the CWRC the previous day— which was a figure of 15,000 cusecs for 15 days. However, Karnataka, during the Authority's meeting, said it would release only 8,000 cusecs, and that too up to August 22.

How has Karnataka responded?

Karnataka has contended that lower rainfall in the Cauvery catchment including in Kerala has led to the poor inflow to its own reservoirs. On Saturday, in Mysuru, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah told journalists that whenever additional water flowed into the reservoirs, Karnataka was releasing it to Tamil Nadu. But, this year, Karnataka was not in such a position, he conceded. According to data of the Meteorological Department, Kodagu, the district cited by Mr. Siddaramaiah for the deficit rainfall (the Cauvery originates from there), received 44% less rainfall during June 1-August 15 than what it was expected to experience. Also, Karnataka, at the Authority's meeting, had refused to accept the demand of Tamil Nadu for following a distress-sharing formula, even though its Chief Minister, in Mysuru, favoured the idea of sharing distress.

What lies next?

Tamil Nadu, especially its farmers in the Cauvery delta, is eagerly awaiting to see whether Karnataka will go at least by the decision of the Authority. The present storage of the Mettur reservoir in Tamil Nadu is precariously low with about 20 TMC, which will last only 10 days after giving allowance for dead storage and drinking water requirements, even though water will be required at least for one more month for the standing short-term crop, kuruvai. It remains to be seen how the Supreme Court is going to view the matter.

A distress-sharing formula, acceptable to all, seems to be the need of the hour.



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