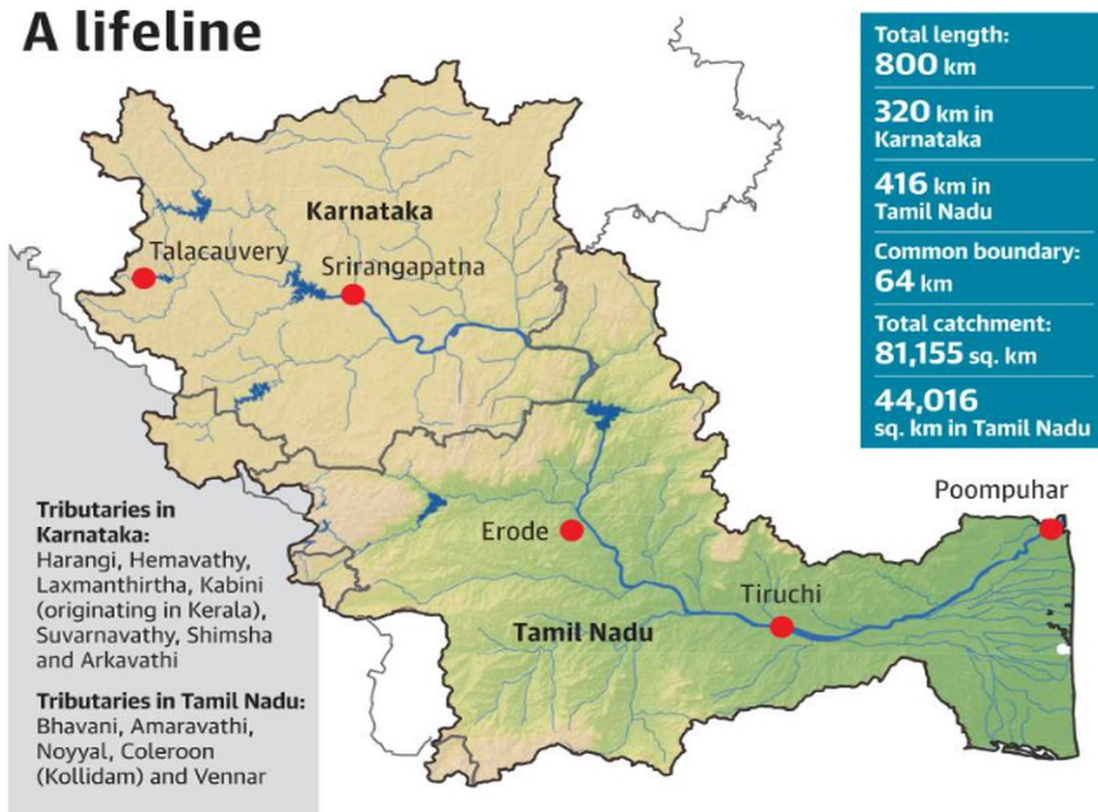


Mekedatu water project continues to divide Karnataka and Tamil Nadu

(GS Paper 2, Issues & Challenges Pertaining to the Federal Structure)

Why in news?

- Recently, The Karnataka Cabinet approved the resolution of the Karnataka Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council that urged the Centre to provide clearance to the Mekedatu project.
- The Cabinet was also said to have approved the resolution passed by both the Houses that the DPR for **Godavari-Krishna-Pennar-Cauvery-Vaiagai-Gundar project** taken up by Tamil Nadu should not be cleared till the decision on the distribution of the rightful share of all the basin states were established.
- Karnataka has been pursuing, with renewed interest, the project of building a reservoir to cater to the drinking water requirements of Bengaluru, as it has allocated ₹1,000 crore in Budget of 2022.



Ecological significance of Mekedatu:

- Broadly meant in Kannada as **goat's leap**, Mekedatu, **part of the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary**, is hardly three km downstream of the **point of confluence of the Arkavathy and the Cauvery river**, called Sangama.
- The **sanctuary is home to grizzled giant squirrel**, considered endemic to Sri Lanka and south India and classified by the International Union for Conservation of Nature as near threatened.
- **Endangered fish species, Deccan Mahsheer**, and vulnerable species such as oriental small clawed otter are among those which have found a haven in the Cauvery.

How Mekedatu is a need for Bengaluru?

- All residents of the metropolis, including those in added or extended areas, want the Cauvery water, because the quality of groundwater is not that good.
- The Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board supplies 1,450 million litres a day (MLD), using the Cauvery as the source, as per the information available on its website.
- Another project, envisaging the supply of 775 MLD, is under way. As per an estimate, the population of Bengaluru, which is now 13 million, is expected to touch the 20-million mark by 2031, when the city will need 4,000 MLD.

- It is not just the IT professionals but several villagers in and around Makedatu are also eagerly looking forward to the proposed reservoir project.

Background:

- Originally mooted in 1948, the project had undergone several changes in its scope and coverage over the years. After the re-organisation of States in 1956, it was talked about prominently, especially in the early 1960s. Around the same time, Tamil Nadu came up with the **Hogenakkal project**.
- Subsequently, Makedatu was almost forgotten after the two States were locked in an acrimonious dispute over sharing the Cauvery river water.
- At one stage, the proposed project at Makedatu was viewed only as a hydroelectric project and the National Hydro Power Corporation (NHPC), a Central agency, had shown interest in taking it up as a package of four projects — two each in the two riparian States.
- According to the NHPC's plan, in addition to having a power plant of 400 MW at Makedatu, Karnataka would have one at Shivasamudram of 345 MW. In Tamil Nadu, plants were proposed in Rasimanal (360 MW) and Hogenakkal (120 MW).
- Since the late 1990s, the Central government, for about 10 years, had made several attempts to work out a consensus between the two States on the execution of the projects. Now, Karnataka is back to implementing Makedatu on its own.

What is Makedatu?

- As per the upper riparian State's plan, a **₹9,000-crore balancing reservoir has been proposed at Makedatu**, seeking to impound 67.16 tmcft (thousand million cubic ft.) of water.
- The project, which will submerge around 4,996 hectares of land, including about 4,800 hectares of forest and wildlife land, is expected to help Karnataka utilise an additional 4.75 tmcft of water allotted by the Supreme Court in its judgement in February 2018 to meet the drinking water needs of Bengaluru and neighbouring areas.
- It will have a **400 MW hydro power component too**. More importantly, the proposed dam will regulate the release of required quantum of water to Tamil Nadu on a monthly basis as per the Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal (CWDT)'s final award of February 2007, as modified by the Supreme Court, says the Karnataka government's pre-feasibility report of June 2019.
- The CWDT emphasised that "whenever any such hydro-power project is constructed and Cauvery waters are stored in the reservoir, the pattern of downstream releases should be consistent with our order so that the irrigation requirements are not jeopardised".
- This position was not disturbed by the Supreme Court in its judgment in February 2018, while reducing the share of Tamil Nadu from 192 tmcft to 177.25 tmc ft.
- Besides, the one constant refrain among proponents of the project in Karnataka is that a lot of Cauvery water goes waste to the sea, after it reaches Tamil Nadu. At least, the proposed reservoir will reduce the waste.

Why Tamil Nadu objects?

- But, the history of the dispute over sharing of the Cauvery water has provided several unpleasant experiences to Tamil Nadu, leading to a serious trust deficit with Karnataka.
- Tamil Nadu's grievance against Karnataka acquires more intensity as the track record of the latter in releasing water during the first four months of the water year (June to May) is seen as far from being satisfactory.
- These four months, which mark southwest monsoon too, yield much less rain for Tamil Nadu than many other States in the country because the State falls in the rain shadow region.
- This is one of the major reasons for the Tribunal and the Supreme Court to have ensured that Tamil Nadu gets approximately two-thirds (123.14 tmcft) of its annual quota (177.25 tmcft) of Cauvery water during the four months.
- But, the Central Water Commission data on Cauvery water realisation at Billigundlu shows that ever since the Tribunal's final order was published in the Centre's gazette in 2013, Tamil Nadu got its due or more than its quota during the period only in four out of nine years, even though its overall realisation exceeded the annual quota in six out of nine years.

Trust deficit:

- It is because of the trust deficit factor that Tamil Nadu has been opposing any discussion to be taken up by the Cauvery Water Management Authority (CWMA), a body created to ensure the implementation of the CWDT's final order and the Supreme Court's judgment of 2018, on the Mekedatu matter, despite repeated attempts by Karnataka to have the issue discussed.
- In fact, on many occasions, the CWMA had even included Mekedatu as an item on the agenda for its meetings including its last on February 11, 2022.

Detailed Project Report (DPR):

- In October 2018, Karnataka, which **had earlier submitted the feasibility report to Central Water Commission (CWC)**, got a glimmer of hope about the project when it received "in principle" clearance from the CWC's screening committee for the preparation of Detailed Project Report (DPR) of the project.
- The panel had provided a rider, saying that the CWMA's approval would be a pre-requisite for consideration of the DPR by the Advisory Committee of the Union Ministry of Jal Shakti.
- An agitated Tamil Nadu had approached the Supreme Court with an application to restrain Karnataka from preparing the DPR. It had also filed a contempt petition against officials concerned. The cases are still pending with the Court.

Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA):

- The Karnataka government, in January 2019, submitted the DPR on the Mekedatu Balancing Reservoir cum Drinking Water Project to the CWC, which, in turn, had forwarded it to the Authority.
- Five months later, the upper riparian State moved the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change with a proposal for getting its proposal cleared for the Terms of Reference (ToR) to conduct the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) study regarding the project.
- But, it suffered a setback there as the Ministry's Expert Appraisal Committee, in July 2019, took the stand that in view of the inter-State issues, an "amicable solution" needed to be arrived at between the two States. The Ministry had also decided that it would consider the proposal for ToR only after getting the clearances of the Union Ministry of Jal Shakti and the CWMA on the DPR. The Authority is expected to hold its meeting in June after the onset of southwest monsoon.

Opposition by various sections:

- The opposition to Mekedatu is not just from Tamil Nadu. A section of residents of Muthathi village in Mandya district of Karnataka is against the project as their village will get submerged if the reservoir becomes a reality.
- Four other villages — Sangama, Kongedoddi, Madavala and Bommasandra — will also go under the water.
- The opposition to the project is also from other sections of society too.

Alternative course:

Rejuvenation of lakes:

- Pointing out that there are 193 lakes in and around the city, Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, says the **best option to meet the local water demand is to rejuvenate the water bodies**; enhance storage capacity, and improve groundwater recharge. This assumes critical importance as a substantial portion of the city's water needs are met through groundwater.
- Removal of silt from the lakes, re-establishing interconnection among the lakes and getting rid of the encroachments are among the measures suggested by him.
- Keeping Bengaluru's requirement as 18 tmcft annually, the city, having a spatial extent of 740 sq km, gets annual rainfall of 700-850 mm, which, in turn, yields about 15 tmc ft. Also, wastewater, if properly treated, will give about 16 tmc ft. Optimal treatment of wastewater is possible through the integration of constructed wetlands and algal ponds at the inlet with the secondary treatment plants.