

The Cauvery water dispute is more than an escalated local issue, it is an urgent cautionary tale

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*The Cauvery water dispute is symptomatic of some of the biggest problems that India is grappling with, writes **Pragya Tiwari**. The water wars, farmer suicides and cynical identity politics that have grown from a legal battle over the sharing of a river's water have echoes all over the country. She writes that if India seeks to rise to the position of a global superpower it needs to learn from the current conflict.*



Two of India's largest southern states, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, are locked in a bitter legal battle over the waters of the river Cauvery – a battle that has been spilling over to the streets.

On the 12 September, Bengaluru, the capital of Karnataka and a city known as India's Silicon Valley, was beset by spectacular arson and rioting. Hundreds took to the streets in **violent fury** bringing work and life to a grinding halt. Estimated losses ran in excess of **Rs 20,000 crores**. Late last week, the threat of violence in Karnataka loomed large again. The **anxious state government** prohibited the assembly of large groups in public, liquor stores were shut, security forces patrolled the streets and the Central Government was asked to send more forces in a bid to stop the state from burning again.

The vigilance has helped curb the intensity of protests but has failed to stem them altogether. Earlier this week farmers took to the streets **again**, and at least as long as the **case is being heard** in the Supreme Court, the situation is likely to remain on the boil.



Image: Banks of River Cauvery. Credit: [Ashwin Kumar](#) CC BY-SA 2.0

The nature of the dispute between the states through which the river Cauvery flows is **complex** and dates back to agreements signed between the Madras Presidency and the Princely State of Mysore in 1892 and 1924. The 1924 agreement lapsed in 1974. 16 years later the Cauvery Water Dispute Tribunal was constituted, and after over a decade, in 2007, it came up with a formula for dividing water between states. The Central Government notified this award in 2013.

However, no party to the dispute is entirely satisfied with the award and the dissatisfaction has been exacerbated over the last couple of years due to below average rainfall. 2014 and 2015 were [drought years](#) for India and even though the nationwide average of monsoon rain in 2016 has been regular, roughly one third of the country has received [deficient rainfall](#) this year as well.

Karnataka, for one, has been largely dry and the district where the Cauvery originates is [likely to be declared](#) drought hit. Paucity of water has serious adverse implications for agriculture and has led to the states arguing over a distress sharing formula.

A lot has been written about the technicalities of the dispute and appropriate mechanisms of resolving it, and even more about the spectre of violence and breakdown of law and order. But shadowing these immediate stories, is the larger context of this deadlock and if, for a moment, we were to focus on the macro picture, we would find that the Cauvery water dispute is symptomatic of some of the biggest problems that India is grappling with.

Foremost of these is the scarcity of water as a resource. The population of India has more than tripled since 1951 but shares nearly the same 4000 billion cubic metres of water that it did at the time. There is little by way of effective water management across the country. The level of groundwater is [depleting at an alarming rate](#) as it continues to be tapped indiscriminately, and unchecked [river pollution](#) has rendered large quantities of available water unusable.

54% of India faces [high to extremely high](#) water stress and the national supply of water is predicted to fall 50% below demand by 2030. Yet, the country is not taking concrete steps towards becoming a low water economy. As urban centers and industries expand, more and more water is being diverted for their use. Meanwhile, farmers continue to grow water intensive crops across India, including in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, with rice dominating the produce in both states.

The result is widespread water wars of which the Cauvery water dispute is but one example. [Similar](#), intractable inter-state and intra-state arguments over river water are playing out in other parts as well. India's capital city is besieged by [water mafia](#) and armed guards and cops are being deployed in states like [Maharashtra](#) and [Madhya Pradesh](#) to prevent looting of water.

The second calamity feeding the frenzy over the water of the Cauvery is the deep-rooted and widespread agrarian crisis in the country. Nearly half of India's population is dependent on agriculture but the share of agriculture as a percentage of the GDP is low has been [declining](#).

Farmer suicides are a common part of daily news and the suicide rate in Karnataka has been the highest in a decade. Near absence of adequate insurance, steep fall in the prices of cash crops, delayed payments, a looming debt crisis, small land holdings, lack of transportation, and delayed or scarce inputs such as fertilisers and seeds are among several interrelated reasons why [2 out of 3](#) farm households are unable to make ends meet.

What makes matters worse is that only about 46% of all agricultural land is irrigated, while the rest of it depends directly on rainwater. Failed monsoons lead to failed crops, and failed crops often prove to be the proverbial last straw in the lives of struggling farmers.

Failed monsoons, in turn, are a national manifestation of the global crisis of climate change. The country is heavily dependent on seasonal rainfall and as that gets more and more unpredictable, floods and drought, alternatively wreak havoc on farmlands and lives in rural India.

However, the impetus to riot – courting arrest and danger, is not entirely explained by the despair in rural India. Cynical identity politics has become a mainstay of Indian democracy and there is no easier way to appeal to vote banks than to encourage animosity along pre-existing social faultlines– most often of caste, region and religion.

In this case, both states have a distinct [linguistic identity](#) and have nursed latent competition and rivalry. Chauvinistic groups in Karnataka are tapping into historical misgivings to fan discontent. As are major political parties– including

the ruling Bharatiya Janta Party that in its role as part of the Central Government should be vested in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu reaching a peaceful working solution but its state unit is opposing the release of the water to Tamil Nadu in order to be seen as safeguarding the interests of local farmers.

Hundreds have been arrested for creating disturbance in Bengaluru alone. Steep inequality in urban Karnataka, like in the rest of the country, makes it easier to incite violence and find volunteers who will take to the streets to loot and burn. The [story](#) of a 22 year old woman called C Bhagya from Bengaluru is a case in point. She is under arrest for allegedly leading a mob that burnt 42 buses in Bengaluru. Yet Bhagya is a daily wage labourer and it is at first hard to see why this issue would affect her enough for her to risk life and liberty. Her mother claims she was done with work by noon on the 12 September and agreed to riot only because she was promised Rs 100 and a plate of mutton biryani as inducement.

As vested interests — hoping to accumulate power and eventually capital — keep the discord alive, farmers and the urban poor such as Bhagya stand to lose more and more. But evidently, the state government cannot solve this issue merely by deploying armed guards. There is an urgent need to rethink policies relating to agriculture, water and climate change as well as develop and strengthen appropriate institutions that can respond effectively to the crises threatening India's future.

The Cauvery water dispute is more than an escalated local issue. It is an urgent cautionary tale. If India seeks to rise to the position of a global superpower as it ostensibly aspires to, it will need to pay immediate attention to the moral of this story.

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