Cauvery water is the main source for farmers of both states, if it should be shared distress should also be shared

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Public anger in Tamil Nadu has come to a boil after the Centre failed to meet a Supreme Court deadline to constitute a Cauvery management scheme to execute its verdict on the sharing of river water between riparian states. Mannargudi S Ranganathan, general secretary of Cauvery Delta Farmers Association and the original petitioner in 1983, talks to Julie Mariappan about the complexities involved and the attempt by farmers in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka to bridge the gap:

- Why is the Cauvery dispute spiralling and how do we end it?
  Centuries ago, there was less agriculture on the Karnataka side and the Cauvery water was almost totally available for farmers in Tamil Nadu. The Chola kings developed the delta region, and you can still see every channel in the delta named after a Chola prince or a princess.

  The chemistry of allocation changed after the enactment of the States Reorganisation Act, 1956, along linguistic lines. Karnataka insisted on taking more water. The mindset of people changed. A rude shock came in the form of land reform laws and water use by riparian states, in the wake of the well-known Helsinki Rules (on the uses of waters of international rivers, recognising equitable use of water by each basin state), depriving farmers their birth right. The dispute is psychologically-driven. All we need is the mentality to resolve the issue. This is easily possible. At least 38% of the total population of the (Cauvery) delta is landless labour, and a majority belong to scheduled castes. Agriculture is the only sector that can provide labour for millions.

- Was the Centre justified in asking for three more months to formulate the scheme?
  No. The final award of the tribunal of 2007 has the essence of the mechanism to distribute water. It clearly states that the mechanism is Cauvery Management Board (CMB). From the beginning, not a single solution given for management of Cauvery has been accepted by Karnataka.

  The Cauvery Monitoring Committee set up with bureaucrats from Union water resources ministry and that of basin states could do little, despite holding talks. On the suggestion of the Supreme Court that Cauvery needs a political authority controlled by the PM as its chairman and CMs of the riparian states as members, Cauvery River Authority was set up. It turned out to be futile. J Jayalalithaa called this toothless.
When you have a tribunal order which is explicit, why should they (Centre) call for a scheme?

- **What difference does the name make?**
  CMB and scheme are different. Scheme may mean that you evolve some other method.

  The tribunal has recommended this board on the lines of Bhakra Beas Management Board, which is successfully functioning for four states.

  Southwest monsoon is the most prevalent monsoon in the country, except in Tamil Nadu. The second monsoon, north-east, is destructive in the state, pouring for just a week or less. But Karnataka has been reducing the flow since 1983 during the short-term kuruvai (April-July) season, allowing only the surplus water to flow to Tamil Nadu. The (Cauvery) delta, which accounts for 40% of total production in the state, suffers.

- **How would you rate the success of your Cauvery Family involving farmers in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka? What is it doing to end the dispute?**
  Cauvery Family was constituted in 2003-04 to find a solution after the 1990s experience of destruction of properties of Tamils in Karnataka. A handful of people from various walks of life, under the leadership of Justice VR Krishna Iyer met in Bengaluru and decided to exchange knowledge and experience in agriculture and water use. We had advisers like the late Union water resources secretary Ramaswamy R Iyer. Both would have met not less than ten times. Cauvery Family is redundant today, but not destroyed. We are not functioning due to political interferences from Karnataka. How could we act when we have destructive elements around who look like they may even assault us? Having said that, members of both sides are still in touch with each other. We are called in during crises, but not invited during normal times.

- **What is your advice to farmers on the two sides and the state governments?**
  Crisis is not a permanent feature. Crisis is man-made and should be avoided. We should have integrity to put an end to man-made crises. Technology-based development is most needed for crisis management. That means don’t depend on paddy where there is lesser water. Try to have, as far as possible, alternative crops. A correct strategy based on experience and technology will make us live better in future.

  Cauvery water is the main source for farmers of both the states. If it should be shared, distress should also be shared. Not only mental and physical distress, but also economic distress.