EQUITY, ACCESS AND ALLOCATION

Conflict in the Bhavani

An increase in population, unplanned expansion in the command area of the river Bhavani in Tamil Nadu and the growing domestic and industrial demand for water have intensified competition among water users in the river basin.

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Bhavani is an important tributary of the Kaveri in its mid-reaches in Tamil Nadu. It originates in the Silent Valley forest in Kerala and flows in a south-easterly direction for 217 km till it joins the Kaveri at a town named Bhavani. The total area of the Kaveri basin in the state is about 43,000 km^2 of which the Bhavani sub-basin constitutes roughly 5,400 km^2. The Kaveri basin which drains Karnataka, Pondicherry, Kerala and Tamil Nadu comprises about 82,000 km^2 of which the Bhavani river basin is 6,000 km^2. A major portion (87 per cent) of this area is situated in Tamil Nadu.

The Lower Bhavani Project (LBP) is a major multi-purpose reservoir, mainly constructed for water storage and distribution to canal systems in the basin. The reservoir is also used for hydel power generation and fishing. Apart from this, anicuts like Kodiveri and Kalingarayan are used to divert water into different canal systems. These are old systems that have been in existence for several centuries. The upper part of the basin is not well developed and mostly depends upon wells and rain-fed agriculture.

Parched Land, Thirsty People

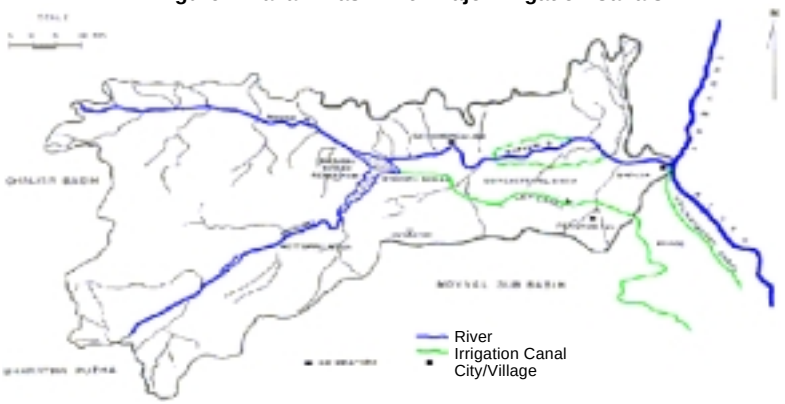
The river plays an important role in the economy of Coimbatore and Erode districts by providing water for drinking, agriculture and industry. Due to an increase in population, unplanned expansion in the command area, as well as the growing domestic and industrial water demand, the basin is already "closing" and stressed. As a result there is intense competition among water users and a sizeable gap exists between demand and supply in agriculture and domestic sectors.

Water shortage downstream is even worse due to a prolonged drought that has lasted several years. Out of about 1,700 mm^3 of normal water supply in the LBP dam the actual realisation declined to 1,275 mm^3 in 2001, 793 mm^3 in 2002 and 368 mm^3 in 2003. There was already a conflict of interest between farmers in the valley, the original settlers and the new command farmers of LBP. Old command farmers are entitled to 11 months water supply which they used for growing two or three paddy crops and annual crops like sugar cane, banana, etc, whereas the new ayacut farmers were only able to grow a single paddy or dry crop in a year.

As long as water supply in the dam was adequate the conflict too was subdued. But supply was at an all time low in 2002 and water was not released to the new command area. This has prompted the new ayacutdars to file a case against the state in the high court seeking water supply for at least one crop. Their contention is that water should be provided for the second crop in the old settlement only after meeting the requirements of the first crop in the new command as per the Government Order (number 2,274)issued as early as August 30, 1963. The court asked the Water Resources Organisation to arrive at a compromise formula for water sharing between the two areas. The department prepared a plan on the basis of size of command area – 60 per cent of the available water was to be given to the new ayacut (for irrigation of 80,000 ha) and 40 per cent to the old ayacut (about 20,000 ha). However, the old settlers objected on the grounds that they are entitled to 11 months of interrupted water supply as per their riparian rights. The impasse prompted local central ministers to bring the two sides to the negotiating table but this attempt to seek a solution also failed. The court in its interim order has now told the state to take prior permission from the court to open the system every season. Under the original regulation the canal was opened on April 18 for the old settlement and August 15 for the new ayacut.

The expansion of irrigation and hence demand has mostly taken place in upstream areas (and to some extent in old ayacut too) through unauthorised tapping of river water by direct pumping. Apart from direct pumping the other major issue is the unregulated exploitation of groundwater in the catchments, which the state is unable to control; this practice is actually encouraged by liberal institutional financing. Supply of free electricity by the state has also contributed to the growth of this problem. Downstream farmers did take the issue to court and even won a favourable judgment

Figure: Bhavani Basin with Major Irrigation Canals



but the ineffective bureaucracy has been unable to implement the court's orders.

Highs and Lows

Water conflicts played a major role in the 14th general elections held in 2004. There was a flurry of negotiations between politicians and farmers' associations in the basin.

The water-sharing problem between the old and new settlers had been compounded by growing demand from industry and the domestic sector. The drought in 2004 had added to the situation and there was a severe shortage of water in the dam. As election time approached, the ruling party ministers sought to build up their vote banks by trying to get the farmers to compromise; the effort failed and in the meanwhile, the drought worsened and a new dimension was added to the dispute. The water shortage in the region forced the farmers in the Kaveri delta to clamour for water. This group constitutes a sizeable electorate and since it was potentially more beneficial for the ruling party to get their support, water from the dam was released to the Kaveri delta, totally against the norms set for operating the reservoir. This angered the Bhavani basin farmers who chose to nominate an independent candidate. They named him, "Water Candidate" and this was a first in the electoral history of India. However this attempt too failed due to ideological differences among various agrarian groups and finally it was a candidate from the main opposition party in the state who won the farmers' vote.

This has helped the new command farmers to take up water issues with the irrigation bureaucracy and receive more water from the reservoir easily as the politician went on to become a minister in the central government. The new command farmers association has also taken the old settlers to court with help from the minister.

While the case is now pending in court, the water situation remains grim and the domestic water consumers – especially the middle class – have resorted to purchasing water for drinking purposes. Farmers affected by pollution have sought legal remedies and have succeeded in getting some of the polluting textile and chemical units shut down. These are the spontaneous actions of different stakeholders, with each group working in isolation to resolve the issue. Unfortunately it seems that farmers have more faith in the legal system than in other efforts.

The basin water management situation is precarious due to uncoordinated action and counteraction by various stakeholders. The situation is likely to get critical in future as the demand from the non-agricultural sector continues to grow rapidly. Under these circumstances, there is a need for an integrated approach and a mechanism for coordinated development of water resources in the basin with the participation of all those concerned, especially the state. This could be undertaken by an external agency who needs to get all parties – farmers, industrialists, domestic users and the state – together and establish a forum where solutions are sought through dialogue.

Stakeholders' Dialogue Meeting

A stakeholders' meeting was held on February 21, 2005, to get ideas and feedback from farmers, NGOs, government departments, industrialists, social activists and academicians. All of them have agreed to discuss these issues further and negotiate their way out of the tough situation. EPW

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