

Canals and Computations: Understanding Irrigation Engineering and Social Relations in the Kaveri Delta
August 18, 2017
French Institute of Pondicherry
Pondicherry

The deltaic irrigation system has a long history, ascribed to the medieval Chola state for its origins. It has pervaded popular consciousness of the people of the region, almost to mythical proportions. This coupled with the long-standing inter-state river water sharing dispute between Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, clouds the local realities of production and labour, often leading to parochial histories and politics.

Alternating years of drought and floods in the delta has been part of the labouring lives in the region. Locally, the function and status of the canals come alive for discussion, during periods of stress and crisis like in the case of extreme conditions of drought, this year, which for the first time has claimed many lives of hard working farmers in the delta. On the other hand, there has evolved a consensus or a resigned acceptance across all concerned, that irrigation infrastructure is synonymous to institutionalized corruption, manoeuvred by the political class, along with the executive. Political cynicism pervades the canals of the delta, while public works engineers continue their day to day computations to optimize scarcity. The farmers and workers of the delta continue to wait for water, year after year, a resource that dictates the rhythm of their working lives.

Historians and anthropologists have studied the political geography of the deltaic region, with rice and irrigation as two central aspects for state building and agrarian relations. The changes that this system went through during the colonial period however have been of interest only to engineer-practitioners as part of their official work for the Public Works Department. The creation of the river basin approach to public engineering work for the purpose of irrigation coincided with the increased demand for rice during the inter war period. It also accompanied a historical process of labour migration in this region to the plantation economies of South East Asia and its return during the first half of the twentieth century. The delta has continuously witnessed the flow of labour, since then, along with the changing fortunes of flowing water through its canals. We want to understand this changing relationship between flowing water and the working lives in the delta.

What has been the historical relationship between canal irrigation and the organization of physical settlements of peasants and labour around land and canals in the delta? How has this conditioned the social relations of rice production in this region? How can this relationship be understood through the prism of running water, flowing through a political geography of rice work?

Historians, studying rivers and floods, have pointed out control and regulation of moving water as central to the imagination of the colonial state. There has been a recent interest in the history of engineering as a profession in the making, during

the colonial rule. But engineering interventions for production as a practice, as conceived and executed by engineers and hydrologists since the inter war period probably requires critical attention.

How did engineers conceive their own work, in relation to land and labour? Did they ever peep out of their canals, to see who worked with the water and the plants, while they constantly measured and computed water in relation to its demand? Were abundance and scarcity the only categories in their practice, which marked a demand-supply regime of computing water? What relationship this had with the cost-benefit regimes of devising engineering projects, where economic efficiency and engineering control merged together for the purpose of 'productivity'?

How did their work feed into the fiscal planning for agricultural production? Maintenance work has witnessed the shifts from maramat to the contractor, from manual work to the hydraulic machine, all in anticipation of running water. How have these shifts conditioned the relationship between planners, engineers and the farm worker, historically?

How rational or optimal allocation calculations of the public works engineers, encounter localized hegemonies of caste and politics, that otherwise tend to influence the running water?

We invite you to come and contribute to the discussions where we have tried to bring together engineers with a substantial experience and investment in the delta irrigation system along with historians, social scientists and activists for a useful dialogue that will help us understand the issues at stake for the farmers and workers of the delta.

**Programme for the Workshop on
Canals and Computations: Irrigation and Social Relations in the Kaveri
Delta
August 18, 2017, Department of Social Sciences, IFP-Pondicherry**

- 10 am: Welcome: Frederic Landy, Director, IFP
Introduction: Audrey Richard, Head, Social Sciences, IFP
Objectives: Senthil Babu, IFP
- 10.30 am: Prof. Subbarayalu
A Historical Perspective on Irrigation and Society in the Delta
- 11.30 -11.45: Tea Break
- 11.45 am: Mr. V. Deivasigamani
Irrigation in the Delta: An Overview since the 19th Century
- 12-15 pm: Mr. S. Asokan
From Mettur to Poompuhar: How Irrigation Engineering works in
the Delta
- 1.15 pm: Lunch Break
- 02.15 pm: Mr. Komagan
Engineering in the Coastal Delta: Issues and Prospects
- 03.15 pm: Prof. P. Chidambaram
Farmers and Irrigation Management: Experiences of an Engineer
- 03.45 pm: Tea Break
- 04.00 pm: Round Table on Farmers and Engineering in the Delta

Discussants:
Dr. Ravi Bhalla, FERAL, Pondicherry
Mr. K. Balakrishnan, Tamil Nadu Vivasayigal Sangam
Mr. Somu Ilango, Thalaignayiru, Nagapattinam
Vidyasagar, Chennai
Geetha. V, Chennai
- 05.30 pm: Thanks by Vannessa Caru, IFP