Cauvery delta as a Protected Special Agriculture Zone

Why in News?

The Government of Tamil Nadu has announced that the Cauvery delta region will be declared as 'Protected Special Agricultural Zone' (PSAZ).

What does this announcement mean?

- By making such an announcement, the State's Chief Minister (CM) has recognised farmer concerns about hydrocarbon exploration.
- It also accorded primacy to food security.
- The State's CM has rightly sensed that the farmers' emotive and intense opposition can be ignored only at a political cost.
- This decision comes weeks after the CM protested the Centre's unilateral amendment of the Environment Impact Assessment Notification 2006.
- [Amendment - Exempted prior environmental clearance and public consultations for oil and gas exploration.]

Why this region is significant?

- The Cauvery delta region is the rice bowl of Tamil Nadu that comprises eight districts.
- This region produces 33 lakh tonnes of grains in 28 lakh acres.

Why there are protests in this region?

- **Protests** - This delta has seen multiple protests for a decade over methane, hydrocarbon, oil and natural gas projects, which required acquisition of fertile lands and well drilling.
- These proposals triggered fears of groundwater contamination.
- **Response** - In 2013, the then CM ordered suspension on coal bed methane exploration and production in Thanjavur and Tiruvarur and followed it up with a ban in 2015.
- But in 2017, the Centre signed contracts for hydrocarbon extraction from 31 areas of discovered small fields.
- Two years later it allowed Vedanta Limited to conduct tests for 274 hydrocarbon wells in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry.

Is such a zone new?

- Agricultural scientists have for long mooted such zones similar to special economic zones.
- Uttarakhand and Kerala already have them.
- Tamil Nadu now has to enact legislation to protect a vast region, largely in the coastal area, from industries that would affect farming.

What challenges does the State have?

- In 2017, a government notification delineated 45 villages in Cuddalore and Nagapattinam districts in the delta, as a Petroleum, Chemical and Petrochemical Investment Region.
- This notification eyed on over ₹90,000 crore in investments.
- The proposed PSAZ raises a question on this ambitious scheme.
- The government may have to brave central pressure and litigation from companies which pumped in money for exploration.
- The latest decision may have implications for the State's investment climate, as it recently closed the Sterlite Copper plant.
- But the intent to prioritise farmer interests and food security is beyond reproach.

Source: The Hindu

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