

## 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**

