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COOUM – A RIVER THAT RUNS THICK WITH GREED

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ABSTRACT

Once a revered waterway immortalized in sangam literature as the sacred cooum, Chennai's Cooum River was once a thriving trade route. Historically, it sustained commerce and spirituality, however unchecked urbanization and industrialization overtime since the 1960s, transformed it into a toxic drain. Successive state governments have encashed the river's misery as a cash cow, pumping public money since 2004. Instead of tackling the root causes like sewage drains, encroachments, and industrial dumping, funds have been utilized inefficiently into endless feasibility studies, overrun beautification drives, and kickbacks. The 2015 Chennai flash floods brutally exposed the systemic decay and leakages, yet budget allocations continue to balloon without much accountability and measurable impact. The Cooum's degradation is not just an environmental disaster but an economic and political apathy. To break this cycle, the state government must move beyond performative clean-ups and implement strict pollution check guidelines, independent river management, decentralized sewage treatment solutions along with transparent fund allocation. The Cooum is more than a lost river; it is a test of whether governance can serve public good over politician's profit. If political intent and staggering budgets couldn't clean it, perhaps transparency, sustained policy compliance and accountability can. Ultimately, the success story will revolve around the classic boating adventure we've all heard of, about Cooum reclaiming its legacy as a vibrant and thriving waterway, where communities once again connect through culture and recreation.

KEYWORDS: Toxic drain, Systemic corruption, Unchecked urbanization, Industrial waste, Sewage inflow, Transparency, Accountability, Waterway, Connect A river doesn't die by accident. It's murdered. And in the Cooum's case, the killers are still cashing the checks.

1. INTRODUCTION

The word ‘Cooum’ comes from ‘Coovlan,’ a Tamil term for a person skilled in groundwater knowledge. The river originates in Thiruvirkolam village, once hailed as the ‘Thames of South India.’ It is a bar-built estuary and features in the sacred *Koova Purana*. The Cooum connects with canals like the Buckingham Canal and Otteri Nullah, enhancing water flow and urban resilience. These canals once supported trade and irrigation and are now key to monsoon water management. Efforts are underway to restore their ecological role. The Cooum remains a symbol of Chennai’s rich cultural and hydrological heritage.

2. HISTORICAL VIEW

2.1 Ancient Era

The Cooum River has been mentioned as early as the 7th century by Thirugnana Sambandar, a revered Tamil Saivite poet. During the Sangam period, particularly under the Pallava and Chola eras, the river flourished as a vital transportation route. It was used extensively to carry goods to the port of Manarpha (modern-day Mylapore) for trade with Roman merchants.

2.2 Medieval Era

Inscriptions at a temple in Koovam reference the Battle of Takkolam (10th century), where the Chola prince Rajaditya faced defeat at the hands of Rashtrakuta king Krishna III. This period highlights the strategic and cultural importance of the river in medieval Tamil history.

2.3 Colonial Era

In 1639, the British arrived in Madras and established Fort St. George at the mouth of the Cooum River, marking the beginning of the British colonial era in the subcontinent. Subsequently, in 1806, they constructed the first Buckingham Canal. During the Great Madras Famine of 1876, Lord Buckingham, the then Governor-General, launched a ‘Food for Work’ campaign. As part of this initiative, the Adyar to Cooum Canal was constructed and completed in 1878. However, it is important to note that the British construction of the canal was driven by strategic interests rather than benevolence. The introduction of railways in 1856 had already made waterways less efficient, turning the canal project into a means of economic exploitation rather than a genuine effort to aid the local populace.

2.4 Post-Independence

After India’s independence in 1947, rapid urbanization and industrialization transformed the landscape. The Cooum River, once a thriving waterway, gradually became a dumping ground

for sewage and industrial waste. This environmental degradation was a consequence of poor planning and the unchecked expansion of urban areas.[1,7,6]

3. The Great Coovum Scam

For over two decades, the Coovum River's 'clean-up' has been one of Tamil Nadu's most expensive political dramas. Every election season, parties whether DMK or AIADMK promise to revive the river, allocate massive budgets, and then fail spectacularly. After estimated ₹5,000 crore spent since 2004, the Coovum remains a toxic sewer. The question isn't just 'why' it's still polluted but 'who benefits' from keeping it that way.

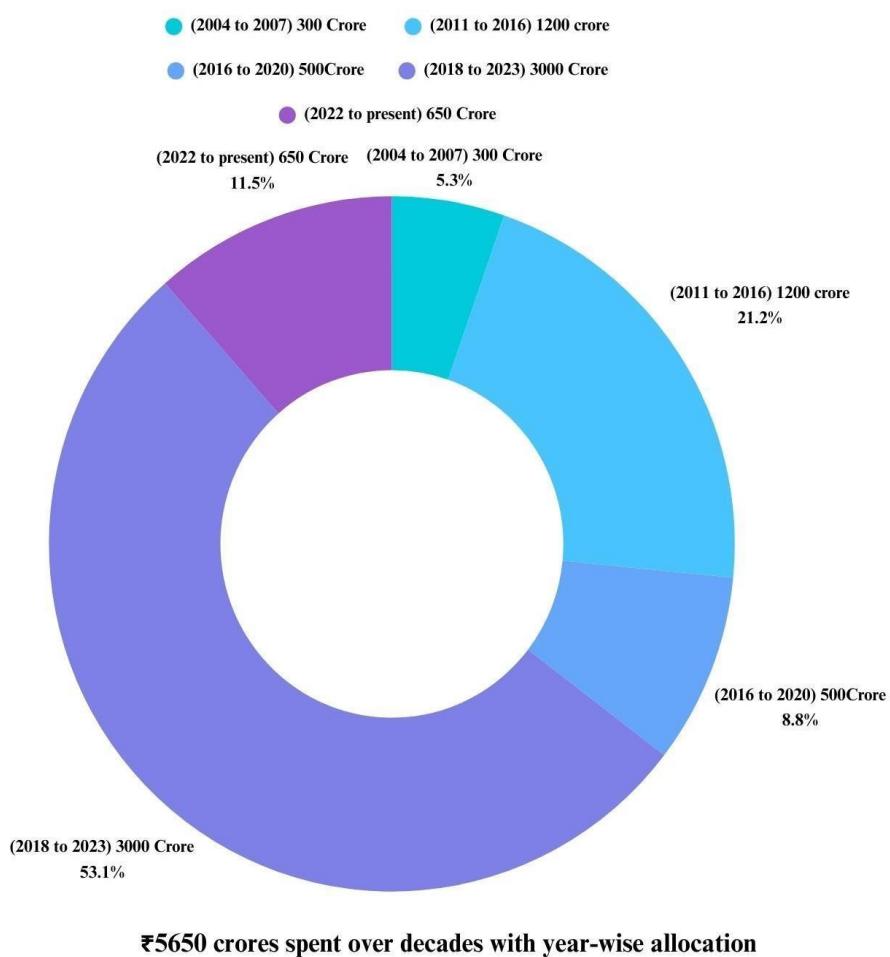


Table 1: Estimated money spent.

3.1 A Never-Ending Election Gimmick

1996–2001 (DMK Government)

The DMK started a project to clean and beautify the Coovum River, aiming to bring back its old charm. But the opposition said the solutions were only temporary and pointed out that factories were still polluting the river.

2001–2006 (AIADMK Government)

The AIADMK signed an agreement with Singapore to create a detailed plan to restore the Cooum. They promised a permanent fix. However, the DMK criticized it, saying the plan was fake and that the river's condition kept getting worse.

2006–2011 (DMK Government)

The DMK set aside ₹300 crore under the JNNURM scheme to divert sewage lines that were polluting the Cooum. But the opposition accused the DMK of corruption and said the money was used for other projects.

2011–2016 (AIADMK Government)

The AIADMK said they made progress on cleaning the river, but the DMK disagreed and pointed to ongoing pollution.

In 2013, The Hindu reported that 'Mission Clean Koovam' aimed to make the Cooum clean enough to bathe in by 2016, with help from international experts.

Opposition Criticism

In 2015, Stalin criticized the Tamil Nadu government for ignoring the Cooum, saying the water had become toxic due to neglect.

2016–2021 (AIADMK Government)

The AIADMK claimed they got ₹1,000 crore from the Central government under the National River Conservation Programme and said they would clean the river by 2020. However, the DMK said the money was being wasted on publicity instead of real work.

2021–Present (DMK Government)

After coming to power in 2021, the DMK announced the 'Singara Chennai 2.0' project, promising long-term solutions with help from Dutch experts.

The AIADMK responded by questioning Stalin's promises and reminded people that the DMK had not taken enough action when they were in power earlier from 2006. [11,12,13]

4. An Overview of Investments, Setbacks

In 2004, the Cooum River conservation project received a Rs. 300 crore budget, but efficient fund allocation concerns arose. The Audit Report (Civil) for 2006 raised suspicions about fund diversion. Rs. 3.48 crore was spent on unrelated activities, Rs. 34.84 lakh on inadmissible advances, and Rs. 5.98 crore on unnecessary purchases. Excessive paperwork,

officer delays, and inefficiencies plagued the project, which involved multiple departments. Relocating people along the riverbanks also contributed to its failure.

The Chennai City River Conservation Project (CCRCP), implemented from **2011 to 2016**, had a Rs. 1,200 crore budget. The Central Government contributed Rs. 492 crore, while the Tamil Nadu State Government covered the remaining Rs. 700 crore. This project focused on interceptor sewer lines to prevent untreated sewage and dredging to enhance the river's flood-carrying capacity. Various departments were inefficient, such as the Coastal Regulatory Authority, which delayed dredging. Coordination issues between the Chennai Rivers Restoration Trust and the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board delayed resettlement.

Resettlement was crucial, with Rs. 181.85 crore allocated. However, unproductive investments like sewerage improvements failed to prevent untreated sewage from entering the Cooum River. Consequently, Rs. 90.34 crore was spent on a diversion channel project, which was abandoned due to land acquisition difficulties.

The 'Restore Cooum' initiative, part of the Smart City Mission, allocated Rs. 500 crore (2016-2020). Despite removing over 23,000 tonnes of garbage, the project failed due to persistent garbage accumulation and inadequate stormwater drainage, worsening flooding. After the 2015 floods, dredging and flood-carrying capacity enhancements were made, but poor planning and bureaucratic hurdles hindered progress.

1. The Cooum River Eco-Restoration Plan (2018-2023, ₹3,000 crore) aims to intercept and divert sewage through modular sewage treatment plants and interceptor sewer lines. ₹1,200 crore was allocated, but sewer line connections to STPs remain incomplete, causing untreated sewage to flow into the river.
2. Riverfront Development includes such as 22 walkways, 17 cycle tracks, and 24 parks. A nature trail was created between College Road Bridge and Chetpet Bridge. However, 'excessive public spending' on fiber-reinforced plastic in elevated broadways is evident. Flood management and resettlement were allocated ₹500 crore each, but no solutions have been achieved.

The Kovalam-Cooum River Link Project, initiated in 2022 with a ₹650 crore Phase 1 budget, aims to develop water flow infrastructure between Kovalam and the Cooum. However, sewage management remains a challenge, with incomplete sewer line connections to the STP. The project, which began in 2018, has a ₹150 crore allocation.

A notable aspect of this project is the allocation of a portion of the budget for monitoring and evaluation activities. This includes regular water quality assessments, ecological surveys, and community feedback mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability in project execution. This mechanism appears promising.

Chennai's river restoration projects, which have garnered investments exceeding ₹5,650 crore, encounter challenges such as mismanagement, bureaucratic delays, and inadequate community engagement. The lack of effective mechanisms to track funds ('follow the money') undermines transparency,[2,3,4,5,8,9,10]

Table 2: Comparison Chart.

Project	Duration	Ruling Party	Outcome	Public Reaction	Criticisms
Cooum River Conservation Project	2004-2007	DMK (M. Karunanidhi as CM)	Failed - Only 10% sewage diverted; silt dumped on banks.	Mostly muted at first; occasional protests by local communities as the project stalled	Lack of planning, corruption
Chennai City River Conservation Project	2011-2016	AIADMK (J. Jayalalithaa as CM)	Partially completed - Walls built, but sewage inflows continued.	Initial optimism from residents, later overshadowed by disappointment once corruption allegations surfaced	Focus on walls, not sewage treatment; ₹220 crore „unaccounted“
'Restore Cooum' under Smart City Mission	2016-2020	AIADMK (Edappadi Palaniswami as CM) + BJP (Central funding)	Cosmetic changes - Only 2 km of 65 km „cleaned.“ Sensors installed but not maintained.	Locals felt let down by unfulfilled promises; limited community engagement during the project's rollout	Lack of focus on core issues; Corruption allegations
Cooum River Eco-Restoration Plan	2018-2023	AIADMK (Edappadi Palaniswami as CM) + BJP (Central funding)	Stalled - Only ₹400 crore spent on studies and temporary dredging.	Growing public skepticism about large funds with little visible outcome; activists demanded audits	Ambitious but poorly executed; Lack of transparency
Kovalam-Cooum River Link Project	2022-Present	DMK (M.K. Stalin as CM)	Ongoing - Slow progress; 30% work completed as of 2024.	Some optimism about a comprehensive approach; overshadowed by Frustration over repeated project delays	Slow progress; Contractor lobbying allegations

5. Way forward

1. For two decades and estimated ₹5,000 crore later, Tamil Nadu's Koovam River remains a toxic sewer because the current system a maze of inefficient boards (CMWSSB, TNPCB, GCC) is designed to fail, allowing politicians to play blame games while contractors loot public funds. The solution? A Koovam River Corporation (KRC) modeled after Chennai Metro Rail's success a tripartite partnership (Central/State/Public) with private expertise, transparent tenders, and real accountability. Unlike the failed Ganga Action Plan's bureaucratic approach, KRC would combine government funding with corporate efficiency and citizen oversight, using drone monitoring, whistleblower rewards, and strict prosecution of polluters. Global examples like London's Thames and Singapore's PUB prove this works. It's time to replace the scam-ridden 'board' model with an institution that treats the Koovam as Chennai's lifeline not a political ATM.
2. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) could offer a transformative model for revitalizing India's rivers. By issuing a tender to assign the cleanup and maintenance of a river to a private company similar to the National Highways model the government can leverage private-sector efficiency, innovation, and capital. Under this PPP framework, the company could recover its investment through a user fee over a 20-year period, ensuring accountability and aligning profit motives with long-term ecological outcomes. This approach would not only reduce the fiscal burden on the government but also create a self-sustaining system where public funds are safeguarded from inefficiencies. PPPs have already proven their worth in building India's world-class road network; applying this model to waterways could turn rivers into thriving revenue streams rather than ecological liabilities. By sharing risks and responsibilities, PPPs can deliver scalable, technology- driven solutions while ensuring transparency, ultimately transforming rivers into assets that benefit both communities and investors.
3. Just like Kerala has successfully implemented its Water Metro project, we too can explore a similar initiative once the Cooum River is cleaned and restored. With the right infrastructure and connectivity, the river can be transformed into an efficient water transport corridor, linking different parts of the city. Water transport isn't just scenic it's smart. It's significantly cheaper than road or rail. In fact, transporting one ton of cargo by water costs only around ₹0.50 to ₹1, making it one of the most cost-effective modes of transportation. This could ease road congestion, reduce fuel usage, and offer an affordable, sustainable commuting option for both people and goods.

They say the river was murdered but history will remember Who fought to bring it back to life.

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