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Cauvery row: Let us dive into facts and figures

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Economic Times in [ET Commentary](#) | [Economy, India](#) | [ET](#)**By Veena Srinivasan**

Recent developments over the Cauvery waters have gripped the public imagination like no other contemporary environmental issue. The following WhatsApp message showed up on a group a few days ago: 'The problem with the Kaveri (sic) issue is lack of facts, more of emotion and opinion. Let's look at the facts and figures.'

The message then presented a set of numbers. The problem is, it's surprisingly difficult to verify these numbers on water availability in the Cauvery, and even harder to make sense of their implications.

Traditionally, government departments have taken the position that data on water flows, reservoir levels, cropping patterns and water use were best kept in the hands of experts.

Tribunal negotiations were historically conducted behind closed doors with each side presenting their case in private. Water data is increasingly being made available in the public domain. Yet, when claims go viral via social media, these are virtually impossible to fact-check. It remains difficult to ascertain how much water is available to whom and where.

One problem is that state governments remain the sole source of information. When conflicting, incomplete or inconsistent data are published by riparian states, there is little that can be done.

Field studies reveal significant differences between officially published data and independent sources such as satellite imagery analysis. A second problem is that the data available are fragmented and not in a form that is digestible.



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Raw data alone aren't useful. To piece together a coherent story, we need good science built on a bedrock of data.

There are indications that the historical lack of access to hydrologic data has hampered hydrologic research too. Researchers in the West use publicly available gauging station data to build models and reconstruct historical water flows through wet and dry years. These models are then used to test a range of scenarios of climate, land use, water technologies, markets, etc.

In contrast, a Google Scholar search reveals only a handful of hydrologic sciences papers on the Cauvery over the last decade. In the absence of solid data and models, claims about whether rainfall has declined due to deforestation, whether plantations and groundwater pumping have reduced river flow, whether drip irrigation, urbanisation and watershed development have resulted in decreases or increases in water in streams, cannot be substantiated.

In contrast, the trend globally has been towards full transparency via open data initiatives.

The Mekong River Commission and Murray Darling Basin are excellent examples of such international and intra-national initiatives that aim to create a shared understanding on the state of the river basin.

In contentious basins, the data may even be collected via a joint monitoring protocol. Both sides are present and sign off on the flow readings. With reliable data that both sides agree on, dozens of scientific studies are published.

In recent years, attempts are being made to go even further. Computer-Aided Dispute Resolution (CADRe) uses sophisticated visualisation techniques to help stakeholders on different sides of a dispute achieve a shared understanding of the facts and linkages. This, in turn, allows the conversation to move from disputes over facts to agreement on principles of sharing.

We live in a brave, new world where there are emerging opportunities to change the science policy paradigm.

More data is being placed in the public domain and new sources of information from private sources (satellite imagery, citizen science, low-cost sensors) are becoming available that will allow scientists to contest and validate published data. One approach would be to place as much data as possible in the public domain.

Allow the data to be triangulated from multiple unrelated sources and collaborate with graphic artists to make the information transparent and understandable. The government has already taken the first baby steps through India Water Resources Information System (WRIS), the online water data portal. It's up to scientists and civil society to do the rest.

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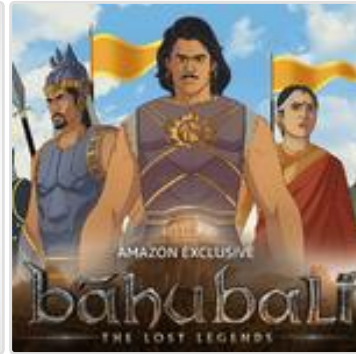
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