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Cauvery row shows why India needs a low-water economy

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All over the country, every day, there are a million conflicts around water, right from the jostling over the local tap to the sharing of big rivers. Once in a while, one spills from the courts into the streets and, amplified by media, flows across the troubled conscience of the nation. The Cauvery dispute is only one of these conflicts, though more severe than most.

Why has the country's water crisis spiralled seemingly out of control? What can we do about it?

First of all, we must wake up to the fact that water is an increasingly scarce resource in India. A population that has quadrupled since 1951 shares the same 4,000 BCM (billion cubic metres) of India's rainwater, in the context of a growing economy. So we have to better manage this finite, though renewable resource. If you total up the expressed demand in the Cauvery basin, for example, it is more than twice of what is actually realisable. There is no way out of this mess then, without reducing the demand on water.

After all, it is not just inter-state rivalries that cause a political headache. Most states are dealing with upstream-downstream conflicts well within their borders. Each time the government plans large-scale basin transfers, for example, those communities whose water will be diverted quickly rise up in organised protest. Feeding large urban agglomerations with western-style water delivery systems causes particular disruption. Bengaluru cannot take more water from the Cauvery, so it wants water from the Netravathy, far, far away. Mangalore district, which depends on that river, raises loud alarm bells. Cities must respond by using

local resources first, including urban wastewater, to immediately reduce their demand on distant water.

Secondly, we must acknowledge that we can no longer take rainfall patterns and river flows for granted. Climate change- driven rainfall variations are happening just when we have reduced base flows in rivers due to over-extraction of groundwater.

We can hardly talk of perennial water any more, when so many of our dammed rivers are so polluted and do not even reach the sea. Updated, reliable data on this recent variability, decline and pollution levels must be out in the public domain.

Unfortunately, many state governments do not put out enough water data, especially on river basin flows, because of the heightened nature of political conflict over sharing. Ironically though, transparent data sharing will allow for an enlightened self-interest to create the necessary trade-offs that will benefit everyone in the medium term. We have seen this time and time again in participatory groundwater management, when communities armed with data on their invisible aquifers are able to create social processes to limit the use of water to fit the annual availability. This they did through pooling of bore wells, changes in crop patterns, social fencing for drinking water, and so on.

Can larger societies come together in a similar fashion to manage demand and reduce conflict? To recharge aquifers, to rationalise water intensive crops, to treat and reuse all wastewater, for example? Or to innovate smaller, flexible water storage systems instead of continuing with our abysmally under-performing big dams?

We have some fine traditions of being a low-water society, embedded in perspectives of ecological and inter-generational justice. The imperative now is to become a low-water economy, coming equally from the urgent need to create economic prosperity for all. Just as countries talk of a low-carbon economy to reduce fossil fuel dependency and mitigate the threats of climate change, India must lead the way now as a low-water economy. We have to re-imagine and overhaul water consumption patterns to optimise every drop, across all competing uses — agriculture, industry, and urban and rural domestic needs.

Thirdly, we have long known that our governance and institutional systems for water need a radical rethink. We especially need integrated institutions for surface water and ground water, which have for too long been treated separately. Some significant changes in the architecture of water governance are being currently framed at the Centre for just this purpose, and hopefully, states will adopt these proposed changes quickly, so that water can be governed more wisely, both for quantity and quality.

For water conflicts can be as much about quality as quantity, with tens of millions of people at the risk of pollutants not only like arsenic and fluoride which are geogenic, but also industrial pollutants like lead and other heavy metals, which are showing up in the food we eat. Ironically, as Bengaluru participates in fights over the Cauvery, it has managed to pollute and destroy two rivers — the Vrishabhavathy and the Arkavathy, flowing right in its backyard! If conflicts on quality are not to escalate sharply, the pollution control boards need to be radically restructured and made far more accountable to the public interest.

Let's squarely face the truth. We cannot reduce conflicts like the Cauvery dispute without addressing the underlying issues of spiralling demand, missing information and neglected institutions. Citizens will have to force elected representatives to create the new political paradigm for all the changes needed. We need a road map towards a low-water economy. Peacefully and perennially, then, the Cauvery can flow.

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