

Making Sense of the Cauvery River Water Dispute

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Abstract

Much work on river water disputes focuses on international rivers where the conflicting parties are nation-states. The hegemonic theory of power or more recently regime analysis has been applied in such cases. In this paper, my focus is on the south Indian river Cauvery and the inter-state water sharing dispute where the hegemonic and regime theories are of limited help. I approach the issue from collective action framework. River water disputes are often caused by asymmetry, contested property rights, difficulty in enforcing such rights, conflict of uses and a lack of willingness to compromise. A co-operative outcome may be difficult to achieve in such circumstances. In my view, a co-operative outcome in the case of disputes such as the Cauvery dispute depends on three main factors: the fragility of ruling coalition in the Federal government; the extent to which the claims of river waters can be elevated from those of immediate riparian peoples to those of an entire state; the dominance of a masculine approach to river waters compared to the alternatives. From a collective action analysis, it appears that the existing Interstate Water Disputes framework militates against a co-operative solution. An alternative would be to move away from the existing absolute (volumetric) riparian rights to an allocation of relative rights in terms of a certain percentage of water. This will work only if an independent water resources monitoring institution is designed. In a sense, the monitoring function should be de-politicised. However, this is unlikely to happen as this diminishes the scope of riparian state governments to use the river water dispute to leverage influence with the federal government. Some issues for further exploration are identified.

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