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CLIMATE ACTION NEEDS AN UPDATED OFFICIAL VOCABULARY

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A severely-inundated area following heavy rains in Tamil Nadu's Thoothukudi. | Photo Credit: ANI

Multiple districts in south Tamil Nadu received an astonishing amount of rainfall earlier this week. In 24 hours from 6 a.m. on December 17, Thoothukudi recorded 361.4 mm and Tiruchendur 679 mm. What was until December 16 a northeast monsoon deficit for the State swung overnight to a 5% excess.

That these areas didn't suffer as much damage as Chennai (although the final picture isn't yet clear) is only because they're smaller and less built-up. Chennai received 500 mm from noon on December 2 to pre-dawn on December 5, due to Cyclone Michaung, and suffered greatly.

The question of what we consider to be 'devastating' is deceptively simple because of the shifting baseline syndrome. A syndrome is a collection of symptoms, and this one exemplifies those pertaining to memory, community knowledge, and language.

For example, a community may consider a particular amount of forest cover — defined, say, by the knowledge handed down to them — to be the 'original'. But the community may be unaware that at an earlier time, there was greater forest cover and what it has inherited is really a small remnant.

Shifting baselines cause us to underestimate how much we have lost over time. This distortion subsequently affects how much we believe we have of that resource, how much there can really be, and how much loss we are prepared to tolerate.

As the impacts of climate change become clearer, we confront a different kind of shifting baseline, one that stretches into the future. For example, on a particular emissions pathway, what we considered 'awful' yesterday — relative to the situation a decade earlier, say — might really have been 'average', with 'awful' to come years later as a climate system matures.

This in turn raises questions of our language and memorialisation.

Our meaning-making about the future is currently led by words that come to us as jargon from reports of various government and international agencies. For example, the worst warming

scenario the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change contends with is RCP 8.5. Countries are on one of five possible Shared Socio-economic Pathways (SSPs). Within India, ‘extremely heavy’ rainfall is any amount greater than 204.4 mm in 24 hours. Heatwaves are based on three conditions, two of which are deviations from a historical average and the type of local topography.

As such, these definitions are restricted to people who have a conceptual understanding of various terms. Governments translate them to actions and decisions on the ground through early-warning policies. But these are also often imperfect, such as the definitions of heatwaves not including the wet bulb temperature or indoor living conditions and rainfall alerts not accounting for real-estate development.

All other words that don’t find mention in these definitions and reports are potentially susceptible to shifting baselines.

Revising our baselines as we go along is desirable, but doing so too rapidly could get in the way of reliable communication and be resource-intensive as well. People might collectively remember something terrible they experienced, such as 500 mm of rain and 750 mm of rain, both in 24 hours, plus their respective effects, but without helpful language in the official record, only be able to differentiate between the two as time passes based on their memories.

An official vocabulary, or officialese, is crucial because it gives us a way to translate between knowledge of scenarios that are otherwise trapped within communities, by languages that typically evolve under the influence of unrelated constraints. Officialese that’s localised, say by State-level laws or the State government, is better because then people can use it to memorialise their lived experiences with more context about the bigger picture.

Officialese also needs to be updated as often as possible. Consider, for example, the effects of our sense of what constitutes ‘bad’ pulling away from definitions put together at a time when it was less severe, reducing trust in institutions charged with helping people prepare for an impending weather anomaly. For 24-hour periods, the India Meteorological Department has one classification for more than 204.4 mm of rain: ‘extremely heavy’. But while both Chennai on December 4 and Thoothukudi on December 17 received ‘extremely heavy’ rainfall, equating them would be laughable.

Of course, the State’s own accountability is important to understand ‘devastation’ inasmuch as it relates to the human toll.

For example, the State’s response to a disaster is determined to an important degree by the medical certificate of cause of death (MCCD). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indian government’s policy for a significant period was to list a comorbidity, e.g. heart disease, as the cause in MCCDs even if a person died with COVID-19, even though the viral disease was known to exacerbate some comorbidities.

Similarly, State government officials descending on Ballia in Uttar Pradesh in June were eager to attribute a spate of deaths there — that a medical superintendent had blamed on heat — to comorbidities instead.

Officialese also has significant global implications. Developing countries have pushed back on developed countries’ efforts to exclude India and China from the ‘loss and damage’ fund by asserting that money from the fund should be disbursed based on the severity of climate-related disasters rather than where they occurred.

For this to be possible, we need new official words to describe unprecedented amounts of rainfall, lest India find itself struggling to explain why it could deal with ‘extremely heavy’ rainfall on December 4 but not on December 17.

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