Monsoon Journalism: on Slippery Ground

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Considering the role that the monsoon plays in our socio-economic life, it is a healthy and encouraging trend that more media coverage is being given to this item. The public interest in this subject also seems to have increased thanks to efforts of organizations like India Meteorological Department (IMD) to make more information available in the public domain (see, for example, www.imd.ernet.in, www.cmmacs.ernet.in).

Like any technical subject, however, reporting on monsoon requires certain degree of competence, lack of which can result in severe misreporting. Matters can become worse when the reporter presumes to be competent to interpret the facts in his/her own way.

A prominent example is a recent report on monsoon forecast by Mr Ashok Sharma in the New Indian Express (July 17, 2003). The sensationalism exhibited by the heading and the content of this report is pathetic and exhibits the total lack of competence on the part of the reporter to write on this technical subject.

To begin with, the reporter claims that the IMD forecast has been proved wrong. This appears to be the reporter's own long-range forecast! After all, the (primary) IMD forecast is for the all-India rainfall for the entire summer monsoon (June-September) season. How has the reporter decided on its accuracy in the middle of July?

Even considering rainfall till the date of reporting the IMD forecast is not far off to be declared wrong.

The reporter takes some time (and space) to highlight certain aspects in which C-MMACS forecasts have (reportedly!) gone wrong. The reporter, however, is surprisingly mute about aspects for which C-MMACS forecasts have been right this year so far.

To begin with, it may be a safe conclusion (but technically very wrong, for reasons given above) that the Neural Network forecast of 15% deficit given by C-MMACS will prove to be wrong. Although we have two more months of monsoon left yet, the trend is in the direction of a normal monsoon.

C-MMACS, this year, however, also came up with its high-resolution (50 km × 50 km) long-range (based on initial data April 1, 2003) experimental forecasts of monsoon of 2003, a pioneering effort in the country. Some of the successes of the C-MMACS experimental dynamical forecasts are:

(a) Advance (April 2003) forecast of delayed (June 6, 2003) onset for monsoon of 2003.

(b) Severe deficit in the southern belt covering Karnataka for the month of July (fig 1)

The list could be much longer, but we invite the interested reader to visit the C-MMACS website. These however, find no place in Mr. Sharma's report, while he highlights the failures (not all of them acceptable). Has the reporter found a European (or American) forecast which has got everything right, say even at 100 km × 100 km scale (C-MMACS forecast is at 50 km × 50 km scale with more than a two-month lead for June rainfall and more than a 3-month lead for July rainfall)?

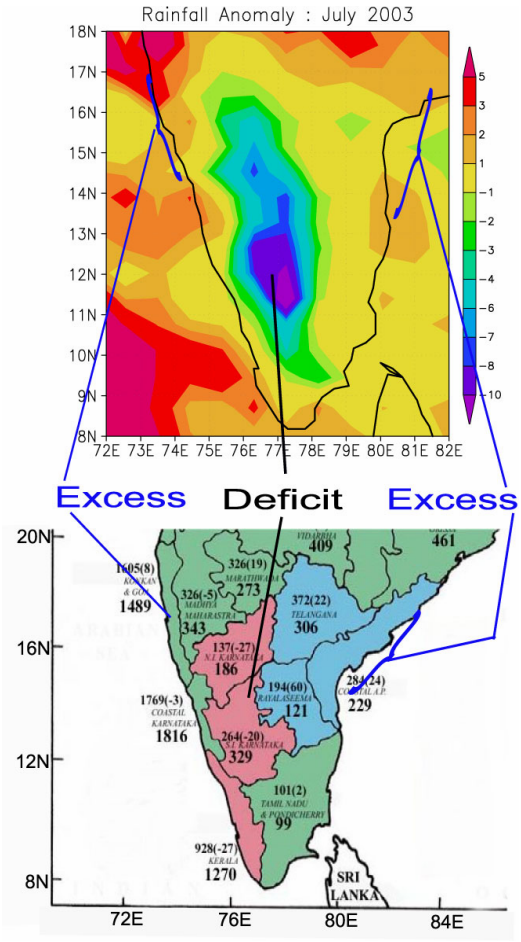

Figure: Structure of monthly rainfall anomaly (with respect to 11 year climatology) for July 2003 from experimental forecast (top panel) and the structure of cumulative rainfall and anomaly for June 1st – July 23rd,2003 period from observation (India Meteorological Department). The significant departure over the southern belt is clearly seen in both observation (~ -25%) and the experimental forecast. The experimental forecast also shows the small areas of excess over eastern coast around 13^{O}N and over the western coast.