

Good Intentions and the Way to Hell

It is said that the way to hell is paved with good intentions. Well- intentioned, but unwise policies can devastate local economics.

The plight of farmers and labourers in Kolleru area of Andhra Pradesh – the low land between Krishna and Godavari deltas – is a striking example of misplaced policies and institutional mistrust causing disproportionate damage to the economy. Three decades ago, there was hunger, malnutrition, disease and distress in Kolleru area. Though located between two great deltas enjoying irrigation over a century, Kolleru area suffered drought and flood alternately. Being at the tail end of both irrigation systems, the farms were dry when there was no rain; and being low lands, they were inundated when it rained. Severe flooding caused devastation in 1964, 1976, 1983, 1986 and 1989.

Since the 1970's the government actively encouraged the farmers take to fish farming: loans were granted, training was imparted, and technology was transferred. In time, a thriving pisciculture led to rural prosperity. Adversity was converted into opportunity, and the wasted drain water became a source of wealth creation. Now, over 600,000 tons of fish are produced in that area valued at Rs. 2000 crore, supplying food to the rest of India. The sale of fish from Kolleru never exceeded 15,000 tons earlier. In this densely populated area, people's livelihoods, incomes, health, economy, and state revenues – all improved dramatically.

Such high growth led to some aberrations. At times, with the connivance of officials, farmers encroached upon drains, and obstructed flood flow, leading to inundation. Several big farmers and entrepreneurs saw an opportunity in pisciculture, and started taking large tracks on lease, paying annual rental of Rs. 20,000 per acre typically. There are vague complaints of possible ecological impact of pisciculture. All these have practical answers: encroachment should be evicted from drains, and the channels cleared of silt and weed; small farmers should be strengthened, and big farmers should be evicted from government lands traditionally cultivated by local farmers, and now leased out; industrial and municipal pollution in the upper reaches should be stopped; and pisciculture practices should be improved reducing dependence on fertilizers.

Instead of such rational policies, the government, which had earlier actively encouraged pisciculture, now decided to throw the baby with the bath water. Following years of uninformed media campaign, the state, without genuine consultation with the local people, declared an area of 300 sq. km as a wild life reserve, on the pretext that migratory birds including Siberian cranes needed untouched wetland. Fish and birds together actually form a mutually beneficial relationship: bird droppings make natural fish feed; and fish plankton and the resultant ecosystem feed birds. Both growth and nature could be sustained by wise policies. Instead the misplaced policy has the effect of snatching poverty from the jaws of prosperity!

About 35,000 acres of fertile land, including about 10,000 acres of land granted to the local dalits and backward classes is now part of the wildlife reserve. In this area alone, the annual fish production is about Rs. 500 crores. The livelihoods of over 100,000 people in the area are now jeopardized. All this, without any land acquisition or payment of compensation! A fair compensation would be of the order of Rs. 5000 – 7000 crores. All rights of farmers over their own lands are practically extinguished and they are directed to resort to 'traditional fishing', and agriculture without any chemicals. Fish tanks are destroyed in great haste. Drains are left unattended, increasing chances of inundation in upper reaches. Pollution from industry and municipalities is not stopped. But agriculture and pisciculture are blamed for ecological damage. If agriculture is unacceptable on grounds of pollution, there is farming and pisciculture in 12,00,000 acres in the upper reaches, and the waste water drains into Kolleru. It is absurd to think of curtailing agriculture in this rich rice and fish bowl with over 3 million population! And if such 'pollution' is harmful, then the wild life reserve in the lower reaches has no meaning.

State's folly is now compounded by institutional mistrust and logjam. Under the law, the state government can declare an area as a wild life reserve. Once such notification is issued, all authority vests in the Union, and the State cannot correct its follies. Even the Union executive has no real power, as the wild life board and its standing committee take over. Even they cannot correct the mistakes, as the Supreme Court decided that all proposals for changes even if approved by the State, Union and the wild life board, should be cleared by it. The Court itself created sixteen empowered committees with extraordinary executive powers. In the Kolleru case, a few well-meaning activists went to court, and obtained orders for demolition of fish tanks even before land is acquired. Neither compensation for lands, nor a comprehensive package of rehabilitation entered the picture. Agriculture is now criminalized, as par with smuggling or counterfeit currency. Now, even as politicians slowly recognize their folly, they are helpless to correct the mistakes. A system of alibis is created with everyone claiming helplessness. When the region is finally devastated economically without commensurate benefits to society, no one can be held accountable.

This is a classic case of chopping off the head for a simple headache. Can we disentangle the mess we created and promote rational policies and sustainable growth? It will take years of dedicated efforts, wisdom and restraint from all players before some sanity is restored to our polity. Meanwhile, will somebody, anybody the State, Union, the Courts – understand the pain, anguish and needless suffering inflicted on the helpless population of Kolleru and protect their rights and livelihoods? Or will we add to the growing rural alienation, unrest, and resort to violence, which have bedeviled our skewed growth?

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