

IS FLYING BLIND AN OPTION?

By Karuna Gopal

If there were hospitals for cities, the critical care units will surely be occupied by lakes. A historian of Herodotus caliber is not needed to chronicle how lakes in Hyderabad ended up in this sorry state — especially the Hussainsagar.

It is common knowledge that this iconic lake has been violated in more ways than one — lake bed illegally invaded and ravaged, industrial waste force fed through nalas — flora and fauna asphyxiated to death. Even as cadmium, lead and mercury are eating away at its innards, the water body is ejecting carcinogens into the food chain. Once a resplendent lake, today it is but a refuse dump that is spewing toxins instead of spawning economic prosperity.

Anatomy of abysmal growth

Since 1995, there has been a slew of PILs seeking court's intervention for protecting lakes in general and Hussainsagar in particular. Progress was abysmal in the absence of a regulatory framework and institutional arrangement for stewardship. Hope sprouted in the hearts of citizens in 2004 and again in 2008 when JBIC (Japan Bank for International Cooperation) and JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) announced financial assistance of INR 300 and INR 370 crore respectively for lake cleaning. The hope was soon snuffed out due to poor implementation of the project and dismal progress on ground. Reason? As the lake is managed by a dozen agencies, the lake became a victim of "Jurisdictional Schizophrenia".

These agencies were not only inefficient but they also failed to collaborate — a common malaise of city administration. Can a handful of activists, how much ever passionate, navigate a huge transformation? The success of HMDAs recent clarion call for lake conservation depends on how many crusaders and foot soldiers root for the cause and how robust the delivery mechanism is.

Here's a snapshot of the requirement

A million text messages were sent to residents and officials in China protesting the planned US \$1.4 billion chemical plant near the center of Xiamen City in 2007. This massive text messaging for environmental protection forced the city government to halt the plant construction. Can the youth of Hyderabad, adept at social media and viral communication, mimic the Chinese protest? How many citizens of Hyderabad know that lack of sewerage system in the city periphery is responsible for lake pollution? How many can associate growth of the city boundaries with toxins in a lake? Who among us is willing to educate the common man?

When China invested billions of dollars to combat pollution in its third largest freshwater lake, Taihu, it failed to stop industrial waste from entering the lake. As Taihu was a source of drinking water, millions in China experienced water shortage. It spurred activism demanding action and today people in China are arguing for green GDP. How many advocates of economic progress in our city know or even care that that lake toxicity is a result of their own flawed waste management measures?

CSE's report (Centre for Science and Environment) says that INR 1,076 crore is required to treat contaminated water and INR 4,622 crore to fix the problem of water shortage. Today our city is forced to pump water from almost 200 kilometres away from rivers Krishna and Godavari. Infrastructure worth thousands of crores is being built. In addition to this, Hyderabad water board has to spend crores of rupees annually on power for pumping water. Today, even as AP Transco and water board have locked horns over unpaid electricity dues running into crores, some glorify this infrastructure as iconic and worthy of showcasing to the world — sad but true. Who will demystify and shatter this perception?

Canada and the United States have long understood that the "Great Lakes" are a national treasure. Both nations are investing billions of dollars to clean up the lakes and leverage them as a vital part of their regional economic infrastructure. Leaders there know that lakes provide a unique competitive advantage and create jobs. In our city, which segment of the society is worried that the city's competitive advantage is getting eroded? How many industrialists here are savvy enough to see that doing business is directly linked to the water resources of our city? Who among us will be the torch bearers?

Action Imperatives

Cities around the world that had visions to capitalize on the economic assets created City Economic Development Agencies. We must also have an Economic Development Agency for Hyderabad. It should have an institutional set up that withstands vagaries of leadership change. Like a ring fenced special purpose entity it has to be financially and administratively independent. We have to evolve extreme collaboration protocols for sustained action. Any effort falling short of these audacious goals will be have to be shunned. We have to get past baby steps, and play learning. It's time for a bold vision, concerted action, robust institutional structure, crusading and smart stewardship.

Has flying blind ever been an option for any city?

