

Deteriorating pollution reminds urgency to relook our approach to environment

Dr N Bhaskara Rao

Delhi's Lt governor told the Supreme court of India last week that he was not aware that court permission is needed for felling over 1100 trees in the Ridge area and that no one had brought that fact to his notice until after. This he told the Supreme Court in an affidavit. The high ranking officer involved in this episode has been shifted to the Prime Minister's office from Delhi Development Authority.

A week earlier 500 tribals of 13 villages in Surguja district were gheroed and injured by over 500 police and forest personnel for protesting to save over 6000 trees being cut to expand an electricity line in Chhattisgarh state.

In the same week nearly two dozen farmers in Punjab were arrested by police at the instance of the court for not complying with their order on not cutting wheat or paddy stubble as such burning was argued causing pollution in Delhi.

Last week Supreme Court also reminded that every citizen has a fundamental right to environment free of pollution and to live in a pollution free environment and reminded failure of government to create the machinery for such support. Such pious observations of courts over the years made no difference on the state of environment in the country. In fact, neither cognisance nor awareness is there of provisions of the Acts related to environment.

Instances of unconcern of authorities for trees in declared forests and in the name of one or other "project" trickle down in social media every now and then from all over the cities and states as if the story is same. Similar has been the fate of lakes and water bodies in cities despite floods remind every rainy season of devastation due to such neglect. Are we concerned?

If this is the kind of concern about forests, why search for causes for raising temperature and pollution levels in cities of India. Is this not appalling or apathy or unconcern of the Governments and elected representatives?

India's priorities and performance in protecting environment has been bewildering. That was why I called my 2021 book on the subject as "Green Puzzle". Approach of successive governments has been one of one step forward and two steps backward. **Unshackling protective initiatives** of the past few decades has become a preoccupation recently to the extent of government being accused as an "adversary". Environment Protection Act has already been reduced to shambles. The latest in July 2022 was to officially remove punitive steps for violating with a penalty instead of imprisonment as provided.

A country whose culture and customs are nature loving, and which was foremost in the world fifty years ago to come up with environment protection policies, is being ranked in global environment index year after year as **“fourth worst country in performance”**. How come? What lead to this?

Have we taken a serious and dispassionate review of the state of affairs to do with nature and environment? Or, have we fallen prey to global politics or have we forgotten that challenge and task of enriching nature and environment is primarily that of people? Can it be safeguard without concern continuing as part of life-style and living traditions of families and support of people! Have we failed to realise that environment sustainability is a guarantee for economic development and recovery, not vice versa? We seem to have forgotten or ignoring that cultural roots and heritage is far more reliable way than relying on bureaucracies and rhetorics of tenure concerned political leaders and priorities of regimes. We need to reconnect to culture and customs. Can we sustain nature without realising limits of a “greed and growth” based approach and the resulting all out consumerism? Realising that, way back in 2000 Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had even cautioned. Speaking to Ministers of Environment of States he talked about “narrow perspective of development model” and reminded about “mindless consumption and destruction” going on in the country. And yet we seem to have intensified that pursuit at all levels. How one can we ignore what Mahatma Gandhi had said about such path as at one’s own peril. He reminded that **“the earth provides enough to satisfy every man s needs, but not every man’s greed.”**

It is high time today we take a retrospective review as if it is yet another chance for a course correction. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has historical opportunity to bring that much needed Big Bang break in the country’s crusade for sustainable development. His special focus and appeal will go a long way not only as the Prime Minister but as the most articulate leader of the country and towards fulfilling global initiatives he has taken.

.....

(Dr N Bhaskara Rao is Chairman of CMS)