

The Tragedy of the Commons

The luggage that I carry, on my back and in my mind, weighs heavily on me. I hate my city, the transport system, the noise, the density of humanity around, the dust and about everything else that I see on my way to the bus station. This is not my Bangalore.....

The bus is waiting at the platform and is a comfortable one, with push back seats and an air-conditioning system that is noisier than a jet engine. I get in and take my seat.

There is a man in the next seat. He isn't very tall, is slim of build and has a bag on his lap. I smile at him and take my chair.

'You are going to Mysore?' I ask, hoping to strike a conversation that will last some part of an otherwise tiresome journey.

'Yes,' he smiles in return.

Some small talk ensues about the departure of the bus, the length of the journey and the comfort it provides. As we start for Mysore, I am surprised to find that the man next to me on this bus to Mysore is from Tripura. Didn't quite expect it, to be honest. I mean, we all know that Tripura is a part of India and there is a democratic right for him to travel and all that sort of thing, but down here....?

He is simple and articulate, has had his education outside the State. And, he tells me, he isn't Bengali, but comes from a tribe.

'I travel regularly to Mysore.' I say, 'and it is unusual to find someone from the North East on the bus. Do you have work there?' I am now shamelessly curious.

He is on this train to Mysore, he says, in search of something he lost long ago. It's called Peace. He hopes to find some of it in Bylakuppe, the Tibetan monastery on the way to Kodagu, though he isn't a Buddhist.

And, of course, my curiosity only builds further. I engage this simple man in conversation, intrigued by his statement and his slow and careful method of speaking. His eyes are particularly intriguing, the lines around them reflecting many lives, many experiences.....When he looks at me, the eyes don't shift away, he wants his words to register.

The story unfolds (my research, subsequent to this meeting, only strengthened his tale). He speaks hesitantly initially; who knows, I might be from some Government agency. Yet, as the bus settles into its fifth gear and cruising speed, his trust in me increases and, with it, his loquacity as well.

There are lots of troubles in his homeland, he says. Some of them simple, others intensely complex.

He abruptly stops to ask me a question. "Do you know who a normal person is?" he asks, with a smile playing around the lips.

He isn't expecting a thoughtful answer, of course, so I smile and ask him what he has in mind.

"In our tribe, we say that everyone is mad. Those who have the least madness in them are normal."

He continues his story. I emphasise, this is his story, not mine.

Tripura has witnessed true madness over the last forty years (Mutually Assured Destruction, that acronym for mad) - between the indigenous tribals deprived of their land in the 'greater common good' and the settlers, hard working folks from Bengal who came into the State in large numbers in the 60s, gaining hold over land and trade in an agrarian State. The tribals, as tribals all over India were until the late seventies, were an easy lot to deal with; they didn't know their rights well enough or indeed the value of money or their goods and many could be bought with the promise of liquor and jobs in a distant city.

As the economic disparity between the settlers and the original inhabitants grew, the social inequality increased as well. When, at last, the tribals protested against the exploitation of their innocence, it was a protest guaranteed to fail, confronting, as it did, the conventional Force of the State. The Government machinery always backs those who wield economic power, even as it seeks to establish the perception that it does just the reverse. Politicians and religious groups, intent on exploiting the differences on both sides stoked the flames in vicious self-interest. The result: thousands dead, many maimed for life by bombs and landmines and a State in flames. Flames, that are far away, too far away to be seen by a Economy growing since the early '90s at six plus percent. Too far away to be seen from the roof of the tallest mall or the highest floor of the Bombay Stock Exchange. And, too far away to be seen from the Utility Building in India's software capital.

How did it all start? I ask in wonder. Where was the first match struck, the first flame lit?

The genesis of the devastation lies, he said, in the destruction of pristine jungle by the Government to settle Bengali refugees in tribal forest habitat. The first documented case of a tribal uprising was Sengkrak (which means 'clenched fist' in Kokborok, a language spoken by the majority of the tribals) in 1967, which was quelled. This was a temporary win for the Force, for failed violence rears its head in successive reincarnations, followed by retribution by the Bengalis elsewhere. And if the Government's short-sighted settlement policy was not enough, it constructed a dam called Dumbur in 1974 that submerged a

huge area and evicted 25000 people, tribals and Bengalis, all for the production of 9-10 megawatts of electricity every day. No compensation was paid to them since they had no deeds to their lands or property records - where do backward tribals have such data available?. The tribals now want this dam de-commissioned and their lands back, something that no politician will agree to, since it is the right thing to do.

Today, the tribal and Bengali militant groups have sophisticated weaponry, supplied by their friends in Bangladesh and Myanmar. In every such story, of course, it's the innocents who are slaughtered the most. There are millions of innocents on both sides, only a comparative few who are militant, yet the count of the dead grow amongst the tribes and the settlers, the violent speaking a language of constant retribution, that can only have one result: both sides will lose. So will our Nation as we work hard to placate the armed, to defend the indefensible, to impose a fragile peace through the latest generation weaponry.

There once lived a Man we all have read about and since forgotten who said, "An eye for an eye....."

The man on my bus is innocent. His wife, on her way, from Agartala to her village, was killed by a bullet, as she stepped off a bus. As he mentions this, he speaks unemotionally, as if he were talking of yet another defeat of the Indian cricket team.

On and on it goes, the killing, the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, the senseless violence driven by a cause long forgotten and by blinkered bigots with less religion and more hatred, in a fertile land that historically was ruled by a rich King. Amazingly, my friend tells me, nobody, he repeats, nobody wants any of this. The Army hates being there, the two parties to the conflict are now tiring, while the common people are sick of the whole thing. Yet, all of them have the tiger by its tail and its takes courage for one or more to let go, even if the tiger has now become very old.

As I hear this story, thoughts of other conflicts come to mind. Have the Narmada and the Tehri dams gone this way? Can't we value our forests as the 'greater common good', and as sacred treasure troves that belong to everyone? Is humankind's sociological development this stunted that it needs to evoke populist formulas and religious conversions that will surely define the scope of future conflict?

He interrupts my reverie. "Let me tell you, Sir, that when people in Government can't see beyond their noses, they don't reach for their spectacles. They assume that what they see, all that is front of them is their reality. Everyone is intelligent and bureaucrats are extraordinarily smart, yet few use

their power of intelligence. Most take decisions in glorious isolation from the larger picture.”

And as he speaks, my mind begins to wander again. I am not a trained environmentalist, yet something that I once read, rings a bell. About how such local decision making can become myopic and short-term and can cause the destruction, first identified by an ecologist named Garrett Hardin, called “The Tragedy of the Commons”.

So important is this concept, so enduring a principle, that we must divert from the story of this man from Tripura to discuss it. Very simply, it describes situations where what's right for each part is wrong for the whole.

The Sahel region in sub-Saharan Africa was once a fertile pastureland. In the middle of the 20th century, around the 1950s, it supported over a hundred thousand herdsmen and over a half million head of grazing cattle, called 'zebu'. Today, it is a barren desert, yielding a small fraction of the vegetation it once produced. The people who live in the Sahel region now live a meagre existence under continual threat of drought and starvation.

So, what happened in a mere forty odd years?

The tragedy of the Sahel was rooted in its fertility; in the fact that, in the middle of a desert, this was a true oasis. Herdsmen have their own rules, their own codes of conduct, to ensure that the pasture their cattle graze on outlast them. In the 1920s though their rules began to change, imperceptibly at first and faster, much faster, later. The pastureland belonged to everyone, and yet to no one. There was a steady growth of population and herd sizes from the 1920s to the 1970s. The growth accelerated from 1955 to 1965 due to unusually heavy rainfalls and assistance from international aid organisations who financed numerous deep wells. Each herdsman on the Sahel had incentives to expand his herd of zebu, both for economic gain and social status, these incentives provided by those in the developed World who believed that they were doing the thing right. As long as the common grazing lands were large enough to support these new, larger herds, there were no problems. But in the early 1960s, overgrazing began to occur, as the herd of cattle in the Sahel crossed the tipping point, the point from which there is no return.

Eventually rangeland vegetation grew sparser. The sparser the vegetation, the more overgrazing, until it got to a point where the cattle consumed more foliage than the ranges could generate. The desertification reinforced itself as decreases in plant cover allowed wind and rain to erode the soil. Less vegetation was produced, which got overgrazed more severely to support the herds, leading to further desertification and yet, few saw disaster coming. The vicious spiral continued until disaster struck in the form of a series of droughts

in the 1960s and 1970s. By the early 1970s, 50 to 80 per cent of the livestock was dead and much of the population of the Sahel was destitute.

Hardin first coined the term to describe situations where two conditions are met:

1. there exists a “commons,” a resource shared among a group of people, and
2. individual decision makers, free to dictate their own actions, achieve short-term gains from exploiting the resource but do not pay, and are often unaware of, the cost of that exploitationexcept in the long run.

The sum total of all the individuals acting in their self-interest add up to a total activity with a life of its own. Eventually, the individuals fall, as the economic activity itself collapses due to over-exploitation.

‘What are you thinking about, Sir?’ the man from Tripura interrupts my reverie.
‘ Human beings are the same everywhere.’
‘I agree with you, Sir.’

There is silence for a while and I can sense that he is in deep thought. I have met few like him before, since I work in a corporation, where thinking beyond the obvious is quite unnecessary and might indeed get one dubbed a heretic.

‘Do you have any children?’ he asks me.
‘Yes, they are young, very young. What about you?’
‘I had a child, Sir. She died of high fever. Don’t give us more dams and wars,’ he changes the subject suddenly and the passion is now unmistakable, ‘give us more doctors, teachers and.....peace. All that human beings need,’ he repeats, ‘is hospitals, schools and peace.’

Mysore is not far away now and the bus is fast. I realise that he and I are similar in our aims. There is a different kind of peace that I am searching for, the peace that leaves you when you are running in the centre of a crowd and are left with two choices: to run at the pace of the crowd or slow down and be trampled. This, in the last couple of years, has worried me a good deal. Yet, did the Buddha not say, if you have lost your fingers, grieve not, for there are others who have lost their limbs. But what would the Buddha tell this man?

As the bus enters the station, I put my hand out. ‘May you find peace in everything you do.’ I hear myself saying.
‘I surely will. After many years, I have had sound sleep in the last few days on the train to Bangalore. It is a sleep that I want to get used to now.’

We step off the bus and I guide him to the right platform. We shake hands again and I walk into the afternoon sunshine, knowing that, when I return to my home in Bangalore, it will be with a glass half full.