Ecological perils of discounting the future

With growing environmental distress, policymakers cannot shy away from adopting best eco-management practices

In a report last year, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) called the Chennai floods of 2015 a “man made disaster”, a pointer to how the encroachment of lakes and river floodplains has driven India’s sixth largest city to this ineluctable situation. The Chennai floods are a symbol of consistent human failings and poor urban design which are common to most urban centres in India if not urban centres across the world. Now, Chennai is in the midst of another crisis – one of water scarcity.

Unlike issues such as traffic congestion or crime which are visible, environmental degradation is not what most people can easily see or feel in their every day lives. Therefore, when the consequences of such degradation begin to wreak havoc, it becomes difficult to draw the correlation between nature’s vengeance with human failings. In Chennai, more than 30 waterbodies of significance have disappeared in the past century. Concretisation or the increase in paved surfaces has affected the percolation of rainwater into the soil, thereby depleting groundwater levels to a point of no return.

**Urbanisation without vision**

Chennai, however, is not alone in terms of suffering from the consequences of human folly. Urbanisation at the cost of reclaiming water bodies is a pan-India if not worldwide phenomenon. There are examples in cities such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad and even Mexico city.

In Bengaluru, 15 lakes have lost their ecological character in less than five years according to a High Court notice to the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike, the city’s administrative body responsible for civic amenities and some infrastructural assets. The lakes, which are now encroached areas, find uses as a bus stand, a stadium and, quite ironically, as an office of the Pollution Control Board. The city of Hyderabad is now moving towards a sustainable hydraulic model with some of the best minds in the country working on it. This model integrates six sources of water in a way that even the most underdeveloped areas of the city can have equitable access to water resources and the groundwater levels restored in order to avoid a calamity of the kind that has gripped Chennai now.

The larger question is: Can we not take inspiration from the following examples? When Mexico city can create a new executive position of a “resilience officer” to save its sinking urban sprawls, Bengaluru can reclaim Kundalahalli lake (once a landfill) through corporate social responsibility funds in a Public Private Partnership model, and Hyderabad and the larger state of Telangana rebuild its resilience through a combination of political will and well-designed policies such as the Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Scheme and Mission, what stops us from learning from each other?

**The Telangana example**

There are a number of lessons that can be learnt. The Chief Minister of Telangana launched a massive rejuvenation movement in form of “Mission Kakatiya” which involves the restoration of irrigation tanks and lakes/minor irrigation sources built by the Kakatiya dynasty. From the perspective of inter-generational justice, this is a move towards giving future generations in the State their rightful share of water and, therefore, a life of dignity. The city of Hyderabad is now moving towards a sustainable hydraulic model with some of the best minds in the country working on it. This model integrates six sources of water in a way that even the most underdeveloped areas of the city can have equitable access to water resources and the groundwater levels restored in order to avoid a calamity of the kind that has gripped Chennai now.

The larger question is: Can we not take inspiration from the following examples? When Mexico city can create a new executive position of a “resilience officer” to save its sinking urban sprawls, Bengaluru can reclaim Kundalahalli lake (once a landfill) through corporate social responsibility funds in a Public Private Partnership model, and Hyderabad and the larger state of Telangana rebuild its resilience through a combination of political will and well-designed policies such as the Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Scheme and Mission, what stops us from learning from each other?

**By 2050**

It is estimated that in just 30 years from now, half of India will be living in cities. If we truly envision a great future for this country, how can we possibly risk the lives of half of our people and the next generations who could be facing a life in cities parched by drought, stranded by floods, mortified by earthquakes or torn by wars over fresh water? What has happened in Chennai now or what happened in Kerala last year in the form of floods are not a case of setting alarm bells ringing, but one of explosions. If we do not wake up now, we have to be prepared to face the consequences of nature wreaking great havoc on humanity. We would not need nuclear bombs for our obliteration.

---

Kalvakuntla Kavitha is a former Member of Parliament and the founding president of the Telangana Jagruthi