PLIGHT OF THE DOOMED AND OUR RESPONSIBILITY

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I make no apology for putting this matter across in personal terms. I believe that in human affairs a person’s consciousness and conscience are the ground, the flux and the matrix where reality is experienced, perceived and reflected upon, and choices made in terms of action, response and intervention. Reconstruction, creative effort and movements for change flow out of sensitive, usually painful, at times exhilarating experiences and exercise of conscious, moral choices with a deep sense of relationship and responsibility to the reality, the milieu and the epoch one is confronted with in ‘the fateful hour’.

The period since 1982 has been a period of inner turmoil for me. This was triggered off in October of that year by the realisation that once again the rains had failed at a crucial time and this would mean widespread loss of the main crop for the tribal communities in the rain-fed agriculture areas of the southern Aravallis. This single occurrence became my preoccupation and I pursued my inquiry and action in response to its implications. On the one hand I tried to understand the problem and on the other hand I tried to seek immediate and long term redress for the affected communities.

A seemingly natural but recurrent aberration in the climate, the failure of the late monsoon, had landed several communities we had been involved with in deep distress. It was a personal crisis since in one stroke it undid the earlier educational and developmental work our organisation had been engaged in for several years. I had no choice but to reflect on the larger dimensions of what had happened and to think out a further course of action. The conclusion presented here emerges from these efforts.

The communities of our concern are not merely in deep immediate crisis; they have no conceivable future in the areas they inhabit at present. This is a direct result of the destruction of their natural resource base by external forces of depredation. They have been deprived of their indigenous surplus for survival and regeneration and are now living off their own future by destroying their remaining assets. They have an awareness of their present hardship and the grim prospect they face but they have no choice but to survive. Even when they are persuaded and prepared to put forward their demands they do so half-heartedly and without confidence that anything will materialise. On the contrary, they are also afraid of adverse repercussions if the officials or the local leaders get annoyed with their independent assertion of their rights.

Despite this the plight of these people was brought to the attention of the authorities and the public at various levels and their support sought for relief and redress. This has been a revelation as far as the prevailing attitudes to such problems are concerned. The authorities have treated the drought distress as a routine occurrence to be managed according to a set code and procedure. They have minimised its seriousness and quibbled about its causes and consequences. They have had other preoccupations ranging from communal riots to security arrangements for the shooting of multi-million dollar foreign films to weddings and celebrations of one kind or another. At the higher level, they have pleaded paucity of resources verging on bankruptcy while indulging in extravaganzas like the Asiad ’82, Nam ’83 and cultural festivals. The public at large has read about and listened to these tales of people’s woe with studied indifference and have continued with life as normal as if the afflicted people belong to another land far away. Even the social workers and their organisations have maintained a curious silence and failed to undertake even relief on a massive scale as they did on earlier occasions. The press after a virtual blackout of the problem until NAM was over began to pick up the more sensational stories about starvation deaths and the meagre and corrupt relief measures. It remained oblivious to the magnitude of the disaster.

Even though there is no accurate assessment of the size of the population affected, the reports from the field by activists, researcher and journalists give an indication that the affliction verging on threat to survival is the lot of millions in the remote areas of the country. Unnoticed by the elites hell-bent on living it up, a major human and ecological disaster is already under way whose immediate victims are the poorest in the land. In many cases it is at the cost of their resources in land, water and forests that the so-called progress is being made. They are even seen in the way of this progress. Perhaps that is why their distress and imminent destruction fail to emerge as issues of any significant concern for the conscious of the ruling elite.

The matter could be left at that and one could take refuge in any alibi of one’s choice: impotence, helplessness, disbelief, futility. But this can be done only through an exercise which entails the denial of responsibility and which commits moral and cultural suicide. And here the crucial factor is in one’s perception of the relation of people who are in danger, to oneself. How is one to regard them and to react to their plight? The perception of the power elites is tied to the reality of the sufferers as voters. Drought and other forms of distress are occasions for calculated response to reward the faithful, to punish the deviants and to keep the poor divided and fighting for crumbs. For the bureaucracy there are occasions for routine programmes with enhanced outlays which permit greater opportunity for side incomes. For the academics the situation is an opportunity for elaborate exercises and debates in defining lines and levels and indices of abstractions like poverty, malnutrition and starvation. For social workers these are times for token and standard responses like relief and rehabilitation. None of these institutionalised responses sees the situation in crisis terms and one that reveals the inherent, deep-rooted malaise of the system. The politicians, the bureaucrats, the social workers and the academics look at the afflicted as a special category of sub-human beings, objectively defined, with traits of ignorance, disease and backwardness. For none of them, those in distress are fellow human beings, members of the great human family whose suffering is one’s own suffering, whose crisis of survival is a crisis of one’s own existence.

From the foregoing it follows that for those of us who care and are concerned, the essential task is to clarify not only our view of the critical situation of the doomed but also our view of our relationship with them. Do we in any sense see them as fellow human beings, as fellow citizens and as our kith and kin? Is their suffering our suffering and in their dying out an essential, vital part of ourselves is likely to vanish? Can we feel, feel from the heart that in the evocative words of Vivekananda ‘millions of descendants of rishis and sages are reduced to the state of brutes’? Does the refrain ‘vaishnavjan to tene kahiye je pir paraiye jaane re’, ‘Truly godly person is one who feels the suffering of others), continue to have a meaning? Do we realise that we are responsible for the present situation, in that we have partaken of the acts of omission and commission which have led to this plight of the doomed and we have an obligation to save them from disaster and to restore their life and dignity to them?

It is my humble submission that unless we are able to take our responsibility and perception to the degree of intensity, identification and oneness indicated above, we are unlikely to generate understanding and action commensurate with the nature of the crisis and its magnitude.