

Localise to save the world! Lessons from Mendha Lekha

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Why should the world watch with increasing trepidation, the impending default of the United States' debt payments? If a global economic meltdown worse than in 2008 stares at us, we should be asking some serious questions about the form of globalisation that has made us so vulnerable.

And what is common between this and the recent threatened power breakdown in south India resulting from the Telangana agitation?

Both these, and a number of other periodic crises we face, are related to the increasing intermeshing of global and national economies and infrastructure. Whether it is the centralised grid of electrical power in India, or the grid of financial power across the world, the last few decades have seen an intensification of potentially paralysing economic interdependence rather than genuine cultural exchange.

If we want to save ourselves from such periodic shocks, we need to reverse this form of globalisation and centralisation. Why should we suffer economic woes if the Republicans and Democrats in America can't get their act together? Why should most of Andhra Pradesh's residents have to tolerate crippling power cuts because some folks want Telangana and others don't?

During the 2008 global economic crisis, our prime minister proudly spoke about how we were 'buffered' because our economy was not fully globally integrated. Ironical, considering that since the 'economic reforms' he ushered in as the finance minister in 1991, he and his colleagues have stressed global integration being essential to India's development. The buffering argument was anyway blown to bits by the way the rupee recently reacted to international forces. Globalisation was supposed to deliver us from poverty and unemployment, but it is only exposing us the vagaries of global forces over which we have little control.

The Andhra Pradesh blackout was a similar phenomenon. Electricity development has concentrated on centralised grids, fed by big and super-big coal and hydro projects. A single connection tripping can trigger a vast blackout, with catastrophic socio-economic impacts. The frequent, often unannounced power cuts badly affecting small towns and parts of big cities, are also part of this 'dependence-creating centralisation' phenomenon.

There is an alternative way of doing things. The localisation of economies and polities, of production and consumption chains, could not only reduce such vulnerability, but actually deliver socio-economic security.

This is not to argue for an isolationist approach, but rather for the core principle that for basic needs, the local must be prioritised. This includes food, water, energy, shelter, clothing, sanitation, education, health, economic exchanges, and aesthetics. Over and above this, cultural and material exchanges that enrich our lives should be encouraged as part of a more meaningful globalisation. This should include reducing the visa restrictions that have been imposed even as finance travels across countries without hindrance.

Localisation is also not an argument for tolerating social injustice related to caste, gender, class, and ethnicity. There are several examples where communities have taken control over their lives, but also retained touch with the outside world, learning from it and giving back in return.

They have also challenged local inequalities. Dalit leader R Elango has pioneered local manufacture-based employment in his village of Kuthambakkam near Chennai, mobilised Dalits against upper-caste discrimination, and encouraged mixed caste housing.

Adivasis in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra such as those of Mendha-Lekha have taken control over their forests, earning substantial incomes to put into village reconstruction, and can hold their own on national and international platforms. Dalit women comprising the Deccan Development Society in Andhra Pradesh have achieved food sovereignty and nutritional security, and a dramatic transformation in their status as women and Dalits, vis-à-vis previously exploitative upper-castes and men.

They run their own public distribution system (PDS), community radio, school and film-making unit. Hundreds of villages in the driest parts of India in Rajasthan and Gujarat have innovated to achieve localised water security, without megadams having to transport water long distances to them.

Several dozen farmers or craftspeople producer companies are trying to take back collective control over production and marketing. Citizens in Pune, Bengaluru, Bhuj, and elsewhere are trying to be central voices in budgeting and decision-making so as to push for more sustainable cities.

In the face of the dominant system, these initiatives remain small and scattered. With appropriate facilitation and policies, they can be transformed into widespread phenomena.

For instance, localisation of the PDS with appropriate governance checks could provide enormous incentives to farmers for sustainable, remunerative farming, offer local consumers safe and nutritious food, and help check foodgrain loss and corruption.

A policy to prioritise decentralised renewable energy, currently being considered by the Bihar government, could reach secure and affordable power to hundreds of millions of people in a relatively short time, and eliminate dependence on central grids.

The official policy of 'communitisation' of health, education, and power services in Nagaland, by which village councils get greater control over relevant budgets, has shown remarkable improvements these services. Jharcraft in Jharkhand has enhanced livelihoods of 2.5 lakh families through village-based production, in just six years.

Similar initiatives around the world can provide crucial lessons. This includes large networks of non-monetised exchanges and local currencies that delink from the dominant monetised system, the European 'degrowth' movement questioning over-consumption of resources, transition towns in the UK moving towards carbon neutrality, and thousands of community councils in Venezuela's experiment with radical democracy that is even demanding a transformation of the state. Indigenous peoples in some South American countries are putting forward alternative visions of buen vivir and sumak kawsay or good living, challenging the notion that only material accumulation gives us happiness. There is of course a long way to go for these to become a comprehensive enough reality to challenge macro-political and economic structures.

But they demonstrate the potential of a more sustainable and equitable world, one that does not catch a cold when the US sneezes.

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