

Jallikattu Protests: Demonstration of distributed leadership and learning for managers

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January 16, 2017 saw launch of protests at Chennai demanding a revoke on ban of Jallikattu in Tamil Nadu. This was a follow up of events that happened in interior parts of South Tamil Nadu especially in Madurai district. There have been huge coverage and debates in media including national channels, news portals and magazines. Social media was flooded with views and comments. As a researcher, one must look at managerial perspectives namely: environmental and social factors for decision makers in public policy; and what could local business learn from this agitation which is incredibly calm, non-violent and inclusive with representations from common people - shying away political parties and celebrities.

At the outset, it looks like an outburst of the element of "Tamil Pride" and respect for the tradition, triggered at the emotional level. Execution of this agitation is a case of demonstration of distributed leadership by each individual participant and those who assembled in small groups. This is a complex representation and congregation of people which started with a small number of less than three digits. It went on exponentially growing as hours passed. There was no stated or assumed leadership. No trade or public interest bodies involved. People walked in believing the gathering for a "good cause" and exercised principle of leadership namely focus and discipline towards the objective. In this case, one may not be sure (especially in urban areas and metro like Chennai) whether people gathered would have prior knowledge on Jallikattu beyond what they have seen in silver screens. So the euphoria of gathering was Jallikattu as symbol of "culture"! People used this to express that culture is what they perceived as and practiced over time in the society. They rejected redefining culture without involving them.

Culture statement is worth probing deeper. The demonstration did not stop at Chennai and urban centers. It was across the globe where there was considerable Tamil population. Hence this agitation is not against ban of Jallikattu or hatred against PETA but over a perceived imposition on culture. It is interesting to note that even though those who are not part of Jallikattu and may not even understand history and rationale towards the sport got united to uphold culture. Culture again has an interesting twist. Is not supporting Jallikattu a reversing symbol among population which is otherwise believed to imbibing highly westernized cultural traits?

The fact is deep internalization of values on perceived cultural traits are stronger than science. There are certain things which run over centuries in the system. It is difficult to change them over in a short time. Further, it may be noted here that what has been in Tamil Nadu is symbolic to those involving in policy changes in various cultural horizons.

One cannot be conclusive here that agitation is on moral grounds rather than real sport at the ground except in the villages. Policy makers need to understand that when "self-esteem" and "justice" of people (read as customers) are threatened, they revolt. Fortunately, here it was well-disciplined and peaceful.

The intent of policy makers would not have been to impose change on a cultural trait. Probably, there had been not enough dialogue between aggrieved parties and policy makers to understand the nuances of sport and the need for regulation. Learning here is that there could have been enormous cultural features that have evolved over the years and change has been constant. The fact those have been

consciously driven by people. Perceived imposition of cultural change is not going to be a welcome. This is not only to policy makers but also to any group which desires a social change.

Furthermore, we need to probe if there could be any other suppressive factors which led to show of unified strength. It looks like so! Though none of the demonstrators spoke about anything other than lifting of ban on Jallikattu and invoke a ban on PETA, there is under current that this part of the society has been at the receiving end. One of the main reasons could be severe drought conditions caused by failure of monsoon and inadequate water for irrigation across Cauvery in Tamil Nadu over the last few decades and so on. Again one may note these are all perceived and poorly articulated by a few which could have had wider impact. One may have to do an expectation, outcome and perception gap study.

It was amazing to watch the strength of discipline and energy among protesters. There were active protesters. There were also those unsure protesters! But they were there because of sense of oneness created at the venue. There were a number of observers who started supporting the agitation and thereby became passive agitators. There was huge number women representation to this rural sport of men. There were girls studying at colleges and working with new generation companies. They have never experienced a mass movement before. There were families with children and many of them were wide-awake at late night making walks across that a few kilometers stretch showing solidarity. Important to note that people assembled as individuals or small groups with no affiliation whatsoever! There were representations in different parts of the city. No untoward incident reported for three days. How did this kind of dispersed leadership show incredible behavior pattern? When discussed with number agitators, it was found that commonness of cause and need to stay purposeful without losing focus was imbibed in them.

In recent times, one can observe that Chennai and rest of Tamil Nadu came around on a common cause and stayed united without crimes being reported in more than one occasion. Tsunami was what this millennial generation got united to work for a common good. Second event was at Chennai after torrential rains and floods at Chennai in December 2015; and third during the recent cyclone in December 2016. All these are natural calamities and disaster of losing wealth and inconvenience to kith and kin could have been moving!

What policy makers should note is that people have converted the learning and strength of togetherness for a peaceful agitation. Everyone understood importance of staying together and right in difficult circumstances as loss of character to the agitation would lead to an undesirable outcome and cause a greater inconvenience. The agitations across Tamil Nadu were not articulated by any leadership but through distributed leadership are good to cheer but a cause of worry too. We have seen in earlier such demonstration a spark of ill-conceived act by an agitator or controlling agents led to sporadic violence lasting over a long period before it got settled. It reinforces a fact that group learning could be fast and demonstrable and policy makers must ensure sensitive issues are well articulated before it breaks into an agitation.

The idea of this article is not too judge on any stakeholder but to register demonstration of distributed leadership, collective discipline and learning from past for future action. Should not policy makers use this for positive change in society and resolve a number of socio-economic issues? Or should we lose momentum generated by this after invoking an ordinance to bring back jallikattu?

It is also important for businessmen and managers to understand environmental changes impacting this society and strong statement made by this group of agitators. One, they are any longer not going to wait for a leader to fight suppression. This event shows how effectively social media and digital forums make them unite and create conditions for distributed leadership to agitate. Technology diffusion and absorption are pretty high. Anyone from society and without language barrier can be instantaneous and

contemporary in any revolt, as we saw in this agitation. Jagglikattu agitators used technology and knowledge of English extensively. They could effectively communicate to local Tamil community in Tamil to join the movement. HR managers must develop intelligence to read such under currents in the system. Investors must see that there are more perceived benefits than ill-effects which otherwise could create problem. Decision makers must note that open source knowledge creates a lot of objectivity and transparency and can prompt a stakeholder group raise over any perceived suppression or unacceptable behavioral trait.

To sum up, this is not an agitation for jallikattu but one on reinforcing strength of technology deployment and ability to focus change in being together yet an individual! We have a responsibility to steer this positive change for a better living and creating a peaceful society for growth and equity.

