

TS Should Implement Noise Control Measures

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HYDERABAD: What every sensible person expected has begun. With the advent of public address systems with their powerful amplifiers and high decibel loudspeakers, two new critical issues have arisen which have implications for Telangana.

The first issue is a secular one aggravated noise pollution. It is clear that high noise levels can be upsetting to humans and animals and affect their health. In the past, hospital neighborhoods were “No Horn” zones as motor vehicles were then the only noise pollutants but as bulb horns were replaced by electrical horns and then by air horns the problem became acute everywhere.

The second issue is a religious one. The loudspeaker has been recruited in cause of religious multiculturalism. The azaan chanted by the muezzin has been enhanced electronically most times, the muezzin has been dispensed with altogether and substituted by a tape recording five times a day, starting at 5 am and closing at 8 pm. Hindu temples also amplify the 6 am suprabhatham devotion, katha recitals and other daily and festival rituals. Christian Churches have abandoned ringing of bells and resorted to amplified calls-to-prayer and sermons. None of these are welcomed by those to whom they are not obviously addressed.

The simple point is that all religious chants and prayers are related to a particular manifestation of the Being or His followers which is not the same for all religious communities. Beliefs, either in concept or form, are not shared by all. Private beliefs may be sacred to believers but when they are imposed unsolicited on non-believers they can be a provocation. The scene for provocation and counter-provocation is thereby set. This is aggravated by public dissemination ritual by high levels of amplification and becomes a threat to public order and religious harmony

In the past periodic religious processions were the common cause of Hindu-Muslim and Shia-Sunni riots. These have been suppressed by aggressive civil, police and paramilitary efforts during the periods concerned. Erection of flags, damage to places of worship or to holy books are other “causes” of riots. These too are contained when they happen.

Now, however, technology has been subverted to create religious antagonism every day. Awareness that loudspeaker broadcast can start riots came with the alarming events in Mumbai - that most densely polluted city, where competition between Friday prayers and aratis - both on the road - became a major source of religious antipathy and conflict.

Of the 600 Hindu-Muslim disturbances studied, in nearly 120 cases the cause was temple loudspeakers competing with amplification of the azaan.

The religious loudspeaker war has begun in earnest. Telangana needs to take urgent steps to avoid this as the potential damage is widespread, unending and unpredictable.

The most sensible statement on this issue came from Tahir Mahmood, the former Chairman of the National Minorities Commission and former Member of the Law Commission. He stated that:

1) Calcutta High Court in 1956 decided that nowhere did Islam permit the use of amplifiers in a mosque for azaan.

2) But nonetheless amplification continued and more during Ramzan with alerts for sahari (the pre-sunrise meal) and iftar (fast-breaking at sunset) by sirens.

3) In 1996, the Calcutta High Court ruled that using an amplifier in a temple or for a Hindu religious ceremony elsewhere is not an essential practice of the Hindu faith.

4) The Madras High Court decided that the Pentecostal Church could not contend that a loud speaker prohibitory order violated their fundamental right. It stated: "Undisputedly, no religion prescribes that prayers should be performed by disturbing the peace of others, nor does it preach that they should be through voice-amplifiers or beating of drums."

5) In 1999, the Supreme Court clearly stated that: "In a civilised society, in the name of religion, activities which disturb old or infirm persons, students, or children having their sleep in the early hours or during daytime, or other persons carrying on other activities, cannot be permitted."

6) The Central Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, and the Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules restrict the volume, pitch and reach of loudspeakers the voice must not reach "beyond 50 feet" or so.

7) Tahir Mahmood says further that, "as aptly put by the Calcutta High Court, "prayer is intended to be a silent communion with the creator and does not call for a tumultuous prelude or a noisy accompaniment."

The legal position is that loudspeaker broadcasts are not a part of the right to practice religion. These broadcasts pose a threat to religious harmony and to peaceful enjoyment.

Before the situation deteriorates further, the Government of Telangana should ban use of loud speakers on all buildings, structures whether of religious, cultural, political, commercial or any other nature. This must include loudspeakers in open areas, on mobile vehicles and processions too.

Such amplification should only be authorized by a special permit granted by the senior-most police officer of the district. He should prescribe a fixed period in normal hours and decibel sound-levels for a specific event to be held only in non_residential areas.

Permitted loudspeaker use must be monitored by the police with noise-recording equipment for compliance. The ban (and severely conditional exemptions) would go a long way to remove the growing irritation between religious communities, reduce noise pollution for all communities and make Hyderabad, in particular, and all Telangana towns and villages, places of quiet enjoyment and religious peace.

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