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Trash driving

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Cartloads of garbage being taken to the collection centre. Photo: Keya Acharya The Hindu

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Can the IPL format be used to keep our cities clean? It certainly seems so, after witnessing a government-sponsored sporting event that generated public enthusiasm for a most unlikely cause.

It was a competition. An amazing total of 386 teams, from 57 municipalities and taluk panchayats in 10 districts of the Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh. The arena, for a period of seven days, was historic Warangal city — the seat of the Kakatiya rulers from the 12th-14th centuries, the remains of their majestic fort lying like resplendent Roman ruins in the heart of today's city.

A few kilometres away from these ruins, a unique sporting competition was underway. The teams represented a unique effort in training and awareness-building on the correct methods of segregating, recycling, dumping and composting municipal solid wastes (MSW). They were now gearing up to compete for the best-performance prize.

The rules of the game were elaborate. Each participating municipality sent their best staff, a Sanitation Inspector as Team Leader, a Route Manager and two staff members for waste-collection. Warangal city, as the host municipality, provided three select staff members per team, both for local help and their own training.

Intense activity

There was intense activity for three weeks before the competition. Waste collection centres were identified, route maps decided, local staff trained in door-to-door collection, weighing, sorting... the entire process worked out for a city of six lakh, producing 300 metric tonnes of MSW daily. Each team had to cover 500 households daily.

Stainless steel pushcarts holding large bags (for plastics) and buckets (for wet waste) went out each morning, from 7.00 a.m. to 11.00 a.m., to the city's 53 sectors, accompanied by activists explaining segregation to householders.

The waste was then wheeled into collection centres for weighing and loading. Plastics went to a storage yard for baling and collection by recycling units and wet wastes to Warangal's 39-acre dumpsite at Marikonda, 15 km outside the city.

"We wanted to harness the spirit of competition and sportsmanship that India displays in cricket for public health," says Uday Singh, the 'hub man' of the operations. He got the idea while watching an IPL game in Mysore.

In IPL cricket, says Singh, individual teams from different areas form, and play, in leagues called a 'round robin.' The last two winning leagues then vie with each other for the best team. Singh followed the IPL method by asking each municipality to send their best men ("We're too new to deal with accommodation and logistics for women," he says), thereby simulating winning leagues in the lower rungs.

Singh first discussed this idea of using the IPL sporting method with three other activists — Sanjay Gupta, Suresh Bhandari and Muthu Kumar Swamy — and the quartet went to the Andhra Pradesh Government.

That there is still some verve left in the governance system is evident from what followed. The force for the initiative, named ‘Clean Cities Championships’, came from AP’s Joint Director of Municipal Administration, Khadar Saheb, a man with a reputation for getting things done. Under Saheb, Suryapet in Nalgonda district became India’s first ‘waste-compliant’ city in 2003. Saheb took the championship idea to AP’s Director of Municipal Administration, B. Janardhan Reddy, who immediately went to the Pollution Control Board (APSCB) for money to conduct the event. APSCB responded, equally dynamically, with Rs. 24 lakhs.

Then, a young IAS officer, Warangal’s 31-year-old Municipal Commissioner Vivek Yadav, agreed to prepare for and host the show in a month’s time. “I found this an opportunity to learn more; I too wanted to know how to get segregation and disposal done”, Yadav said.

Yadav flagged off the event by cycling 10 km in heavy rains, much to the chagrin of his obviously older aides who had no recourse but to follow suit.

Amid the ancient, winding streets of Warangal, the sound of the team’s whistle in the mornings brought housewives to their gates with their segregated garbage. At Kumarapalli, 61-year-old Sultana Begum and her tenant, 32-year-old Rani, were unsure about what happened to their segregated waste, but they had no hesitation in deciding that what was happening was a good thing, a sentiment echoed by people throughout Warangal.

At Machhli Bazaar, which was once — according to a map of the Archaeological Survey of India — a frontier village inside the old Kakatiya fort, the town’s water-tower premises now holds a collection and weighing centre. Teams with loaded hand carts came into the compound to have their collected waste weighed and stored, and left again for the next round, monitored by sanitation inspectors. ‘Visiting’ staff at the collection centre were a mix of municipal tractor drivers, cleaners and garbage municipal staff.

“The aim,” said Khadar Saheb, “is to train all municipal staff so that they go back to their constituencies and spread awareness”. Each municipality’s commissioner was invited to come observe the proceedings for at least two days. Each team was observed and rated daily on performance in collection, segregation, awareness dissemination, and issues such as hygiene and cleanliness. Daily data was collated every evening at the municipality offices and judged by a team of experts after a week.

Sixteen-year-old Purnachandra, an NCC cadet volunteer accompanying the team at sector 49, with form and pencil in hand, looked too young to be doing the rating. “I don’t judge,” he explained. “I was trained to give one mark if they have their caps on, one mark if they have their gloves on and so on.”

The most serious drawback was the exclusion of Warangal’s ragpickers, who unwittingly found themselves out of a job, with segregated dry wastes now going to municipal collection centres. At sector 49, 22-year-old Lakshmi looked both miserable and hungry. “I don’t know what to do,” she lamented, a baby on her hip. “No paper, no plastics, and no money.”

Uday Singh said the ragpicking community would be inducted into the collection process at the plastics centre in due time, though a more inclusive process would have been to include them initially. Saheb agreed, when queried about the exclusion of a community from their only means of livelihood.

There were also roadblocks from vested interest lobbies and entrenched mindsets. At Warangal’s dry resource centre, the sanitary inspector on duty looked disgruntled at the plastics being baled. When asked for his view of the proceedings, his expression changed to disgust. “Too risky,” he said, his distaste at his ‘new’ job overriding his need for caution in front of an audience. An aide whispered snidely that the man had never had to work so hard before. “They come for work at 9.30 a.m. or so, sign their registers and leave for the day by 11.00 a.m.,” complained the young aide. Elsewhere, a senior health officer was disgruntled at having to change old methods. Her comment that things would go back to ‘normal’ once everyone left after a week reached her bosses’ ears.

Determined to carry on

But Commissioner Yadav and Joint Director Khadar Saheb took this negativity with quiet composure and an underlying determination to carry on. Yadav said that spokes in the process

would be handled, and key persons posing problems would be shifted.

Still, the enthusiasm and determination behind the event was more contagious than any rotting waste or negativity could ever be. Almitra Patel, who filed a case in the Supreme Court in 1996 that led to India's Municipal Solid Waste rules and now a member of the SC's MSW committee, worked overtime to arrange for an entrepreneur to showcase his garbage-sorting machine at Warangal's dumpsite. The machine, from JK Engineering in Maharashtra, digs up garbage landfills, then chops and sorts out plastics in one stream and nearly-composted garbage in another, freeing up precious dumpsite lands and providing compost to boot. Patel called the machine's reception a 'thundering success'.

The championship trophy, meanwhile, was won by Khammam municipality, though there were several prizes for other teams as well. "There are no losers here," said Singh.

There are plans to take the championships to Guntur, Anantapur and Tirupati, to begin with. Singh said one strategy for longevity is that all participating municipal commissioners will now issue orders for mandatory segregation, recycling and composting in their jurisdictions.

"I will file a writ of mandamus," said a determined Singh, "pointing out the MSW rules for which training has been given and awareness conducted, so we are petitioning the court to ensure its implementation".

Mandamus or not, the 'Warangal Premier League' could well set an example for the rest of India. A 2011 estimate found the country generated 68.8 million tonnes of MSW in urban areas. That figure will become 920 million tonnes in a decade, posing mind-boggling problems for our already-deteriorating cities.

Warangal, meanwhile, is now clean. Old circular dumping bins have now become tree-holding pots. The streets are free of waste, with debris used to fill up potholes. What started as sport has ended up serving society.

For more information, call Commissioner Yadav at 9701-999-753, or Jt. Dir. Khadar Saheb at 9949-683-331.

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