

Two Styles of Leadership

by
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"Pundits and pollsters have decreed already the theme for next year's Presidential election. It is to be about leadership."

These are the opening sentences of an article in the Guardian (London) about the American Presidential election. They show that the problems of leadership, including the lack of leadership, are not a monopoly of this country.

In India, the word "leader" and its Hindi derivative "lideri" have become dirty words. What a pity. Because, if India needs anything today, it is good leadership. This is true not only in political life, where it is so obvious, but also in the fields of education, management and various other walks of life.

There are perhaps special reasons to account for the fact that leadership in India is in short supply. Our tradition and culture contain elements which do not exactly encourage the qualities of courage, dissent and adventure, which are essential parts of the bundle of qualities that go to make a leader.

Thus, for example, there is often the somewhat exaggerated and hypocritical respect for the aged and for those in authority. Grown up men and women will smoke, but not in the presence of their parents, and we are all loyal to those who are at the head of our government until they are removed, and then turn our backs on them. On the one hand, there is the cult of personality and on the other the absence of what in English is called "the non-conformist conscience which takes the form, when necessary, of saying: 'I am damned if I can see it that way.'"

Since the English poet wrote long ago,

"They are slaves who dare not be
In the right with two or three",

it is obvious that the number of those who are prepared to stick their necks out for an unpopular or unpallatable cause is limited even in Britain.

Unfortunately, such men are even more scarce in India.

Then there is what the historians have described as the dialectical nature of the Indian mind which is unable to see things in terms of black and white but can only see ~~gray~~ all round. Pandit Nehru's speeches, when he was the Prime Minister, followed a well-known pattern of saying : "At the same time, we must remember....." and then a little later "on the other hand, it is also true that...". No wonder this trait of not coming down on the other side of the fence led in due course to the evolution of what is grandiloquently described as the policy of "non-alignment".

The result of this background is, as Gandhiji remarked, "India has to learn to say 'no'", ^{shav} ~~this~~ is still valid and that a lack of decision making in regard to matters big and small, is omnipresent.

One of the biggest weaknesses of Indian Management at the top is a weakness in decision making. In politics, this takes the form of "tailism", to use Lenin's phrase, on the part of political leaders, which means not leading one's party but carrying out the behest of the dominant trend in the party, whether it is right or wrong..

Gandhiji, of course, was an exception to this case. As is well known, he resigned even his four-annas membership in the Congress rather than compromise his own principles.

I personally happen to agree with the view of leadership that was practised by Winston Churchill and General De Gaulle, which was that they were only available to lead their parties so long as the parties were prepared to follow them. In other words, they were prepared to be leaders on their own terms. Compare that with the record of Mr. Morarji Desai and Mr. Charan Singh as Prime Ministers from April 1977 till now, and one sees the contrast between the two styles of leadership.

Most politicians in India believe that a leader who asks to be relieved from his position if the Party does not follow his lead on a major issue behaves like a dictator, whilst a democrat will bow to the party's decision, however injurious it may be to the national interest!

In the result, we have certainly have had big governments but not strong government. We have had, since Independence, a maddlesome but ineffective government which passes laws which we cannot enforce. We are a country, where, as somebody put it, we have a bullock cart economy with labour laws

which are more "progressive" than those in the most advanced democracies of the world.

Many years ago, Walter Lippman in his book Public Philosophy wrote :

"If the people find that they must choose whether they will be represented in an assembly which is incompetent to govern or whether they will be governed without being represented, there is no doubt at all as to how the issue will be decided. They will choose authority which promises to be paternal in preference to freedom which threatens to be fratricidal. For large communities cannot do without being governed. No ideal freedom or democracy will long be allowed to stand in the way of their being governed....."

If Indian democracy today is in danger and the country faces the possibility of authoritarian government, it is because those who call themselves democrats cannot, or will not, lead.

There is no short cut out of this predicament. What is needed is education - education in Indian citizenship, education in leadership.

A small but modest effort on these lines has been made by the Leslie Sawhney Programme of Training in Democracy which came into existence in 1968 and has since trained some five or six thousand men and women in the ~~true~~ importance and skills of grass roots activity.

Those who seek to promote the qualities of leadership ^{Can} ~~could~~ do no better than remember some pertinent things which were said twenty-six centuries back by a Chinese philosopher, Lao Tse, who set down the criteria for judging a good leader :

"A leader is best
When people barely know that he exists
Not so good when people obey and acclaim him
Worst when they despise him,
'Fail to honour people
They fail to honour you',
But of a good leader, who talks little
When his work is done, his aim fulfilled
They will all say : "We did this ourselves."