

Leadership

■ Dr. M. N. Buch

The Preamble to the Constitution of India does two things. First and foremost it states that sovereignty in India vests in the people and it is the people who can make and unmake the Constitution and the form of government. Secondly, it lays down the mandate for those who are required to work for the people in accordance with the Constitution. Those who aspire to be leaders of free India must always bear in mind that leadership itself emanates from the mandate given by the people and their ultimate accountability is to their sovereign, the people. Leadership, therefore, in the Indian context is not a function of the power which vests in the leader, but rather in understanding the mandate given to him and then using the concomitant power of leadership to fulfil this mandate. There are two views which can be taken of power, one being that power gives the authority to rule, or the right to command. A second view is that power is the ability to do anything, an energy or a moving force that can be enjoyed only for the purpose of doing things for people for whose service the wielders of power is employed. Depending upon how one views power, it is either a means of exploitation or an instrument of public welfare.

India has a long history of government, culminating in our present Democratic Republic. Regardless of whether the government be a democracy, a benevolent dictatorship or a tyranny in which the tyrant has a conscience, the ancient Indian concept of power is embedded in the principle of Dharma, which means right thinking and right action. Thus justice, rule of law and good governance would form part of Dharma, whereas injustice, tyranny and anarchy would be the attributes of the opposite of Dharma, Adharma. In the words of the Sabha Parva of the Mahabharat, a person can provide good leadership only if he eschews greed for wealth, sloth, hardness of feeling and procrastination.

In the Sabha Parva, Anushasan Parva and Shanti Parva of Mahabharat the whole question of leadership is discussed in detail in the form of a dialogue between sage Narada and King Yudhishtira. As a treatise on leadership and governance this dialogue is extraordinary in its depth of understanding of what constitutes good governance and is as applicable to the world's largest democracy as it was to the Pandavas. Narada asks Yudhishtira, "I hope that it is only after you have conquered your own self, that you expect to conquer others?" (*Sabha Parva 5.126*).

Narada goes on to ask,

"Do you assign to the ministers who are above reproach, behave as their forefathers did, and are distinguished, the works of the realm that are of the greatest import?" (*Sabha Parva 5.37*).

Considering the large number of suicides by indigent farmers today, what Narada tells Yudhishtira makes interesting reading indeed.

Narada asks the King,

"I hope the farmers and the workers of your realm are not unknown to you? Are you aware of what they do? Are they happy with you? Their happiness is one single cause of social prosperity". (*Sabha Parva 5.72*)

These words are prophetic because several millennia after the Mahabharat our rulers, whose main constituency is rural, are still either blissfully ignorant of the fate of the farmers or are totally indifferent to what happens in the villages. Our present day rulers would not pass Narada's tests.

In the Shanti Parva Narad advises the King, "The power of governance is to be exercised in accordance with Dharma and not arbitrarily". But the most important of all is what Narada states in Anushasan Parva 212.26, ""The interest of all his subjects alone is his interest, their well-being is his well-being, what is pleasant to them is pleasant to him and in their good lies his own good. Everything he has is for their sake: for his own sake he has nothing". In today's context the Mahabharat is the Constitution. The Preamble demands that the government ensures for all the people justice, liberty, equality and fraternity as inalienable rights. Article 38 directs the States to secure a social order for the promotion of the welfare of the people. Welfare, therefore, becomes pivotal to government and from it flow all the duties of the State. Welfare cannot be promoted in a state of anarchy, in the absence of rule of law, in an environment of prejudice and under conditions where greed, low cunning, immediate expediency, deviousness and a desire to acquire power for personal gain by any means, right or wrong, become the guiding principles of the politicians and officials. Unfortunately after 1967, when governments were made to fall and new combinations formed the government through outright bribery of legislators, leadership has declined to an extent where one can question whether there is a government based on Dharma in India. The dark side of our political life is that all political parties are bereft of ideology and have courted a spirit of immediate expediency. When power becomes an end in itself it becomes a means by which predatory politicians feed on an oppressed people. Unfortunately what we are witnessing today is that once in power a ruling group will make any compromise, abandon any principle, act with all the prejudice necessary, make any false promise, offer sops which may beggar the nation and shamelessly misuse the State machinery in order to fill their own coffers. The large number of leaders, former ministers and chief ministers, senior officials in jail for various crimes is suggestive of the depths to which our polity has sunk.

One unfortunate result of the breakdown of the rule of Dharma is the rising tide of populism which itself is the result of pandering to immediate expediency. No long term policy decisions are possible in such an environment, which means that it now becomes vitally important for the political parties to sit back and start rethinking ideology and government based on ideology. If that happens then obviously populism would have no place in how the party functions. If all parties move towards that kind of a goal then we can restore democratic functioning aimed at the welfare of the people and move forward towards a government based on Dharmic ideals. The sheer weakness of the government at the Centre is making people look for strong leadership. The challenge before us is to ensure that the leadership is strong in terms of what Narada tells Yudhishtira and not in terms of what Nietzsche's philosophy seemed to mean to Hitler. That is the real challenge before all our political parties.
