

LEADERSHIP - A CROWN OF THORNS

LEADERSHIP IS NOT A STATUS - IT IS A RESPONSIBILITY

“*Bapuji* why are you punishing your body?” asked one perplexed *satyagrahi* to Mahatma Gandhi while he was fasting after violent incidence of Chaura Chauri. Some *satyagrahis* (freedom fighters) turned violent and set ablaze a police station, wherein many policemen were killed. In protest of this incident Gandhiji went on fasting. The *satyagrahi* further added, “*Bapuji* the policemen got what they deserved, they were tyrant and tortured us”. Gandhiji replied calmly, “ our freedom struggle is based on the principles of truth and non-violence. If any of the *satyagrahi* is at fault, it is defect on my part. I own it up. How can we call it a *satyagrah* if our foundation is based on violence and distrust? ”Gandhiji continued his fast as a mark of self punishment till the time the guilty *satyagrahis* asked for unconditional pardon and he was assured that such incidents would not occur in future. The incident reveals the highest quality of leadership and accountability i.e. responsibility.

Leadership and Management:

Yes, indeed leadership is not a status but it is a responsibility. It is based on the fundamental principles of management that every authority must have counter responsibility or accountability. Greater the authority higher the responsibility. Leadership enjoys greater authority, as leader is a person who has an ability to influence his followers. He has a special place in the lives of his followers as he is enjoying their trust and commands respect .

This makes his position all the more difficult and responsible. Leader should always be on guard as there is always a danger of followers being misled or misguided may be by distortion of news, or by sheer misunderstanding or wrong interpretation of events or beliefs on the part of followers. The situation becomes all the more precarious especially when there are many layers of leadership. When the leader is not in a direct contact with the last rank of his follower and he communicates through intermediaries. We are all aware about problems in communication. Vested interest of sub-leaders at every stage aggravates the situation. And if this happens the movement will fail and the leader will be blamed for the disaster. Hence, leader should be very careful and selective in appointing sub-leaders and delegating authority.

Abuse of Leadership:

Few years ago Textile Industry was at its peak in Mumbai so much so that it was considered as the “Manchester” of India for production of cloth. In seventies the union leader late Datta Samant went on historic strike in textile mills. It was one of the longest strike in the history of Indian trade unions. What was the outcome? Many mills were closed down, some shifted business to nearby states and few more became sick and unviable. Millions of workers were rendered jobless and many committed suicide out of hunger and frustration. Today textile industry is totally finished in Mumbai. This is a classic example of failure or abuse of leadership. When leader fails to safe guard the interest of his follower he has no right to continue as leader. The position of a leader is an august place which needs to be respected.

Leader must exercise his authority most judiciously. It is the duty of the leader not only to see the well being of his followers but also to lead them, guide them, successfully to their destination of growth and prosperity ensuring justice at all times. But unfortunately today we find that leaders prosper at the cost of well-being of their subjects. This is an abuse of leadership.

Political leadership have been abused world over and India is no exception to it. The sorry state of affairs in India is that almost one –third of our population is illiterate and almost two-thirds are not educated. With this scenario leaders in India have been successful in exploiting people at large. The political leadership in India is characterised by corruption, dishonesty, and cynicism. Leadership in Indian politics is not on merits but based on caste, creed and religion.

The high of abuse is that leadership is believed to be hereditary. Indeed, leadership in Indian politics is believed to be a status and not a responsibility.

A Responsible Leader :

Let us see now what are the qualities of a responsible leader. Leadership is a responsibility. What does it mean ? If we break the word responsibility we get response + ability = responsibility. In other words leader should be able to generate desired response from his followers by commanding their respect and trust of highest orders. This he can achieve only if he possesses requisite qualities of a responsible leader. We have already learnt an incident from the life of the most responsible leader of the last Century, namely, Mahatma Gandhi.

Leader may belong to any field but in order for him to be responsible he must possess following minimum qualities. A leader should be:

--- Dynamic / Spontaneous / Enthusiastic

Leader should be dynamic and spontaneous like child. He should be open minded and adaptive to the ever changing world. He must have contagious enthusiasm which can give force to his conviction.

--- Honest

Nothing can replace honesty and integrity of a person, more so in case of a leader. In fact it is these qualities, which gives him strength and power of conviction to fight against injustice. No compromise can be made about honesty and integrity. Once honesty is lost, character is lost, once character is lost everything is lost.

--- Intelligent / Decisive

Leader should be intelligent to tackle most difficult situations and safe guard interest of his followers. Nobody likes to follow a dumb leader. Intelligence will provide him know-how of effective communication. He must provide proper direction and sense of purpose to the activities of his followers, as he is responsible not only for his own actions but also for actions of his followers.

--- Sensitive / Strong (Flexible / Firm)

A leader must have qualities of a coconut fruit – externally very strong but soft within. He should be sensitive to the needs and pains of his followers at the same time he needs to be strong enough to enforce his convictions on his followers to get desired results. What this implies that he should be flexible to new ideas, new thoughts but firm in their implementation. He should never allow his heart to rule his mind. He cannot afford to sway away in emotions. He has to have larger interest of the community at his heart and evaluate every situation objectively. In short he needs to be as soft as rose petals and as strong as thorns guarding rose flower. If he can achieve this then only he can protect interest of his followers and serve the community at large.

The list of qualities given above is not exhaustive. The leader must be hardworking, unselfish, visionary so on and so forth. All above qualities put together forms a character of a person. Character is very important as people generally consider their leader as their role model and they respect and obey him.

Preaching vis-à-vis Practice:

Many a time we found that leaders preach one thing and do something else. This is nothing but hypocrisy. In India many so called religious leaders who were preaching celibacy (*brahmacharya*) were caught practicing adultery. Well, people don't spare them. They are behind bars now. But it is difficult to identify and punish such hypocrites in a country like India where there is a mass illiteracy, poverty and herd mentality. People here accept leaders not out of intellectual conviction and understanding but out of fear, ignorance, greed, caste, creed, and religion or merely by trends. Their views and beliefs swing like pendulum.

Leaders in such a situation make use of their position and exploit the status of leadership for their personal benefits. Their preaching and actions remaining pole apart ultimately fails to influence the minds of followers. When I was in 8th standard our class teacher used to advice us not to smoke. He would daily repeat this advice as he had caught two-three boys smoking from our class. However this never resulted in desired impact and those boys continued smoking, as our class teacher himself was a chain smoker. What thousand words of advice cannot do a small act can do it. Gandhiji never preached a thing, which he did not put to practice. Sri Ramakrishna practiced different religion and then preached that God is one and that all religion leads to realisation of that Supreme Being.

Change of views by leaders:

Many a time it happens that a leader may have to change his viewpoint at a later date say on a particular issue then what happens? In the process of growth and world of dynamism beliefs and views do change and it should. Then there is a danger of those being misled who follows leader's previous views. Isn't it? When Gandhiji was asked similar question, he promptly said that "yes, my views are subject to change and in the event you find my views are contradictory on a similar subject views expressed by me at a later date should prevail upon.

The point here is that a leadership should be responsive to the needs and moods of the changing world. A responsible leader is one who is responsive and dynamic and not static. A leader has to constantly grow so that people can look forward to him for guidance and direction.

Leadership is a duty:

Arjun was undoubtedly the hero of the great epic *Mahabharata*. When he suffered from *vishad yoga* and was overtaken by his emotions, Krishna enlightened him with the knowledge of Geeta and reminded him of his duty as a leader. Being a leader, he could not leave the battlefield and ran away. It was his duty to fight for the rights of his subject. It was his duty to protect the *Dharma* at all costs, may be his life also. When this wisdom dawned on him and he was ready to fight. Thus leader cannot escape his duty. His responsibility is unlimited. He is like a captain of a ship who cannot leave even if it may cost his life. Leadership is a pious duty as it is an opportunity to serve others.

Summing up.

“ Give me blood and I shall give you freedom “ so said Netaji Subhashchandra Boss. A leader of great height exclaimed that if you give me your blood, your cooperation, I shall be responsible to give you freedom. A clear message, a full responsibility and a firm conviction was the beauty of this great leader. On one occasion Netaji walked barefoot, which were cut and bleeding, with his army through Burmese forest notwithstanding close chase by British Army, so that he can provide an example to his soldiers and boost their morale. Isn't it a classic example of responsible leadership? Leadership can never be enjoyed as status as rise and fall of an empire, organisation, institution, religion, and country depends upon the leadership. Similarly success or failure of any movement depends upon the leadership. Only cowards enjoy the fruits of leadership status and runs away in times of difficulties. For example Hitler committed suicide when Germany was defeated. A leader is not a good leader if he cannot own up failure. It is easy to reach at top but difficult to maintain that position.

Likewise it is easier to attain leadership but difficult to fulfill the responsibilities attached to that post. Leadership is responsibility in as much as leader is responsible for

- success or failure of the movement and
- success or failure of his followers.

Thus leadership is a crown of thorns, which only a man of character and values can adorn it.