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# Political Leaders of Independent India

H Y SHARADA PRASAD

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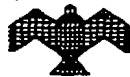




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**I** am greatly beholden to the authorities of the Institute for the privilege they have given me of addressing this distinguished group. I must confess I am also somewhat nervous. The subject assigned to me is a challenging one - one to which even a trained historian cannot do justice. But there is one thought that emboldens me. That is that history does not happen only for the sake of historians. It happens for all of us.

It is one of the virtues of democracy that we are free to hold whatever views we want to about events and about our rulers. It is not so under other forms of government. A cat may look at a king, goes an old saying. But we cannot be sure how the king would have reacted if the cat had spoken out what it thought of him. There was of course an exceptional king who did not punish the washerman for

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saying what he thought about the queen. That is why, one supposes, it was Ram Rajya.

If an opinion survey were carried out in the country in the 52nd year of Independence, you would find that the people do not have a particularly high opinion of their elected representatives. Few ministers command respect. Most of them are regarded as figures of ridicule when they are not figures of downright revulsion. If the young have any heroes at all, they certainly will not be from the political world. This is not true only of our country. All over the world there is a great shortage of tall leaders. A Nelson Mandela is an exception.

It was all so different until only yesterday. The British have just declared that in their view Churchill is second only to Shakespeare as their choice for the Englishman of the millennium. There are any number of people around in Britain who pine for return to the Age of Churchill. If a similar poll were conducted in our country, it would be found that most people look back with nostalgia to the days when Mahatma Gandhi and his great contemporaries walked this land. The question that puzzles and haunts many peoples is : Why has India lost its capacity to beget and foster greatness? Why do we find bonsais instead of banyans?

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A satisfactory answer may never be found. But if you looked at the history of nations, you would discover a very remarkable concentration of creativity and greatness occurring right when the nations came into being - and not equalled thereafter for decades. The histories not only of large countries like the United States of America, the erstwhile Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China and our own Republic, but of smaller countries like Unified Italy, Egypt, Israel etc bear this out. If you take USA, it took eighty years - until Lincoln came along - to produce a person matching the stature of some of its Founding Fathers. As for our next door neighbour, Pakistan, it is doubtful if it will in the foreseeable future give birth to a person who can come anywhere near even Liaquat Ali Khan, not to mention Mohammed Ali Jinnah.

The men who made the American, Russian, Indian and Chinese revolutions were indeed men of extraordinary political calibre. Many would remember the quip of President Kennedy that there was never a greater concentration of intellect in the White House than when Thomas Jefferson dined there by himself. But Adams, Madison and Hamilton were no midgets. But the man who towered above them all and commanded their respect through his sheer grit was George Washington. A perusal of the speeches, articles and correspondence of these people is a fine course in political education.

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I should like to put forth the proposition that our own Founding Fathers were easily the equals of the American Founding Fathers in intellect and in their understanding of human nature and the nature of political processes and institutions, and were their superiors in what, for want of a better expression, can be called the spiritual dimension. Mahatma Gandhi and all those who came into his magnetic circle thought deeply about ends and means, about the problem of man's injustice to man. Freedom was not merely an abstract political value for them; it was the very *sine qua non* of liberating the people of India - and of the colonised world, from their economic misery. Above all, through their concern for nonviolence, they were grappling with one of the basic problems of civilization. Freedom by itself did not suffice; man could not survive unless he learnt to conquer hate.

Speaking in the heart of the Kannada country, I cannot but recall the great line from the great Karnataka sage and reformer, Basaveshwara, who spoke of *antaranga shuddhi - bahiranga shuddhi*: purity within and purity outside. To bring the public and the private into open alignment was one of the great aims of the Gandhian movement. I am not suggesting that there were no scamps and hypocrites among the followers of Gandhi. Or that many Gandhians in later years were corrupted by power and fell away from their own earlier standards of probity. There are cynics who have



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called Gandhi himself a humbug. But the fact is that his life was an open book. Of how many figures of history can you say this? When going through the private and intimate letters exchanged among our Founding Fathers, we cannot but be struck by the unfailing nobility of their utterance and the total absence of pettiness in their thinking. This could not be claimed even for Lokamanya Tilak. A senior leader once told me that he had known only two people - Gandhi and Nehru who did not fall victim to the common human failing of making snide remarks the moment a person left the room. Even in the private asides of Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Azad and Rajen Babu we shall never encounter the vulgarity that you will find in the personal conversations (taped for the benefit of posterity) of statesmen like John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton.

Let us go back to Jefferson himself and some of his private dealings. I am not referring to the case of Sally Hemmings, one of his slaves, and the reports current in his own lifetime - and now confirmed by history - that he was the father of her children. We should be more disturbed by the fact that this great champion of freedom of the press did not hesitate to hire editors to go after his political rivals - or that he did not find slave-owning incompatible with his subscription to the belief that all men are created equal.

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Nehru, Patel, Rajen Babu and Azad had differences but they were bound by an extraordinary moral bond of the kind that subsists only among the co-disciples of a spiritual guru. Whoever wishes to find an example of political leadership at its best cannot do better than spend some time on the Gandhi-Nehru-Patel story.

The manner in which Gandhi came to dominate the national scene in such a short period is one of the miracles of history. Just a few years earlier he had met Pherozeshah Mehta, Tilak and Gokhale and had been awe-struck. Among them he chose Gokhale as his mentor. He wanted to join Gokhale's Servants of India Society. It is at his behest that, when he returned to India in 1915, he spent a year going round the country and learning about it before plunging into politics. Within a few months of his doing so, Tilak prophetically declared : " He, Gandhi, and not any of us will lead India to freedom."

Jawaharlal Nehru has described Gandhi's advent in a passage which is so famous that I need not repeat it here. The historian S Gopal has spoken of Gandhi's Christ-like gift of seizing men and their minds. People much older to him threw away their all to follow him. To the young he was the veritable Pied Piper. Few could resist his compelling magnetism. The greater mystery is how, in the pre-radio, pre-television era, without the aid of the mass media, with

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the largest circulating newspapers of the land ranged against him, Gandhi could spread his message to the remotest village. (Novelists like Raja Rao can explain this phenomenon better than political scientists could perhaps do.)

It is small wonder that Jawaharlal Nehru felt attracted to Gandhi. From his youngest days Nehru had been critical of the policies of petitioning and prayer that the Moderates in the Congress had practised, and he was waiting for a messiah who believed in action. As Nehru has put it, what attracted him to Gandhi was that behind his soft words there was steel. That reminds me of a remark made by one of the followers of Martin Luther King to me in America one day back in the late fifties; "I like your Gandhi, man. He has the killer instinct"! The remark recognizes that non-violence is indeed the moral alternative to war; that it is a weapon. It is this deadly earnestness of Gandhi that attracted yet another westernized barrister, Vallabhbai Jhaverbhai Patel, to him. When Gandhi spoke to a group of Ahmedabad lawyers, Patel interrupted a game of bridge to hear him in amused indulgence. But he found this strange man's ideas and words going straight into his heart like so many arrows. Within a week, gone were Patel's western suits. He had become a follower of Gandhi.

It is easy to know what Jawaharlal Nehru found in Gandhi. But what did Gandhi find in Nehru? Why was he so attracted

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to him? When Gandhi was a member of the Congress Committee which inquired into the Jallianwalla Bagh firing, he watched Nehru closely: Jawaharlal worked as the committee's secretary. Gandhi was intrigued to find a young man who had everything going for him - affluence, youth, good looks, a bright future - but who was yet so withdrawn and lonely. Very soon he formed a high opinion of Nehru's absolute, transparent integrity and dependability. If disciples seek out gurus, gurus seek out disciples, and in Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhi must have found a disciple who had something of his own master, Gohkale.

Within ten years, Jawaharlal Nehru was to become the president of the Congress. Gandhi said of him at that time: "In bravery he is not to be surpassed. Who can excel him in the love of the country? He is rash and impetuous, say some. This quality is an additional qualification at the present moment. And if he has the dash and rashness of the warrior, he has also the prudence of a statesman. He is humble and practical enough not to force the pace to the breaking point. He is pure as crystal, he is truthful beyond suspicion. He is a knight *sans peur, sans reproche*. The nation is safe in his hands."

Throughout the twenties there had been a great deal of comment on Jawaharlal's spectacular rise in the Congress. At the time of the Lahore Congress, it was common

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knowledge how Motilal Nehru had pressed his son's choice on Gandhi (- which makes Motilal Nehru the true founder of the Dynasty!). It is doubtful if Gandhi, who did not do much for his own sons, would have gone along with the paternal principle if he had not been convinced of Jawaharlal Nehru's worth and value. The son owed his ascendancy not so much to the father as to the Holy Ghost.

The person who lost out at Lahore was Sardar Patel. For he had been the delegates' first choice. This was to be repeated eighteen years later when he had to step aside to let Nehru become free India's first prime minister.

There is a considerable body of opinion in the country which holds that India would have fared better if Patel, instead of Nehru, had been the first Prime Minister. We need not go into the debate here, but try to find out what Gandhi's reasons were for preferring Nehru. In integrity and courage, Patel was as notable as Nehru, but Nehru's mass appeal, especially his hold on the young people (which he shared with Subhas Bose), was far greater than Patel's. As the first true mass leader of India, Gandhi knew how important a mass base was for building a party. There were several leaders of exceptional ability who had no mass base; for example C. Rajagopalachari, who had a Victorian liberal's suspicion of the crowd and who hesitated to fight

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a single direct election in all his life - even when the electorate was limited. Nehru's very youth was a plus point in Gandhi's eyes, for he knew that in politics, if the choice was between a young man and an older one, the younger should be preferred for the simple reason that he would have a longer tenure and there would be no need to make a choice again soon. Experience may be an argument in the civil service, but in politics, energy is the deciding factor. As a western epigram has put it, parties are built around men with a future. (That is only half the epigram; the second half goes : and women with a past!)

There was yet another consideration, namely Nehru's international appeal. If what made Gandhi prefer Nehru to Patel was his youthfulness, what made him prefer him to Subhas Bose, who also had youthfulness going for him, was Nehru's acceptance of non-violence. Gandhi was convinced that Nehru would never compromise with non-violence. Hence his assertion in 1942: "After I am gone, he will speak my language". Nehru by and large fulfilled that trust.

When Gandhiji once asked Patel what he would do after freedom had been won, Patel replied : "Take sanyas". Patel, masterful though he was, had a strong self-abnegatory streak. His own master's wish was law to him. "Whatever paternal love fell to my lot I got from Bapu and Ba", he

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once declared. If in his younger days Patel had allowed his elder brother Vithalbhai to take his own P and O ticket and travel to England, in his later years in the forefront of national politics, he cheerfully stepped aside for his political younger brother because that was Gandhi's preference. He remarked to Azad once: "If I had been Jawaharlal's age, I would have said I will run the government." But time and again he told the people of India : "Jawaharlal is our leader. Bapu appointed him as his successor. It is the duty of all of Bapu's family to carry out the bequest."

It is well-known that when Nehru and Patel pulled the national cart as yoked animals there were strong differences between them. There was a showdown just before Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. One of the last things Gandhi did was to call Patel over and persuade him to continue to work with Nehru. The three were to meet to seal the compact but Godse's bullets did not let that meeting take place.

A couple of days after the tragedy, Nehru wrote to Patel: "With Bapu's death everything is changed, and we have to face a different and more difficult world. I have been greatly distressed by the persistence of whispers and rumours about you and me, magnifying out of all proportion any differences we may have. It is over a quarter century that we have been closely associated with one another and

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have faced many storms and perils together. I can say with full honesty that during that period my attention and regard for you have grown, and I do not think anything can happen to lessen it.

“Anyway in the crisis that we have to face now after Bapu’s death, I think it is my duty, and if I may venture to say, yours also, for us to face it together as friends and colleagues not merely superficially, but in full loyalty to one another and with confidence in one another. I can assure you that you will have that from me.”

To which Patel replied: “I am deeply touched, indeed overwhelmed by the affection and warmth of your letter. We both have been lifelong comrades in a common cause. The paramount interests of our country and our mutual love and regard, transcending such differences of outlook and temperament as existed, have held us together. I had the good fortune to have a last talk with Bapu for over an hour just before his death. The opinion also binds us both and I can assure you that I am fully resolved to approach my responsibilities and obligations in this spirit.”

Nehru and Patel kept the compact, even when there were strong differences of opinion, as for example over the election of Purushottamdas Tandon as Congress President. Working together, the two laid the firm foundations of the



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Indian state and the Indian political system. This is not to minimize the contributions of Rajendra Prasad, Azad, Ambedkar and the other makers of the Constitution, but if Nehru and Patel had not held together, we could not have survived as a credible, viable, democratic nation and withstood the later challenges. The Nehru-Patel decision not to wind up the Congress must be seen in this context of immediate and long-term imperatives.

Jawaharlal Nehru was fortunate in his colleagues and never more so than in Sardar Patel. The Nehru-Patel duumvirate has few parallels in history in terms of the quality of their personal relationship as well as in terms of capacity and achievement.

Nehru's own reputation has in recent years greatly declined. With the world-wide setback to socialism, his strategy of state-led planning is seen as a producer not of wealth but of poverty and backwardness. The end of the cold war should have been interpreted as a justification of his policy of non-alignment, but the disappearance of the Soviet Union is adduced as proof of his unrealistic reading of international relations. His secularism is anathema to a vocal section of the people - and they happen to have now risen to power. He is not even remembered for his role in building up parliamentary democracy; more often he is held responsible for building up an over-centralized state.

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The Kashmir dispute is held up as the millstone he put around the nation's neck. Above all he is not forgiven for being Indira Gandhi's father. He is also charged with responsibility for inaugurating an extravagant life style. (Remember Dr. Lohia's booklet which said that the Prime Minister costs the country 25,000 rupees a day?) Nehru was probably ill-advised to choose Teen Murti House to live in. Indira Gandhi wisely decided not to move in there. Her decision to stay on in 1 Safdarjang Road, probably the smallest house that any head of government lived in anywhere in the world, won the admiration of people all over the country. It is not generally known that even while living in Teen Murti House, Jawaharlal Nehru led a spartan life. He had no air conditioning, for example. Many habits he had practised in prison continued with him - like darning his own clothes when they tore, and sticking to khadi clothes and hand-made paper, swadeshi soap and tooth paste and so on. The daughter also shared these habits. She was a great one for switching off the fans and lights whenever she left a room, whether at home or in her office. She was a frugal housewife.

Jawaharlal Nehru is accused of grooming his daughter as his successor; he has also been compared to the banyan which allowed no other tree to come up in its shadow. I just said that Nehru was lucky in his colleagues. But there was one exception. He was particularly unlucky with a

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group which started off being identified with him, the Congress Socialist Party, whose members became some of his most trenchant critics outside the Mahasabhaites (who called him a maulana) and the communists to whom he was the running dog of the imperialists.

It is well-known that Nehru had hoped that Jayaprakash Narayan would share his political burdens and eventually succeed him but his efforts to bring him into government came to nought. Jayaprakash remained, to the end of his life, a very attractive but very baffling philosophical anarchist, ready to fight the aberrations of the state but reluctant to assume any office of responsibility himself.

In his lifetime, particularly in the pre-independence days, Nehru was often called the Hamlet of Indian politics. The label was a clear sign of lack of understanding either of Hamlet or of politics. No man who had Nehru's will to power could be a Hamlet. He never said "O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right". He revelled in the chance to set things right. He was one of those men of action who were also men of thought. If he discussed the alternatives in public, that is because of his doubts about the morality and practicality of a particular course of action, not the result of any doubt about the need for action or about his own capacity. Even Jayaprakash Narayan, to whom the Hamlet tag came to be attached later, had no hesitation

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about his duty. But his persistent refusal to assume political authority was a real waste of a vast and unusual national resource.

Grooming does not work in democracies. It has often failed even in monarchies. Choices in democracies are often determined by the configurations at the final hour, not by horoscopes cast in advance. We need only to recall the sad case of Anthony Eden whom Churchill himself had groomed as his heir but who proved a woefully inadequate man for crises. Time and again we find a good No.2 failing as No.1 (just as in the film world a fine supporting actor or actress need not turn into a top star.)

Nehru planned his succession very ingeniously through the Kamaraj plan. Morarji Desai, one of the leading claimants, always believed that the Kamaraj plan was Nehru's plot to do him out of his due. The other leading claimant was Lal Bahadur Shastri. It would have been ideal for the nation if there had been a candidate who combined in himself the best qualities of the two. But that was not to be. Shastri and Desai were wholly different in temperament and endowments. Both were divested of office (along with a few others) under the Kamaraj plan, and asked to work for the party. The whole country had a chance to see which of the two would prove more acceptable to the Congress rank and file, to whom they would turn for settling their disputes.

They turned to the affable, humble Shastri rather than to the stern and rather imperiously aloof Morarji.

A vivid example of Shastriji's style comes to mind. It happened at the first meeting of the Planning Commission to meet under Lal Bahadur's chairmanship after he had become Prime Minister. I was at that time editing the Planning Commission's journal and attended the meeting. Lal Bahadur was no orator. His prose was plain, but his manner was warm and made a deep impression because of his earnestness. He began by referring to the loss that the nation and the world had suffered in Nehru's death. When he went on to allude to his own personal association with Nehru, he was heard with rapt attention. A few eyebrows went up when he said: "I once told Panditji, 'Panditji, I am more intelligent than you. Ask me how.' Panditji asked me: 'How?' I told him: 'Panditji, when people come to you and tell you their stories and give you their version in disputes, you with the bigness of your heart, believe them. I, being nearer to their level, am able to see through them. That is why I am more intelligent than you!'" It was a wonderful way of paying tribute to his mentor and also making the world aware of his self-confidence.

Lal Bahadur was a living disproof of the banyan tree theory and the dynasty charge. Who would have imagined - it certainly was not part of Nehru's design - that this little

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big man's life would be cut short so soon? If he had been in office for the full term, there is no knowing whether Indira Gandhi would have become Prime Minister at all, although she had emerged, even during Lal Bahadur's tenure, as a rival centre of power.

I worked with Indira Gandhi from the first day of her Prime Ministership until the last day. In fact I began working for her a few days before her election as leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party on 19 January 1966. (I was one of the last persons to speak to her. I had seen her a few minutes before her death on 31 October 1984.) She was more forthcoming in the early days than in later years in talking about herself. More than once she told me that it was Govind Ballabh Pant and U.N. Dhebar, and not her father, who had persuaded her to take an active part in the party councils, and that Pant also showed her many files. There was one corroborative piece of evidence to support her assertion that she had not foreseen that she might one day be called upon to hold the top spot. And that is that she, who took great care about her father's papers, took none whatever about her own papers- her letters, her speeches etc. There were no papers with her of her own months as Congress President. She was truly torn between remaining a private person and becoming a public personage.

But there is little doubt about her political acumen even in her younger days or her deep understanding of the strange organism called the Congress. She had known all the important leaders and party workers since her childhood in Swaraj Bhavan, which was also the AICC headquarters. And she had a natural gift for reaching out to party workers at the field level. She had of course the advantage of being her father's daughter and his hostess in Teen Murti House and his companion in his travels within the country and abroad. The two recently published books *Freedom's Daughter* and *Two Alone, Two Together* (edited by Sonia Gandhi and published by Hodder and Stoughton), which give the letters which were exchanged between Nehru and her, show what a keen political mind she had developed even during her student days in England, a fact which made Laski advise her not to become her father's satellite.

When Indira Gandhi became Prime Minister, there was not much of a public record about her thoughts and views to go by, so the label *goongi gudiya*, dumb doll, came to be attached to her. Within a remarkably short time, she was able to turn the tables on her tormentors within her party, Parliament and the country at large. Indira Gandhi was a tremendously quick learner. One of the reasons for it was that she was a good listener. She had the advantage of being underrated. She was an adept at converting handicaps into strengths. When she hit, she hit hard, with several

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times the force needed. The opponent was caught off guard but there were many unintended consequences, too. If we keep this in mind we shall be able to understand why she did some of the things she did and the way she did them.

Let me not act as Indira Gandhi's PRO so many years after her death. One observation about her stays in my mind. That is a remark made by Gen Thimayya's sister, Amie Crishna. Mrs. Crishna was Indira Gandhi's personal secretary for more than two decades. When a biography of Indira Gandhi appeared, Mrs. Crishna told me : "Look at those people. I have worked for Indira Gandhi for 24 years, yet I don't know her. But these authors claim to know all about her!" It is wise not to play a know-all. Indira Gandhi was one of the most complex of people and she elevated inscrutability into a fine art.

By contrast, the next Prime minister I worked for, Morarji Desai (- I worked as his Information Adviser as well, for almost a year and a half) was an easy book to read. His predictability gave a big advantage to his adversaries in politics. Morarji Desai looked every inch the leader. He had a strong and impressive mien and bearing, with authority exuding from every pore. The trouble about him was that the top spot came to him too late in life. He looked upon Prime Ministership as something that fortune had wrongly withheld from him time and again but could no longer do



so. It was not a challenge or an opportunity for him to justify himself. He was a fatalist. He made no attempt to defend himself when attacked. He had undoubted administrative ability, but lacked the first ingredient in a politician's make-up, namely the art of winning and retaining people. He snubbed his friends and antagonized his followers. He had a peculiar way of cross-examining them. When a journalist once asked him : "Prime Minister, why do you always answer a question with a question?", he replied "Why not?" When a health faddist met him and argued about the superiority of her remedy to his, he told her: "The trouble with you is that you are too rigid and opinionated; you seem to think you are always right. You should learn to have an open mind."

If power came too late to Moraji Desai, it came too early to Rajiv Gandhi, the third Prime Minister I worked for. In contrast to his mother, who had a long apprenticeship, Rajiv Gandhi had virtually none. In fact he had set his face against a career in politics. When it was forced upon him, however, he took to it with zest and relish. His youthfulness was attractive and infectious. The flip side of it was that he lacked patience. He worked hard. He had a sharp mind, although it lacked the intellectual sweep of his grandfather or the intuitive flair of his mother. Like them he entered politics at the top and had to work his way down. The people took to him as they had to his mother and

grandfather. A politician has to learn by his mistakes. It was Rajiv Gandhi's tragedy that his learning process began after becoming Prime Minister, when the penalty for mistakes was too large. He would have done far better in a second term - he was sure to get it if death had not claimed him. He did possess the basic qualities of leadership - energy, self-assurance, grasp and the ability to dominate.

Of the four stop-gap Prime Ministers we have had, Mr Charan Singh, Mr Chandra Shekhar and Mr Deve Gowda were not wanting in self-assurance; and Mr. Gujral was too suave to make a show of it. What the four had in common was that Prime Ministerial office came to them through party brokerage. It had not been earned by them in open battle. The cases of Mr. V.P. Singh and Mr. P.V. Narasimha Rao fall into a different category - they had a solid bloc in parliament with them. As Prime Minister, Mr. V.P. Singh was a restless soul, always in search of some new miracle drug. He started with a great reservoir of goodwill for his idealism, but soon dissipated it. Mr. Narasimha Rao was a more conventional chess-master. He achieved what few had thought he would be able to do - last the full term with a minority government. His tactical skill and his depth were not underrated by his colleagues or adversaries. What he lacked was the gift of generating deep loyalty. Neither Mr. V.P. Singh nor Mr. Rao could be called a Man of the People.

As for Mr. Vajapayee, courtesy demands that we should not dissect him. He might still spring surprises. His trouble is that damage will not come to him from the front, that is, from his open opponents, or from the sides, from his allies, but from the back, from his own supposed supporters. There is a trident pressing on his spine.

I have confined this discussion of leadership to Prime Ministers. They are not the only leaders in a society. The subject being so large, I had to cut it down to the size of my own limited knowledge. I shall conclude by doing what I should have perhaps done at the beginning - namely give a definition or description of leadership as I see it. To the question who is a leader, my answer would be:

A leader is a person who has a vision of a better life for the people around him as well a strategy to bring it about, and the ability to communicate that vision to others and inspire them to work with him for the realization of the objective. His courage, his character, his sense of justice, his understanding and his dedication should be such that large numbers of people will place their future in his hands.

*A newspaperman by profession, Sharada Prasad was chief editor of Yojana, journal of the Planning Commission (1959-66), and Information Adviser to Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi, Morarji Desai and Rajiv Gandhi (1966-78 and 1980-88). Currently he is Vice President of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. Among his publications are Exploring Karnataka, Rashtrapati Bhavan and commemoration volumes on Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi.*





