

Leading India

Gopalkrishna Gandhi



Ambedkar University Delhi

The Dr BR Ambedkar Memorial Lecture Series was established in 2009 by Ambedkar University Delhi. Under this series, an eminent scholar or public personality from among the best minds across the world is invited annually to share his / her thoughts and reflections through a public lecture, particularly in areas of knowledge and human experience such as democracy, constitutional law, equity, social justice, social transformation, social action and engaged spiritualities.

The first lecture, *Ambedkar's Legacy*, was delivered by Bhikhu Parekh. The second lecture, *Citizenship as a Claim or Stories of Dwelling and Belonging among the Urban Poor*, was delivered by Veena Das. The third lecture, *Discrimination and Justice: Beyond Affirmative Action*, was delivered by Deepak Nayyar. The fourth lecture, *Theories of Oppression and Another Dialogue of Cultures*, was delivered by Ashis Nandy. The fifth lecture, *Restoring 'Title Deeds to Humanity': Lawless Law, Living Death, and the Insurgent Reason of Babasaheb Ambedkar*, was delivered by Upendra Baxi.

Dr BR Ambedkar Memorial Lecture 2014

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I am grateful to the Ambedkar University, Delhi, and to its Vice Chancellor Professor Shyam Menon, for inviting me to speak in this series of lectures commemorating Babasaheb Dr BR Ambedkar.

Introduction

Nearly six decades after he passed away, Dr BR Ambedkar remains more alive, more invoked, more honoured than any political leader, dead or living, in India's political imagination. The name that comes closest to his in terms of an undiminished and, in fact, a growing posthumous following is that of Shaheed Bhagat Singh. Their images are iconised on hoardings, posters, calendars.

Custom decrees that portraits of Gandhi hang on official walls; protocol places those of the President of India there. But Ambedkar adorns those walls because none dare leave him out. Not anymore.

This is the tribute realism pays to history. This is the correction time carries out on its own defaults.

It is, however, in the unbounded commons of India that his image reigns not by official leave or institutional facilitation but by the granite strength of popular will. Cyber cafes, computer training one-roomers, taxi and auto stands, shoe repair and cycle repair stalls and countless hundreds of our country's improvised livelihood corners display his portrait proudly, as that of an inspiring forbear, with no sentiment other than a sense of

belonging. But we must note, self-chastisingly, that the overwhelming number of such non-official sites where Ambedkar is commemorated by means of photographs or busts and statues, are powered by Dalit India. The India of the so-called higher castes stands by, cautiously if courteously distant, acknowledging him half-heartedly, even absent-mindedly. This is no loss to Ambedkar's contribution; it is a great loss to India's collective ownership of his legacy. We are great, we Indians, at squandering what we have and chasing after what we do not.

Dalit organisations have had to act as trustees, conservers and disseminators of the Ambedkar legacy. If they did not function as the agency for the dissemination of his word, the interpretation of his thoughts, the application of his ideas to contemporary situations, who would – Manu's India, Gandhi's, Nehru's India or that of the RSS? In the process, we see two responses to Ambedkar – self-depriving neglect by the upper strata on the one hand and, on the other, something Babasaheb would, I believe, have been uncomfortable with. In Shakespeare's words, it is the 'gilding of refined gold, painting the lily, smoothing the ice, the throwing of a perfume on the violet' of the transformational man's transformational life and work.

Nothing in political allegiance can be as injurious, both to the hero and the hero-worshipper, as the placing of a halo of attributed perfection over the hero's head. That inhibits, as Anand Teltumbde has recently shown in an incisive article, access into the hero's mind which can, like all minds, be as fallible as it can be formidable.

Hero worship anoints the worshipper, rather than the worshipped. Political India uses his legacy self-servingly. He is placated, commemorated, by crass co-opters, used, misused, exploited to settle scores, gain absolute and differential advantage in influence, control, power and, above all, in leadership contestations.

Leadership deficits are sought to be filled by the surpluses of Ambedkar's charisma, values and vision. Ideational vacuities are made up for by the clarity of his writings; deficiencies in political understanding, historical associations and cognitive interpretations are routinely made up for by recourse to quoting Ambedkar. An Ambedkar head-quote can indemnify a piece of writing against mediocrity. An Ambedkar mid-course quote can embellish tedium, while an Ambedkar final quote can prevent its intellectual demise. His intellect is tunneled, like the mines of Bellary or Chhattisgarh, opportunistically, impudently and self-aggrandisingly, by political Mafiosi.

Here his leadership of India shares something with another iconic figure, Periyar E V Ramasami Naicker, whose revolutionary leadership of the Dravidian movement generated an ideological dividend of such richness and versatility as to provide intellectual life-support to the two Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu. Both keep drawing nourishment from the Periyar legacy without making any ideological value additions to it. He provides the rationale; they add the rhetoric.

The nation-wide celebration of Ambedkar may be summarised thus:

1. The State hails him out of a sense of respectful obligation and intelligent 'play-safe'-ness.
2. Millions of Dalits adore him with passionate commitment as their emancipator.
3. Great and salutary exceptions apart, political organisations, Dalit and non-Dalit alike, link themselves to his legacy out of sheer opportunism.

This historically narrow, intellectually stunted, and politically gross limitation of Ambedkar is, however, not a new phenomenon. In a very crucial way, this happened in his lifetime as well. Whether acting on Gandhi's instincts, Nehru's democratic temper, or sheer intellectual compulsion, the Indian National Congress (INC) did the right thing right in encouraging Ambedkar to head the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly and to join the Nehru cabinet as Minister for Law and Justice. But it is a thousand pities that the same Congress could not see its way to backing him in his first electoral contest in 1952.

As we all know, when the time came for India to identify its first President and first Vice President, Dr Rajendra Prasad, as quondam President of the Constituent Assembly, was regarded as the natural choice for the first President of the Republic. I believe the INC, which was wise enough to have utilised Dr Ambedkar's intellect for the drafting of the Constitution, should have seen him as the unanimous choice for India's first Vice President. A great politico-psychological leap would have ensued in India's political maturation had that happened, for it would not only have placed Dr Ambedkar in the direct line of succession to the office of Head of State, but would have given India's political leadership an altogether new and vital impetus.

No one has any say in the laws of mortality. Dr Ambedkar was to die in 1956. But had he been Vice President from 1952 onwards and lived into and beyond 1957, India could have had Dr Ambedkar as President and Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan as Vice President, a sight for the Gods and for us humans, perhaps in reverse order.

Leading and leadership in political India was, during the movement for freedom, about commitment, about sacrifice, about placing the nation above one's self. The country saw in unprecedented profusion, leadership examples which would have generated discussion on the question Plato raises in *The Republic*: 'What qualities distinguish a leader?' Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero-worship*, where he discusses leadership attributes in terms of skills and acquired prowess, including the human physique, we can be sure, was widely discussed while analysing our leaders. What has now to be described as "the trait theory of leadership", as against the Galtonian positing of heredity and blood-line inheritance as decisive factors, must have been the subject of speculation in the 19th and early 20th centuries, with the leaders of 1857, subaltern heroes like Mangal Pande, and self-honed charismatic men like Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Tilak, Gandhi, Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, the brave-hearts of the Chittagong Armoury raid, and Ambedkar himself, spectacularly refuting the hereditary principle, the role of 'blue-blood' or of leadership genes. History being created by the intervention of great men and women, with powerful personal attributes, must have seemed a real-time incontrovertibility in tune with what has come to be known as the "trait theory" of leadership. 'Do the times produce the person or persons make the times?' must have been a subject for conclusion-less if luxurious enquiry.

Hero-worship, an old trait handed down to us by the legacy of epic literature, legends and mythologies, was anathema to Ambedkar. He said: "You must know that your man is really great before you start worshipping him". And he added: "This unfortunately, is not an easy task. For these days, with the Press in hand, it is easy to manufacture great men. Carlyle used a happy phrase when he described the great men of history as so many Bank Notes. Like Bank Notes they represent gold. What we have to see is that they are not forged notes".

In the 'manufacturing of great men', in the making of leaders and leadership, the real and the fake, the true and the forged, the genuine and the counterfeit, arise together. It requires an Ambedkar-style winnowing of the chaff from the grain to tell one from the other. That he himself was whole wheat grain, no one doubted then, no one doubts now. He himself doubted it not at all.

Ambedkar showed a remarkable degree of patience with mediocrity and worse in the Constituent Assembly. Prejudice was clearly at work

against him, even in that august assembly. And so he gave it back, very often, and very rightly, in hard kind. There was Prasad, a meticulous and hard-working President of the Assembly overseeing its work. There was Nehru, young and lucent, casting a spell on its proceedings by the loftiness of his vision. But it was Ambedkar who was the Assembly's mind, not just working from its helm but actually being the helm. And he had to go against his colleagues' dominant traits which, for instance, in the case of Pandit Kamalapati Tripathi, made the gentleman from Varanasi say, addressing the Chair, during the discussion on India's official name, in chaste Hindi, "Sir, I am enamoured of the historic name – 'Bharat'.... The Gods have been remembering the name of this country in the heavens.... The gods have a keen desire to be born in the sacred land of Bharat". The Pandit then invoked the benediction of Sri Rama. He referred to Rama 'twanging the chord of the bow' which, he said, 'sent echoes through the Himalayas, the seas and the heavens'. At this point, Dr. Ambedkar had to rise. 'Is all this necessary, Sir?' he asked the Chair. Tripathiji tried justifying his invocations. Dr. Ambedkar responded tersely, 'There is a lot of work to be done.'

He was leading India from the helm, saving the day from debasement at the hands of blind dogma, stale conditioning and atavistic recoil. But most importantly, he was leading all of India, not some segment of it, some shard, some splinter of it. He could, like Pandit Kamalapati Tripathi, allow his own subliminal mind get the better of his larger picture, but no, he was holding on fast to that larger picture. There was a rage in Ambedkar. But it was a rage over which he had total control, not the other way around. It was, in a sense, almost a calm rage. Those two attributes – calm and rage – are great connectors. His rage linked him to the enraged in our midst. His calm connected him to those, intellectuals, one might term them, who responded to his impassioned dispassion.

It is important now to let Ambedkar be accessed as the helmsman that he was, for the whole of India, and not just for that section of its population whose immiserations he sought very pointedly to remove. It is important that if none patronises, marginalises or diminishes him out of bias, none praises him for fear of a sectarian backlash either. He is too great to be anybody's *bête noire*, too big to be anybody's totem. His leadership is too pervasive to be an ideological vogue. He compels engagement – serious but not uncritical; appreciative but not cultist. Those who enshrine Gandhi do him greater disservice than those who pillory him for enshriners put a lid on all thought-vents, while traducers only lower the slats. That must not happen with Ambedkar.

India's height contrasts with its abysses, its accomplishments of the mind and spirit are annulled by its depravities. I, for one, am appalled by Katherine Mayo's 'Mother India' for its conceit but am shaken by its uncomfortable truths. Let us not delude ourselves into imagining that the freedom struggle was free of narrownesses, latent prejudice and active bias. It was not. The Grand Old Party contained in it then, as it does now, all the bio-diversity of Indian politics, including communal bacteria. Cliques existed then in the Congress as they do now but, difficult as it is to visualise that, pre-Independence cliques cliqued at a higher clique-level than they do now. And, by and large, leadership visions were at their broadest then, in terms of regional inclusion and social embrace. For the leaders, the nation came above politics, politics above party. And something of that vision had to permeate the rank and file.

Today, there are many parties in the scene. But, with great and redemptive exceptions, particularly in India's Left, leading India now, is about first leading a community, then a faction within the party, then a conglomerate of factions within that party, then the party with fault-lines sharp and ready to tear and then, if at all and very optionally, to a vision that is all-India. Leading India politically today is about adhering to those regressed wedges of belonging. It is about being known, being, in a sense, anointed and made recognisable within those wedges in the vocabulary of known parameters and only thereafter, if at all, about being understood intellectually, being interiorised in terms of ideas, being made a thought-partner.

It would be lyrically gratifying but intellectually self-indulgent to expand on the Wordsworth quote: "Whither has fled the visionary gleam? Where is it now, the glory and the dream?". I must resist that temptation and proceed rationally with the theme under discussion.

It is not that we, as a people, are unfamiliar with reason and reasoning that requires de-coding, dis-assembling and deconstruction; we are not. We have a tradition of ratiocinative disputation, as Professor Amartya Sen has tried to explain to us. But we are more comfortable, more easy, more at home with capsular coda. We are happier with aphorisms than with exegeses, with formulae rather than with formulations, with broad-brush colours than with nuances. We prefer that which is mnemonically accessible, acoustically mimetic, and visually replicable over what seems to require intellectual hosting.

It is not that Indians are intellectually inert or psychoanalytically

passive. But broadly speaking, there is a trait in us that makes us better disciples than analytics, better followers than equals, and better imbibers than reflecting listeners.

This trait advantages the laryngally dominating over the intellectually suasive. This trait does not contradict and in fact complements another trait, a twin-trait, which makes factions of the disciples, cliques of the followers, schismatics of the adherents, each trying to win the leader's favour, nod or pat.

In this latency, as in everything generic about India, there are great and redemptive exceptions. We have one in Gautama the Buddha, no less. He had disciples, but he was aware of the perils of disciple-ship, which is why, one may assume, he taught his disciples not to adopt even his teachings uncritically.

The Buddha certainly knew the unquestioning traits of his people, which included uncritical worship of preceptors, gurus, leaders. To consciously impart the trait of questioning, including self-questioning, to such a society was no ordinary task. And even though in his own case this teaching meant that he was subjecting himself to critical analysis and possible rejection, he maintained his position firmly.

The political 'helm'

Was the helm that the Buddha occupied, a philosophic or a political helm? In so far as he forsook a present and future public office to extend his inherited political obligations to a willed engagement with the wider and deeper field of the human condition, the Buddha occupied in my view, a political helm. In so doing he was upsetting in the process, many social and political conditionings, leading to the setting up of a Sangha which in intricacy and intent and also, alas, in future splintering and self-debilitation, rivaled any political organisation. The Buddha, anticipating egalitarian movements and theories of the future, dismantled notions of inherited hierarchy.

Leading India, rather more than leading any other part of the world is, therefore, about belonging to its peoplehood without exculpating the drawbacks and the debasements that blotch its copybook. Leading India, if it is to be honest and not self-seeking, has to be an exercise in challenging those who are misleading India. This, *ipso facto*, means leading India is about risking wide-spread opposition, unpopularity, and, now, increasingly,

violent intolerance. Leading India is, therefore, no occupancy of a cushioned helm. Leading India is about creating a helm in terms of a pivot from where the leader can command attention, without that helm being a destination.

‘Leading India’ politically is about being at the helm in India and about how that helm is viewed by India. There are certain venues for this helm that are easily identified in our pauranik and aitihasik traditions. One is the fabled chariot, another is the very historical elephant howdah. Others include the horseback, with the heroic horse-rider firmly and dramatically on the saddle in the style of Chhatrapati Shivaji, Maharana Pratap and Rani Lakshmbai of Jhansi.

This is a stance which came effortlessly to Jawaharlal Nehru when he chose to arrive on horseback for parleys in 1946 with the Cabinet Mission at the Viceregal Lodge in Shimla, when others arrived in motor cars or in hand-pulled rickshaws. Equestrian statues are about being at the helm. The more flared the stallion’s nostrils, the more its neck-veins distended and the more horizontal its flying tail, the greater the helmsman’s or helmswoman’s stature is supposed to be.

The ramparts of a fort, the flagstaff and, of course, the throne make for great helms, as do, in miniaturised form, royal insignia in the shape of textuality and animation. The wordings of land grants and the State-minted coin with the regnal image embossed on it have made the helm mobile, kinetic, puissant, carrying the leader’s legend into active public currency. When resorted to by upstarts and putatives, these coins were exercises in hilarious futility but, in serious instances, were anything but frivolous. Asoka, as ingenious a communicator as inspirational a leader, devised his own accoutrement in his great edicts, making it clear that the leader was leading visibly, from heights of public command and depths of personal belief. He created, in effect, a bandwidth of communication with his subjects, the pillar and rock edicts, in their differentiated format serving as the Mauryan equivalent of a G2 and a G3 spectrum.

An extraordinary symbol of helmsmanship, as literal as mind-churningly metaphorical, is the ingeniously raised central pillar in the Divan-e-Khas at Akbar’s Fatehpur Sikri, with a circular platform for Akbar to sit on and meet with representatives of different religions, discuss their faiths which, with Akbar, was as shrewd a political move as it may have been a philosophical one.

Leading India, politically, philosophically and intelligently, was never

more imaginatively facilitated by State architecture as in that nugget of carved policy by Akbar. Until, decades later, in Shah Jehan's repeating of the triumph of symbolic architecture when he thought of the great rampart of the Lal Qila, in Delhi. From this promontory he could see and be seen by his subjects on their way to and back from their prayers at the Jama-e-Masjid and the venues of worship for other faith traditions in the vicinity. Leadership is about plinth, about a differential in persuasive height. But the elevation has to be on hard rock, on terra firma, not clayey loam if it is not to implode. The incorporation of the Lal Qila's leadership plinth in the political landscape of India by Subhas Bose in his aborted imagination, and by Nehru in his physically realised and lyrical somnambulism, is a gift in faith from helmsmanship to the un-predictabilities of leading India. Modern symbols of political helmsmanship in India include, in a bizarre reversion, the old chariot.

Buses and trucks, creaking in their aluminium bodies and reeking of diesel, have been re-tinkered to carry the Chosen One standing under a canopy of tinsel and marigold, to play-act heroism. The 1990 Jan Chetna Yatra of Mr LK Advani which coincided or synchronised with the telecasting of Ramanand Sagar's 78-episode Ramayana, with chariots, arrows and ballistic missiles, was greatly embarrassed when the bus-rath got stuck under the Koilwar bridge on its way from Patna to Ara. The TV serial advertised as "the world's greatest mythological serial" was frank enough to sub-title it with 'Limca Book of Records'. Buses getting stuck and impeding passengers' journeys are no strange thing, but this leader-carrying rath, in its mock-up edition, getting stuck threw mock helmsmanship at the unforgiving feet of truth and created a record of its own kind, Limca or not.

India's modern helm-symbols include the national emblem and the national flag, both, in India, deriving from Asoka and while giving to the Indian nation-state an impersonal palladium, also daubing the Prime Ministerial forehead with the legitimising unction of moral authority. The Nehru-Radhakrishnan descriptions of these two symbols of State are colophonic and cannot but make any leader who is sworn into office self-chastisingly mindful of his or her responsibilities.

Following the ancient coin model, the currency note which bears a particularly banal representation of the Father of the Nation, pre-emptively, I suspect, to keep other claimants and counter-claimants out, is another signet of helmsmanship.

Helmsmanship is as visual, as tactile as currency. And it is as liable to devaluation.

The counter 'helm'

For each 'helm' which valourises and platforms the established leader, there is a counter helm which does the opposite from the other end of helmsmanship. This is the helm which interrogates and can excoriate the official helm, thereby leading India, not from the vantage of power but from the pivot of influence. This is the influence of refutation, of rebellion, of revolt. Here the helm is not the throne but the counter-throne – in the shape of the agitated street-corner, the eloquent dock, and the heroic gallows. From these sites, the counter helm is massively unsettling for the helm which it describes, destabilises, and demolishes.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz' stirring nazm, 'Hum Dekhenge', can be called the anthem of the counter-helm. It has these peerless lines: *Sab taaj uchhaale jaenge / sab takht giraae jaenge...laazim hai ki hum bhi dekhenge...hum dekhenge...*

The counter helm upturns the traditional helm. It shows up the conventional helm, the seat of power, temporal or ecclesiastical or, indeed, social, in terms of oppression, of *zulum*. That is when the counter-helmsman challenges the establishment by labeling it evil and promising redemption. Gandhi said, famously, after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre that, "co-operation in any shape or form with this satanic government is sinful". Among the sites of the counter-helm, is an intangible one, disappearing after it has done its subversive magic.

Though not made of physical materials, it is very real. This is the pivot in a procession of protest, the sharpened point at its lead, where the procession's dialectical tension, its dramatic appeal and its deconstructionist arsenal get concentrated. At the head of his 1913 satyagrahic march in South Africa and then at his 1931 march to Dandi, Gandhi was at that processional counter-helm. Both marches were huge successes, bringing about huge changes in public thinking, self-esteem and priorities and leading government to make strategic moves.

Three decades later, Subhas Bose's 'Dilli Chalol' plan, essentially a grand plan for a march on Delhi, was classically counter-helming but fated, like his political career, to end prematurely.

In 1946, undivided Bengal saw the Tebhaga Movement led by the

Kisan Sabha of the Communist Party, for equity in crop-sharing. As many as 70 peasants were killed in police firing but the imagination of the country was stirred as never before. Post-independence, Kerala and the Andhra region of Madras saw many land-rights based movements of kisans. But the most significant leading of Indian opinion came in 1974, when Jayaprakash Narayan at the age of 72, spearheading a formidable movement, led a silent procession at Patna. The procession was lathi charged and he received brutal blows. The effect of that on the national mood was electric. This counter helms-point was a turning point in the Bihar movement and consequently in the politics of the Indira Gandhi era.

Leading India, at that point, as no one else did, JP declared : “ After 27 years of freedom, people of this country are wracked by hunger, rising prices, corruption... oppressed by every kind of injustice... it is a Total Revolution we want, nothing less!” The words have a strangely contemporary ring to them. All we have to do is substitute “twenty seven years” by “sixty seven years”, and we have today’s counter-helm. The counter-helm is the pedestal that seeks to turn disadvantage to advantage, both in the person of the counter helmsman or helmswoman and as a cause, the cause of the disadvantaged as one who cuts a path where there was none, a path which is both a way and a world in itself, a way to new awareness, new understanding, a new belief by which to better our inner and outer world.

Leading India by advantage

It would be instructive to see how one major ‘advantage’, the advantage of birth becomes an ingredient in leading India. Galton might not be amused but I call this principle, ‘ascent by descent’. Whether one likes that phrase or not, approves of that or not, heredity and leadership in India and in what used to be called the sub-continent of India are, literally, joined at birth. However, it is not limited to the sense of ‘family leadership’ alone, as heredity can be about the family of people as a collectivity. The term ‘family’ is modular. There is one’s immediate family, in terms of the *khaandaan* one is born into.

Then there is the larger family of the caste and community one belongs to, and then the federation of those communities within a country and so on. Heredity, therefore, is an extendable term and in that larger sense, India has had the most amazing community leaders.

Since no one wills his or her own birth, it follows that those who are

born into political families are innocent, at birth, of political aims or ambitions even as a baby born into a royal household is blissfully unaware of the merits of monarchy verses a republican order, or one born into an agricultural family cannot have a clue about the advantages or disadvantages of Bt Brinjals over organic ones.

Those born into political families take birth in and grow into a *fait accompli*. Politics is, for them, a pre-established and ineluctable destination. Now, this is not a new phenomenon. This was the case during the freedom struggle in India and what are now Pakistan and Bangladesh. We find many father-son, brother-brother, husband-wife and less frequently, father-daughter teams in the political theatres of the sub-continent of India. And so the children of leaders become chhota leaders in themselves, from the start.

The Mahatma is regarded as one who did not 'project' his biological descendants onto the political screen. That is true, however, in the struggle in South Africa, Gandhi's eldest son Harilal Gandhi played not just an important political role but a vital leadership one. He was, in fact, his father's alter ego. Harilal was called 'Chhota Gandhi' and was a valued leader, going to jail with and without his father and earning his respect. If Harilal Gandhi had not been enervated by personal setbacks, many of them of his own making, he could well have evolved into one of Gandhi's front-ranking colleagues, sharing his political helm.

Harilal Gandhi is the classic anti-hero, anti-leader who only validates his opposite number. But compared to some of the leaders of today, what a refreshing contrast he provides! He destroyed himself, not others. He borrowed and squandered money on his indulgences, but not one paisa of public money was spent on Harilal Gandhi.

Symbiosis marked the great pre-Independence pairings, as did synergy. No one thought of such team-ups then as being monopolist. On the other hand, they were regarded as natural, felicitous. The Motilal Nehru-Jawaharlal Nehru example is, of course, the best known. Countless others have followed. In India, home and work have not been so strictly demarcated and the families of politicians invariably get hurled or hurtled into the world of campaigns, agitations, manifestos, elections. In the main, politics does not leave the families of political leaders alone. It envelops them. One might even say it traps them.

The families of political leaders get willy-nilly drawn into political

ways of thought, political ways of behaviour, a political vocabulary (often at the cost of other forms of study and learning), political activity, then on to political leadership and the yo-yo of political adversity, political opportunity, success, popularity, un-success, unpopularity, even obloquy and, alas, more often than is acceptable, tragically, in the snapping of everything by a violent death. Yoyo-s swing, yoyo-s snap. Entering a political legacy is therefore not necessarily the same as walking to a golden throne. It is often like falling into a snake-pit. Biological inheritors of a political legacy have to come to terms with the pluses and minuses of that legacy, its sweets and bitters, its crowns and its Crosses. That legacy can be a privilege, it can be a punishment. It can, often, be both.

Leading India has, therefore, two seemingly contradictory originations. First: pre-determination or pre-design by caste, community, kinship and family expectations and obligations. Second: the chance throw of Fate's fatal dice on the other. The same matrix of kinship operates powerfully in both.

This is the standard pattern.

But that said, leadership of the really alchemic kind, leadership that has been truly transformational and has left an extraordinary impress on Time, has come from beyond the confines of kinship. And I must, there, own allegiance to the "trait theory" which validates the leadership examples of the Mahatma, Dr Ambedkar, Shaheed Bhagat Singh, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Sardar Patel and a host of pre-Independence national leaders, with the same being said, in more recent times, of the Loknayak Jayaprakash Narayan.

Leading India by disadvantage

Democratic processes in India are responding with different degrees of immediacy and efficacy to the rages and agonies of the people.

The result: The rise of what is called the politics of street power, of the public square, of the *khula maidan*. This politics is neither strange to us, nor is it undemocratic because it is essentially non-violent. But it is coercive in that it is at cross-purposes with the conventional processes of democratic remedy.

The far more serious result of the slow and inadequate response of democratic procedures is the rise of organised armed violence as an

alternative. No violent movement or initiative is a one-shot affair. It is like a *shikaar*, which never stops with one kill. No bullet has only the name of one user or one target engraved on it.

Violence feeds on itself, evolving from a tool with an objective to a cult with none other than its own nameless, faceless, soulless gratification. Convention has decried violence. It has fallen to the violence, a victim. But it is yet to call violence's bluff convincingly by showing itself to be a better harbinger of change than violence. And so, 'leading India by disadvantage' is now less a democratic phenomenon than a violent one.

Leading India – today and tomorrow

Wherever else they may or may not apply, philosophical approaches ranging from Plato's *Republic* to Plutarch's *Lives* such as "What qualities distinguish an individual as a leader?" are of but academic interest in India. India has had leaders, great ones and petty ones.

Anything unusual in that? Have not all societies and nations had those?

Yes, except that India's great leaders have been truly millennial, starting from the Buddha.

Great leading is a desideratum in India.

And that greatness has meant far-sightedness.

Anything narrow, shortsighted or fractured might helm India awhile; it cannot and does not lead it. Stagnation ensues; stillness does. Listlessness and the Doldrums result.

We need to be aware that we are now at a cusp in India, when a narrow-eyed, pinch-hearted and stuntingly bigoted ideology is claiming our trust.

And a dictatorial creed, cruising on the fallacious self-definition of nationalistic strength and patriotic virility, is poising itself for power over this diverse nation. What makes this claim towards the leadership of India sinister is the underlying appeal to glorify one individual above normal scales of human potential, into a political giantism of unprecedented proportions.

The helm, under-served by those it gave of its hospitality over the last decade, is now up for grabs by a skein of ethnic prejudices passing deceptively for a nationalist ideology.

Hindutva may or may not be the short term for Hindu-mata-tvam; it certainly is a short-cut to human credulousness. The lack of vision, of far-sight and of what Radhakrishna invoked when he said Indian statesmanship should '*dirgha pasyatu, ma hrsvam*', is sought to be made up for by this short-cut. Have no vision, give power-point demos from our epics, puranas, itihisas, with the current hero playing all the epic heroes at once.

Leading India by stoking subliminal prejudices, creating new bogeys, mixing ancient biases with new and imagined insecurities, super-imposing on new manifestos, old testaments with rings that stir sub-conscious memories of mythic wrongs and legendary vistas, is to seek a short-cut intravenously, into popular endorsement. It is also to revive, after a long exile, fear as a tool of leadership. Machiavelli might well gloat that his theory "Better to be feared than loved" seems to imbue the political creed of a claimant to the prime ministership of India.

The facts of the matter, as a legal order might say, are that:

Political leadership in India is in difficulty.

Its credibility is at stake.

And so it is resorting to dangerous short-termism, sinister short-cuts.

Leading India is now about survival, rather than service, placing faction above party, party above politics, and politics above nation.

Leading India is now about desperation. The desperate is dangerous.

The grip of money and, therefore, of moneyed manipulation over politics adds an edge that cuts, to this desperation. The pre-Independence leading of India was about ideals; it was about, literally, leading the way, showing a new and a bigger road, away from the older and narrow ones. It was about correcting India where the leaders thought it needed correcting. The post-Independence leading of India is not about ideals but, dropping the 'I', it is about deals, cutting deals with the status quo, with existing

prejudices, existing polarities, fault lines, which is why the fledgling challenge thrown to the mainstream parties by the AAP holds interest and promise if it also holds anxieties of even this initiative being gobbled up by the known patterns of political leadership.

Being hugely well-informed and discerning, the public knows there still are some noble exceptions – both in terms of persons and political formations – to this general reputation for desperation and recklessness in its political leadership. But those exceptions are insignificant in numbers.

Not surprisingly, therefore, non-political leadership is beginning to look attractive. At a remote school on the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border, to my question ‘What do you want to be?’, came the reply: ‘A footballer like Messi’ and ‘a bird-watcher like Salim Ali’. Not one child mentioned politics as an avocation or a single political leader as an exemplar.

Leaders of NGOs and non-elected constitutional authorities are held in a level of regard that is much higher than that of politics and politicians. One hears regularly ‘I have faith in the judicial system’. Not in a long time has one heard ‘I have faith in our political leaders’.

Legislative bodies remain the most reliable vessels for the expression of public opinion, public grievances, public expectations and, of course, for the modification of existing laws where modifications are needed and the enactment of new ones called for by our times.

Those bodies cannot afford any further drop in public estimation.

The great challenge before the political leadership today is the retrieval of its credibility, of leading from *leaderbaazi*.

But the greater need is the re-discovery of a leading that is not about politics or even of governance and statecraft but about the human condition in India. We need the leadership of social philosophers, ecological philosophers, philosophers of science, thinkers who may themselves be activists or generate activity, like Bertrand Russell, Schumacher, Wangara Mathai, Chandiprasad Bhatt, and Sunderlal Bahuguna. We need leaders who can walk out of palaces, parliaments and pontiff-seats, and speak for the plundered forests, decimated mines, scooped out rocks, ravaged water bodies, polluted river basins, neglected monuments, ruined craft-traditions, threatened tribal life-systems, our wild life, and our ageing populations.

We need leaders of our womankind, especially the girl-child so often and so tragically facing the most bizarre exploitation, neither of these have constituencies. But they are about the most precious things on our earth.

Leading India has to be about leading India, not one chunk of it, howsoever large. Leading India has to be about making it just, not giving it an air-pumped illusion of becoming a super-power. Leading India has to be about speaking bitter truths about what are we doing or rather not doing about the tonnes of garbage that we know we generate and the nuclear waste we know nothing about. And around which garbage, often within inches of which, thousands of human beings live, cook, wash, sleep and being human, procreate, give birth and die. It is on these that politicians, in the business of leading India, descend like vectors at election time, laden with cash and hooch, to buy their votes. Babasaheb had spoken of how this India may well explode and blow up our Constitutional edifice. Why and how that has not happened yet defies my understanding.

Leading India has to be about leading and not misleading India.



Gopalkrishna Gandhi was in the Indian Administrative Service from 1968 to 1992, and was privileged to be on the staff of two Presidents, R Venkataraman and KR Narayanan, during testing times for the Head of State, which coincided with uncertainties in government-formation and in the nation's politics. He was India's High Commissioner in South Africa during President Nelson Mandela's initial years of challenge and endeavour. He was the High Commissioner in Sri Lanka during President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunge's formidable engagements with the LTTE and the problem of political devolution to the Island's north; along with being the Ambassador to Norway when it undertook, not wholly in vain, steps to facilitate a pause in the then ballistic travails of Sri Lanka. In addition, from 2004 to 2009, he was the Governor of West Bengal during the last term of the Left Front's stewardship of that state, which began momentarily in 1977. Gopalkrishna Gandhi continues to hold several important positions. He is, at present, the Chairman of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, and of the Kalakshetra Foundation, Chennai. He is a Distinguished Professor at IIT-Madras, and a Senior Fellow at the Shiv Nadar University's Centre for Public Affairs and Critical Theory, New Delhi. He is a Member of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library Society, Teen Murti, New Delhi. His published work includes *Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (OUP, 2008), and *Of a Certain Age* (Penguin, 2011), a collection of twenty life-sketches.

Ambedkar University Delhi

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AUD's teaching and research programmes focus on generating knowledge and building capacities for public systems and institutions to function as instruments of social transformation and development, and on preparing professionals at the interface of Civil Society and the State.

AUD functions through its various Schools and Centres. The Schools offer doctoral and master's programmes while Centres promote studies, research and outreach programmes. The School of Undergraduate Studies is the academic home for the undergraduate programmes in the social sciences, humanities, mathematical sciences and liberal studies. The details of the Schools, Centres and programmes of AUD are available on the University website www.aud.ac.in