

India has Only One Enemy - Poverty

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DEFINING THE PROBLEM

I am a simple soldier. I like to think that I served my country to the best of my ability for upwards of forty years, in the Armed Forces and in Industry, before going into what is commonly termed a well-earned retirement. I am and always have been proud of my country; I have rejoiced with it and wept with it, as it has progressed and suffered set-backs, over the sixty and odd years of my thinking life.

I appreciate that the life of my country has been and will be thousands of times longer than mine. Much as I may wish it, therefore, I know that all the improvement that I want India to achieve cannot be achieved within the short span of my life. My training and discipline have taught me to be patient and, believe it or not, to abhor dictatorship. (when I look around at the "shambles" that surround us, on this sub-continent and beyond, I thank the Lord that we continue to remain a democracy). Nevertheless, I cannot get rid of the feeling, which persistently gnaws at my innards, because I love my country, that it is not going forward as fast as it intrinsically deserves to do.

I am neither an economist nor an intellectual, but in my years of work I have faced problems in which I had the responsibility of determining the best possible solution *and* of implementing that solution. Although my years at the University had developed and broadened my mental equipment, it was the Army that taught me how to grapple methodically with a problem and to arrive at a well-rounded, practical and timely answer, which took into account every known relevant factor that had a bearing on the problem.

APPRECIATING THE SITUATION

The process was known, in military parlance, as "appreciating the situation" and went like this. You began by defining the "Aim" that you wished to achieve. You then considered every "Factor" which may affect the achievement of your Aim, with a view to seeing how to make the best use of the Factors which were in your favour and how to reduce to the minimum the effect of those which militated against the accomplishment of your Aim.

Having thus examined every relevant Factor, you normally found that there were a number of "Courses Open" to the enemy and to you. You first considered those open to the enemy, in order that you may not be caught unprepared by his adopting a course which you had not thought about and catered for. You then examined thread-bare the advantages and disadvantages of each Course open to you, until you were clear which one, on balance, was the most likely to lead to success. Now you were ready to formulate your "Plan of Action"

The Plan of Action began by the statement of your "Intention" and you checked back to ensure that this Intention of yours was in line with the Aim which you had defined at the very start of the entire process of thought. You then went on to state the "Method" by which you would accomplish your Intention; the task of each sub-unit of your Force; the most effective means of coordinating their efforts; the administrative details of how they would be kept supplied with ammunition, food and other requirements; how casualties would be evacuated so that the progress of your Force was not affected and, simultaneously, the wounded received medical aid properly and in time; how inter-communication would be maintained between your Headquarters and the various sub-units as well as between the sub-units themselves.

This logical thought-process has served military organisations well, both in peace time and in the heat of battle, irrespective of whether one is a junior leader commanding thirty men or a General commanding an Army of a quarter of a million. It ensures that nothing of importance is overlooked; that you are not deflected from your Aim by irrelevancies; that each limb knows its precise function and the entire body operates in an organised and coordinated manner - and that the goal is accomplished in time.

THE WEAPONS - EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION

Loving my country as I do, I have tried in my humble way to apply this thought-process to the vast canvas which is India. Considering the many and baffling factors over and over again, whilst remembering all the time that the arch enemy is Poverty, I seem invariably to come to this simple and basic Plan of Action; Employment and Education are our two prime needs, in that order of priority.

Productive employment on a regular basis for every able-bodied person throughout the country, according to each one's current ability, is the first need. The resultant earnings, and the continuous creation of real wealth through productive work, would have the necessary snow-ball effect of getting

the country moving forward, with an in-built momentum which would give ever-increasing speed to that forward movement.

A full stomach through one's own hard work leads to the creation of self-respect. The taste, however faint, of a better standard of life gives one the desire for further betterment, for one's self and for one's children. And the fewer the children the better the betterment. This, more than anything else, could be the most potent factor in leading our people towards smaller families, with fewer but healthier and better cared-for children.

Education improves a person's mental equipment and thereby enriches the nation. Potentially, it lays the basis for people to become more employable in a larger number of fields of activity. Combined with productive employment, it further stimulates the desire for individual betterment and for smaller but healthier families. The two together, open the way for continuing progress.

BUT HOW?

How is this basic Plan of Action to be implemented in our vast country? It can only be done in small, well thought-out packets of local effort; productive work must be provided where the people are.

Government should not, and should not be expected to, be solely or even primarily responsible for organising and running those local schemes of gainful work-except as secretary, treasurer, statistician and coordinator if required. In fact it is essential that our people break away from the slavish habit, formed during the two hundred and odd years that we were ruled by foreigners, of running to the "Sarkar" whenever there is a problem.

THE AGENTS

In our democratic system every inch of the country is represented by an elected individual, both in the State Vidhan Sabhas and in the Lok Sabha. These individuals know the territory from which they have been elected, its strengths and weaknesses and its needs. They are responsible to the local people, who had them elected by voting for them. These individuals should be deeply involved in and, indeed, responsible for both formulating and implementing the plans for bettering the lot of the people whom they represent.

There are many organisations which have no political, religious or personal axe to grind and, additionally, have the training, the devotion and

the will to be of use in this great task. There are ex-servicemen throughout the length and breadth of our Country; they have learnt much of value whilst in the Armed Forces, which could be utilised at the local level. There are Soldiers', Sailors' and Airmen's Boards at District level and the Indian Ex-Servicemen's Association as well as Resettlement Directorates at the all-India level, through which the efforts of ex-Servicemen could be organised and coordinated.

Then there are some fine voluntary organisations which, I feel sure, would be delighted at the prospect of serving the people in an integrated and purposeful manner. The elected representatives - the M.Ps and M.L.As - should know these set-ups in their areas and rope them in, regardless of caste or creed. The Ramakrishna Mission comes immediately to mind, but there are several others. In this context, one organisation which has a virtual all-India coverage, deserves special mention; the Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organisation. With an emblem which embodies the signs of all major Indian religions, this outfit contains devoted leaders at State, district, taluka and village/mohalla levels. Its motto - Sathya, Dharma, Santhi, Prema (truth, righteousness, peace, love) - is of a universal character. Not only does it run welfare projects at district and lower levels, but it also has effective ladies' and children's set-ups at all levels. And, most importantly, it seeks to restore the moral fibre of our people. Who will not say that morality - at the personal, social, political and national levels - has been the most serious casualty in the country during the last few decades.

THE TALUKA IS THE HUB

Although broad planning and coordination are undoubtedly necessary at the district and higher levels, it is essential that there should be a coherent, practical plan at the taluka/tehsil level. Not only is the taluka the lowest administrative level but, even more important, each taluka normally contains a large village or small town which is the local market town and, therefore, the hub of local economic activity. Productive employment means making goods which are to be sold, and for such goods manufactured at village/hamlet level the natural and most accessible outlet would normally be the taluka town.

The taluka/tehsil economic plan should be formulated at the grass roots, practical level, taking into consideration locally available raw material resources, with each village panchayat directly involved at the planning stage and responsible for implementation at its own little level.

The AIM of each Taluka plan must be "to provide productive employment for every able-bodied adult in the Taluka now"

What goes for Talukas goes equally for towns and cities. The organisational set-up is already there - metropolitan councils, municipalities, wards and the like.

THE ELECTED LEADER

The elected leader - the panch, the municipal councillor, the M.L.A., the M.P. - has been placed on a pedestal, so to speak, by the will of the people of his locality. He should, therefore, be given the responsibility for ensuring that "his" people have productive employment.

Detailed, practical planning at the village/mohalla and taluka/town level with the AIM of providing productive employment to every able-bodied person *now* is the first, the most important and the most urgent need. Empty bellies cannot be asked to live on promises of a square meal tomorrow, next week or, worse still, at the end of a five-year plan.

Of course higher planning is necessary, at district, State and Central level, but at none of these levels can the primary AIM be forgotten; the provision of productive employment *now*. Having ensured that that has been effectively planned, we may consider ourselves sufficiently free to get on with planning for the future.

LET'S INTROSPECT

I do not know if we, as a nation, have applied ourselves seriously to the task of such low-level planning, but it would not seem so. Otherwise there should have been more visible and rapid progress in defeating the enemy, Poverty. Instead, one reads that the numbers of unemployed and under-employed continue to increase and so do those below the "poverty line".

In the national thought-process, did we define correctly our Aim to begin with - to defeat our arch enemy, Poverty? If so, did we check back, when charting out our Plan, that it would achieve that Aim in the shortest possible time? If so, have we set up the machinery with which to accomplish our Plan? If so, has that set-up proved to be the correct one to achieve our Aim?

We have undoubtedly gone wrong somewhere, else we should have been getting palpably closer to our Aim of licking Poverty, with a larger percentage of our people climbing above the "Poverty line".

Detailed, low-level planning is a bore and a chore, but you have to do your homework if you wish to succeed; there is no short-cut. If you did do it in the first place and now find that the answer you arrived at is not the right one, you have to get down pretty smartly to determining where you have gone wrong, so that you can without delay set yourself on the right course.

AUTHORITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

At this stage, let me state another axiom which has stood the Armed Forces in good stead over the years; authority and responsibility must never be divorced from each other.

The M.P./M.L.A. has the authority to represent the people of his area. He must, therefore, bear the responsibility for delivering the goods, by ensuring that the people he represents do not continue to be ground under the heel of the enemy, Poverty. He, and not the Government servant or the voluntary philanthropic agency, is responsible to the people. Place the responsibility squarely on his shoulders, therefore, and let him be answerable to "his" people for failure and, equally, let them make him their hero when he succeeds.

The Government servant who, in the classic sense, does not derive his authority from the local people, should not be burdened with this responsibility. He can provide the "secretarial" services - the keeping of records, accounts, statistics and the like. In all conscience, he already has enough on his plate - running his District efficiently, so that the people are given the "climate" in which they can go about their lives without fear, let or hindrance.

In all this, there is no room for "party-baazi". No matter which political party you belong to, the enemy is the same, Poverty. You can have your little intrigues and your skirmishes, within your party and against other parties, but you may not take shelter behind them; they are irrelevant to the central problem. The poor want reasonably full bellies, and now.

CONCLUSION

I hope this article does not smack of anger or hatred. That was not the intention; impatience perhaps, but not anger or hatred, which solve nothing. The task is urgent and needs to be tackled accordingly, on a war footing. And soldiers do not go to war in a spirit of anger or hatred, but with the clear and firm resolve of defeating the enemy - so that there may be peace again.

Let us, then, look at our Plan of Action critically and objectively, but urgently. And let us ensure that we get down to solid, hard work, particularly at the local, village and taluka levels and the M.P./M.L.A. level, in order to eliminate the scourge of Poverty *now* - not tomorrow or next year. And let us make the "man of the people", the M.P. and the M.L.A, responsible for achieving the Aim, which is the same for all regardless of political creed - to defeat the arch enemy, Poverty.

**"WHAT WE DO" is not what matters;
The glory of endeavour lies in
"HOW WE DO IT"**

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