

## Leadership in Southasia

*Delivered by Gopalkrishna Gandhi*

18 December 2012, Kathmandu

*From Netritva to Netagiri: Between the leader and the politician falls the shadow.*

### **PULL-QUOTES:**

“We tend to judge critically those who pass political leadership down to their children and grandchildren in almost monarchic succession. I believe we err in doing so.”

“Violence has tried to be a feature of Southasian leadership. It is, in fact, the replacement of leadership by anarchy.”

“Netritva esteems credibility; it can be brutally honest. Netagiri values popularity; it is a master of double-speak. Netritva has adherents; netagiri has salesmen.”

“I believe Southasia will surprise a future generation to a new order of ecological, sociological and civilisational intelligence.”

Let me start off with an imaginary conversation between me and anyone present here.

*Is that a Southasian leader who speaks?*

Goodness gracious, no. A Southasian, yes, but ‘*leader*’? No, thank you!

*A failed one, perhaps?*

Please! I never tried to be one.

*An aspiring one?*

No! Not that I have never dreamed of being lauded, applauded; of being, so to say, in some kind of lead.

*In the lead? Of what?*

That’s the trouble. To nothing, really. I have no particular cause to advance.

*No cause? Nothing? Beyond wanting to be lauded and applauded?*

Sounds familiar and quite awful, I know.

*Too familiar! So many leaders, with nothing to them beyond wanting to be hailed, followed.*

That's it. Leaders wanting applause, then more applause, deafening applause, then slogans, posters, rallies, processions, platforms, followers, people behind them, backing them up, holding them aloft, giving them credence and credibility, and then power.

*What are your credentials, what is your adhikaar for wanting some public space?*

Oh, nothing. Zero. But you see, there is this thing called family history. It can be very conditioning.

*Your family has had leaders, so you want to become one?*

Something like that. In fact, quite exactly that.

*So belonging to a family of leaders entitles one to leadership roles?*

No, it doesn't entitle one to anything like that. Belonging to a political family should not become a passport into politics, no. But in Southasia there is this tradition, not a very old one but nevertheless now quite an established one – and not just in politics but in several other fields as well – of what one may call, 'ascent by descent'.

*Ascent by descent! I like that. But Tenzing Norgay did not ascend Mount Everest by descending from it.*

By 'descent', of course, I mean heredity. It is a fact – is it not? – that the tradition, the skill of scaling mountains was in Tenzing's blood, in his DNA. That played a part, most certainly it did. It powered and propelled him, it egged him on and on, until he was on top.

*Maybe. He had the DNA yes, but he struggled – by himself, bone by bone, muscle by muscle, tendon by tendon, with every fibre of his being, his mental and physical being. No one gave him any advantage. On the contrary, Tenzing's story is the story of an individual's striving, step by step. It is an individual's effort. His success is his own.*

You are right, absolutely right. Tenzing was the very personification of leadership. His life tells us all that can be told about true leading. Destiny, Jawaharlal Nehru once said, deals one's hand. But you have to play it, largely, yourself. And on how you do that depends its fulfilment.

### **A larger family**

With that catechistic initiation, let me turn to certain facts and aspects of leadership in Southasia. We can and should congratulate ourselves in Southasia for the leaders we have had. They are among the best and the greatest the world has known. When we use the word 'leader', we should know that we are referring to something far greater and beyond politics. We are referring to a

person who cuts a path where there was none before, 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 worlds.

There is a story that when, after his enlightenment, Gautama Buddha first returned to Kapilavastu with a band of disciples, Yasodhara and the child Rahul saw him from the balcony of the royal palace. 'Which of them is my father?', Rahula asked his mother. The princess did not point him out with 'the first from the left' or 'the one with his hair tied up in a topknot', or with some such mundane description. Looking through the cloud of moving dust, she replied, 'Son, your father is he who walks like a lion'.

The world has never had – and, I believe, will never again have – a leader of the like of the Buddha, who was born in this land. He leads even today by his mind-altering vision, his clear enunciation of the causes of *dukkha* – or life's torments – and the ways of addressing them. Two living Nobel laureates, both of whom can be called Southasians, derive their inner strengths from him – the Dalai Lama and Aung San Suu Kyi. Both have something of a lion or lioness in them.

When a prince leaves his palace and becomes a teacher, when a pontiff has to abandon his high seat and go into exile, when a natural-born leader of her people has to see her natural turn to lead them being turned aside by the fates, we see not ascent but a kind of descent: a sudden disadvantaging. And yet we see in that very descending or disadvantage a huge surge of that which turns a 'mere' person into a leader. Particular incidents and historical episodes can sometimes be overly-romanticised, but that should not make us impervious to the true magic of individual moments.

I said something like this in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, and I say it again today: When, some 120 years ago, in Pietermaritzburg, an Indian was evicted from the train, an Indian Southasian visiting South Africa fell. But who rose? Who ascended from that descent? Gathering his wits, and with an amazing new resolve about him, a statesman rose. Gandhi fell with a railway ticket no one honoured; he rose with a testament none could ignore. He fell a passenger but rose a patriot; fell a barrister but rose a revolutionary. His legal brief became a political cause; his sense of human decency transformed itself into a passion for human dignity, human justice. The person gave place in that moment to the leader whose example was to change things not just in South Africa but in the whole of Africa, not just in Southasia but in the whole of Asia, breaking the chains of colonialism and imperialism, and of our own home-grown exploitations.

'Ascent by descent' can have a meaning not just higher than, but totally different from, the role of heredity and family ties. Southasia has had its share of family-propelled leaders, not just in politics, but in several other fields too. Yet it is Southasia that has also shown to the world that real leadership, in the sense of a new awakening, comes from the other 'descent'. It comes, in other words, from disadvantage, both sudden and systemic, which is about challenge – not advantage – and adversity – not privilege.

The term 'family' is modular. There is one's immediate family, in terms of the *khandaan* 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, Southasia has had the most amazing community leaders.

Two men come immediately to mind: They saw the inherent disadvantages of their kin, their community, their slice of humanity, so powerfully and traumatically as to say to the world on their behalf, 'We, here, are not powerful, not rich, but do not you ignore us. Do not underestimate our ability and our resolve to make ourselves heard!' I refer to Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan – who came to be called 'Badshah', and not just by the Pathans he spoke for – and to Bhimrao Ambedkar, who became 'Baba-saheb', not just for the Dalits he was representing but for the whole of India. Both of them took their particular qualities and created a larger vision, a broader path.

Heredity – the accident of birth and descent, from a 'family' in the smallest or the largest sense of the word – plays a defining role in leadership roles in Southasia, perhaps more so than in other parts of the world, and in more ways – more serious ways. To the extent that Southasia is a field of challenges and contests for survival and betterment, for dignity and justice, each one of us is born into a political family, a political condition and a political context. Whether politicians or not, we are political entities. And, by that fact, we are or can be aspiring leaders, failed leaders, frustrated, satisfied, disgruntled, false, true, great and noble leaders. And even if we are none of these, we can laud, applaud, disapprove of, decry, empower or disempower anyone who leads us, or claims to do so. And, as Nepal more than any other Southasian country has shown, so-called 'ordinary people', even when quite leaderless, can band together in an incredible upsurge of popular will to change not just an incumbent in office, but the very form and nature of that office itself, turning a monarchical order into a republic.

### **Southasian forebears**

Heredity and leadership in Southasia are, literally, joined at birth. But not in the limited sense of 'family leadership' alone. Heredity can be about families. Heredity can be about the family of people as a collective. 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 a monarchy verses a republican order. Yet for those born into political families, politics is a pre-established and ineluctable destination. This is not a new phenomenon; it was the case during the freedom struggle in British India. We find many father-son, brother-brother, husband-wife and, less frequently, father-daughter teams in the political theatres of the Subcontinent. And so the children of leaders become *chhota* leaders in themselves, from the start.

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 example of Motilal and Jawaharlal Nehru is, of course, the best known. Countless others have since followed.

In Southasia, home and work have not always been very strictly demarcated, and the families of politicians invariably get hurled into the world of campaigns, agitations, manifestos and elections. There is no dearth of followers and supporters – basically political parasites and retainers – who instil a sense of ‘destiny’ in the children of our leaders, and a sense of a succession that ‘has to happen’. We tend to judge hastily, and judge critically, those political leaders who pass political leadership down to their children and grandchildren in almost monarchic succession. I believe we err in doing so. Biological heredity has often preset paths to political work and political leadership in Southasia. Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala, the first democratically-elected Prime Minister of Nepal, when asked how he became interested in politics is said to have replied, ‘There was politics in the blood of my family. My father had to leave Nepal when I was three years old. Everyone in the family had an arrest warrant against them.’ Bishweshwar’s brother Matrika Prasad Koirala was also, therefore, the product of a political family tradition.

In the main, politics does not leave the families of political leaders alone. It envelops them. One might even say it traps them. They get drawn into political ways of thought, political behaviour and political vocabularies (often at the cost of other forms of study and learning), and political activity. And then political leadership, with the yoyo of political adversity and opportunity, of success and popularity, failure and unpopularity, even obloquy; and, alas, more often than is acceptable, tragically, the snapping of everything by a violent death. Yoyos swing, yoyos 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 political legacies have to come to terms with the pluses and minuses of that legacy, its sweets and bitters, its crowns and crosses. That legacy can be a privilege, it can be a punishment. It can, often, be both.

In a contribution to a commemorative volume for former Sri Lankan prime minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, I looked at other fields of life and work where next-of-kin succession is known and accepted. This was not to justify or defend successor sons or daughters or wives or, now with President Zardari’s example, husbands, but to better understand the syndrome. In the corporate world, for instance, biological heirs have been known to succeed board chairmen. Entrepreneurial acumen, displayed well and quickly, puts all doubts regarding the boss’s ‘heir’ to rest. Likewise in the professional world, lawyers, doctors and teachers have been known to ‘pass on the mantle’ to their sons and daughters. Of course comparison with the distinguished forbear haunts the offspring until his or her own individual reputation is established beyond doubt. In the world of the arts, musicians, dancers, actors and painters often see their particular art form organically taken forward by their biological heirs. The inheritance principle has worked well in the field of sports too.

What then, in politics, is the equivalent of a boardroom’s recognition of a son’s or daughter’s commercial intelligence, of a courtroom’s acknowledgment of the legal prowess of a barrister’s equally brilliant son or daughter, of an operation theatre’s acceptance of the surgical skills of a surgeon descended from a reputed doctor, of a cinema or art critic’s applause for a daughter or son doing the actor or painter proud? What is that equivalent? It is and can be only one thing: the

resounding endorsement of the next-of-kin in elections, fought fairly and won transparently, under the competent observation of an independent election commission.

Not every next-of-kin of departed and, especially, of slain leaders has passed the test. But several have, and Sirimavo Bandaranaike heralds that stream of subjectively chosen but, in due course, objectively legitimised leadership. She also inaugurated the Southasian trend of coming into a political legacy through matrimony.

Leadership in Southasia has, therefore, two seemingly contradictory origins: first, pre-determination or pre-design by caste, community, kinship and family expectations and obligations. Second, the chance throws of fate's dice. 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 history, has come to Southasia from beyond the confines of kinship.

In that category comes, of course, the Mahatma. No family, no forbear, no caste, no community, no launching pad save his own inner voice and the hand of destiny propelled him to become the greatest leader India and, I would say, Southasia has known in recent memory. His political heir, Jawaharlal, although following his father Motilal Nehru into the presidentship of the Congress, owed his charismatic leadership to nothing other than his own idealism, honesty, courage and energy – qualities that made Gandhi say to him “*Bahut varsh jiyo aur Hind ke jawahar bane raho. Live for many years, and be the jewel of India.*”

The leadership provided by Shahid Bhagat Singh and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, likewise, owed nothing to their belonging to any particular family, caste or community. And Ambedkar, in the sweep of his vision for India as a whole, showed that one can be propelled by one's own descent towards a whole panorama of common concerns.

And the same could be said, in more recent times, of Jayaprakash Narayan. Though belonging to the well-regarded family of Babu Rajendra Prasad, JP was just himself, unclassifiable and also, in ideological terms, indefinable. He was of the Left, and yet no Left party could hold him. JP was a Gandhian, yet none of the fads of the Gandhi 'circle' applied to him. He was with Vinoba Bhave and yet was not. JP's equation with 'BP' – Bishweshwor Prasad – here in Nepal is of the stuff of legend.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the 'Father of Bangladesh', likewise rose from no family privilege. The son of a *sheristadar*, he could well have entered government service and remained in comfortable oblivion. You need not be born into politics to be born a leader. And that was what the immortal Bangabandhu was: a leader of leaders who was propelled by the deprivations of his people to alter political history and geo-politics. His distinguished daughter, Sheikh Hasina, has the privilege and the challenge of trying to fulfill her legacy.

## Who do we look to?

What is the present condition of leadership in Southasia? What is its foreseeable future?

Democratic processes in Southasia are responding with different degrees of immediacy and efficacy to the rages and agonies of the people – and, my word, do we have those! The result: the rise of 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 *shikar*, a hunt, 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 no objective other than its own gratification. Violence has tried to be a feature of Southasian leadership. It is, in fact, the replacement of leadership by anarchy.

And so, political leadership in Southasia is in difficulty. Its credibility is at stake. The grip of money and, therefore, of moneyed manipulation over politics and over leaders is the subject of widespread dismay, distress and despondency. And, also, of rage. Being hugely well-informed and discerning, the public knows there are still some noble exceptions – both in terms of persons and political formations – to the general reputation of political leadership. But that general reputation is not complimentary.

Leadership is now understood in different ways in our language and our slang. Where the correct equivalent of 'leadership' in Hindi is '*netritva*', and in Urdu is '*rehnumayi*', our slang says that 'leadership' means 'leader-*baazi*', and can also be called '*netagiri*'. While *netritva* has great and noble examples in Southasia, *netagiri* is seen as a marketable commodity, with a prominently announced manufacturing address, a price-tag with numerous cancelations and corrections, but no list of ingredients, also no expiry date. Also – very unfairly and unfortunately – *netagiri* is seen as an activity meant essentially for private gain, not public service. I say 'unfairly' because there are – and I know several – politicians who are selfless, honest and even self-critical. *Netritva* is in decline, *netagiri* is on the rise. India's second president, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, advised, '*Dirgham pasyatu ma hrasvam*' – 'Look far ahead, be not short-sighted'. *Netritva* looks at the far scene, *netagiri* looks around under its own nose, sniffing at regional, sectarian and locally emotive issues. *Netritva* is above the small, *netagiri* is about the small. *Netritva* rises above the petty, *netagiri* wallows in it. *Netritva* esteems credibility; it can be brutally honest, frank. *Netagiri* values popularity; it is a master of double-speak, deceit. *Netritva* has adherents; *netagiri* has salesmen. *Netritva* sublimates personal hatreds and rivalries; *netagiri* thrives on it. *Netritva* has a stride; *netagiri* has swagger. *Netritva* will stop at a traffic light; *netagiri* will cut it. *Netritva* will stay firm on principles, and not hesitate to compromise on detail. *Netagiri* will compromise on principles, as long as the details of its convenience are protected.

Political leaders today face threats to their persons and when not covered by the State's security protection systems, and so have to hire private security-guards. Between privately owned arms and illegal arms there is a thin and porous line. Illegal arms and political leadership at the grass-roots level are closely linked. As a result non-political leadership is beginning, in contrast, to look civil and even attractive. At a remote school on the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border earlier this month, to my question 'What do you want to be?' came the replies 'A footballer like Messi' and 'a bird-watcher like Salim Ali'. Not one child mentioned politics as a future avocation, or a single political leader as an exemplar.

The lower the image of political leadership plummets, the higher goes that of social activists, of leaders of NGO movements – who are engaged in political issues but not political in the sense of being in active politics – of sports heroes, cultural icons and, needless to say in Southasia, film stars. These personalities are increasingly occupying the space that was once reserved for national political leaders. This is generically unfair to politics and to political leadership.

Non-elected constitutional authorities are also held in higher regard than politics and politicians. One hears regularly, 'I have faith in the judicial system'. It has been a while since one heard, 'I have faith in our political leaders'. I find all this most unfortunate because in democracies political leadership is of the utmost value as a harbinger of social justice and economic prosperity. Others can catalyse, inspire. But the actual delivery of results, in a democracy, can come only from legitimate democratic political agencies. Legislative bodies remain the most reliable vessels for the expression of public opinion, grievances and expectations, 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 in Southasia today is the retrieval of its credibility, the rescue of *netritva* from *netagiri*. But the greater need for Southasia, as indeed for human society today, is the rediscovery of a leadership that is not about politics or even governance and statecraft, but about the human condition and its place in the web of life on planet earth. We need the leadership of social philosophers, ecological philosophers, philosophers of science, thinkers who may themselves be activists or generate activity – people like Bertrand Russell, E F Schumacher, Wangara Maathai, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Sunderlal Bahuguna. There are many non-political Southasian leaders who have shaped the course of international events and global thought – U Thant, Amartya Sen, Mahbub-ul-Haq, Rehman Sobhan, Mohammed Yunus, Hamilton Shirley Amerasinghe. In India, many remarkable women have shown leadership of that kind; Aruna Roy, Medha Patkar, Arundhati Roy, C K Janu and Vandana Shiva may not be heeded in our time as much as they should be, but posterity will regard them as pioneering leaders. The same is true in Pakistan of Akhtar Hameed Khan and Arif Hasan, pioneers of sustainable urban living.

We need leaders who can walk out of palaces and parliaments, and speak for the plundered forests, the decimated mines, the ravaged bodies of water, the polluted river basins, the neglected monuments, the ruined craft traditions, the threatened tribal systems of life; speak for our wild life, our ageing populations, and especially for our girl-children, who so often and so tragically face the

most bizarre exploitation. None of these have constituencies, but they are about the most precious things on our earth. If Southasia's leaders speak for these causes, they will be recognised by their stride, which would then be that of lions, not of jackals.

I believe that Southasia is not meant to buckle under unsatisfactory models of leadership, or under the violent alternatives to those. I believe Southasia, which has given to itself and the world leaders of a class never known before, will yet surprise a future generation, not too distant from ours, with a spectacular display of its capacity for leadership powered by its people, going beyond politics to a new order of ecological, sociological and civilisational intelligence.

I mentioned Aung San Suu Kyi at the start of this lecture. I would like to conclude it with a salutation to that heroine of patience and courage, whose descent was a matter of pride for her, not a source of preferment; whose ascent has been slow, tedious, fraught with danger, and as yet short of the summit; but who has shown leadership in Southasia, and left us with a new definition of leadership, and with new hope.

*~ Gopalkrishna Gandhi is Chairman of Kalakshetra Foundation, Chennai, and the chairman of the governing body of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, and president of its society. He was the Governor of West Bengal from 2004 to 2009, has served as the Secretary to the President of India, and as High Commissioner to South Africa and Sri Lanka, among other administrative and diplomatic posts. He is the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi and C Rajagopalachari.*