

B.S. RAGHAVAN



Leadership in government

QUALITIES of leadership are not the same for all types of organisations. There are some which are specific to the needs of particular organisational setups. The qualities — risk-acceptance, quick decision, staying power, killer instinct — needed for leading a private sector outfit are entirely different from those — accountability, transparency, prudence, propriety and probity — expected of a public sector chief. Technical prowess may not be enough to lead a marketing organisation. Chiefs of the Armed Forces decked with a plethora of medals have been found to be disappointing in civilian leadership positions.

Class by itself

Among organisations, a government falls in a class by itself because it is unmatched in its reach, range, and volume and variety of transactions. It is also cast into the straitjacket of a rigid and complex hierarchy manned by personnel from heterogeneous backgrounds. In a democracy, it may be run by a single party enjoying majority, or by a number of parties forming a coalition or alliance, often pulling in different directions. Since it has to face the hustings at stated intervals, there is greater and more relentless pressure on it to show results than on any other organisation.

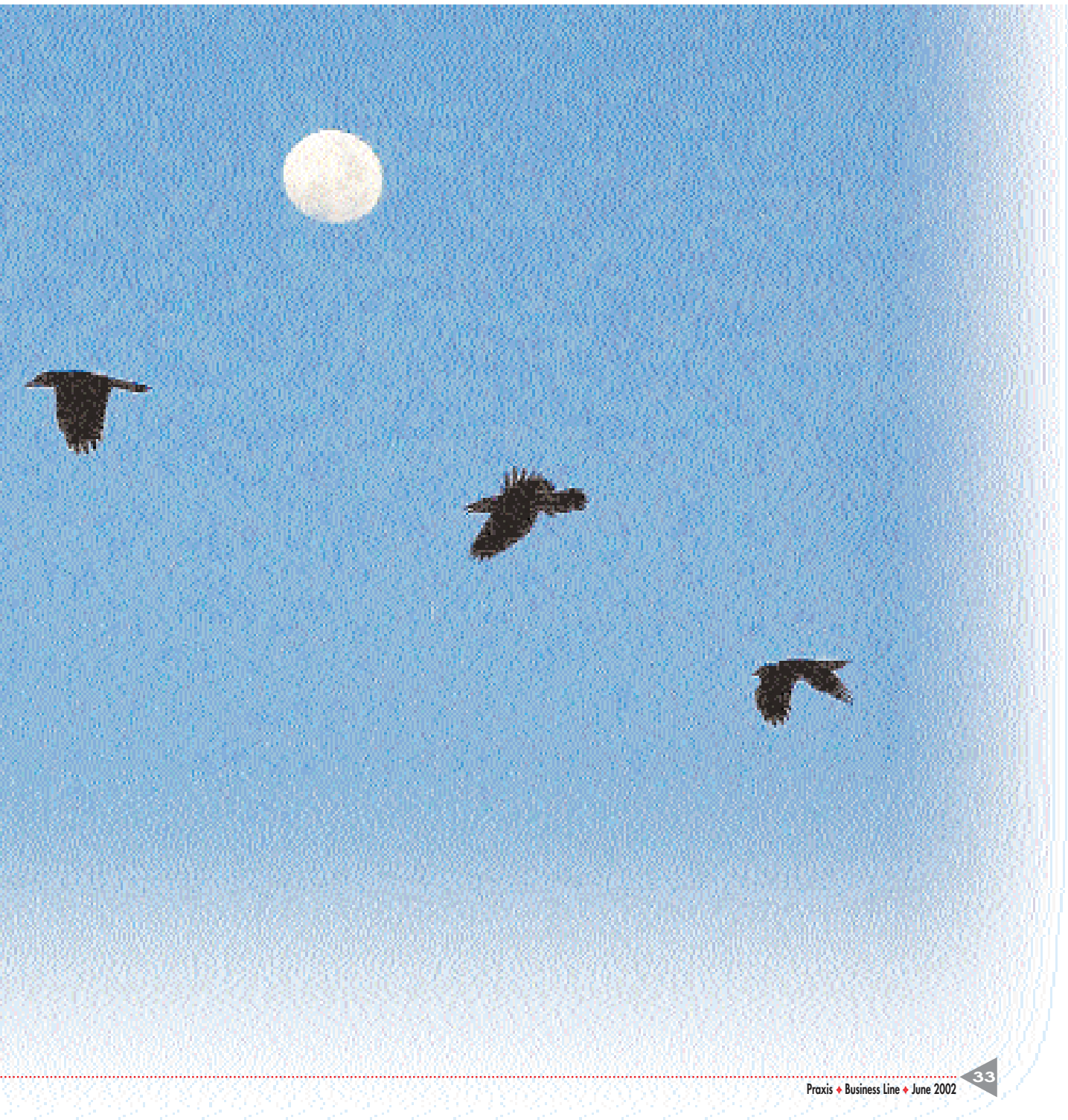
The supreme consideration outweighing all others is that the functions and responsibilities of a government are strictly determined by the Constitution. Being of the people, for the people and by the people, it has got to be service-oriented, and attuned to the concerns and needs of the people, and the promises made to them during elections.

In all that it does, it is subject to almost



Pic: Shaju John

Any leader is expected to lead from up front, but in government the energy and effort to be put in are nearly superhuman. The leader has to impress as a role model in ethical values, intellectual calibre, professional acumen and solid achievements if he is to evoke the ready and willing cooperation of others.



PROFILES OF A FEW STALWARTS

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU



Constantly travelled throughout the length and breadth of the country taking the people into confidence regarding the Government's plans and policies, and gathering feedback on ground realities. Here is a typical instance of his way of handling an official who committed an honest error of judgment: Following the Chinese invasion (1962), the Secretary to the Information & Broadcasting Ministry had entered into negotiations with the US Government to establish a base for the Voice of America in the Andamans. There was a big uproar in Parliament and in the country at inducting a US cold war propaganda agency on Indian soil. Nehru took the blame on himself in public, chiding the Secretary in private.

JYOTI BASU



His strength as a leader was in cementing the disparate and self-willed constituents of the United Front coalition into a spearhead for the State's progress. He regularly monitored the implementation of ongoing schemes to tone up performance and solve problems as they arose. Relations with officials were the best in his time. He never indulged in petty vendetta and never once resorted to the gimmick of so-called 'bureaucratic shake-up'. Trusted and supported his officials to the hilt.

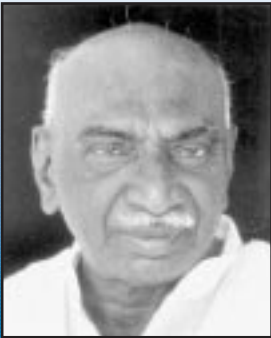
daily oversight by legislature and judiciary on the one hand, and audit and anti-corruption agencies on the other. Unlike other organisations, a government cannot execute quick U-turns or make sea changes in long-established systems and practices which have acquired a sanctity and momentum of their own. And it is difficult to redeploy, retrench or discipline government personnel at

will even for good and sound reasons.

Several levels

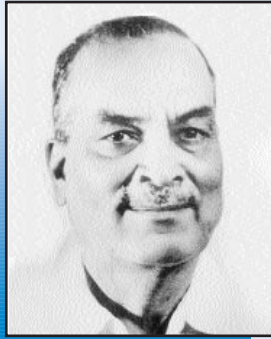
In India, the touchstone for judging the quality of leadership in government pertains to the three planes of Central and State Governments and Panchayati Raj institutions. These, again, operate at several levels: Political, bureau-

K. KAMARAJ



He had his finger unerringly on the pulse of the people, and was ever responsive to their expectations and needs. His directions for action were unambiguous and crisp. His mass appeal, as well as his shrewd judgment of persons and issues, won the loyalty and cooperation of officials from top to bottom in Government.

B.C. ROY



Made a tremendous and lasting impact on West Bengal by rising completely above narrow partisan politics. His all-encompassing vision, thorough professionalism, utter commitment to the State's all-round development and astounding mastery of detail made him an unchallenged titan. His presentation of the State Budget in the Assembly from memory without once referring to the documents was a marvel to watch.

C. SUBRAMANIAM



Was able to build a strong partnership among his political colleagues, civil servants, technical experts and the people at the grassroots to usher in the Green Revolution, carry through his projects in the Ministries of Heavy Industries and Steel, and launch a comprehensive science and technology policy. His success was due to his ability to spot and inspire new talent and encourage innovation and creativity even if they misfired occasionally.

cratic, technical, policy-making, implementational, public sector, headquarters, field offices and the like. Thus, at any given moment, all these levels might be seeking to accomplish a bewildering multiplicity of tasks and targets at different stages of implementation, proceeding at varying speeds, and calling for an incredible diversity of skills.

Moral stature

Any leader is expected to lead from up front, but in government, the effort and energy to be put in are nearly superhuman. He makes his impact not by the panoply of power and authority or designation, but by his moral stature, which, in turn, comes from personal example. He has to impress as a role model in ethical values, intellectual calibre, professional acu-

men and solid achievements if he is to evoke the ready and willing cooperation of others.

This means that he should himself excel in most things that matter for the success of any mission, and have the capacity to think things through, taking nothing for granted and leaving nothing to chance. The formula for commanding the respect of fellow human beings has remained unchanged for ages: To

Leaders come with various temperaments and traits, and not all leaders are made for all kinds of situations and enterprises as their capabilities are not identical.



thine own self be true. Just one deviation, however minor, from the norm and the government's credibility suffers serious damage.

Trust and confidence

The unremitting glare of public scrutiny makes it incumbent on persons in leadership positions in government to inspire the trust and confidence of the people at large as also every stakeholder with whom it

has dealings. Trust welds human beings into a cohesive team, enthusing them to throw themselves heart and soul into whatever tasks they undertake.

Personal chemistry

The ability to get the message across is what ignites people in organisations to act as one person, in sync with the given objectives and goals. This applies much more to government in view of its spread and complexity, and its impersonal character. While written communication may be appropriate in certain formal or legal contexts, personal chemistry operating in face-to-face interaction is important for getting results in government since it imparts and improves clarity on the spot regarding the course of action to be taken, induces a sense of participation and pride in the ideas generated, facilitates unobtrusive monitoring of ongoing actions, without seeming to control or breathe down the neck of associates, promotes better mutual understanding, and maximises the synergy in the achievement of the objectives. No one wanting to be

effective in government should discount the importance of easy working relations combined with genuine interest in fellow human beings evidenced by patient listening and unhindered access.

It is the leader of the team who is automatically and invariably given the credit for the success of an endeavour, even though the efforts of a number of others may have contributed to it. This imposes a corresponding obligation on him to protect his associates from criticism or blame when things go wrong. Of course, he is duty bound to fix responsibility and take corrective measures, but this he should do in a constructive and positive spirit, without leaving a trail of bitterness and acrimony. In any case, he should regard genuine and honest errors of judgment as the inevitable price of learning and growth, and not as something to be condemned or punished.

No standard fit

The desiderata outlined above should be distinguished from leadership style. Leaders come with various temperaments and traits. They may be all types: Aggressive, gruff, reserved, blustery, bluff, forthcoming, formal and so on. But these are superficial, and it is hard to assert that any particular type delivers better than the others. Styles need not distract attention from substance so long as the leader satisfies the core criteria and his style merges imperceptibly and naturally into his personality.

Not all leaders are made for all kinds of situations and enterprises, since their capabilities are not identical. A war leader, like Winston Churchill, may be a misfit in peacetime. One who can lead an organisation that is comfortably coasting along may be no good in handling crises or turning around an outfit which had fallen into bad days.

For a politician or bureaucrat at the helm, the manifold layers of

action extend to the outermost reaches of his domain. His leadership has to pass a three-fold test: Those working for and with him should have no problem synchronising their vision with his and being aligned to his sense of purpose and dedication; since the activities of the government touch the lives of the people every moment, the delivery of various services should be prompt, efficient and adequate; and he should be good at bringing multidisciplinary groups into a mutually reinforcing and tightly knit team.

Five imperatives

More than in any other organisation, effectiveness in government depends on five imperatives: Policies formulated should be practical, workable and viable; they should be communicated in unambiguous and simple terms in the language they understand to those responsible for carrying them out; there should be proper coordination of efforts to get over turf wars and make mid-course corrections; monitoring the quality and pace of implementation should be close and constant; and those masterminding the activities should undertake frequent visits to formations as far down the line as possible and be available as a focal point for solving problems and providing guidance. In short, the aim should be to integrate all levels of personnel operationally, functionally and emotionally with the overall mission with a running awareness of how the contributions of each mesh with those of the rest.

This, then, is a sampler of principles and practices which account for the success of those who leave their mark in government. Although the situations they encounter and manage may be widely different, one can discern certain common features in their approaches. To cite the more salient of them:

1. Their personal and intellectual integrity is beyond reproach.
2. They maintain harmonious relations with politicians, officials, experts and professionals, as well as the people and voluntary organisations. Everyone coming into contact with them is comfortable and at ease, and gives his or her best in the discharge of responsibilities entrusted.
3. They encourage free expression of honest opinions on an issue or a proposal, without equating dissent with disloyalty. They listen patiently and intently, and go carefully through whatever proposals are submitted to them, in order to be able to collectively chalk out a clear-cut line of action.
4. They are able to orchestrate the varied talents and disciplines — the generalists and the specialists,

secretariat and the field, officialdom and the public — so as to pool their resources towards achieving the intended objective.

5. Once a decision is taken, they refrain from interfering in the execution, so long as the follow-up action conforms to the time-frames and targets agreed upon.

6. They invariably uphold exercise of judgment and discretion even if it is not in tune with their line of thinking, provided it is guided by considerations of public or national interest.

7. They not only avoid public disparagement or criticism of their associates, but also build up their self-esteem and effectiveness. ■

(The author is a former senior bureaucrat who has worked with Pandit Nehru.)

etc.
RAVIKANTH



“But for the politics,
I could’ve become a great leader.”