

Article – 6

Image Building

Dear Y's Men and Menettes,

As the Area Service Director responsible for helping build the image of Indian Y'sdom, I dare say it is time for some plain speaking, hopefully without ruffling too many feathers. If we are willing to step back and look at ourselves without being overly influenced by personal feelings, we will have to admit that the image that we once had, of which we were rightly proud, has been losing some of its lustre for some time now. Let me therefore, at the outset, make bold to suggest that our priority should rather be to restore our old image first before we build on it further.

At the Y'S Men India Area Convention held at Kochi on Sunday, 27th June 2010, the guest speaker Mr. Justice Syriac Joseph of the Supreme Court of India, in his keynote address, talking about leadership in general, averred that the present trend of uninformed and ill-informed persons posing as leaders was a symptom of a deeper and more general social malaise in public life. It would appear that across the board in public organizations, there tended to be more people vying to be leaders rather than be followers, he said. He felt, therefore, that the time had come to wean such pushers from their undue haste to be leaders, and train them to be followers first. Only then would they **know the way**, and be able to **show the way** and **go the way**.

One can extrapolate from his words that an organisation can function effectively together only if they have shared objectives and a leadership to give them cohesion. A readiness to accept new ideas and delegate work effectively is indispensable to such leadership. This can be achieved only by a team leader who is also a team member. He can only lead by consensus and example, not by control. He moves with the foot soldiers and imbues them with a common goal. Mr. Justice Syriac Joseph's cautionary words sounded uncannily apt for recognizing some of the problems that have lately tarnished our image in the eyes of others. And, thereby hangs a tale.

Earlier this year, on Wednesday 17 March to be precise, Rolando Dalmas, the Secretary-General of Y's Men International had sent an e-mail message to the International President, copied to other top-rung leaders, under the heading "**Deep concern regarding India Area**" making certain charges based on the information that he had earlier been sent by several Indian leaders. Seen against the backdrop of this communication, it was apparent that the reporting done by some Indian RDs was "not strictly honest". And what was worse; there was the case of a certain Past RD who had "not yet remitted to Y's Men International the Programme contributions collected from clubs in his region". If such things could be done so blatantly, it would argue the case for believing that embarrassment had gone out of indulging in such doubtful practices.

One of the more serious complaints was in relation to the ‘unbelievable’ rise in the number of ‘paper members’ (non-existent members) that are being ‘inducted’ and in particular the overwhelming increase of youth members (who need only pay half the stipulated dues for enjoying full-fledged membership entitlements including voting rights) resulting in the unprecedented and the highly contentious spurt in membership figures. One region alone reported in the 1 February report, 10 new clubs with identical membership figures: 48 members each (25 adults and 23 youth in each club) and 36 clubs with exactly 25 members each (15 adults and 10 youth in each club). And, what was even more irregular was the unauthorized use of International Programme contributions received from clubs to pay the International Dues of the aforementioned paper members with the result that, and I quote Delmas “the reported and paid membership in the region is higher than what it actually is”.

Even while expressing his sadness at having been compelled to point out these irregularities, the Secretary General does not fail to give credit where it is due. He knows that, and I quote, “the Y’s Men in India at the grassroots level contribute tremendously to their communities and YMCAs. There are also many great Y’s Men leaders who are absolutely and totally straight and irreproachable.” But he goes on to repeat his earlier charges succinctly with the words: “there are some who have principles and ideals not in line with those of our movement.”

In the response that their censure elicited at the Kochi Convention, both in the sessions and outside, clearly opinion was divided on Geneva’s less than flattering perceptions about our leadership and of the questionable beefing up of membership in our movement. Their inference was that this sharp practice was done with an eye to influencing the seat distribution in the International Council. Also discussed on the occasion was the charge of our ‘unseemly’ obsession with accumulating awards by any means possible -that we are crazy about earning awards even for having merely gone through the motions.

We should pay heed to these charges, but with the caveat that if we restrict our membership to persons with irreproachable antecedents, and in the process keep self-seekers out, no one ought to raise objections about how many members have been inducted and how fast. This would of course necessitate a screening mechanism at the club level to vet aspiring applicants thoroughly before they are inducted. Admittedly, even this cannot be a foolproof method, and so if any member acts in a way as to bring the movement into disrepute, by acts of omission or commission, he must be stopped in his tracks. We should likewise make the criteria for winning awards more stringent and drastically scale their numbers down so as to make them hard to come by.

To get back to our response at the Convention, the discerning among the delegates at Kochi concurred on all counts. Some kept a discreet silence. Did they have vague feelings of guilt? But some, instead of reflecting on the charges in a calm and considered manner, were in a state of denial and were only too ready to take issue with the censure by being vehemently defensive. One wonders if the SG’s remarks were seen as being

more overbearing and patronizing than advisory. Even if that perception may have some element of truth, we ought to have desisted from such a knee-jerk reaction.

And, instead of taking exception to the censure, I think we should rather have regarded the rap over our knuckles as a form of feedback. In fact, in future, we would do well to be open to criticism whatever quarter it came from, including in-house criticism or self evaluation at our meetings from time to time, which will surely have a cleansing effect on the movement and lead to our gaining more goodwill and trust among the rank and file.

It is not as if this is the first time that anyone has ever hinted at our inadequacies before this. In fact, over the years, the more perceptive of our own leaders have expressed their concern about such tendencies in our movement. Y'sm Dr. Patrick Sukumaran, past International President, had as long ago as July 1986 at the Aarhus International Convention expressed his concern about '...poor selection of members, poor orientation and poor utilization of members in club activities'. Needless to say, the onus of the selection, orientation and utilization of members rests squarely with the leadership. And if that were done indifferently, that would reflect badly on the leadership. We profess that the "Office should seek the candidate" for leadership, which means that we should opt for those who have been put through their paces and have proved their leadership potential. However, we have some who have wormed their way into leadership ranks by resorting to unethical means, like for instance proffering various inducements for gaining votes, and have sadly created the impression that such practices are the accepted norm for us.

Commenting on leadership, Y'sm T. K. Easo, India Area President 1992-93, while laying down his office, is on record as having remarked, 'Leadership is another problem area. Whereas many of our leaders have justified the faith and confidence reposed in them, we have many who have craved for positions, but have failed to rise to the occasion and live up to the expectations of those who made them leaders – virtually doing nothing for the Movement, thereby belying our motto'.

And in the latest Area Convention under reference, our veteran leader Y'sm P. Gopinath said pretty much the same thing when he made an oblique remark that Y'sdom in India remains a sleeping giant, implying that it has not yet realised its full potential. In a similar vein, the outgoing Area President Y'sm Rajan Panicker stressed on the need for greater accountability in the Movement as also on the need for building up our credibility by showing greater social concern and looking for unexplored areas to work in. The foregoing no doubt point to the necessity for reducing the deficit between our professed intentions to serve the community and the actual quantum of our performance. All this suggests that there is an urgent need for restoring our image or the impression that other people have of us.

In every sphere of human endeavour, whether it is in the field of politics, or economics, or social affairs or, even in the field of voluntary community service such as is ours, we see these days a mismatch between the real image we have pledged to create in the community and the false image that some end up projecting, having paid but scant heed to our ideals. If, on the other hand, we wish to measure up to our pledge as Y's Men,

driven by a common loyalty to the principles we have espoused, we have to answer to a stricter code of conduct than is generally obtaining elsewhere, like for instance in the shenanigans of present day politics.

It would then follow that at every stage, we could individually as well as collectively follow the path we have set out to travel, on the straight and narrow. If for any reason we fall by the wayside momentarily, we can always pick ourselves up and soldier on. To be able to achieve this, periodic self-assessment –call it ‘soul searching’ if you like- is crucial in order to make course corrections where we have gone astray, by restating and even revising our goals as needed. This would show us to be not only innovative and dynamic but also to be caring about community needs. Our community objectives may not always be fully attainable, but unless we bridge the gap between the little that we end up doing and the much that can be accomplished, we cannot claim to have done our best.

Our movement, the Y’s Men International professes to uphold ‘service before self’ as our cardinal objective and enjoins us to be **unselfish idealists working quietly and earnestly** –that is the operative phrase- in serving the marginalized in our society. Our constitution says that there shall be but one class of members. It claims to be a partnership that offers equal opportunities to all its members, irrespective of caste, creed or gender, to help ‘build a better world for all mankind’. We in India certainly ought to put our shoulders to this wheel of *dharma*.

Well-nigh fifteen years ago, at the Regional Convention of the SWIR held at Kozhencherry on 10th December 1995, I recall the then Area President, Y’sm. C. K. Thomas stating that, whereas in many Welfare States like the United Kingdom and the Scandinavian countries social security measures are taken by the government to sustain the destitute, the old, the differently-abled, and the unemployed, India has not much in the way of a national social security system to support the poor and the needy. Therefore there are ample opportunities for voluntary agencies such as the Y’s Men’s movement to offer a safety net to cushion the fall of our less fortunate fellowmen, he added.

The India Area President has proposed the implementation at the club level of certain projects, among which are such projects as finding foster homes for neglected children, sponsoring the education of clever children from poor families from start to finish until they find their feet, running charity shops/fairs to sell used goods to make money for charity work, and promoting a campaign for the greening of our denuded surroundings. He suggests that these and other such projects can be done in collaboration with a reputable NGO or a government agency.

There are many clubs that I know of that render sterling service to their local communities by giving liberally of their time, effort and above all their hard-earned money for such causes as marrying off indigent girls or building houses for the homeless or for the education of poor children and what have you. And during the festive seasons such as Onam, Ramadan and Christmas some clubs have also been known to give away new clothes or food kits generously to the have-nots. There have also been instances of making up the money to defray the medical expenses of the needy. Medical camps have

been run as have campaigns to increase public awareness regarding such areas as the carnage on our roads, alcohol and drug addiction, and other ills of society.

However, there are clubs that get by on a minimal approach. As the local saying goes ‘They want to reach for the rafters without letting go of what is under their arms’. That is, they would feel deprived if they did not win awards to line their showcases. The most they might have done for eyeing such awards was to be up-to-date with their correspondence and be prompt in paying their dues, but having given precious little for community service. Giving is not giving in the real sense of the term unless it hurts our pockets; that is, unless it is a sacrifice or an act of renunciation. ‘He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise.’ Giving ‘small change’ that is lying around is not giving. It is rather like throwing out our leftovers.

Then again, there are clubs that are not much more than family clubs for fun and games. This is no doubt in keeping with our concept of ‘Forward with the Family’ to make the meetings interesting and enjoyable for all, but if that doesn’t go hand in hand with community service, we will have dishonoured our pledge. Members with a social conscience, who would no doubt enjoy the opportunity to unwind and chill out at their club functions, would feel cheated if the opportunity to loyally serve the cause is missing from the club’s activities.

The important thing is to be seen doing your *dharma* in earnest and not merely putting on an act; in other words, as the **Bhagwat Gita** counsels us ‘**to act without acting**’. Our Area President Y’sm Philip Mathai has aptly chosen as his theme “**Be the Light of the World**”. As the Good Book says, “Let your light so shine before men, that they see your good works...” Let the community, and in particular those well-known in your community for their social work, know what you are doing.

Let me sign off by quoting from our Area President’s acceptance speech at his installation: “A true Y’s Man should think about the conditions of the society he lives in. How best we could help our less fortunate brothers and sisters should engage our serious consideration. Unselfishness of character is the hallmark of our membership. If we are honest, upright and truthful and believe in our motto ‘**To acknowledge the duty that accompanies every right**’, we cannot be selfish, self-centred or unconcerned about the happening around us’.

Yours in Y’sdom,

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