

Article – 8

Image Building (What With?)

“You can predict the weather by looking at the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs concerning the times!” (Matthew 16:3) Jesus spoke these words to the hypocritical leaders of his day who had asked him for a sign to prove his credentials. Today, two thousand years on, this answer still rings true of leaders as a whole, only much more so. Of late we have seen our country being buffeted by a spate of scams and scandals without it being able to sail on an even keel. Our leaders have either been pitifully inept at anticipating these crises as they lacked the vision to do so, or, more to the point, their perennial preoccupation with acquiring pelf and power has inured them to regarding these ills of society as the norm i.e. as nothing out of the ordinary. (*Chalthaa hai, hamaara Bhaarat mahaan!*) This propensity seems to have rubbed off on our society as a whole, not the least our movement as well. And yet, how have we Y’s persons with our proclaimed ideals of selfless service to the community reacted to it? By keeping our own counsel??

If we are afraid of openly sharing our perceptions about and insights into the inner workings of our movement for fear of rocking the boat, then we are not being intellectually honest. Incidentally, sending anonymous letters, for whatever reason, is not the right approach either, because it also argues a lack of moral courage and is no different from a cowardly act of attacking someone by stealth. Of course if you are openly critical, the people targeted are likely, more often than not, to jump to the defensive and spoil for a fight, but at least you are prepared to counter it with valid reasons, which brings to mind the sequel to an open letter that the President of the Anchalumudu Y’s Men’s Club of Kollam, SWIR (1994-1995) had written in response to the tiresome exhortations to increase membership and to view such increase as a lifeline that is connected to awards criteria. The thrust of the president’s letter was that his club did not set as much store by the points and awards that they enticed clubs with as by the community service that the clubs were duty-bound to render to the needy, without regard to the recognition that such service may or may not bring. Some leaders were not amused. They harrumphed. That the very hand that dangled the carrot very nearly wielded the big stick on the ‘non-conformists’ on that occasion is now history. Alas, in the sixteen-odd years that I have been in Y’sdom, I have time and again heard the rhetoric that unless we registered a marked increase in the enrolment of members in India, our voice would not be heard in international committee meetings. Pray, tell me, do our ambassadors all speak with one voice, if they have it in them to speak at all? And, in any case, isn’t one, or maybe two, spokesperson/s from India good enough?

In this context I recall a letter that I received from the RD when I was the President of the Kumbanad Y’s Men’s Club, SWIR back in the Y’s year 1996-‘97. Our roster had reflected a membership of as many as 44 in our club which he duly acknowledged and yet, this is what he went on to say: “...As for Award Criteria we are expecting a membership increase particularly being the RDE’s club and hope that you will send us a

supplementary list....” As if we had to be ‘fishers of men’ in return for favours we may receive! Let me quote in part from my reply:

“Your letter RS/743/97 of 31st January compels me to write this response. I was more than a little taken aback by your reference to ‘award criteria ‘in the second paragraph of your letter. I had a feeling of *déjà vu* when I read it. Surely, I had heard it all before? What am I to make of these periodic reminders? That a headcount is all that matters? That the primary objective of our movement comes only next in importance to the quantum of dues it can generate....? And all for some handouts from the very sums we send them? ...

I believe it is more important to enthuse the present membership to pay more than token allegiance to the ideals of our movement. At its inception, our club was small and, by all accounts, it functioned as a cohesive unit with a deep sense of common purpose. Sadly, the unseemly haste with which more members were inducted over the last three years or so has not brought with it tangible results commensurate with such an increase. It is the same small band of faithfuls that had sustained the club at the beginning that continues to give of their time, effort and money to the club unstintingly without seeking a place in the Y’s Men’s Hall of Fame. Of course, getting a pat on the back in the form of points and awards is not unwelcome to them, but they fight the urge to seek it by any means.”

The point is we have to move beyond merely attending dinners, having fun and fellowship and doing not much more than generally flaunting our increasing membership. The leadership, especially at the club level, has to rise above taking the line of least resistance and go out to the community which they are pledged to serve. And also they must resist the urge to induct all and sundry, some of whose antecedents are questionable, merely to create vote banks for the wannabe leaders to huddle with these ‘hangers-on’, plotting how they can upset others and win elections and, having won, how their own positions can be consolidated. Whatever has happened to the hallowed principle of ‘the office seeking the candidate’, I wonder.

Can we look back with unmixed pride on the years that have gone by and claim that we have achieved the goals we had set for ourselves? Some time ago I had occasion to read a book titled ‘**Our Own Worst Enemy**’ by **Norman F. Dixon**, (Published in 1988 by Futura Publications), the central theme of which is that the survival of Modern Man is threatened not so much by the elemental forces of nature such as inundating waters or raging epidemics or global warming and such like as by the elemental passions of his own psyche (inner self). That is, this book is about why man might, and probably will, destroy himself of his own volition.

This might sound too alarmist a view to be aired in a service organisation such as ours, but I dare say it has a bearing on the natural instincts of human beings; at worst, on the one hand to work at cross purposes for self-interest or, at best, on the other hand to sublimate their vaulting ambition, which sadly would lead to their working against one another’s efforts, to the need for working together towards a common goal that helps exemplify the success of community work. By working against each other, we indeed become our own worst enemy.

The words of Rolando Dalmas, our immediate past Secretary General, (in a message sent to the IP on 17th of March last year in the light of the deviant functioning of some leaders in our neck of the woods would bear repetition here: "...**there are some (leaders) who have principles and ideals not in line with those of our movement.**" How did this come about? Let me hazard a guess and make bold to say that our movement have of late been swamped by all comers (every Tom, Dick and Harry) who have managed to infiltrate our ranks, thanks mainly to our propensity for club extension with undue haste and therefore without their antecedents being properly screened. Since these 'legions' have the numbers, they have been able to push some of their own ilk to leadership. Such 'infiltrators', who do not have it in them to make their mark elsewhere and are mostly archetypes of mediocrity, therefore with little to lose by way of merit, see our movement as a means of easy self-promotion and self-aggrandizement with the added chance to see the world at our expense as our so-called representatives..

We know of leaders who, unlike the well-intentioned ones, do what can only be called 'club-crawling', for want of a better expression, casting aspersions on and bad-mouthing perceived rivals for leadership by making invidious comparisons even while unctuously spouting the oft-repeated, pious platitudes of what our movement stands for. And the irony of it is not lost on the audience! But they choose not to react.

Rumour has it that in the last International elections for ICM's, the votes cast by some clubs for the candidates of their choice were declared invalid because some parties had deviously downloaded ballot papers online to forge the aforesaid clubs' voting rights, thus leading to such duplicated votes to cancel each other out. In the process, the number of valid votes cast turned out to be much fewer than it would otherwise have been, had it not been for these invalidated votes. Again, to go off at a tangent and add a rider to it, in the process fair representation of ICM's from India across the board is denied to those regions which cannot match the brute numbers of clubs- some of them merely paper clubs- that, for instance, SWIR has managed to nurture with an eye to the main chance. It is a sad commentary on our movement's ideals that, we who should have known better, have abdicated our moral responsibility by choosing to turn a blind eye to such duplicity. And the few who raise their voice for a level playing field find that theirs is a 'voice in the wilderness'.

Norman Dixon the author cited above goes on to say that leaders who are unfettered by moral scruples have a huge advantage over those who are held back by notions of fair play. If the leader is unscrupulous, he frees those who accept his leadership from constraints of morality. And, if such a leader has a frank, open countenance, it induces a level of trust far beyond what he or she deserves. It is a sugar-coated pill, like a wolf in sheep's clothing, which is best dressed to deceive, he adds, mixing metaphors merrily. They can with such disarming ease make their followers accept their barefaced deceptions to marginalize and silence those sincere workers who they perceive as a threat to their entrenched positions.

Instead of sharing their ideas and insights, such leaders of Y'sdom spend time taking jabs at those they dislike. Probably being captive to past hurts, real or imagined, they continue to nurse them indefinitely without any thought of letting bygones be bygones. How much more creditable to our movement would it be if 'friend and foe alike' sit together, share

their ideas and insights and discuss the common challenges the movement faces. The more they discuss them, the more their opposing visions would converge and become one common vision.

Y'SM EASAW JOSEPH JOHN, ASD (IMAGE BUILDING)