Half Measures

Badly Begun is Never Done

By J V NARLIKAR

HISTORY tells us of the two battles of Tarain fought between Prithviraj Chauhan and Muhammad Ghori. On the first occasion, Ghori was defeated but allowed to go by the 'magnanimity' of the winner. On the second occasion, Ghori won and held Prithviraj in captivity and subsequently had him killed. While leading an enormous army to fight the third battle of Panipat, the Peshwas from Pune had also carried with them a large number of womenfolk and non-fighting personnel who wanted to use the occasion to visit the holy places in the north for a *teerthayatra*. Although the Maratha army outnumbered the Afghans of Ahmadshah Abdali, the battle turned out to be a rout of the former with the womenfolk taken as captives by the invaders.

Historians may debate these events ad infinitum, but to me they seem to display a lack of professionalism on the part of the ultimate losers. Professionalism implies getting to the goal, whatever it may be, with a well planned strategy that brooks no compromises. In modern sports, it is identified with the killer instinct. We lack it in India. Instead, compromises seem to be the order of the day. This explains why we do not produce tennis grand slam winners in singles, why we manage to lose even to Kenya in cricket, why our medals tally in international sports is so pathetically poor. There are other walks of life where this lack of professionalism shows up.

Our Constitution begins: "India, that is Bharat...", that is giving two names to our country. Why two names, when most countries have one? Why retain the name "India" conferred on us by our colonial rulers? One can understand the reluctance of the leaders of the time to retain the name by which the country was already well known in Asia; the then existing alternative of 'Hindustan' could be considered embarrassing to a secular democracy. But having found an alternative in Bharat, why retain India also? After receiving independence from the various European colonisers several new countries shed their colonial appellations and renamed themselves with native flavour.

To me, this two-name approach smacks of half-heartedness; our reluctance to give up a name by which we were well-known in the contemporary world. Does it also reflect a secret desire to have a western sounding rather than a 'desi' name? It indicates a tacit acceptance of the superiority of the 'West', a lack of confidence that whatever name we adopt, it has to be accepted by everybody.

A few years ago my wife and I visited Brazil. In the streets of Sao Paulo, we saw foodstalls selling fast food like hot dogs, hamburgers, etc. But there was no litter of empty plastic bags or half-eaten food. Why? Because all stall owners carried big bags in which they collected the refuse, of course, with cooperation from their clients. At the end of the day they wound up their stalls and carried them along with their garbage bags, leaving the streets clean.

In India such a practice would be deemed a miracle. We may wish to keep the insides of our houses clean but do not care two hoots about public places. A public place should be the responsibility of the public; instead it becomes nobody's responsibility. Even in a university campus where the so-called higher-educated people reside and work, beautiful and scenic areas are ruined by plastic waste for which nobody claims responsibility. I once asked a vice-chancellor, "Why don't you offer some pocket money to the needy students to keep their local vicinity clean?" The VC's reply was that although he could offer such financial inducement, the students would consider it below their dignity to clean up the mess left by others. True enough. There are students earning money through gardening; but if they don't care to clean up their own mess, why would they clear the mess left by others? Frankly, with this mindset, we don't deserve to have Mahatma Gandhi as the father of our nation.

IN BRIEF

- Compromises are the order of the day in India
- No one takes responsibility for public places
- People go to ridiculous lengths to circumvent rules
- We set high ideals but lack the professionalism to achieve them

Would draconian measures like those operating in Singapore work? Should we try imposing heavy fines for littering public places? I suspect, it won't work. Because all those slogans which mayors and other city leaders put on huge billboards, like 'Clean Mumbai-Green Mumbai' are limited to those billboards only. Their target groups are not interested in cleanliness of their city. Nor do the law-enforcing agencies have any desire to ensure cleanliness. So, if we initiate a system of heavy fines, it will only add to the corruption that exists already.

Gandhi's name is also associated with abstinence from alcohol. The government and all the states also claim to follow him by banishing alcoholic drinks from all government entertainment. But how many of those who make and enforce this rule sincerely believe in it? Would they shun alcoholic drinks in a private party?

Here again one sees how people go to ridiculous lengths to circumvent the rule. If foreign guests are being entertained, alcoholic drinks may be ordered for them. It may well happen that they do not want such drinks but the locals do and so they are ordered. On some occasions, drinks are camouflaged as extra food dishes in the bill.

Either we should have the courage of conviction to say alcohol is bad and we will not have it under any circumstances, or we should take the policy decision that it does not matter if alcohol is served in moderate quantities.

We claim to be a secular state. If we really wish to follow this declaration with action, the government should stop recognising all religious holidays. Instead it keeps on adding holidays to its long list of compulsory and optional holidays to please and appease all religions. Secularism as per my dictionary means that religion of any kind should not be a consideration in the functions of the state. So why should the state grant holidays based on religion? The state should recognise only those days as holidays that have national significance, such as August 15 and January 26. To this list one may add up to four bank holidays needed for national book keeping, say, one per quarter. Any employee wishing to be absent beyond this list of six days could avail of leave from his or her leave quota.

In short, we set ourselves high ideals for achievement, but cannot summon the ruthless professionalism needed for the purpose. So we are left with half-hearted compromises that lead us nowhere.