

The Message is the Man

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I reckon Shri Charan Singh's Speech of 23 March 1976 in the Legislative Assembly of Uttar Pradesh as one of the truly great landmark speeches of all times in the annals of our parliamentary history. If there were a contemporary 'time capsule' on our parliamentary institutions, that speech would qualify pre-eminently for the remembrance of posterity.

In that historic speech of 23 March 1976 Shri Charan Singh articulated the agony of a stifled nation and gave forthright expression to the anguish and the sorrow of the people of India in a state of siege. He spoke courageously and with wisdom; he spoke with righteous indignation but without rancour or malice. He spoke as a sage and a warrior with a remarkable combination of vision and valour. He spoke not for this or that party or for this or that point of view in a transient debate. He spoke for the political system and its ground norms, for the common people and their liberty and for democracy and rule of law.

To appreciate that heroic speech of Shri Charan Singh, we must recapitulate the perspective of India's modern political and constitutional history and remind ourselves of our national tryst with democratic destiny.

With the advent of Independence in 1947 and the proclamation of our republican Constitution in 1950, the concepts of freedom, liberty, equality, justice, and the dignity of man were enthroned in our national pantheon. In the long night of India's struggle for Independence and in our dawn of Freedom, we had promised ourselves never to allow the enslavement of the human spirit. Our constitution and the basic values of our struggle for freedom had committed us deeply as a nation against all forms of arbitrary and authoritarian absolutism of power.

During the Emergency of 1975-76, freedom was in bondage. Freedom had lost its constitutional foothold. The power of the Courts, the influence of the elected representatives of the people and the impact of the press, the academics, the professions and the public opinion were suddenly eclipsed. In March 1976 the Emergency had, at least seemingly and for the time being for all practical purposes, succeeded in consolidating itself in legislative and administrative echelons. The skies of the Legislatures and the Courts were overcast with the darkest clouds. Shri Charan Singh's Speech of March 23, 1976, came as a veritable thunder and lightning, piercing and somewhat dispersing those clouds.

The most remarkable thing about that Speech was that in fact it came to be delivered on the floor of the Vidhan Sabha when the encircling and enveloping gloom was overwhelming and

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impenetrable. The press had been muzzled. Public opinion was voiceless. The ruling as well as the opposition parties were paralysed and atrophied. Electoral process was in abeyance. Courtiers abounded and flourished in the corridors of power; critics languished either in jails or in wilderness. Civil servants were without any real options. Many of them had not only surrendered themselves but had enlisted themselves as mercenaries. Industrialists were afraid. Traders were apprehensive. Workers and peasants were baffled. The political leadership itself had lost its moorings. The promise of social justice and equity, and of discipline, tranquility and order on the one hand and the climate of fear, apprehension, vengeance and vendetta on the other brought about acquiescence and even enthusiastic support for authoritarianism. It was in that bleak situation that Shri Charan Singh spoke out firmly, clearly and courageously on March 23, 1976.

Members of legislatures have a constitutionally guaranteed privilege of freedom of speech within the House. That privilege is the foundation of democratic debate and of parliamentary institutions. Never was that privilege better employed in our country than when Shri Charan Singh resorted to the forum of the Assembly for uttering those elementary truths, which remain for ever relevant for all governments.

Shri Charan Singh started his Speech mildly persuasively and courteously, He said:

“Mr. Speaker, Sir, today’s debate in the House is of historic significance. We may or may not be able to do justice to the questions which confront us but there can be no two opinions that our country and its future is in the throes of an extra-ordinary and unprecedented crisis. At the outset I wish to tell the Hon’ble Members who sit on the Treasury benches that I shall talk to them sincerely and candidly and that if any time I am overcome by emotion and harsh words escape my lips, I ask for their forgiveness and indulgence.”

It is clear that Shri Charan Singh was anxious to have an intimate heart-to-heart talk with the members. He was not out to score debating points. He spoke more in sorrow than in anger. Obviously, he had in mind not only the members of an Assembly but the apex rulers in Delhi and the people of India at all levels. He wanted to appeal to reason and conscience all around. We do not know precisely what effect Shri Charan Singh’s Speech had on political processes, but it is certain that the members of the Legislative Assembly were deeply touched and stirred. The speech was not only widely talked about among legislators, politicians, lawyers and other politically aware sections of the population but also helped to rekindle, re-assuring hopes of the continued existence of the spirit of freedom in our country.

Shri Charan Singh's speech will be remembered in our parliamentary history not merely because it contains cogent and coherent political criticism of the Government of the day, nor because it was the lengthiest and the most comprehensive parliamentary discourse delivered by any elected representative during the Emergency, but because it was a milestone of faith on the bedraggled path of embattled freedom. He had marshalled his facts carefully. Those facts had an inexorable logic of their own. His arguments and his appeal to the reason and conscience of the House were an integral part of the factual landscape itself. The facts were not fully known. There were only whispers, rumours and one-sided reports. Shri Charan Singh's speech confirmed and authenticated those stark facts and asked the legislators, particularly those belonging to the ruling party, to search their hearts. The refrain of his song (and it seemed at that time to be the

swansong of freedom) was: "Whither India? Whither Democracy and Rule of Law? Whither Human Dignity and Liberty?"

Shri Charan Singh told the House of the arbitrary and indiscriminate arrests and detentions of rampant terror and of inhuman torture. He told the House that Emergency was being misused, that freedom of expression and dissent was being suppressed ruthlessly. He reminded the House of the heritage of India's freedom struggle and how it had been abandoned and departed from. He did not have the powers, the apparatus, and the paraphernalia of the Commissions of inquiry, but his Speech was in a sense "the grand inquest of the nation".

Shri Charan Singh took the House with him on a kind of "Bharat-Darshan" tour and at each pause, he asked a basic question. The Speech was packed with factual material, and he made the facts speak for themselves. He spoke of the breakdown of the constitutional and the political system, of the suspension of fundamental and ordinary legal rights, of lawless and heartless laws and of the excesses of the administration and the police. He narrated at length the grim and gruesome details of unbelievable instances and techniques of torture. He spoke of the motivated supersession and transfer of judges and also of certain judgements which still provided a ray of hope. He spoke of the constitutional amendments and the ineffectiveness of parliamentary institutions to check and prevent abuses of authority. He spoke of the destitution of public life and of public morality. He challenged the rulers of the day and defied them to hold the general elections, making an emphatic and unambiguous prophesy that the ruling party was bound to lose at the polls.

In the course of his speech, Shri Charan Singh touched upon a delicate point. He said that the charge against him and many of his colleagues that they were going to commit violence was without any foundation and was an instance of prevarication. He said that it was not possible for him to advocate violence but at the same time he reminded the House that Mahatma Gandhi preferred violence to slavery. He also said quite clearly and candidly though under the pressure of political despair prevailing at that time that six hundred million people will not remain in slavery for long and there would be an explosion and the country will be in flames if normalcy was not restored. He emphasized that Gandhiji had opted for non-violence but not out of cowardice, and repeated what Gandhiji had said, that if non-violence failed, he would ask the people to use physical force to attain Swaraj. He said that violence could only beget violence and that in extreme situations of pervasive violence by the State and the political apparatus the people might be left with no option but to reply in the same coin. That part of Shri Charan Singh's statement provides a measure of the depressing depth of despair prevailing at the time.

Shri Charan Singh built up a formidable array of arguments against the continuance of the Emergency. Equally effectively he demolished the edifice of justifications for the suppressions of freedom. He quoted with telling effect to poignant passages from the speech of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru which he delivered at the Session of All India Congress Committee in 1936. The first passage quoted by Shri Charan Singh from Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's speech was:

"Comrades, being interested in psychology, I have watched the process of moral and intellectual decay and have realised even more than I did previously, how autocratic power corrupts, degrades and vulgarises".

The other passage quoted by Shri Charan Singh from Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's speech was:

"A government that has to rely on the Criminal Law Amendment Act and similar laws, that suppresses the press and literature, that bans hundreds of organisations, that keeps people in prisons without trial..... is a government that has ceased to have even a shadow of justification for its existence".

Concluding that marathon speech, Shri Charan Singh reminded the House of the strange predicament of Duryodhana in Mahabharata and said that Duryodhana did know what was right and what was wrong, but he said that he found himself unable to do right and to resist wrong, because he was, as it were, under a spell. Shri Charan Singh said that it was no use finding fault with Shrimati Indira Gandhi and said that in fact the fault lay with the selfishness of politicians who were unable to put the nation above their selfishness. In unforgettable words, he said:

"Friends, I ask you to think of the nation. Our lives are transient, but the nation is immortal. Therefore, friends I ask you to search your hearts and think of the situation which the nation faces today impartially and without any blinkers. Let us think of undoing the grievous wrong which has been done to the nation".

Shri Charan Singh must have alternated between hope and despair when he made that Speech. Both elements are discernible in what he said and the way he said it. One sees in that Speech unclouded reason. In many ways, his Speech was a battle cry and a clarion call to wage a fearless battle against authoritarianism. In another sense, Shri Charan Singh's Speech represented the desperate effort of a political historian to leave a testament of truth for the posterity. He could not know at that time how and when the dawn of freedom would return to this nation. There was in his Speech a sense of sorrow and sadness but there was also a vow not to bend or to yield. He was prepared to fight as long as life permitted him to do so and then to leave the legacy to the people in whom he exuded boundless faith. In that moment of despair and dedication. Shri Charan Singh could well have sung with Byron who said:

*"For Freedom's battle once begun,
Bequeath'd by bleeding sire to son,
Though baffled oft is ever won."*

Of Shri Charan Singh and his memorable speech it can be said with justification that the message is the man, for that speech represents Shri Charan Singh better than any catalogue of biographical events or a compilation of what he has said and written on different occasions or a portrait of his physical likeness. In that speech is to be found the quintessential man who epitomises some of the remarkable qualities of the soil of India. He is of the earth, earthy. His commonsense has a typical sturdiness, all its own. He has courage and strength. He is singularly straight forward, and he is also stubborn and uncompromising. He has a rough exterior as also an inner softness and natural generosity. Above all, his patriotism has a spiritual quality. His speech of 23 March, 1976 represents him at his best. That speech, if success and high office are not to be the criteria, was the most effulgent zenith of Shri Charan Singh's distinguished public life.