

Raghu, an exponent of shared leadership

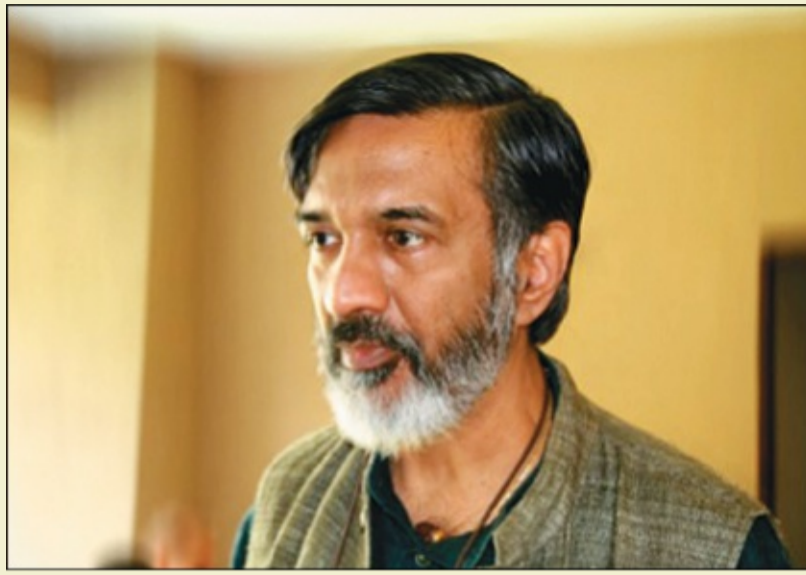
■ By Vijay Phanshikar

RAGHU Ananthanarayanan may be using the story of the heroes of Mahabharata -- the five Pandavas -- to highlight what leadership is, but in no way is he stuck in the past. By any standard, he is modern in thought, and often looking forward to a bright future. As a corporate trainer of repute teaching leadership to bosses and managers and executives, he insists that in Mahabharata, there are answers to the most modern dilemmas, and today's society needs to ensure that it does not waste that wisdom encapsulated in the pages of the great epic.

He sports a white beard, wears simple attire that seems aimed at a natural simplicity, and speaks a language which is both at once -- steeped in history and bathing in modernity. For him, Mahabharata is a treasure-trove of great learning. "What we learn is an extended analysis of complex human nature -- through anecdotes, through discourse on issues and principles, through personality studies of the characters involved in that great story. At every turn on the road, at every twist in the journey, we learn when we are delving deep into Mahabharata", Raghu Ananthanarayanan asserts.

Despite the firmness of opinion, the tone is soft, and very convincing. No, Raghu Ananthanarayanan does not want you to be impressed. He does not expect anything like that. But he also appears very sure that the story of the epic conflict has mesmerising angles that can leave anybody almost speechless, thanks to the complexity of human issues involved, thanks to the details of how the characters then sought to resolve those issues, thanks to the ramifications that are left in the wake. It is all mind-boggling, Raghu says in effect. He is in Nagpur to conduct a workshop on leadership organised by the Vidarbha Management Association.

Yes, traditionally, the story of Mahabharata is a narrative of larger life in which conflict is inherent, in



Raghu Ananthanarayanan

which fight between good and evil is intrinsic, in which characters involved have been bestowed upon with certain greatness. Everybody in that story is a performer. Everybody there has a point to make. By that token, everybody should be a leader in that great story, Raghu exclaims. But then, that is actually not the case. Duryodhana is not a leader in the correct sense, though he may appear to be one, ahead of the pack of the Kauravas. "In fact, Duryodhana is just an obstinate prince who refuses to yield to higher intelligence. He is seeking everything for himself, no matter if it militates against the basic principles of morality and fine dimensions of justice," he insists.

In sharp contrast, the Pandavas are the upholders of justice and truth and goodness. And Lord Krishna chooses them so that he could deliver his divine justice through the five brothers, Raghu stresses.

And then he takes the discussion to a higher realm. Who is a leader in the true sense? -- he raises the question. And then he goes on to say something that is very unusual: "A leader

often tackles *Dharmasankata* (a dilemma between the right and the wrong, just and unjust, truth and untruth). The leader has to keep navigating his path through various *Dharmasankatas* so that his followers get the right direction, right thought and action, right goal to achieve.

**MASTER
MIND**

"Pandavas were those kind of leaders who had to tackle this or that *Dharmasankata* all the time. Each one of them was a high achiever, somebody endowed with superior skill in some domain. Despite this, they never allowed themselves to be victims of a bloated image of themselves. They tried their best to do things in a righteous manner, and opted to go to war only when all other legitimate means failed. Of course, war, too, was a legitimate action, and the Pandavas were not considered war-mongers. At best, they were seen as seekers of justice."

Until this point, the discussion is carrying on in a normal manner, along a predictable trajectory. Then comes the master-stroke. Raghu says, with a twinkle in his eyes, "The Pandavas represent the principle of shared lead-

ership. Each of them handles one domain. Each of them is given freedom to tackle that domain. Yet, all of them are very closely bound by a rare sense of togetherness. They form a leadership group that leads a great army to victory after a bloody war that lasted for 18 days. Theirs is a very orderly conduct of the war. They lose some of their warriors. They also suffer setbacks during the conflict. Yet, their entire action is very orderly."

But the same could not be said about the Kauravas even though they too had great warriors among their ranks. "Despite this, they kept losing their leaders one after another, often having to tackle certain vacuum. That was so particularly because the Kaurava armies were formed by people who joined the effort out of certain compulsion -- of personal commitment, of political tangles, out of something that pushed aside the idea of justice.

"In sharp contrast, the Pandavas led armies of people who were complete volunteers who wished to side with justice and truth. That lent the Pandavas certain moral fibre -- *Dharmik fibre* -- that led them to victory," Raghu asserts.

How does the corporate world of today react to this exposition?

"They respond very well, very positively. I have many foreigners, too, among participants of my training sessions. They realise the strength of the metaphor of Mahabharata. They understand the principle of shared leadership, which the five Pandava brothers represent. All participants appreciate the interpretation because they realise that it would benefit them in their corporate careers", Raghu says with a chuckle.

Then he goes on to discuss the merits of all the five brothers -- Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva. And as the discussion treads along a predictable path, Raghu Ananthanarayanan adds another twist. "On the Kauravas' side, Duryodhana is not the leader, since he never faces and tackles *Dharmasankata*. That task has been

left to Dhritarashtra. He has to face the task of making the choice between right and wrong, justice and injustice, truth and untruth, fairness and unfairness. Gandhari, his Queen, certainly appears as a *Pativrata* who opts for artificial blindness so as to demonstrate a complete solidarity with her husband. Yet, frankly, Gandhari does not try to be her husband's complement; she chooses to have herself blind-folded. Both of them know that their son is being unjust, unfair, untruthful. Yet, they side with him. That weakens their morality so much so that they cannot do anything but to see their family getting annihilated slowly but surely," Raghu explains.

Raghu's detailed interpretations of various episodes in Mahabharata are simply amazing. A follower and practitioner of *yogashastra*, his global view is empowered by certain sense of equilibrium. As a disciple of a man of the eminence of Professor Dharmapal (the Gandhian author of the famed book 'The Beautiful Tree'), Raghu also has the advantage of developing a deep understanding of the phenomenon named Mahatma Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Because of his deep study of the process of history -- from the ancient to the modern times, Raghu Ananthanarayanan has his firm opinions on the leaders India has had since Independence. He is not the one who is worried about being politically correct. He expresses his opinions frankly as he analyses the current situation from the reference to context of leadership. But, in the end, he says, "If India has to make true progress, she will have to follow the right democratic principle of shared leadership. It is in that model does India have her salvation in real sense."

It is impossible to disagree with such a considered opinion that has no tinge of pride or prejudice. What strikes one is the core value of Raghu Ananthanarayanan's personality -- an uncompromising faith in the principle of shared wisdom, shared leadership -- and shared destiny. ■