

lessons from Castro's style of leadership

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One may criticise various aspects of Castro's leadership methods, but he created a society in which the basic aspirations, associated with a desire for safe, secure and knowledge-based living, were met adequately

Fidel Castro, a great friend of India and the Indian people died at the age of 90 on November 25. World leaders and people from various walks of life have issued statements ranging from deep regret and sorrow to joy and celebration at his death. In the US, which had a long adversarial relationship with the Cuban revolutionary, several uncharitable views have been expressed by those in positions of responsibility.

In contrast, the statement issued by Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, reflects both his honesty as a statesman and his objectivity in paying tribute to a leader who was a prominent figure on the global stage during the office of 10 US Presidents. Trudeau stated, "It is with deep sorrow that I learned today of the death of Cuba's longest serving President."

"Fidel Castro was a larger than life leader who served his people for almost half a century. A legendary revolutionary and orator, Castro made significant improvements to the education and healthcare of his island nation."

"While a controversial figure, both, Castro's supporters and detractors, recognised his tremendous dedication and love for the Cuban people who had a deep and lasting affection for "*el Comandante*".

Several prominent persons in the US, particularly those with extreme Right-wing leanings, have criticised Prime Minister Trudeau for his statement, but he has defended it justifiably, because it is factually correct. Indeed, the Cuban model, despite its flaws and reported lack of freedom of expression and respect for human rights, has been a remarkable success in bringing quality education and health care to all its citizens.

If there is a lesson to be learnt from the Cuban experience, it lies in the emphasis provided by Castro to indicators of development that go beyond mere growth of gross domestic product (GDP). As an indicator of this fact, based on data available for 2009, Cuba ranked 95th in the world in terms of GDP per capita, but it was 51st out of 182 countries in terms of the Human Development Index (HDI), which in that year stood at 0.863. It is significant that by 2006, Cuba had wiped out poverty almost completely, with only 1.5 per cent of the population below the poverty line. In 2010, the GDP per capita in terms of purchasing power parity stood at 10,200 US dollars, with a growth rate of 4.7 per cent.

We in India have been widely mesmerised by the importance of growth in GDP, while we have neglected the provision of basic services like health care and education for the vast majority of our population. In the field of health care, Cuba's efforts were initially hampered by the exodus of a large number of its doctors. However, with the political commitment of the leadership and major efforts at every level of society in a few decades Cuba's health care system expanded not only to cover its entire population, but there was also a remarkable upgradation in quality. Today, some of the most sophisticated surgical skills are available in the country, apart from the application of preventive measures to minimise the occurrence of disease.

These efforts have built on the traditions that existed in Cuba even during the pre-revolutionary period. For instance, yellow fever, which was widely prevalent in the 19th century, was eliminated at the advent of the 20th century. During Castro's regime, health care was raised to the level of a constitutional right in 1976, when Article 50 of the Constitution incorporated a provision which stated, "Everyone has the right to health protection and care. The state guarantees this right by providing free medical and hospital care by means of the installations of the rural medical service network, polyclinics, hospitals, preventative and specialised treatment centers; by providing free dental care; by promoting the health publicity campaigns, health education, regular medical examinations, general vaccinations and other measures to prevent the outbreak of disease. All the population cooperates in these activities and plans through the social and mass organisations."

Is there something for us to learn from the Cuban experience? The larger lesson that we need to take home with us is the need to focus on human development in a country, which even after seven decades of independence, suffers from unacceptable levels illiteracy, malnutrition and absence of any form of decent health care.

Countries in our own neighbourhood have done much better than us in terms of HDI. The HDI, by definition, is a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: A long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and have a decent standard of living. The HDI for 2013 shows that India was placed at 130 with an HDI of 0.609, while Sri Lanka was 73rd with an HDI of 0.757, and the Maldives at 104 with an HDI of .0706. Even a small country like Montenegro, which was part of the former Yugoslavia, with a population of a little over 600,000, was placed 49th with an HDI of 0.802.

There are multiple benefits that a society can derive from due emphasis on basic development indicators. One of the greatest benefits of literacy and decent levels of education would be in the practice of democracy and the level and quality of debate and decision-making at every level of the system of governance. In our legislative bodies, the level of debate, which showed much higher levels of enlightenment in the years immediately following independence, would certainly be elevated if the populace had higher levels of education and, therefore, elected persons with significantly higher levels of knowledge than we have today.

But at a more general level, if the goal of good governance is to enhance the well-being and welfare of the society which elects legislators in a democracy, then clearly, much higher emphasis of enhancing the spread and quality of basic

services like education, health care and the dispensation of justice would be critical measures of success. While one may criticise various aspects of

Castro's style of leadership and his legacy, he certainly created a society in which the basic aspirations associated with a desire for safe, secure and knowledge based living were met in adequate measure.

(The writer is former chairman, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2002-2015)