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Politics Requires the Art of Knowing

BY INVITATION

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Last weekend, I had the privilege of leading a retreat for the Kerala Cabinet and the newly elected Chief Minister. It was an unusual gathering: politicians temporarily liberated from microphones, headlines and the daily arithmetic of politics, and invited instead to contemplate a more difficult question. The subject was nothing less than the future: how to reimagine Keralam for the next generation of governance.

Kerala is an appropriate place for such a conversation. It is a state that has spent decades proving that human development can outrun economic expectation. It has educated its people, expanded public health, produced a politically alert citizenry, and created a society in which the ordinary voter possesses an extraordinary capacity to question the extraordinary claims of government.

The ministers came with curiosity, but also with the practical instincts of those who know that governance is less a philosophy and more like contact sport such as wrestling or football.

Politics demands empathy. Administration demands decisiveness.

The political minister must be seen among people, listen to their anxieties, understand their aspirations, kiss babies, and cut ribbons. The administrative minister must make choices, impose

priorities, confront failure and, when required, deliver the equivalent of a karate chop.

The difficulty is not in performing either role. The difficulty lies in knowing when to change roles.

A minister who remains permanently in campaign mode may become extraordinarily popular and remarkably ineffective. A minister who remains permanently in administrative mode may become wonderfully efficient and politically invisible. Neither is sufficient.

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Kerala's political culture makes this balancing act particularly demanding. The citizen is educated, organised and accustomed to asking questions. Trade unions, professional groups, local governments, civil society and political parties all possess strong voices.

That means that political leadership cannot be reduced either to popularity or to administrative authority. It requires judgement.

I suggested to the ministers that effective political leadership rests on three foundations.

The first is clarity in policy.

Government cannot be governed by improvisation. A minister must know what he or she wishes to change, why the change matters and what success will look like. Policy without clarity becomes

announcement; announcement without execution becomes theatre.

The second is compassionate engagement with the constituency.

Democracy is not a five-year conversation punctuated by an election. It is a continuous relationship. Citizens bring to government not merely demands but fears, hopes and lived experiences.

Compassion, however, should not be confused with perpetual concession. Listening to people does not mean promising everything they ask for. Indeed, leadership sometimes requires not only empathy, but also courage.

The third is performance excellence.

History is not particularly impressed by good intentions. Roads must be built. Schools must work. Public services must reach people. Decisions must move from files to fields.

The true test of government is, therefore, not how impressive its intentions sound in a conference room, but what difference they make in the life of an ordinary citizen.

This brings us back to the minister's peculiar duality.

The citizen wants a leader who will listen. The state needs a leader who will decide. The constituency wants compassion. The administration requires discipline.

The answer is not to choose between the two.

Keralam's future will depend on ministers who can combine them: the hand that reassures and the hand that acts; the capacity to kiss the baby and, when circumstances demand, to deliver the karate chop.

Politics is ultimately the art of knowing which is required—and when.

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