



An Opinion:

Prophetic Leadership and Working Towards a Sadvipra Society

Marcus Bussey PhD

STRONG VISIONARY LEADERS are what many of us yearn for today. We feel the lack of justice and imagination in our bones. Yet when they arise they become targets for vested interests who violently strike them down. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2025) has recently reflected on this in an excellent article entitled “Requiem for political leaders not yet assassinated”. He identifies moral courage and the prophetic as attributes of leadership and provides numerous examples of assassinations and also candidates for assassination.

Reading his paper made me think of Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar, the Indian Guru and philosopher poet who survived an assassination attempt on February 12, 1973. Sarkar had been imprisoned by the Indian government on trumped up charges of murder. This was part of Indira Gandhi’s ‘state of emergency’, designed to shore up her power and break the will of dissidents across the country. This state of authoritarian rule was eventually struck down, but not before many had died or been tortured.

Power

Power does strange things to people! That is for sure. Sarkar saw this grasping for power, the need to control and dominate at all costs, as a form of mental illness. Many of his political and economic discourses focus on the problem of power.

“Today there is catastrophe and misery in the human society and there is one reason: defective leadership of society. People blindly follow even the unintelligent leaders. The leaders hypnotize and attract thousands with their tall talks, gestures and other dramatics. You should know that the poverty and misery of people in any country are the sins of the leaders. True leaders should always be vigilant and think how to work best for the human society; they must be ever cautious that under their guidance the people are not led to darkness, death and immorality” (1978, p. 143).

This of course sounds familiar. “Defective leadership” is doing well today. In September of this year US President Donald Trump told the UN General Assembly that climate change is “the greatest con job ever perpetrated on the world”. He enjoys the attention he gets when making such outrageous claims. For him politics and leadership need to be entertaining. It needs to confirm the irrational as a key element of human experience. Irrationality helps us make sense of the world of uncertainty. It holds a kind of emotional logic where causality becomes dark comedy as in the world of **Blackadder**. When political systems clearly fail to live up to the rhetoric people lose faith. It is this loss of faith that enables populist politics and the theatrics of Trump, along with a host of other petty leadership figures, to capture media attention around the world.



Dr. Marcus Bussey, Senior Lecturer in History and Futures Studies, School of Law and Society, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia.

Interestingly, a year before Sarkar made the above observation James Ogilvy was writing about the hollowing out of democratic processes in the US and the declining status of the President. His words are as relevant today as they were in 1977 when he noted:

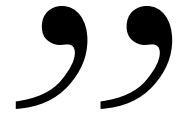
“Countless factors from the mortality of some presidents to the acts of others have strained belief in the presidency – to the point that a presidential candidate could come to the White House by playing on the declining belief in precisely the office he would occupy” (1977, p. 14).

The cynicism and success of Donald Trump bears witness to this observation. Yet, returning to the recent paper by Santos we find useful insights into alternative pathways to healthier leadership. Our current intolerable state of affairs rises up to challenge us to rethink and reinvent systems with the potential to flourish. Yet this involves struggle and risk, hence his focus on assassination as a tool for imperial dominance.

Prophetic Leadership

As Santos’ argument unfolds, he introduces us to the concept of the ‘prophetic leader’. He notes that such leaders were often the object of assassination. And that such killings were the result of strategies of domination that continued the colonial dominance of Western countries and of those reactionary forces within countries who were invested in processes of ‘internal colonialism’. Prophetic leaders were inspired by visions that focused on collective recovery from colonial domination. Where dominating powers ruled by dividing, they sought to lead by uniting. As Santos notes, prophetic leaders:

One of the most powerful irrational beliefs today is that strong leaders, understood as populist leaders, provide certainty in times of uncertainty. What we see here is the human tendency to look to others to anchor identity.



“... were nationalists and anti-imperialists. They believed in the sovereignty of peoples, in some cases recently achieved, and in the possibility of each country being master of its own destiny and development project. Being nationalists, they were also internationalists”.

I really resonate with the critique offered here by Santos but would push it further into a Neohumanist stance that engages with the prophetic pragmatism offered by thinkers such as Cornel West and Mary Grey who set the scene for Sarkar’s description of the sadvipra as a leader who integrates the social vision described by Santos with a spiritual, or Cosmic vision.

Language and Mythos

Mary Grey evokes a language of possibility rooted in the Christian mythos of awe and mystery. Spirituality is central to this critical turn. Yet, in the hands of Grey, this is not a bashful spirituality that withdraws from the world. She is advocating for a muscular criticism that reaches out to others in the struggle for global justice and global soul:

“A spirituality of resistance and struggle refuses to let injustice have the last word. Let us be clear: this is not an opting out from society, a retreat to an inner world where Christians settle down cosily with their own ideals, and give up on social critique. Far from it: prophetic critique today will work as far as possible with whatever forces or energies of society are leading in the right direction. The point about a spirituality of resistance is that we already live from a different vision. And this is what is so energizing” (2000, p. 35).

*There is wisdom and strength
within, which needs to be
cultivated through an active
engagement with memory,
foresight, voice and optimism.*

Prophetic criticism for Grey is above all a “work of imagination” (ibid, p. 43) that challenges the present by evoking tradition whilst simultaneously presenting an alternative—other presents, other futures. Such imagination in Grey’s case involves a refusal to accept the poverty of the capitalist imaginary and the colonized futures inherent to this. Prophetic critique, in all its forms, reminds us that as Matthew Fox observes, “creativity lies at the heart of the universe and at the heart of the human psyche and spiritual journey” and that “it finds its fullest expression in the transformation of society itself” (2003, p. 23).

Towards Optimism

Prophetic leaders give voice, even embody, such prophetic imaginaries. We of course all have access to such liberatory imaginaries in our own lives. We can access such resources by looking inward to our traditions, our images of the future and also to our own sense of agency, as cultural beings with a stake in the here and now and also a stake in the futures we bequeath to all how come after us. If we read tradition, image and agency as Memory, Foresight and Voice we come to a place where Optimism arises (Bussey, 2017, 2025a).

This is what Grey is focused on, as she puts it she is making a case for ‘the outrageous pursuit of hope’. Prophetic leaders embody the hopes of their followers. This is why, in Santos’ analysis of the logic of assassination, he calls these killings ‘epistemicide’. He does so as the killing of a visionary leader equates to the killing of an idea, the killing of hope. He recounts various situations in which the death of a prophetic leader has led to the ending of their social experiment. Without hope humanity is diminished. As a species we fall prey to the irrationalism of populist politics.

Quest for Certainty and Purpose

One of the most powerful irrational beliefs today is that strong leaders, understood as populist leaders,

provide certainty in times of uncertainty. What we see here is the human tendency to look to others to anchor identity. Sarkar (1982) was clear on this noting that our real identity work needs to be spiritual, linked to contemplative practices that anchor identity in a subjective stance that, according to time, place and person, is objectively filtered. In this the prophetic also has a place, being deeply attuned to our traditions and the way we, as cultural beings have the potential to act as creative traditionalist. Cornel West offers us real insight here on the value of traditions:

“To keep alive a sense of alternative ways of life and of struggle requires memory of those who prefigured such life and struggle in the past. In this sense, tradition is to be associated not solely with ignorance and intolerance, prejudice and parochialism, dogmatism and docility. Rather, tradition is also to be identified with insight and intelligence, rationality and resistance, critique and contestation. Tradition per se is never a problem, but rather those traditions that have been and are hegemonic over other traditions. All that human beings basically have are traditions—those institutions and practices, values and sensibilities, stories and symbols, ideas and metaphors that shape human identities, attitudes, outlooks and dispositions. These traditions are dynamic, malleable and revisable, yet all changes in a tradition are done in light of some old or newly emerging tradition. Innovation presupposes some tradition and inaugurates another tradition” (1999, pp. 167-168).

Culture is the repository of the light and darkness of our humanity. It should not be exulted nor reviled but approached cautiously with gratitude and curiosity because it is the source of the deep logics that shape consciousness. In following West’s insight into culture’s potential to seed alternatives, we can find something to open up our futures to alternatives beyond the ‘defective leadership’ described by Sarkar. Spirituality, as a critical force that speaks to our capacity to feel and embody relational

consciousness is key here. Sarkar's concept of the *sadvipra* is spiritually and socially potent. Such a being we can all aspire to. Living our lives with prophetic purpose. I know this sounds grandiose, but purpose is key to life. It is our calling into life. It should not be measured by the external world and its fickle trends but by our inner sense of meaning.

The *Sadvipra* Within

Once we can grasp this fact, we begin to tune into the *sadvipra* within. There is wisdom and strength there. It needs to be cultivated through an active engagement with memory, foresight, voice and optimism as we answer that inner call into life which I think of as yearning: the yearning for being part of things greater than our small selves. This yearning is the driver of human and even biological evolution. It is key to Sarkar's social and spiritual philosophy (Bussey, 2025b). The future becomes a mirror then for how we might individually and collectively express this yearning.

Certainly, we yearn for safety, stability and certainty; yet at what cost are we prepared to pay for this? We also yearn for adventure, change and growth. Again, what are we prepared to pay for this? That is the human dilemma. Our leaders cannot help us with this one though they can play with each position: certainty vs openness? Both positions are problematic. Perhaps there is a third way? I think there is. It calls us all to do the inner work on Self that is key to *sadvipra* consciousness. This is both prophetic in nature and pragmatic in expression.

West suggests we develop a prophetic pragmatism in which we hold onto the best of our traditions whilst working for justice, equity and inclusion. For him:

“The distinctive hallmarks of a prophetic pragmatist are a universal consciousness that promotes an all-embracing democratic and libertarian moral vision, a historical consciousness that acknowledges human finitude and conditionedness and a critical consciousness that encourages relentless critique and self-criticism for the aims of social change and personal humility” (1999, p. 170).

Relentless critique for West is an intellectual, political and spiritual duty. They go hand in hand. Sarkar with his Neohumanist vision of the *sadvipra* made the same argument, seeing the struggle to overcome the limits on consciousness of base human commitments to the sentiments of family, social affiliation and region as core elements in the fostering of critical consciousness (1982).

Rethinking Limits

In a world where the physical limits imposed by the ecological carrying capacity of our planet are becoming increasingly obvious our need for prophetic leaders is becoming evident. Yet, we do not like limits! So, one aspect of relentless critique is to take the struggle within, as a spiritual struggle for self-realization as opposed to a physical struggle to manage the world around us. This move changes the terrain of leadership which in Modernity has been the political stage. In turning inwards to push the limits of identity we come to realize that the spiritual journey is open and limitless. The possibilities of spiritual consciousness are infinite, as Sarkar argues.

“While remaining within the boundaries of time, place and person, people should endeavor to go beyond, to transcend these limitations and march on towards the Infinite. There is no other alternative to reach the goal of the Infinite than following the path of synthesis, than evolving a synthetic consciousness” (1988, p. 13).

One of the traps of modern democracy is that we are all invited to pass on the responsibilities of leadership to elected officials. This has led us to abnegate responsibility for leading, to pass it on to someone else. Sarkar saw this as a flaw in modern Western culture. We want the rewards for our collective success in generating astonishing material abundance, but we do not want to take responsibility for the consequences. Extreme poverty still exists. The planet's ecological limits have been shattered. Populist politics has fallen into the hands of unscrupulous elites and of course we are feeling trapped, powerless and increasingly hopeless.

Conclusion

Picking up on Santos' provocation we could say that our imaginations have been assassinated. Yet, we have the power to take back our imagination, recharge it with prophetic pragmatism and become in our own small way leaders promoting better futures. I think this is a fight worth fighting. Taking the concept of the prophetic leader, the *sadvipra*, we can reorient the debate shifting attention from defective leadership to effective leadership, building a *sadvipra* society in which each of us nurtures our own spiritual potential whilst doing what we can for planet and people.

This opinion article with its complete references are available at theneohumanist.com