Hugo Chavez: The Latin American Transformational Leader
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When we peep into world history, we see examples of many world leaders who have transformed the thought process of their nations and kindled a ray of hope in its people amidst gloom and despair. All these leaders were driven by a compelling positive vision, and inspired millions to join them with their foresight towards creating a better world. and the ability to inspire millions to join them.

The late President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela was one such visionary leader who was not only committed to improving the lives of the great majority of his people, but also knew how to achieve that end as a masterly politician. Chavez, who died to Cancer in March 2013, spoke to the challenges and aspirations of the most vulnerable Venezuelans. Vladimir Putin has called him as an “Uncommon and Strong Man who looked into future and always set the highest targets for himself”.

Born in 1954 to schoolteacher parents, Chavez evoked passion among millions of poor people of Venezuela. They loved his folksy charm, the common touch and his determination to deploy the country’s oil wealth to uplift their lives. He burst onto national scene by leading an attempted coup in 1992. That coup failed, and he was thereafter imprisoned. He was freed two years later, and soon formed a political party. Chavez rose swiftly to become a political leader, and his party swept power in Venezuela’s 1998 elections.

During his 14 years of presidency, Venezuela achieved a dramatic reduction in poverty and inequality levels. A gifted orator who could hold an audience for hours, Chávez combined political courage with immense conviction and an extraordinary sense of destiny. With a clear commitment to his country’s and to Latin America’s sovereignty, the ‘Bolivarian Revolution’ that Chávez set in motion sought to reassert the independence of a region that legendary Simón Bolivar had set out to unify in the 19th century.

Chávez started by nationalizing the biggest domestic oil company, Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), to use the revenues earned in improving the lives of people of his nation. Venezuela has the one of world’s largest oil reserves. Chávez put the revenues to social cause, raising social spending by over 60 per cent to $772 billion in a decade, in addition to expanding healthcare services; furthermore, one in three Venezuelans now gets free education up to and including university level. The country has the region’s lowest level of inequality, with a reduction in its Gini coefficient of 54 per cent. Poverty is down from 71 per cent in 1996 to 21 now, and extreme poverty is down from 40 per cent to 7.3. The social programmes, or Misiones, he started have reached 20 million people, and 2.1 million have received senior citizens’ pensions, a sevenfold increase under Chávez. As for the rest of the region, soon after assuming office, Mr. Chávez accepted the services of Cuban doctors in exchange for oil supplies to a country victimized by U.S.
sanctions for over 40 years. Other countries too benefited from his acts of solidarity. Chávez kept oil revenues within Latin America, and thereby regained Venezuela’s oil sovereignty.

In 2005, under the stewardship of President Hugo Chávez, Venezuela achieved the goal set by UNESCO to declare a country an illiteracy-free territory; 96% of adults and elders know how to read and write. Today 99.6% of the population over the age of 15 is now literate. Unemployment has been reduced by 50%, falling from 12% to 6.1% by early 2009. The public debt dropped from 73.5% of the GDP in 1998 to 14.4% in 2008, placing the national deficit as one of the lowest in the World. Prior to the Chavez government, there was practically no investment in science and technology. Today, 2.69% of Venezuela's GDP is aimed at science and technology.

Chavez led the turnaround of not only Venezuela but also transformed the political and economic landscape of entire Latin American Region. His policies, popularly called Chávismo, represent a clear political programme for pan-Latin American transformation. The better life that millions of Venezuelans enjoy today is the finest testimony to the successful transformational efforts of the Hugo Chavez - the people’s leader.

References


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