

On Republic Day Awards

By M. J. Audi

Article 18 of the Indian Constitution prohibits the State from conferring titles on any citizen in India. It forbids the Indian citizens from accepting any title from any foreign state. Instead of offering any right, Article 18 takes away something which some persons fondly crave. Why did the founding fathers include abolition of titles in the Chapter on Fundamental Rights?

One of our greatest weaknesses is the love of high sounding and pompous titles without substance. The British were shrewd enough to detect and exploit it fully to their advantage. They generously conferred knighthoods and various orders of the British Empire on those Indians who thrived in the British rule as the gift of God and loyally served for the continuation of the British Raj in India. On their part, those Indians proudly publicised their badges of servitude.

The titles are abominable for two reasons. First, they are undemocratic. The cardinal tenet of democracy is that each and every citizen is a dignified personality. Hence no person, whatever be his or her achievement, is entitled to any extra title. True democracy recognises and rewards merit, but rejects vanity which is the most detestable social trait. Secondly, the titles are bestowed by the Government of the day on the basis of patronage. Systems of government that preceded democracy were cursed by patronage. Patronage is the sworn enemy of merit. Therefore, the thinkers hailed democracy because they were convinced that patronage has no place in democracy. However, the facts prove them wrong. In our times, the hold of patronage on the so-called democracies of the world is greater and stronger than it ever was on monarchies and dictatorships. Democracy takes firm roots in any soil only when the citizens value self-respect more than anything else. Patronage destroys self-respect and gives birth to sycophancy. The titles are conferred on sycophants.

Our Constitution banned the titles but it could not ban the weakness of national character. Hence, in 1954 the titles were re-introduced in India but under a different name. They are called the tokens of public recognition of the "distinguished service" rendered to the country. The tokens are -- Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan, Padma Vibhushan and Bharat Ratna in the ascending order of status.

The awards are announced on every Republic Day. The criteria of assessing "distinguished service" are not known. General impression is

that the Padma Shris are selected by the Chief Ministers of the States and the Prime Minister of India is the dispenser of the rest. With the exception of the highest token Bharat Ratna, others are given to artists, civil servants, diplomats, sportsmen and women and writers. Strangely, the civil servants and diplomats not at all known for their creative talents get Padma Vibhushan whilst the artistes get Padma Shri which is the least. Bharat Ratna goes only to the persons with political *sanctum sanctorum* and few outsiders.

Reflection tells us that the tokens are as bad as titles and, perhaps worse. In every year, for every person receiving an award in each category, there are hundred others of equal calibre and competence. Why this one and not those, hundred? Invariably, answer would be that this one is the favourite of the powers that be. Other things being equal, patronage clinches the selection of the recipient of the award.

Those who render meritorious services to the country need no awards. Just as a pearl shines by its own lustre, they shine by their deeds. Only the jackdaws need peacock's feathers. Recognition by the Government of the day is certainly not the public recognition. Public recognition, in true sense of term, means pure and simple gratitude from the people. Bankim Chandra and Premchand, Paluskar and Phalke, Jagdishchandra and Ramanujan, Swami Vivekanand and Swami Dayanand, Bhagat Singh and Chandrashekhhar Azad, Tilak and Gandhi need no title, no award and no prize as token of public recognition. Though gone long ago, they and their likes live in the hearts of the people. Public continue to remember meritorious services rendered by them whereas persons receiving recognition from the Government on the Republic Day are forgotten next day. Therein lies the difference between public recognition and recognition by the Government. Between spontaneous and stage-managed, between patronage and merit.

In 1977, the Janata Party did one good thing for India. The Janata Government scrapped the awards. No token of public recognition awarded by the Government in India on the Republic Days of 1978 and 1979. The awards reappeared with the reappearance of Mrs. Indira Gandhi as the Prime Minister in 1980. Sooner these awards are abolished once and for all time, better it would be for the dignity of people of India.