

REPUBLIC DAY AWARDS

Tokens of patronage

By Prof. M.J. AUDI

Article 18 of the Indian Constitution prohibits the state from conferring titles on any citizen in India. It forbids 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 hailed 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.

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 proved 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 in 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. Titles are conferred on Sycophants.

Our constitution banned titles, but it

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

The awards are announced on every Republic Day. The criteria for assessing "distinguished service" are not known. The general impression is that the *Padma Shris* are selected by the chief ministers of the states and the Prime Minister of India is the dis-

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penser of the rest. With the exception of the highest token, *Bharat Ratna*, others are given to artists, civil servants, diplomats, sportsmen, women and writers. Strangely, civil servants and diplomats not at all known for any creative talents get the *Padma Vibhushan* whilst artistes get the *Padma Shri* which is the least. The *Bharat Ratna* goes only to persons within political *Sanctum Sanctorum* and a few outsiders.

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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 public recognition. Public recognition, in the true sense of term, means pure and simple gratitude of the people. Bankim, Chandra and Premchand, Paluskar and Phalke, Jagdishchandra and Ramanujan, Swami Vivekanand and Swami Dayanand, Bhagat Singh and Chandreshekar Azad, Tilak and Gandhi, needed no titles, no awards and no prizes as tokens of public recognition. Though gone long ago, they and their likes live in the hearts of the people. The public continues to remember the meritorious services rendered by them, whereas persons receiving recognition from the government on Republic Day are forgotten the next day. Therein lies the difference between public recognition and recognition by the government, between the spontaneous and the stage-managed, between patronage and merit.

In 1977, the Janata Party did only one good thing for India. The Janata Government scrapped the awards. No tokens of public recognition were awarded by the Government of India on the Republic Day of 1978 and 1979. The awards reappeared with the reappearance of Smt. Indira Gandhi as the Prime Minister in 1980. The sooner these awards are abolished once and for all, the better it would be for the dignity of the people of India. The National Front government professes to purify public life. The first opportunity for them could be the abolition of the Republic Day Awards.