

'BHARAT RATNA'

The clamour of our noisy democracy, often described as a celebration of the nation's diversity has acquired a tone that discounts the quality of our democratic polity. An inelegant public discourse surrounding the most coveted national honour for the highest record of public service—the Bharat Ratna is a case in point. Leaders of diverse political parties, ideological and intellectual persuasions have chosen to go public with their 'politicking' for the award, which has had the expected, even if unintended effect of robbing the award of the sanctity and the dignity that makes it so special.

Considering that unanimity of views may at times not be possible, the choice of the award is best left to the judgment of the government of the day. A robust tradition of intellectual heterodoxy and an assertive public opinion will, in the best traditions of democracy, ensure that the choice so made finds acceptance in the conscience of the nation as a whole. Indeed, the selection of the recipient must not be vitiated by controversy. It ought to be premised on considerations that pass the test of a most rigorous but honest public scrutiny. The standards of selection must be such as to avoid the slightest suggestion of a flawed decision. After all, those who will join the exalted company of the likes of Gandhi, Nehru, Maulana Azad, Dr.Radhakrisnan, Indira Gandhi and others who have earned

the extraordinary distinction for themselves in the service of the nation can be no ordinary mortals. In choosing from amongst the best, the criteria of selection must do justice to the award and the mood of the nation. A new India basking in the glory of its many accomplishments and pulsating in the 'optimism of our hearts' can only expect the highest standards of excellence in public service from its heroes.

Individuals in public and political life who may be considered for the privilege of the highest national honour must be seen in their exertions and personality to symbolize the undisputed qualities of extraordinary leadership. These must include courage in the face of adversity, compassion and humility in the exercise of authority and an overarching commitment to public service. The chosen one must possess a demonstrated capacity to transform imagination, ability to summon the national mood and push it in the right direction, a willingness to listen and respond to human distress, moral and spiritual generosity that celebrates the multiculturalism and pluralism of our society, a quality of mind that rejects servitude to authority, a non-negotiable commitment to the ethical imperative and grace under pressure. The best amongst us must bring to their work a standard of unmatched excellence and an ennobling leadership. The jewel of the nation may lay no claim to infallibility since that is an impossibility in the scheme of nature, yet his motives must never be suspect. The privileged one must be an agent of progressive change enabling hope and history to rhyme. An exceptional leader must be a democrat who can master our mind by the

force of truth and win the willing consent of his people on a vast scale to his leadership in their cause. The recipient of Bharat Ratna must be seen to have awakened the hidden will of his people as Hegel reminds us, defined the will of his age, told his age what its will is and accomplished it. His work and life should be a saga of an unremitting endeavour to enrich humanity as a whole.

These are no theoretical standards. The evolution of civilization testifies to the fact of ordinary humans reaching standards of excellence through faith in a cause that raises the spirit and unleashes the latent potential in each one of us. The expanse of our imagination and the will to translate hope into reality through tireless exertions defines the outer boundaries of our possibilities.

Each generation must discover for itself the measure of greatness in the image of its own values and judgments. However, the non-negotiable standards that have come to define a life of extraordinary distinction alone must guide us in our choice of Bharat Ratna. The established benchmarks cannot be minimized nor is it necessary to confer the award annually even on the less deserving. The nation can wait till it finds its voice in the life that has shaped history. If history is the essence of innumerable biographies as the historian Carlyle would have us believe, and if the sum of human civilization and culture is represented by the contributions made by geniuses, we owe it to our collective intellectual and political integrity to rise above partisan considerations and ensure that the selection of an outstanding individual recognizes the values that shaped our past and will define our future. We cannot allow the nation's ultimate gratitude to be

diminished in value and meaning. The choice of the best is not easy, but never impossible.

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Note : The views expressed herein are the personal views of the author.