

## CONSCIOUS OF THE HEAVY RESPONSIBILITY \*

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Honourable Members, I am deeply grateful for the kind words that have been spoken about me. It makes me all the more conscious of the heavy responsibility that is cast on me.

One Honourable Member asked me: What difference did I find in the House? One visible difference is the painting of Dr. Radhakrishnan just in front of me in the House. Many years before, as Chairman of the Rajya Sabha he sat on this chair, with very great dignity and distinction and guided this House with utmost brilliance in the formative years of our Republic. I had the privilege of being a student in the University where he was my Vice-Chancellor - the Banaras Hindu University. I still possess his personal certificate to me. That certificate has been a perennial source of encouragement. At a personal level, I shall continue to draw inspiration from this portrait of my teacher and the first Chairman of this House and derive the strength to abide by the lofty standards he set for all of us. I shall always remain conscious that this Chair has been occupied by men of exceptional eminence, from Dr. Radhakrishnan to our present President. This is an humbling thought.

*\* Acceptance speech as Chairman, Rajya Sabha (Edited Version)*

Some Hon'ble Members mentioned about my being very active during Question Hours and in raising questions in the House, when I had the privilege of being its member. Yes, that is so; and I thoroughly enjoyed every moment of it. The sight of a Minister struck dumb by the quality of a Member's question, or, a Member bowled over by the Minister's sharp wit, is an enduring spectacle of the parliamentary drama- It makes

all - even the tallest, look so vulnerable, so fallible and so human. The right to ask question filled me with a sense of uplifting power - the power to hold the whole system accountable to the enquiry of the representative of the people. The atmosphere in this house pulsates with the energising power of democracy. No one is left untouched.

Life does strange things. I never wanted to become a Governor, I was persuaded to become one. Earlier, as a Member of Parliament, I never wanted to be on the panel of Chairmen either in this House or in the other House. And today, I stand here as the Chairman of this august House. I consider this to be the continuation of a journey started and a role defined, several years ago, as an MP. Then, I asserted my identity by asking questions. Now, I will encourage you to assert your identity by never surrendering that essential prerogative of the MP - the right to ask questions. I assure you that I will protect your right to ask questions - regardless of whether you belong to the Opposition or the ruling party or the alliance. In return, all I ask of you is a promise, that you will never give up the MP's inalienable right to question the Government. I say this because, in the last few years, situations have arisen when Members themselves put forth the demand that the Question Hour be suspended on a given day. I found this somewhat paradoxical - Members wanting the Chairman's nod to give up a right, they always fought to protect. Suspending Question Hour, as a political statement, may gain you a few momentary advantages, but is sure to impose a heavy cost in terms of the slow erosion of your rights as MPs. When you give up the Question Hour, you fritter away the sacrifices of all preceding generations who fought and suffered to secure for us the right to question the dictator which lurks behind every Government. Question hour is the life-breath of Parliamentary democracy. When you give up the Question Hour, even for a day, you weaken the ongoing struggle to enforce higher accountability on the government in power; you weaken the evolution of the parliamentary democracy.

I certainly hope you won't give up that precious right of yours or whittle it down for anything else. I promise that I will stand by you in enforcing these standards, whether you are in the Opposition or on the other side of the House.

I have always remained an admirer of the joint family system and I consider this House to be a large joint family. It has its faults and foibles, its traumas and weaknesses, its protagonists and its opponents - but the joint family functions so long as its members are united on the necessity to make it function. They are not expected to give up their self-interest in toto, but only enough to create that essential common space on which every member agrees. As Chairman, it shall be my primary responsibility to help find and, even enlarge, that common space in the midst of political, group, ideological, regional and even personal oppositions. With your co-operation, I hope to succeed.

. During the seven and a half years that I served as the Governor of Andhra Pradesh, the state has had five Chief Ministers. Each was a unique personality with his own distinctive approach to politics. But it should be said to the credit of our constitutional arrangement, that it possesses enough flexibility to adapt to the new policy impulses and approaches. If we function according to the rules of the game and downplay our egos and self-interests, we have in our Constitution an excellent adhesive to keep the country together. It provides the motive force to strengthen national unity, and realise our potential to rise to those great heights, to which any nation can, and should, aspire.

My thoughts go to the titanic people's-struggle that often preceded the victory of parliamentary institutions. Often these struggles coalesced with national liberation struggles, like our own. In the fiftieth year of our Independence, it is wise to remind ourselves of our struggle for independence and the leadership of one of the most remarkable men in all history - Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhi's was not just a struggle against imperialism, it was essentially a revolution in human character and social values. Gandhi gave us our freedom; but he also gave us our credo.

He reminded us of the virtues of orderly institutions and, discipline even in street actions. In 1918, when he was fasting in Ahmedabad jail on the labour issue, some workers said to him, "We will organise a hartal in Ahmedabad". Gandhiji shot back, "And how will you ensure everybody's support for the hartal when some are known to be opposed to it?" The workers confessed that they planned to enlist the support of some anti-social elements to intimidate the dissenters to fall in line. Gandhiji would have none of it. He sternly warned them: "If you hold a hartal or bandh with the support of anti-social elements now, India, when free, will be ruled only by anti-social elements. Never do such mindless acts". That was Gandhiji. "Means", for him, remained as important as the "ends". In his philosophy, "means" and "ends" were convertible. Both had to be moral.

I was always keen to know why the parliamentary system found favour with Gandhiji. The Congress bulletin of 1937 throws a flood of light on this. Gandhiji, as you know, was against office acceptance by the Congress. But after the 1937 elections he advised the Congress in favour of office acceptance. He considered it as a further stage in the development of non-violent experiment. His advice surprised many at that time. He explained: the acceptance of office was not to be a venture in the field of power politics, but a serious attempt, on the one hand, to avoid a bloody revolution and, on the other, to avoid mass civil disobedience.

Even though he himself was the progenitor of mass civil disobedience, he always held that 'satyagraha' and mass civil disobedience could not be resorted to everyday, or even frequently. He authorised mass civil disobedience, as a part of our freedom struggle, in 1920, then in 1930, again in 1932; eight years later in 1940 and, then in 1942. He used 'satyagraha' not as an over-the-counter medicine, but as a rare therapy. His

'satyagraha' enjoined the highest rectitude in the leader as well as in the follower, it was moral action to be employed to achieve only the highest goals and, not for temporary political benefits. What we see today in India may be some form of democratic protest - actions, but these are surely not 'satyagraha'. 'Satyagraha' was the end- result of Gandhiji's search for a non-violent process of power which would be inspired by truth and love and, thus could be a substitute for bloody revolution and mass civil disobedience. But look at what is happening today? 'Satyagraha' is becoming 'duragraha' and bandh is becoming 'durgandha'. If we have to get this 'durgandha' out of our system, we will have to go back to Gandhi again. As "satyagraha" cannot be organised frequently, had he been alive, Gandhiji would have attempted to use every election as some form of 'satyagraha', where truth could be asserted and truthful men elected to public office. If we are able to translate this idea of Gandhiji into practice, it would go a long way in strengthening parliamentary democracy in India.

Happily I find there is a unique convergence of Gandhiji's ideas and the ideas of the other outstanding son of India, Babasaheb Ambedkar. In his last speech to the Constituent Assembly, before it adopted the Constitution, Babasaheb referred to the Buddhist Bhikku Sangha and the political system of ancient India in which all the modern rules of Parliamentary procedure were practised. He then raised a question: Why, in the march of history, did that democratic system lose out? Will we lose it a second time? That is the question - that warning, we must always bear in mind. Babasaheb referred at many places to the divisions in our society and its moral weaknesses. If we want not to lose democracy, then our parliamentary institutions must necessarily become instruments of national unity and social cohesion. It was this unity of India that was the core of Babasaheb's philosophy and approach. In his last speech, he referred to the historical events where a Hindu betrayed a Hindu, a Muslim betrayed a Muslim, a Sikh betrayed a Sikh. Why, he asked, did that happen? Because of the pursuit of self-interest, as he himself answered. In this process, collectively we betrayed India. He remained, till the

very end, deeply concerned about the unity of India. What is happening now? The dreaded phenomenon of caste-politics is eating into our vitals. Religion has become divisive. Gandhiji wanted to spiritualise politics. Unfortunately, a situation has arisen, where we have to spiritualise religion, because religion itself has become politics.

How do we go about correcting these aberrations? What are the parliamentary institutions to do in such a situation? At different places, at different times - Gandhiji, Jawaharlal Nehru, Dr. Ambedkar, Dr. Lohia, talked of transcendence, which, they rightly held, was the hallmark of the Indian civilization ~ the core of the Indian culture, indeed of the entire Asian culture. We have to ensure that parliamentary institutions become instruments of transcendence, of unifying people, elevating them to a higher spiritual plane and making them more conscious of the higher goals they are to subserve.

Dr. Ambedkar was a strong advocate of Constitutionalism. He was basically against the concept of class war and class struggle. He disapproved of civil disobedience, because he thought, it could be the cause for chaos and anarchy. Gandhiji was of the view that non-violent struggles strengthened Constitutional processes and could avert violent action. In spite of this difference, both Gandhiji and Dr. Ambedkar, were for Constitutional and non-violent methods of change and even revolution.

Honourable Members, the new millennium is only three years away. As a nation, we have begun our preparations. We shall be discussing for four days, the new challenges that are awaiting us. Some members referred to the spectre of criminalisation, others referred to something else. I believe, that the greatest challenge to us, along with ensuring the material well-being of our people, will be to ensure their moral and spiritual regeneration. The earlier civilisations, history tells us, rose and declined over distinct periods of time. Today, in the modern-age civilisation, the rise in material prosperity is simultaneous with the spiritual and moral decline of the human race. The processes of rise and fall are going on simultaneously. That is why while addressing the economists in 1915 in Allahabad, Gandhiji raised two questions. Those questions remain valid even

today for all Indians. His first question was: Does development mean development of man? Then he put his second question: Does economic development mean development of moral man? He believed, it did not. So, he gave a warning by citing historical examples; Rome suffered a moral fail when it attained high material affluence. So did Egypt and so, perhaps, most countries of which we have any historic record. And lo and behold! Gandhiji who read the Gita daily, said, "The kinsmen of the royal and divine Krishna too, fell when they were rolling in riches". He warned us all about the consequences of such unbalanced growth. His warning has lost none of its relevance in our times.

The parliamentary institutions, are the moral fulcrum of our country. Pursuing economic and social development is no-doubt, an imperative; but so is moral regeneration of our people.

I have been overwhelmed by the kind words spoken by my friends here. It is difficult for me to express adequately my gratitude for their generosity. My father once told me, "In public life you will receive abundant, even excessive love and severe rebuke, all at the same time. If you are right, never get despondent with the rebuke. Keep the treasure of love as a precious fragrance in a little box close to your heart. Take a pinch everytime a rebuke saddens you or a criticism bothers you". Honourable Members, the love showered on me today will be the precious reservoir from which I will draw solace during moments of despondency. I am grateful to you for vesting me with the valuable asset of your affection.

Before concluding may I say: parliamentary institutions are the temples of democracy. They are the Gangotri from which people expect purity and probity to flow incessantly to enrich the material and moral life of the country. I am sure that in the Rajya Sabha, the House of continuity and in the Lok Sabha, a House of Change; we have a splendid blend of change and continuity in our Parliament. That is the Indian tradition,

that is our dharma. It will set the moral tone and temper of our society while building a new India. In this task, I will be your first servant.

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