

Awards, Titles Or Signs of Distinction?

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We Indians revel in honorifics, including *adaraniya*, *mahamahim*, *mananiya*, etc. We love titles such as *Raja*, *Nawab*, *Zamindar*. The British extended the honours conferred by the sovereign in Britain to India and whilst awarding titles and honours permitted by the British Orders of Chivalry they also created new titles for Indians such as *Rai Bahadur*, *Khan Bahadur*, *Sardar Bahadur* etc. The landed gentry, big businessmen, the Indian princes and those whom the British thought could be depended upon for their loyalty were rewarded by titles and honorifics. Because of the degree of the title, ranging from mere membership of an Order going all the way up to Grand Knight Commander of that Order, the British created a hierarchy which formed a parallel with the hierarchy of caste which existed in India, starting with the Brahmin and descending all the way to the Shudra.

When we adopted the Constitution we decided to have nothing to do with such hierarchies. That is why the Preamble to the Constitution mandates equality of status and opportunity for all. Article 14 gives equality before law to every person within the territory of India, Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth and Article 17 abolishes untouchability. It is in this context that we have to read Article 18 which abolishes all titles. The wording of this Article is very important and is reproduced below:

“Abolition of Titles:

- (1) No title, not being a military or academic distinction shall be conferred by the State.
- (2) No citizen of India shall accept any title from any foreign State.
- (3) No person who is not a citizen of India shall, while he holds an office of profit or trust under the State, accept without the consent of the President any title from any foreign State
- (4) No person holding any office of profit or trust under the State shall, without the consent of the President, accept any present, emolument or office of any kind from or under any foreign State,

In other words, one can obtain a degree as per the statutes of an educational institution, but may not accept a title because the Constitution abolishes all titles. But does it really do so? On 2nd January, 1954 India instituted three Padma Awards and one Bharat Ratna Award. In ascending order these are Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan, Padma Vibhushan and Bharat Ratna. Generally all these awards are announced on 26th January, the Republic Day and to that extent the list parallels the New Year’s honours list issued by the Sovereign in Britain. The Government of India has made it very clear that these are awards and not titles and if they are used either as a prefix or a suffix to one’s name this would be a violation of the terms of the award and can lead to its cancellation. However, the fact remains that people do refer to the awardees by their award as if it were a title and this is a common practice. I myself am a recipient of Padma Bhushan and despite every effort of mine to stop people I find that on several occasions I am introduced as Padma Bhushan so and so. Is this not a violation of Article 18 of the Constitution? When I was awarded the Padma Bhushan the citation read (in translation) “I, Pratibha Devsingh Patil, President of India, do hereby honour you, Mahesh N Buch for your high individual qualities and confer on you the Padma Bhushan”. I compared this with the citation of the Order of the British Empire conferred on my father which referred to him as per the quaint English practice as “Our trusty and well beloved so and so”. In effect the wording of both citations does suggest the conferment of a title. According to me this is a perpetration of our caste system and creates within society a hierarchy of awardees and the vast number of non-awardees.

The awards were instituted on 2nd January 1954, which means that before that date they did not exist. Because one cannot create awards retrospectively it should automatically mean that a person who was not alive on the date of institution of the awards lived in an era when these awards did not exist and, therefore, he would not be entitled to such an award. The late Pt. Madan Mohan Malviya was conferred the Bharat Ratna in the latest Republic Day award list. He certainly was not alive when the Bharat Ratna was created. That is true of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel also. He, too, received the Bharat Ratna, like Pt. Madan Mohan Malviya, posthumously. An award in existence at a time when the awardee was still alive, though the award was given posthumously, may qualify for the award. How can a person who died before the award existed be conferred such an award? Would we consider the cases of Kautilya, Emperor Ashoka and Emperor Akbar for conferment of the Bharat Ratna posthumously? Where would the process end? Therefore, it is absolutely vital to lay down that the awards would be conferred only prospectively and not retrospectively from a time when the awards did not exist and the awardee was not alive. One has the highest respect for Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Pt. Madan Mohan Malviya and this country can do no greater honour than to acknowledge that it was fortunate enough to have such great sons, but not through the Bharat Ratna.

I would like to go one step further. Why have these awards at all when the Constitution itself abolishes titles? Why create a new caste of awardees, with a hierarchical sub-caste classification being built in? Go back to the Preamble and ensure that there is equality of status and of equality in which every Indian citizen feels as honoured as the next. In other words, my prayer to government would be, as also to the Opposition that we should collectively abolish the Padma Awards and Bharat Ratna and implement the provisions of Article 18 in letter and in spirit.
