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Chief Guest-2015

Starting in 1920 if not earlier, the Jamnalal Bajaj family resolved to assist, and when needed look after, Mahatma Gandhi, Acharya Vinoba Bhave and others who were taking the lead in liberating and transforming India.

Soon we will reach the centennial of that initial history-making decision by the Bajaj family. That anniversary of service and care should be fittingly celebrated.

Gandhians – those who practise and pass on Mahatma Gandhi's ideas – have never sought fame or recognition. But surely they deserve recognition. How satisfying it is to honour women and women who are not anxious to be honoured! All of us benefit when the selfless obtain appreciation.

Instituting these Awards was thus a splendid idea, and one that has been steadily implemented year after year. For that idea and its regular implementation, I congratulate the Bajaj family and the Bajaj foundation.

It is a matter of joy to me that among those being honored today is Professor Minoru Kasai of Japan, a remarkable thinker and author whom I have had the privilege of knowing for many years. The company of every other Awardee, each of them a distinguished individual, is equally a cause for joy.

As a student of history, let me remind the present generation that Jamnalal Bajaj was more than a courageous businessman who at a critical period in India's life provided a protective umbrella to men and women who for India's liberty were risking their lives, assets, positions and jobs.

In addition to providing that all-important umbrella, and taking a huge risk by doing so, Jamnalal Bajaj was an astute politician and statesman, a close and frank colleague of Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Subhas Bose, Rajaji, Rajen Babu, Maulana Azad, and Badshah Khan.

Jamnalal Bajaj should thus be seen as one of the founders of independent India.

A flavour of our freedom movement can be had from an 81-year-old story. In December 1934, after four years of almost continuous imprisonment, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, or Badshah Khan as he was known, found himself in Wardha as one of Jamnalal Bajaj's guests.

Also in Wardha at the time were Badshah Khan's four children, three boys -- Ghani, Wali, and Ali – and their young sister Meher Taj. Also present was Badshah Khan's brother, Dr Khan Sahib. Gandhi was there too.

Being in the same place with all his children, who by this time were mother-less, was an extremely rare occurrence for the oft-imprisoned, oft-travelling Badshah Khan. What happiness he and the children must have experienced under the Bajaj roof in Wardha during that December in 1934!

The happiness lasted for two days. On 7 December 1934, the Wardha Superintendent of Police, accompanied by a police officer from Mumbai, showed up with an arrest warrant. Just before he was placed in the police vehicle taking him to prison for yet another term, this is what Badshah Khan said to Jammalal Bajaj and Jammalalji's life-partner, Janki Devi Bajaj, It is all God's doing. He kept me out just for the time He wanted to use me outside. Now I must serve from the inside. What pleases God pleases me.

Friends, the freedom movement in which Gandhi, Bajaj, Badshah Khan and tens of thousands of others – the forebears of many present here – took part, was a noble period in our country's life. Let me add that altogether Badshah Khan would have spent 27 years inside British and Pakistani prisons.

I had the privilege and delight of knowing Jammalal Bajaj's son Kamalnayanji – that brilliant, blunt and impish Kamalnayanji, who love to tease, taunt and challenge – as also his younger brother Ramkrishnaji.

When on one occasion during the Emergency – forty years ago -- I accompanied Ramkrishnaji on a visit, here in Mumbai, to a just-released Jayaprakash Narayan, I was wondering what Ramkrishnaji would say to JP, for I was aware of the closeness of the Bajaj family to Vinoba, and aware also of the difference over the Emergency between Vinoba and JP.

When we were with JP, I saw that Ramkrishnaji was superb in his frank yet brilliantly diplomatic remarks, which JP would have enjoyed and Vinoba too would have liked, had he heard them.

Dear friends, the India of December 2015 is very different from the India of 1934 or 1975 or the year 2000. These are new times. India has a new equation with the world. We are now a major power, large in numbers, rich in talent, strong in youthfulness, and visible, even conspicuous, in every part of the planet.

During the old struggle which led to these Awards, the question was, 'How do we free ourselves from the domination of the British Empire?'

Today the question is, 'What will Rising India do for the world?'

Are we ready for this new role? Will India's performance be better than that of smaller Western powers when they were the top dogs?

As we in India reflect on our global role, we need to think also of life inside India and in Indian society. In their time, Jammalal Bajaj and his wonderful colleagues looked around and said to themselves, 'We cannot bear this subjugation and this exploitation. We will throw off our shackles.' And they did.

We should look around us and ask, 'Are we satisfied with our society with its suppressions and oppressions? Should we not tackle the humiliations in Indian society even as our fathers addressed the humiliation of being ruled by a small nation thousands of miles away?'

I am not speaking of what our governments should or should not do. I am speaking of India's social world, of all of us as members of Indian society. I am expressing a longing for social equality, not just the legal equality which our Constitution provides, but an actual equality, a society where we enjoy and give to one another, men, women and children, azaadi, aman, and aadar, where we as Indians allow fellow-Indians the fullest freedom, peace and respect.

We should ask ourselves: 'Don't we often suppress and shout down one another?' 'Do we recognize the goodness and potential greatness in our fellow citizens?'

'Are we listening to one another? Do we know one another? Do we really know the life and thoughts of groups other than the one where we spend almost all our lives?'

Jamnallal Bajaj died suddenly in 1942, just before the great Quit India movement was launched. After independence, some persons said, 'We need a Knit India movement for bringing Indians together.' They were right.

But we also need a Know Your India movement, for knowing not just the geography of fellow Indians but also their psychology, their hopes, longings and fears.

We harbour strong opinions, often negative ones, about Indians of groups other than the one to which we belong, but we don't really know the fellow Indians whom we criticize mentally or with words.

As we honour this evening the remarkable men and women for their roles in spreading the values and ideas for which Gandhi, Bajaj and their associates spent their lives, and as I reflect on how we might follow in their train, I share with you this thought that we should reflect seriously on the improvements that Indian society may need, and on India's global role today.

Dear Bajaj family and Foundation, you have given all of us an opportunity not only to congratulate and thank several outstanding women and men; you have given us an opportunity to think seriously. Thank you and God bless you.

