

Rahul Bajaj
Chairman, Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation
Welcome - 1994

This is the first occasion since the institution of the Annual Awards in 1978 that we are meeting without respected Ramkrishnaji Bajaj in our midst. The glorious traditions of philanthropy and constructive work which were the most distinguishing features of my grand father Pujya Jamnalalji were inherited by his two sons, my father Shri Kamalnayanji and my uncle Shri Ramkrishnaji. The Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation was set up in 1975 to further the cause of constructive work on Gandhian lines by instituting Awards for recognizing such work.

Shri Ramkrishnaji was the life and soul of the Foundation and the path breaking work he inspired and initiated in the promotion of the constructive movement, the improvement of the quality of life of the people through programmes of rural and economic development, the application of science and technology to rural development and in the delicate but all important field of the promotion of Gandhian values abroad has won him wide acclaim not only in this country but also abroad.

The light lit by Jamnalalji and nursed with care by Ramkrishnaji will not be allowed to be dimmed and the traditions of constructive work which are the hallmark of the Bajaj Group will be carried on equally vigorously through the Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation, the various Trusts and the Companies belonging to the Group.

It is a matter of satisfaction to all of us in the Foundation that the Annual Jamnalal Bajaj Awards have become a prestigious conferment because of the outstanding qualities of its awardees, the rigorous and totally impartial method of selection of the awardees and the impact that it has created for the continued development of constructive work, transforming rural development through science and technology, upliftment of women and children and the promotion of Gandhian values as a panacea for social evils as well as for the establishment of National and International harmony.

I would like to express on behalf of the entire Bajaj Parivar our gratitude for having been given the opportunity to participate in the stupendous and rewarding task of the transformation of our countryside and for the improvement of the quality of life of all people.

Welcome - 2000

We in the Bajaj Group have been striving to ensure that the tradition of Constructive work is continued vigorously through the Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation. In this task we have had the sagacious counsel of the Chairmen of the Advisory council, all of whom have been very distinguished men in public life.

A number of worthy causes are supported by the several Charitable Trusts and Companies of the Bajaj Group. We shall be also assisting the victims of the recent earthquake in Gujarat.

The traditions set by these legendary social workers of integrity, dedication and an impeccable standard of ethics and morality, provide examples which are worthy of emulation by men and women in all walks of life.

Every society survives due to its social capital. That is, the values it lives by and especially the people who give expression to these values and act as exemplars for that society. Today's awardees represent such exemplars.

Our freedom movement created a great deal of social capital for the country. In a sense, for the last 50 years, we have been living off that accumulated social capital.

I wonder if we are, as a society, adequately concerned whether we are today adding to or eating into our social capital? I would like to leave this thought with you.

Welcome - 2001

Every once in a while one must change to keep oneself relevant. It has been customary for me as the Chairman to say something about the awardees. But, today is their day and many people will be talking about their work.

So, in a break from the past, I have chosen to speak about an issue that bothers all of us. I would like to share some of my concerns and ideas about governance of our society.

The JB Foundation tries to recognize and facilitate constructive work. Unfortunately, our prevalent governing structures obstruct rather than encourage such work. So it is an issue of relevance to the foundation. Also, civil society should articulate and stand up and be counted in defense of values that are important for our society.

This is a slippery and controversial subject but I believe after 54 years of independence that we have been badly governed. It could have been worse, but that is no consolation. On whatever dimension we assess our performance as a nation: be it per capita income, Literacy, Health, Infrastructure, Employment; the results of 54 years fall woefully short of our potential and what other nations like China, Singapore, South Korea etc. have achieved.

As Kanwal Rekhi, a venture capitalist from Silicon Valley put it recently, we are a first rate people in a third rate system. But the system is not God given. It is a system that we created and support, even if by default.

At the root of our non-performance is the primacy we accorded to the government rather than individual enterprise. Nani Palkhiwala once described the period 1947-91 as a period of "collective madness". Of course, there were positive elements in the period, but that should not deter us from calling a spade a spade.

China too had its cultural revolution but they did not become the prisoners of an unwise past. Each day one must be willing to look at the world with new eyes. This is not to be confused with inconsistency. Gandhiji wrote in "Young India", "My aim is not to be consistent with my previous statement on a given question, but to be consistent with truth as it may present itself to me at a given moment."

Over a period of time some maybe well intentioned but incorrect principles have come to be the corner stones of our public discourse. Essentially, they represent a belief that political expediency is more important than economic logic. Key amongst these are:

1. Merit is not important in deciding about people
2. There are free lunches available
3. Dogmas are more important than results
4. You can have rights without responsibilities

One can see that these will lead to disaster because they are contrary to common sense. But they are the prevailing principles of our governance. I am even prepared to accept that in exceptional cases the first 3 principles can be used, but in no case can anybody have rights without responsibilities. We have given them to politicians, bureaucrats & workmen with disastrous results.

The task of overturning them is not easy. Large groups now have vested interest in keeping them going. But to continue an unsatisfactory arrangement as a holy cow is tyranny.

I must clarify that though I am an advocate of less intrusive government, fewer controls etc., I am

not an advocate of no government. We need government for providing critical social and physical infrastructure. We need regulation of markets. But what we don't need, is government in business or a micro managing government or a resource soaking, fiscally imprudent government.

The public domain has to be carefully cultivated. We have left it untended and in that vacuum a lot of undesirable elements have moved in. A society cannot progress if its public domain is ineffective. Much as we try, we cannot have private heavens in a public hell.

Our crisis of governance is a crisis of legitimacy. Faced with lack of progress and the brazen behavior of occupants, the public has lost faith in politics for sure, and administration to a large extent. Without legitimacy you cannot govern even in the private sector.

In today's world speed is the essence. Situations develop at a rapid pace and the governing structures should be able to respond quickly. In our pluralistic and diverse society it is difficult to move speedily. It is always easier to put a spoke in the wheel than to put your shoulder to the wheel and move it.

To my mind the critical issues to be addressed are:

1. How do we make the political system more productive, and accountable and responsive to Our society's needs.
2. How do we increase our rate of economic growth so that a greater number of people have a stake in the system and there is pressure from below to move in the right direction.

What needs to be done?

I wish I had the breadth of vision to offer an answer. A society needs direction but it is not a monolithic entity. In practice, a society churns and past & present combine to create a new future. In our society we can see that winds of change are blowing.

But the individual is the center of all change. As Pandurang Athavale says so eloquently, "You are the sculptor of your life." And we in our lives can hold fast to values that we believe are good for us and society. That I guess is a thread that runs through the lives and works of every JB foundation awardees.

This at the political level means that each one of us should vote, every time. And we must vote for the right candidate. Middle class apathy to the political process has to end; and only we can end it. We need to have government funding of elections for the root of the rot in the political system lies in election funding.

We in the private sector have to significantly improve the quality of our corporate governance and speed up the economy's rate of growth by enhancing our competitiveness. Growth creates compulsions and constituencies for change. I have been for long articulating the view that Indian companies continue to be hampered by inadequate internal liberalization and excessive external liberalization. In my view this is still a fact. But as I said earlier, the issue is where do we go from here?

"Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes time. But vision with action can change the world" said Joel Barker. I am indebted to Dr. Irani of the Tatas for this quote. We must articulate and commend whatever is in our national interest. We must rise above narrow considerations that we have become accustomed to. The purpose of my comments today is to stir a dialogue so that we can start to break this logjam.

Welcome - 2002

As is the tradition I have evolved since last year, I will only share some thoughts.

Business generally is not seen as a moral undertaking. Neither in India nor anywhere else. But as

Jamnalalji saw it long ago, the underpinnings of business lie in the trust that we earn of the customer, shareholders, employees, suppliers and the society we live in. Recent events in the US show that when business forgets these moral underpinnings of business; and these stakeholders withdraw their trust, economic turbulence results.

In the long run, doing what is right and holding steadfast to values - of honesty, of fairness, is critical for any system to survive and flourish. The travails of our political system and public institutions of governance, has much to do with the betrayal of trust and its consequences.

The social system is what nourishes the economic system; and no economic system can flourish if it does not nurture its social system.

These awards are a small way for us to both acknowledge our debt to and responsibility towards the society, and present the awardees as exemplars to the society at large. Outstanding individuals who have dedicated their lives to improve the state of our social system.

Welcome - 2003

We have a heavy heart this year. Dr. V. Subramaniam/ the Honorary Director of the Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation since 1992 and a very dear and respected friend passed away recently. He was a gentleman to the core. Despite having such a distinguished career in the IAS and even after having been a Cabinet Minister in Maharashtra, he retained his simplicity and straight forwardness. We were privileged to have him associated with the foundation. We will cherish his memory and miss him.

It is my pleasant duty to welcome this year's winners of the JB awards. My colleagues in the Foundation would be briefing us soon about the details of their endeavours. I will share with you some of my thoughts, as has been my practice during the last few years.

In my view, in the development of any country, three institutions play a critical role. The state, the market and the civil society. In various societies these have been accorded varying emphasis and power. Till 1991 in India the State was accorded exceptional importance, with overall unsatisfactory economic and social results. The world now seems to have little choice but to bow to the diktats of the market.

The market is an institution that on the whole works better than the state because fundamentally in it no entity has a monopoly. Players in it perpetually jostle for position. Change is the only constant. It encourages and rewards innovation and talent. With the coming of the knowledge-economy, the balance between capital and talent is shifting steadily in favor of talent.

But the market has its drawbacks; to be fair and efficient it has to be regulated though not controlled, Also, because it measures everything in terms of money, it knows the cost of every thing but value of almost nothing. This is where civil society steps in. Our culture, values, communities, the family. They define what we value and where we draw the line. Our sense of right and wrong. The myriad social institutions that provide both succor and guidance.

The state is a complex entity. It is important in providing security and in orderly development of markets. It has the monopoly on both taxation and violence in a nation. Democracy is an important mechanism to both shape and control the state. But we know how ineffective democracy is and how corrupting power is. Yet democracy is the best option for governance in a society.

There is a complex interplay of all three. They influence and are influenced by each other. But the state and the market are false Gods. They are good servants but bad masters. We must not pray at their alter uncritically. In my view, it is the civil society that is the real strength of any nation and needs to be strengthened.

Just think of pre-independence India. Was the state for independence? Certainly not! Was the market? Not really. Though the interests of domestic capital were antithetical to foreign capital in quite a few cases. But it was our civil society that sustained the movement. More than anything else, our sense of self respect.

These awards are part of our efforts to strengthen civil society. For rewards are a key signal to the society at large. This is especially so in our country where quite often those that deserve punishment are rewarded.

Welcome - 2004

I will share with you two of my thoughts, as has been my practice during the last few years. Both simple but controversial. First, populism.

Any civilized society has to develop mechanisms to support its weaker constituents. The law of the jungle is not a law for human beings. A society without compassion is a bleak one indeed. The wide variety of efforts by so many individuals and institutions, that we are privileged to become familiar with while deciding on the Jammalal Bajaj Awards, convinces me that compassion, and the willingness to work for the benefit of others, are traditions that are very much alive in our country.

But history tells us that poverty is removed by expanding opportunities, by encouraging the vigorous, so that employment opportunities increase in the society. However, there is need for remedial action by the Government even then to provide the basics - Education, Health, Drinking water and Sanitation - to everyone. But it is equally important to note that poverty is not reduced through focusing primarily on redistribution.

We as a nation are still not convinced of this. For a long time we persisted essentially with a redistribution focused approach, till it was neither intellectually nor financially tenable. The long-term damage of these policies, especially on the poor, has been huge. Since 1991, there has been a process of correction. But electoral compulsions have once again started to cast their shadow on our economic policies.

We are still muddling through in a fast changing world. Democratic dialogue is essential for change to be thought through and implemented on a sustainable basis. But we can ill afford populist deadlock.

For the people at large to be convinced that economic freedom for business is in their long-term interest, Indian business has to improve its credibility in our society. This it can primarily do through satisfying its customers, but also by being fair with its other stakeholders like employees, suppliers and shareholders. Business must also discharge its responsibility towards the environment and the society at large.

It is ironic that the consumer society is driven by self-interest and even greed but for capitalism to work, its leaders must not be greedy. Only then can they retain the trust and confidence essential for their enterprises to prosper. I think this was the insight that led Gandhiji to articulate and Jammalalji to practice the concept of trusteeship.

My second thought is on religion and the State.

I believe the argument between those that emphasise religion and those that want to downplay it, is a misleading one. Religion in any country, and especially in ours, is a powerful force. In our country it is the key moral force that both supports and restrains an overwhelming majority of us. If we have order in our country it is not because of governments but due to our society and our religions.

The Hindu religion is also not a monolithic entity but reflects our plurality. This is why our society has been a living example of peaceful coexistence of different ways of life.

Universally, the history of interaction between religion and the state is not a happy one. That is why after a long process, they have disengaged, at least in theory, in most of Europe and in the US.

At the same time I don't think we need an antiseptic version of secularism. It goes against our grain. What we need is to preserve our traditional tolerance and focus on religion in our private lives. However, aggressive jingoism in the name of religion goes against the Hindu mind. Thus, a middle way, something that most people in our country are already following, is what is needed. It is incumbent on our leadership, religious or otherwise, to propagate such a middle path.

Gandhiji was both deeply secular and deeply religious. I do not see any contradiction in this. One also does not see a contradiction between his religiosity and his zeal to alter its defects, most notably untouchability, from within. It is the genius of Hinduism that it seems structurally designed for change. That is possibly why it has survived for so long. So I for one do not see a contradiction between being secular and being religious at the same time. We neither need to suppress nor flaunt our religious idealism.

Welcome - 2006

During the last year, two major events have occurred in my life. I have formally ceased to be involved in the day-to-day running of Bajaj Auto and, by a very unexpected turn of events, got elected to the Rajya Sabha as an independent. From being a commentator I have become a player. The Rajya Sabha is providing me a chance to be more engaged with the broader issues of our country. These are early days. But I find that my views on the society, politics and economy are if anything being reinforced by this experience.

But what is galling is that the parliament seems to be increasingly becoming irrelevant in the governance structure of the country. A great deal of its time is wasted in trivial matters and important matters are often rushed through without much discussion. For example, 26 bills were scheduled to be passed in the monsoon session of 22 days, but only 13 were passed due to lack of time to discuss them. Even of these 13, 5 were passed in the last 4 days. The Rajya Sabha was adjourned many times and in the Lok Sabha one day there were almost fisticuffs between some members. Some one should consider introducing a bill to debit Rs. 1 Crore an hour to the political party whose members cause an adjournment.

We in the private sector decided long ago to manage without the government's support and have learnt to fend for ourselves. This is the way to move ahead. We must continue to expand the private spaces of freedom. But, whether we like it or not, there is a minimum modicum of decency, honesty, effectiveness and efficiency that is required of the public system to enable the private system to function. And also for those not well off to have access to basic services like education and health. Therefore, all of us have to engage with the system of public governance.

I believe that at least in our large cities, we now have the critical mass of a middle class to seek a political role and bring some sanity into our politics. We must choose to engage. If we choose not to, as we are largely doing currently, we can not escape our responsibility for the consequences. In Brecht's play "Life of Galileo", there is a conversation about the need for heroes in a society. One character laments "Unhappy the land that has no heroes! To me, there is truth in both these assertions.

As the JB foundation we seek exemplars who have worked for social development, usually away from the glare of publicity. We are continually amazed to see the number of such persons in our country and the depth of their commitment. We are indebted to each recipient for accepting our award.

The real worth of a person is neither his wealth nor his power. It is more the number of people who love and respect him and whose lives he has influenced in a positive way.

It is not important for me whether or not India is a so-called superpower, say, 20 years from now. My dream for India, 20 years from today, is a country where poverty has been banished. Where parental income is not a barrier to good health and education, where talent is encouraged, achievement celebrated and the weak can also live with dignity. A country retaining its age-old humanism, tolerant of differences and with a world view that is a cross between that of a yogi and an entrepreneur. A country that retains its soft power in offering an alternative, attractive way of life, that celebrates life, to the world. Where the past and the future complement each other in the present.

Welcome - 2008

Recently, I came across a book written a century ago by Gurudev Tagore called "Greater India". It makes the important point that our civilization survived all the turmoil over centuries because in our society, the community provided for itself and did not depend on the government. Our dharamshalas, schools, water bodies were built and maintained by the society. Gurudev called for the reinvigoration of this Swadeshi, swavalambi Samaj concept. These essays predate Gandhiji's freedom struggle, but almost predict the program that Gandhiji brought to fruition.

Gurudev also stressed the need to be organized and to develop programmes that met the real needs of a large majority of our people, and not just of a few.

I believe that, consciously or unconsciously, such ideas have influenced both the recipients of the JB Awards and the Bajaj group through its public charitable trusts including the JB foundation itself. Our emphasis and undue dependence on the government has been misplaced, at a great cost of resources and time. It is interesting that at a meeting held in March 1948 at Sevagram, Wardha to decide on the future direction of Gandhiji's constructive activities, Nehruji opined that the Government seemed to have a kiss of death as far as any activity was concerned. Why he chose to ignore his own conviction is something lost in the labyrinths of time.

There is a saying that if one is not thinking twenty years ahead then one is not thinking seriously enough.

All those being felicitated this evening are people who have made commitments in such time scales. It is when we are either thinking or committed in this manner that we, whether institutions, organizations or even families, thrive.

If one observes a tree growing, the early years can be pretty difficult. Water is inadequate. Some animal eats it or breaks it. And yet there is this great desire of the tree to survive and grow. A fascinating resilience. A couple of years later, the tree takes root and starts a process of exponential growth. Then it flowers and fruits.

To me trees offer a metaphor for leading our lives. The desire to be strong and lead a full life. Resilience in the face of adversity and a life that provides succor to others.

The awardees have all lived like bountiful trees. The institutions they have built, and the work they have done, are the saplings they planted many years ago and continue to nurture.

