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GUEST EDITORIAL

Should I return my Sahitya Akademi Award?

A simple yes/no answer to this question will not suffice: in an assembly of intellectuals, a reason for the answer will be expected. Here is the reasoning leading to my answer given at the end.

The Sahitya Akademi, along with many other academies was set up by the Government of India to encourage the nation's development in various intellectual pursuits. In their respective fields, these institutions organize various meets, encourage exchange of experts and honour individuals for their achievements. For example, a scientist considers it an achievement to be elected a Fellow of the Indian National Science Academy for his/her work in science. Likewise, the Sahitya Akademi looks after and appreciates the literature emerging from contemporary India in all major languages. The Lalit Kala Akademi plays the patron of performing arts. And so on and so forth. These academies have a national status and one could say that they act on behalf of the citizens of India. Thus a Sahitya Akademi award is a mark of appreciation shown by the Akademi on behalf of the nation.

The awards given by the Sahitya Akademi have acquired a distinguished status since they identify excellent literature in no less than 24 languages. The selection process is transparent and has largely remained unscathed by criticism, nepotism or political interference. Indeed, an award is considered a fitting recognition by the nation, of the creativity of the awardee. Like the Republic Day Padma honours, the Sahitya Akademi awards are valued and respected. To me, getting the Sahitya Akademi award brought a warm pat on the back as I feel is the case with other Akademi awardees.

Against this background, there has been a strong public reaction at the shocking killing of a distinguished Kannada litterateur M. M. Kalburgi on 30 August 2015. Naturally, the reaction has come not only from the man in the street, but also from literary circles. The Sahitya Akademi reacted to the news rather late, by holding a condolence meeting in Bengaluru on 30 September. Nevertheless, several literary leading lights expressed anguish at what they consider inertia on the part of the Akademi which, they felt should have reacted quickly and strongly. Indeed the reaction has reached such a level

that many Akademi awardees have returned their awards as symbol of their anger at its lack of action.

However, my own reaction is different from the above. Certainly, the Sahitya Akademi should express in strong words its shock at the above event. Its Fellows and awardees should put pressure on the Akademi to come out with a strong condemnation of what is seen as suppression of free thinking. However, to return the Akademi award to mark one's protest does not seem to me to be the appropriate response. In making this statement I am in no way questioning the rationale of those who took this drastic step. I respect their judgement, but beg to differ for the following reason.

These awards carry a rare dignity reflecting their national character and so should remain above the fracas of controversy. I may repeat what I said earlier, that an award like Padma Bhushan or a Sahitya Akademi award reflects the honour conferred on the awardee by the nation. Indeed I am proud to state that my Padma award citations have been signed by Presidents S. Radhakrishnan and A. P. J. Abdul Kalam. These are persons I have great respect for and casting their certificates aside as part of a tossing game does not appeal to me.

Having answered the question framed in the title of this guest editorial, I feel that I should express my reaction on the issue raised from time to time, but more frequently in recent times. The issue concerns the apprehension that our society is in danger of losing its image of tolerance. It is generally argued that the tragic killings in recent times are more serious when seen as a sequence. It is further argued that these events suggest that the traditionally liberal fabric of our society is coming under threat. Many intellectuals have drawn attention to this danger. Reading many of these statements or letters signed by large groups, one gets the impression that for the first time, the tolerant secular structure of India is coming apart. However, just as one cannot afford to be complacent, one should also avoid overreacting. For example, a calm survey of the past will tell us that events threatening the spirit of coexistence have occurred in the past too. The large-scale arson in 1948 or the katleam of 1984 are not yet forgotten. While I am apolitical in terms of the

present party structure, I do not see why a single political party should be picked out for blame.

The maintenance of law and order is the joint responsibility of the Central and State Governments. Even though the State Governments are in charge of police, the security concerns are also shared by the Central Government through its paramilitary forces, and agencies like the IB, RAW, CBI, etc. Thus, while insisting that the State and Central Governments carry out their duties of maintaining law and order, the responsible citizens should educate the masses so as to prevent the occurrence of untoward events.

So, in the last analysis, the present disturbing incidents are indicative of a deterioration of the law and order situation for which the Governments, both State and Central, and not the Sahitya Akademi are ultimately responsible.

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