



# WORDS OF WISDOM

**M**AHATMA Gandhi was not given the Bharat Ratna because it was set up in 1954 and could not be awarded posthumously (Gandhi was assassinated in 1948).

The rules have changed since. In response to a petition filed to give Gandhi the country's highest civilian award, the Supreme Court said that as the Father of the Nation, he is held in such 'high esteem' that he is 'beyond formal recognition'.

The Bharat Ratna is conferred in recognition of 'exceptional service/performance of the highest order', without distinction of race, occupation, position, or gender. The award was originally limited to achievements in the arts, literature, science, and public services, but in 2011 the government expanded the criteria to include 'any field of human endeavour'. The convention is for the prime minister to make recommendations for the Bharat Ratna to the president, with a maximum of three nominees per year. The recipients receive a Sanad (certificate) signed by the president and a pipal leaf-shaped medallion. There is no monetary grant associated with the award.

I want to shift my attention away from the politics of the award and focus on the literary contribution of our 53 Bharat Ratnas. Had Jawaharlal Nehru never been the prime minister, he would have been famous as the author of *An Autobiography* and *The Discovery of India*.

Dr Rajendra Prasad took a suo moto decision to confer the Bharat Ratna on him and announced that he



**FLYLEAF**

**VR FEROSE**

*(The author is a technologist based in Silicon Valley who is gently mad about books)*

had done so 'without any recommendation or advice from my prime minister'.

Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar has written 32 books besides numerous research documents, reviews of articles and books, prefaces, forewords, statements and memoranda. Apart from this, he is also the author of the *Constitution of India*. His *Annihilation of Caste*, originally written as a speech for the annual conference in 1936 of the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal, an anti-caste Hindu reformist group, is a powerful critique of the caste system. In it, Ambedkar argues for the complete obliteration of the caste system and advocates for social justice and equality. *Annihilation of Caste* continues to be widely studied for its profound analysis of caste-based discrimination and its call for radical societal transformation. Ambedkar's personal library Rajgruha in Mumbai has more than 50,000 books and it was once the world's largest private library.

Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan is considered one of the most influential and distinguished 20th century scholars of comparative religion and philosophy. His most popular book is *The Hindu View of Life*. This book presents an insightful exploration of Hindu philosophy and spirituality, offering readers a deeper understanding of Hindu thought and its relevance in the modern world. It is widely regarded as one of

his seminal works and has been influential in shaping Indian and global perspectives on Hinduism. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1936 and 1937.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee was an outstanding orator and a poet. One of his most notable works is a collection of poems titled *Meri Ekyavan Kavitaen* (My 51 poems). This collection showcases his poetic prowess and reflects his thoughts, emotions, and observations on the various aspects of life and society.

Books signed by Bharat Ratnas are extremely rare and I rejoiced when some came my way. One such book was *Sayings - Wise or Witty* by Sir M Visvesvaraya, whose birthday is celebrated as 'Engineer's Day' in India. I have multiple copies of the biography of Mother Teresa - one signed by the author Navin Chawla, and another signed by Mother herself. I found a signed copy of Pandit Ravi Shankar's biography *Raga Mala* during a road trip to Solvang. A signed copy of *Satyajit Ray* by Andrew Robinson came from a dealer. And two Bharat Ratnas whom I have met and personally received a book from are Dr APJ Abdul Kalam and Sachin Tendulkar. Dr Kalam's *Wings of Fire* not only narrates his personal story but also shares his vision for India's future. It remains a bestseller and continues to inspire people across generations.

Every Bharat Ratna has left an unparalleled legacy to inspire generations. Their books have given us access to the finest minds the country has produced!

*(The writer's views are personal)*