

TIOL Fiscal Heritage Award: Recipient's mantra - Living is in giving & giving is living!

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I am one of the millions of global citizens who have meagre faith in the 'metaverse' of miracles! Such a faith is largely driven by my belief in the doctrine of input-output which has inarguably its origin in the 'Doctrine of **Karma**' - the pith and essence of **Bhagavad Gita**, one of the magnum opuses from the pantheon of Hinduism-related religious literature! However, I had also come across a quote from a well known spiritual teacher Mary Davis who had said : **"Through the eyes of gratitude, everything is a miracle"**

! It was beyond the rim of my cognitive capacity! The caravan of my experiences chugged on and then popped up a decision by the Hon'ble Jury for the TIOL Awards 2022 when it was unanimously slated that the most prestigious 'TIOL Fiscal Heritage Award 2022' ought to be bestowed on Dr Manmohan Singh for his Lifetime contribution to economic and fiscal space. There were obviously many other enormously worthy names but the members of the TIOL Awards Organising Committee and the Members of the Jury described him as the uncontested FIRST

if one may call it, among the 'Equals'! The onus to approach and seek his consent for a barely two-edition-old history-constructing award was put on me! Although I picked up the gauntlet but was confessedly a little perplexed - how to go about it?

The first two recipients, late Arun Jaitley and Dr Raja Chelliah, were conferred this award posthumously and I had 'not-so-difficult' job of convincing their family members about the honour being bestowed on them!

The task in hand was indeed arduous and intimidating as approaching a former Prime Minister of India who had donned so many challenging hats to twist and shape the 'clay' used for constructing New India, looked tricky and not less than a jigsaw puzzle. Inspired by what Martin Luther King Jr had said - **"You do not have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step"**

, and I lurched to activate my legs with a wrack of thick clouds of ambiguity! The first email (later followed by a written communication) was hesitatingly barrelled - my prayer was wrapped in a few lines besides detailing the process of selection by the distinguished members of the Hon'ble Jury. And my science and philosophy-driven world came crashing down like a straw-thatched roof against a tempest , within a few days when I received a reply - **"I very gratefully accept this honour"**

! His response instantaneously reminded me what Emmanuel Dagher had said -

"When gratitude becomes an essential foundation in our lives, miracles start to appear everywhere"

! What a Himalyan lesson his humble reply taught me! It was not less than a 'Miracle' for a Liliputian like me! **Tour de force** moment for me! His humility overwhelmingly floored me and that is why my Welcome Speech at the conferment of the Award orbited only around the uncommonly found virtue of humility which the Chinese philosopher Confucius had treated as the **"solid foundation of all virtues"** !

My feet moved in an unmistakable cha-cha and I immediately shared the mission-accomplished message to all the members of the Jury and the Award Organising Committee members. But, it was certainly not the end of a web of emotions-baked surprises for me! I was indeed destined to learn many more chapters from the 'elusive' world of high-octane humility! As the lady luck graciously smiled, I was invited to give **tour d'horizon**

to Dr Singh about the nitty-gritty of the conferment ceremony. Since other members were not in the city, I lent strength to my legs to enter the heavily-guarded premise; met his efficient and affable personal assistant who treated me well and even before the minute-hand of the clock could complete its fifth round, I was sitting next to him on a sofa in his elegantly-arranged drawing room silhouetted by his awesomely posh library. First, I got a motherly treatment from Dr Singh's wife - lots of sweets and a home-baked cake piece! I just chatted and chatted and then realised - **Voila**, I had turned into, **um**, a 'chatter box'!

His soft and pleasant voice was probably the 'chemical' which worked on my larynx - the voice box in my throat!

We touched many issues pertinent for the future of India! I then realised that his humility and rare affection had tonsured my glands of sensitivity about his frail health! And it happened after long-40 minutes! At no point I got the inkling that I should simply be explaining the flow of proceedings on the D-day and leave within five minutes so that he could rest! I profusely apologised and took to my legs but not without being patronisingly escorted out to the main entrance veranda by Mrs Singh - **piÃ"ce de rÃ©sistance** my visit to his house! Just too many chapters from the 'science' of humility!

On my return journey, I banged my cerebrum for having failed to brief Dr Singh about the acceptance of my invitation by one of his greatest admirers who was the Treasury Secretary in the US - Mr Larry Summers, the former President of Harvard University! Alphabet search engine had assisted me in obtaining his email. Not sure of the authenticity of his email, I fired my cock-ready invitation and, petrifyingly, got his terse reply from his iPhone in less than 20 minutes - **"I will join virtually"**

! What a glorious attitude of gratitude! Yet another lesson for me from the unfathomable universe of humility! My mind immediately swirled into a thinking orbit - Is humility a common trait for all such people who climb to the pinnacle of their careers in public life? Though I was not sure but one inference I made was - The huge wealth of humility of Dr Singh had clearly rubbed on all those who had the good fortune of being thrust into Dr Singh's orbit of influence!

And my 'instant theory' was soon corroborated when I sent my invitation to Mr Martin Wolf, the Chief Economics Commentator for the Finance Times, London - Yet another positive reply within two hours!

I was thrilled and my chest swelled many inches with the pride that Dr Singh is one of the rarest sons India has produced in the last 75 years and I had the fortune to interact with him for 40-long memorable minutes! The same fortune blessed me when I approached a leading personality from the Indian diaspora in the US and Mr Raja Krishnamoorthi, the Congressman, happily accepted to join us virtually but he later shared his video message as November 8 was the polling day for his constituency. Dr Montek Singh Ahluwalia was equally kind enough to send his consent on my WhatsApp but unfortunately, he could not bless us because of his unavoidable travel.

I am sure that the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India would also have blessed us but for the momentum-gathering electioneering for some of the State Assemblies. Nonetheless, another paragon of humility in the sphere of Indian politics, Mr Nitin Gadkari, whom I approached to do the honour to Dr Singh, could not say NO to me as he himself mirrors the fast-vanishing species of non-partisan traits when it comes to businesses other than politics. Since TIOL Fiscal Heritage Award is about a son or a daughter of India who has devoted his or her lifetime to ameliorate the life of millions of poor and augment the living standards of millions of middle class citizens.

Having risen from the bottom of the political ladder, Mr Gadkari is widely known for being always grounded to 'dusty' realities of India!

He was kind enough and felt honoured to do the honour to Dr Singh. And he did it, proudly and rightly acknowledged that piece of economic history of India which helped him reshape the skyline of public infrastructure in Mumbai as a Minister in the State and later the mazy configuration of road and highway infrastructure in India which all of us enjoy today. He credited Dr Singh for having put in place a never-heard economic philosophy of liberalisation which promoted PPP-led growth model. He also talked about how his present Government, led by Mr Narendra Modi, has benefited by such a market-driven economic philosophy which enabled him to raise eye-watering amount of funds for his road projects vide the bond route. He rightly admitted that piece of history for which entire India is indebted to Dr Singh who not only bailed out the country confronting chronic balance of payment crisis but also propelled it to a new path of high economic growth trajectory in the first decade of 2000s.

The miracle I had experienced, continued even on the D-day when the Fiscal Heritage Award was conferred on Dr Singh! The Chair of the session, Mr N K Singh, the Chairman of the 15th Finance Commission, could not escape the clutches of the time machine and went back to the days when Dr Singh was working with the UNDP and how Mr L K Jha, who was the then Indian Ambassador to the US, roped him in for a NAM delegation to Lima in Peru and how he then joined as economic adviser in the Ministry of Commerce and steadfastly began to break the shackles of licence-permit **raj**

! Invaded by the whirlwinds of rich nostalgia, he shared several anecdotes of Dr Singh's rocky commitment to the high offices he held. He still remembers what he was told prior to the Budget of 1991 when he had stepped into his room - **"We will change India"** ! And indeed, India has not looked back since then. He combined the two arts -

the art of impossible and the art of possible in politics, and came up with the sale of PSUs, viewed as most sinful idea those days, wrapped in the clothes called **"Unbundling of government shares"**.

The Chairman of the 15th Finance Commission also noted that at times his reticence was misconstrued but it was well thought and nothing but tactical! The Tamil Nadu Finance Minister, Mr P Thiaga Rajan, who spoke before him, admitted that meeting the former PM was a great joy and privilege of his life. He said that during his tenures, millions of poor Indians were lifted above the poverty line and his vision always benefited the nation. His sentiment was echoed by two of the party colleagues of the former PM - Dr Shashi Tharoor and Mr Manpreet Singh Badal, who unspooled several statistics to hammer the point that how the canvas of poverty shrivelled and how literacy leapfrogged with the creation of over 51000 schools during his regime. It was indeed a pulsating session for the audiences who attended with unblinking eyes and heard the former Prime Minister deliver his Award Acceptance Speech. He underscored the constructive role of media in pointing out the shortcomings in the working of the government and expressed his gratitude to the nation for bestowing great opportunity on him, an underprivileged child of partition, to serve the countrymen! He is 90 but his last wish is to see India being a torch-bearer not only for democratic values but also an economic powerhouse! Incredible example of humility and gratitude! He truly believes in - Living is in giving and giving is living!