

Why I will not make it to Parliament

By *editor*

Created 10 Jun 2012 - 00:00

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The buzz around prospective candidates for the post of the President of India has caught everyone's attention. A while ago there was a flutter over actor Rekha's brief appearance in the Rajya Sabha as a member of Parliament.

Almost everyone nominated to a post of significance is either a seasoned politician, popular sportsperson, filmstar, a corporate honcho or a prominent somebody. With many, their lineage works as a deal clincher, especially within party circles. Where then is the space for those who are drawn to politics and public service simply because they are passionate about initiating social change?

Like several other children my age, I, too, dreamt of becoming Prime Minister. At that time, politics signified heroism, grit, cars with red lights, eloquent and fiery speeches, leadership and courageous women — Indira Gandhi (in my childhood), and J. Jayalalithaa (in my youth). Life took a different course and I ended up working with some of the most marginalised people in poor rural and urban pockets — people affected by mental health issues, including the homeless. It's now been 20 years. I have seen stark poverty, gross inequality, appalling corruption, mind-numbing inertia and shocking apathy as political structures operate in a top-down fashion — a style that certainly does not befit a nation that we describe as the world's largest democracy.

Aspiration and idealism have given way to cynicism. Here are five reasons why my dream of becoming a parliamentarian will remain just that, a dream.

1. Power is for the rich, the famous and the well-networked: Politics more often than not is an incestuous world where everyone knows everyone else. Outsiders are rarely accorded a warm welcome. If you desire to fit in, you have to conform. The ability to rise above political differences and be human and civil, even friendly, and yet subscribe to different ideologies isn't the way to

stay close to the hot seat of power.

2. Only stereotypes, please: We are a society that likes its leaders — political, spiritual or social — in attires and gatherings that have popular sanction; speaking a language that places them above the rest, in a position to wield power and bestow privileges on those beneath. This creates a distance between the common man and the leader and builds a vertical hierarchy, which is typically feudal in character.

We get what we seek. We seem to be awe-struck by larger-than-life personalities. A common platform that brings together unequals is an aberration. We are enslaved by class and status.

3. Always perfect, always correct: They are confident, make the right noises and always seem to offer solutions to the most complex problems. I, on the contrary, am flawed and have in my insignificant life sometimes been confused, arrogant, misled, foolish and articulated poor logic just as I have been kind, strategic, fair and smart. While I learn from my mistakes and life in general, I will not compromise on the spontaneity of my behaviour, be guarded, and toe a boring, straight line. I should have the freedom to be me and not portray an ideal merely because it is believed that being both profound and a bumbling fool is a paradox, and thus unacceptable.

4. The root of all evil — money: In some panchayats that I work in, it is normal to spend anything from `20-70 lakh on an election. Voters expect gifts as a norm; this is now seen less as a violation of ethical code and more as an entitlement. Any aspirant, not backed by big bucks, will watch his/her dreams of a political career die a natural death.

5. The victim card: This for me is unthinkable. How can I throw my caste/gender/race as a trump card? In my case, of course, my caste wouldn't "work" for me, though my gender could serve me well. However, I don't want to exploit it, especially since I was born into a family that desired a girl child. This doesn't negate the pain of millions of others who live lives of misery and discrimination, owing to their status and gender. I do understand the politics of representation and opportunity. But does suffering, disempowerment and difference alone qualify as a ticket to leadership?

In a country like ours, a leader must show extraordinary commitment, an unparalleled sense of responsibility, integrity, compassion and an urge, ability and talent to drive change. Chasing unidimensional notions of economic progress alone will not do.

Imagine if honesty were an appreciated value; imagine if barriers weren't created every time idealism spoke or emerged; imagine if the world judged its leaders on the basis of his/her merits; imagine if fervour and passion were encouraged, recognised and cultivated. Imagine a world where you and I capture the imagination of our people and gain entry into an otherwise intimidating circle of power. It is only then that we will be free, equal and alive as a nation and do India justice. We are, after all, a nation of a billion people; it's time we found our heroes from amongst the common man.

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Columnists

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