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DOING THE RIGHT THING- THE DEFINING CHARACTERISTIC OF RATAN TATA

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“जातस्य हि ध्रुवो मृत्युर्ध्रुवं जन्म मृतस्य च।
तस्माद अपरिहार्ये ऽर्थे न त्वं शोचितुम् अर्हसि॥”
Bhagavad Gita: Chapter 2, Verse 27.

(Death is certain for one who has been born, and rebirth is inevitable for one who has died. Therefore, you should not lament over the inevitable.)

I sometimes wonder if this is what life is- a place to meet and then part with a handful of memories and a heavy heart. But the cycle of events never ends, the wheel of life marches onwards and we must constantly adapt ourselves to changing circumstances and the challenge of time with courage, strength, and fortitude.

Ratan Tata (born 28 December 1937) strode colossus-like across fields spanning the complete development spectrum from salt to software, hotels to airlines, automobiles to hospitals, etc. His towering personality, raising the bar, innovation drive, sense of compassion, smiling face, and twinkling eyes will be sorely missed worldwide.



It's still early days since the death of Ratan Tata on 9 October 2024. Hence the full impact of the loss and the vacuum in India's body politic will take some time to sink in. While tributes and eulogies are still pouring in, let me make an assessment, howsoever inadequate, of the life and times of Ratan Tata, the man and the milieu, the distinguished tradition of the house of Tatas and the dazzling individual talent of Ratan Tata, who catapulted Tatas to a higher orbit- an orbit not just of organizational excellence but also of individual brilliance, familiar with the big picture but in no way oblivious of granular ground-level details. John Donne, the English writer and Anglican cleric, who is the preeminent metaphysical poet wrote about five centuries ago

“When thou hast done, thou hast not done, For, I have more.”

He was famous incontrovertibly not only as a remarkably successful businessman but also for his generosity and kind nature. An assessment of Ratan Tata is a tall order, a foolhardy task but let me attempt to look at the legend that Ratan Tata was, to identify and isolate the salient features of the tectonic shift he brought about, to capture some dimensions of his towering personality, an *“Ajatashatru”*, if ever there was one.

Let me start with a disclaimer. I neither worked with the Tatas nor met the venerable Mr. Tata, even fleetingly. But like millions of Indian men and women across regions, levels of income and wealth, castes, creeds, communities, religious or political affiliation - what Mahatma Gandhi called the *“teeming millions”* of India, I was always struck by the persona, charm, courage, and integrity of the ‘Iron Man’ in all times-times good and bad.

It is commonplace to observe that the house of Tatas has a long and chequered history going back to 1839. Vicissitudes and travails of transition mark this almost two-century period as the steady ascendance to a megacorp and a global powerhouse. But it is not so commonly realized that while the approach and the strategy of the Group have changed in conformity with the winds of change sweeping the world, there was always an unwavering commitment to the basic values and the centrality of ethics, probity, honesty, and integrity. As President Droupadi Murmu said, *“In the sad demise of Ratan Tata, India has lost an icon who blended corporate growth with nation building, and excellence with ethics.”*

This inalienable ethos and deep root draws sustenance from the insightful observation of Jamsetji Tata, founder of the Tata Group (1839-1904) *“In a free enterprise the community is not just another stakeholder in the business, but is the very reason for its existence”*. The French writer Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr wrote *“plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose”* (1849) – the more things change, the more they stay the same. *Déjà vu!*

Eventful Career - the Ethical Industrialist (no oxymoron here)

All aspects of his extraordinary life have been extensively chronicled. Hence let me just hit the high spots. He took over Tata Sons in 1991, effectively transforming Tata into a global behemoth, over 60 global acquisitions, e.g., Tetly Tea, Jaguar Land Rover (JLR), Corus Steel, St James Court, Eight O’Clock, British Salt and NatSteel had global ramifications. The small car Nano failed because of production and marketing failures.

Some of the main strands of his thought were to provide vision, guidance, and perspective; to effectively manage the Tata brand, and to provide resources judiciously. He identified two transformative instruments *“We have two guiding arrows-one points overseas, where we want to expand markets for our existing products. The other points right here to India, where we want to explore the large mass market that is emerging –not by following but by breaking ground in product development and seeing how we can do something that hasn’t been done before”*.

He was ahead of the curve as seen in his multi-industry global leadership vision *“One hundred years from now, I expect Tata to be much bigger than it is now. More importantly, I hope the group comes to be regarded as being the best in India-best in the manner in which we operate, best in the products we deliver, and best in our value systems and ethics. Having said that, I hope that a hundred years from now, we will spread our wings far beyond India”*.

Shri Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister was *“extremely pained”* by his passing away. He said *“Ratan Tata Ji was a visionary business leader, a compassionate soul and an extraordinary human being. He provided stable leadership to one of India's oldest and most prestigious business houses. At the same time, his contribution went far beyond the boardroom. He endeared himself to several people thanks to his humility, kindness and an unwavering commitment to making our society better”*.

Noblesse Oblige*

La noblesse oblige is a French expression that means that nobility transcends entitlement, requiring people who hold such status to fulfill social responsibilities.

JRD Tata, Chairman (1938-1991) said, *“The wealth gathered by Jamsetji Tata and his sons in a half-century of industrial pioneering formed but a minute fraction of the amount by which they enriched the nation. What came from the people has gone back to the people many times over”*. Ratan Tata, who got *“enormous pleasure from seeing the uplift of an underprivileged or poor person”* was the most well-liked and visionary industrialist in India, a modern-day icon, who created meaning and value in the lives of millions of India through his deep and abiding sense of giving back to society. N. Chandrasekaran, Chairman, Tata Group called Tata

“a truly uncommon leader whose immeasurable contributions have shaped not only the Tata Group but also the very fabric of our nation”.

His pioneering work in philanthropy across regions and activities is reflected in Tata Trusts (education, healthcare, and rural development); donated \$28 million to the Tata Institute for Active Genetics and Society, University of California, San Diego; donated \$28 million for the Tata Center for Technology and Design, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay; multiple initiatives for cancer research, education, and disaster relief.

He was a visionary industrialist and a well-rounded man in the highest tradition of *“noblesse oblige”*. The claim does not rest simply on his achievements, although, judged by them, the claim could be sustained. He had a BArch Degree from Cornell University. Tata’s operations extend to over 100 countries and generated revenues of \$165 billion in FY 24, up over 41-fold from \$4 billion in 1991. This is impressive in itself but what makes it in a class of its own is that he never figured on any billionaires list because Tata Group’s distinctive structure where wealth is held by charitable trusts that reinvests the profits in philanthropic activities. This is why Gurcharan Das, former CEO of Proctor and Gamble justifiably called him *“the conscience keeper of India Inc.”*

He was influenced by the thoughts of J R D Tata; Chuck Feeney, the capitalist philanthropist; John F. Kennedy; Henry Schacht, Chairman of Cummins and Lucent Technologies; Amar Bose, MIT professor and founder of the Bose Corporation; and Jean Riboud, Chairman, Schlumberger.

In a remarkable essay entitled ‘Cricket - Jam Sahib of Nawanagar’ (published 1914), AG Gardiner perceptibly wrote *“But we do not judge a cricketer so much by the runs he gets as by the way he gets them. ‘In literature as in finance,’ says Washington Irving, ‘much paper and much poverty may exist side by side.’”* An application of this principle of the work done and the manner of doing it places him head and shoulders above other industrialists.

He was all this and more. What is greatly welcome is that multiple aspects of his multi-faceted personality, the pursuit of excellence, focus on quality, never renegeing on promises, administrative skills, concern bordering on an obsession with customer feedback, and positive attitude to life were manifested in his life’s odyssey. He epitomized all these virtues effortlessly and this versatility made him truly masterful. When William Shakespeare wrote eloquently in his monumental work *Julius Caesar*, he must have visualized someone like Ratan Tata *“His life was gentle; and the elements So mixed in him, that Nature might stand up And say to all the world, THIS WAS A MAN!”*

Narayana Murthy succinctly said, “*Ratan was a giant in Indian industry, not just for his achievements, but for his decency, humility, and patriotism*”. With his ethical capitalism, values, principles and vision, sense of humor, and wit, he was a jolly good man, wasn't he?

He was a recipient of Padma Vibhushan and Padma Bhushan. He was, however, a fit case for the award of Bharat Ratna.

Enduring Legacy - Doing the Right Thing

अमृतत्वस्य तु नाशास्ति वित्तेन ।

(Immortality cannot be achieved by wealth.)

He was polite but firm, receptive to innovative ideas but unflinching on his values, and above all, a kind and benevolent man for whom “*the meaning of true happiness*” meant buying 200 wheelchairs. His keen and astute mind, business acumen and sharp skills, characteristic humility and simplicity, passion for moral values and principles, willingness to accept his mistakes, gentlemanly manners, infectious goodness, and his “*framework of ethics, values, fairness and objectivity*” were his distinguishing attributes. He would forever be defined by “*the desire to do the right thing*”. Accordingly, he would like to be remembered as “*someone who succeeded in an environment of change, and upheld the value system and the ethical standards that our group was built on*”. Amen!

His great “*satisfaction*” in leading corporate growth with utmost aplomb and acclaim “*without crossing the line that distinguishes ethical practice from some of the things we see around us today*” provides the litmus test. I bow my head in deep and everlasting reverence to the memory of this great man- they don't make men like him anymore.

Allama Iqbal's lines are truly applicable to Ratan Tata:

“हज़ारों साल नर्गिस अपनी बे-नूरी पे रोती है
बड़ी मुश्किल से होता है चमन में दीदा-वर पैदा”

(For a thousand years the narcissus has been lamenting its blindness;
With great difficulty the one with true vision is born in the garden.)

Rest in peace, Sir!

*Incidentally, the Motto of my princely College, i.e., Colvin Taluqdars' College, Lucknow founded in 1889 is Noblesse Oblige.

Note: This is an expanded version of the Op-ed first published in *Financial Express* on October 22, 2024.