

EDIT

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Threshold of Greatness

Our technologist president A P J Abdul Kalam and economist prime minister Manmohan Singh deserve fulsome praise for their superb gesture to recognize the contributions of the leaders of the life sciences and biotech industry. As the saying goes, when it rains, it pours. The Republic Day honors to bestow the Padma Awards, the nation's highest civilian honors on five life science industry captains and two other leading lights of the sector in one swoop has been an unprecedented gesture of recognition of the fledgling industrial sector.

Never in recent times have seven industry leaders been chosen for the nation's acclaim in a single year. And it so happens that five of the seven leaders are from the life sciences sector: Bhai Mohan Singh of Ranbaxy, Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw of Biocon, Varaprasad Reddy of Shantha Biotechnics, Yusuf Khwaja Hamied of Cipla and Cyrus Soli Poonawalla of Serum Institute. It may be a sheer coincidence that two of these awardees were recognized with the BioSpectrum Person of The Year Award – Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw (2003) and Cyrus S Poonawalla (2004). The other two industrialists to be honored this time are: Azim Premji of Wipro and Brijmohan Lall of Hero Motors.

Dr Martanda Varma Sankaran Valiathan, the veteran cardiologist who has been in the forefront of promoting biotech in recent years and Prof V S Ramamurthy, secretary, DST, a strong supporter of the biotech industry, too have been honored with Padma Vibhushan and Padma Bhushan respectively this year.

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The Padma awards have been usually reserved mainly for writers and artists, social workers, doctors, scientists, journalists and bureaucrats. Occasionally a few industry leaders were considered for the awards. So it is a double bonanza this time. Industry leaders got some attention and majority of them are from the life sciences sector.

Every one of them richly deserve the nation's highest civilian honors. Bhai Mohan Singh has been instrumental in launching one of India's widely admired pharmaceutical company, Ranbaxy, which is watched globally for its capabilities. Hamied and Cipla have been in the forefront of rewriting some of the rules of the global pharma marketplace. Cipla's unique AIDS vaccine cocktail has been saving the lives of thousands of poor patients in Africa.

Biocon and Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw's amazing success story continues to be chronicled widely in the mass media and business press. Varaprasad Reddy's triumphs against heavy odds to build Shantha Bitoechnics with the hepatitis B vaccine and take on global pharma giants is already part of the modern folklore in technology business sectors. And Cyrus Poonawalla's unsung efforts to build Serum Institute and India as the world's vaccine maker has finally caught the national attention. Every second child born in the world today gets a vaccine shot from Serum's products.

Above all, Prof Ramamurthy's contribution to the growth of the biotech sector was unheralded so far. It was the Technology Development Board (TDB) chaired by him that spotted the potential in Shantha Bitoechnics and gave the seed money to keep it going in the mid-1990s. TDB has been playing the role of venture capitalists to this sector which the professional VCs have so far been very reluctant to support.

The highest levels of the government have recognized the potential of the biotech sector. Now if the sector can get a little help from Finance Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram (we have a Biotech agenda for him in the magazine), the industry will more than live up to the nation's trust in it.

