

Kaun banega Rashtrapati...

POLITICALLY INCORRECT

SHOBHAA DE



Welcome to the latest reality show in India. The race is on for the top job and there are any number of contestants fighting tooth and nail to win the jackpot. And what a jackpot it is! No exaggeration, but becoming the President of India may well be the most-coveted position in the world. What perks! What a residence! And zero responsibility. No wonder so many hopefuls are frantically scrambling for the honour.

Clearly, they are greatly inspired by Pratibha Patil's tenure. And longing to step into her chapals. Here is a lady who was propelled into Rashtrapati Bhavan as our 12th President, almost by default. Startled but entirely delighted when her name was thrown into the ring less than 12 hours before the announcement, Pratibha swiftly grew into the ceremonial role and didn't look back even once, except to check if her entire family was right there behind her as she merrily traipsed the globe. It's silly to ask what exactly she did during her tenure. She wasn't expected to do anything, for God's sake! And she was good enough to oblige. Which is pretty much why she'd been hand-picked for the job. These are delicate decisions that require forward thinking.

Those who orchestrate such mighty matters are good with math. It's all about getting the numbers right. Who knows what may happen during a national emergency? Which person could pull the rug from under the feet of which party? What then? Aha — that's when a compliant President comes into the picture. It helps to have someone cooperative sitting pretty as the head of state and the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. All it needs is some nifty juggling — addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. Basic stuff. An accommodating President doesn't get into details. It's left to experts. A number here, a number there — big deal. Everything can be managed. Even in a democracy!

The current presidential race is slightly different. There is open lobbying for the job. Nobody is shocked. We live in different times, and soliciting is no longer considered bad form. It's fine to go out there and hustle to become President. Nobody goes 'tch tch'. That's how it's done *aaj kal*. Look at the blatant way in which our top stars aggressively pitch for plum roles in Bollywood blockbusters. There's no shame attached. Same thing here. The presidential race has also been reduced to the bargaining power of candidates. And what's the use in saying stuff like, "Would Dev Anand or Yusuf Saab have gone around with a begging bowl asking to be cast in a coveted



HANDING OVER? Union finance minister Pranab Mukherjee is expected to be the Congress party candidate for the President's post

role?" We know the answer. Was there less competition back then? Not really. But the heroes had their pride and self-respect to consider. A few hints here and there may have been dropped. But there it stayed. Ditto for our former presidents (well, not all, but most of them). Going by the fierce horse-trading taking place on the national stage, we have diminished the nomination process to haggling in a noisy mandi. A tacky affair between interested parties and their sponsors.

But, unlike other reality shows on television, this one doesn't need a star anchor or a panel of celebrity judges. Some canny producer should instantly cash in by jumping on the presidential bandwagon and announcing a show of shows — the first of a kind, in which the *aam aadmi* can participate. Why not? It would be a win-win situation for all. And the gullible of the land would actually believe their votes have made the difference! The show could be cleverly formatted adopting various platforms. 'SMS your choice to' kind of stuff. Twitter, Facebook... the possibilities are limitless and highly lucrative, too. Since the people would be directly involved in such an enterprise, it would have to be converted into a talent-based show. I am sure P A Sangma can sing, dance, play the guitar, pull strings and so on. Pranab would need some coaching in this area, but he has other skills which could be tapped into — miming? Someone else could blow his trumpet or undertake playback singing (strictly Rabindra Sangeet, of course). If we get this right, we would have our Indian Idol in Rashtrapati Bhavan... without involving Asha Bhosle. And then Rashtrapati Bhavan could host the biggest rock show in India — what a gig that would be! All Bharatwasis, warmly invited.

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