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DEMOCRACY AND DETERIORATION OF PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM IN INDIA

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Abstract:

Ours is the largest democracy in the world having witnessed ten general elections since independence. Parliamentary democracy in India seems to be at cross-roads. Ours is an age of confrontation—between peoples and between individuals. At the national level all properties have been lost and if we see the proceedings of the Parliament we hear charges and counter charges, raucous shouting. Today, there has been a qualitative erosion of the Parliamentary system and its functioning.

KEY WORDS:

Democracy and Deterioration , Parliamentary System ,.

INTRODUCTION

There were good parliamentarians at the time of the freedom struggle and the standard has touched the lowest point at present. On a review of the pre-budget and post-budget sessions of Parliament, one has to admit that the standard has gone down and much of the time is wasted on useless and unprofitable debates. In the period after independence, Parliament happened to be the highest law making and deciding body and it was the pivot round which all current events revolved. People had great respect for Parliament and such law making bodies.

During the days of Jawaharlal Nehru, democracy flourished in India while other countries became victims of despots and totalitarian governments were established. In India, the parliamentary system of government was run in the most ideal way although there were noisy scenes in Parliament when some of the stalwarts insisted on their contentions and wanted the government to yield to their demands. Likewise, Zero Hour came into existence and Parliament used to observe conventions and the earlier procedures. There would be a heated debate among the stalwarts in the field but it would be an interesting verbal duel.

Those were the days when great men such as Acharya Kripalani who was upright and outspoken, socialist stalwarts such as Nathpai, orators such as Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee, conversationalists such as Mr. S.K. Paul, a person well-versed in the rules and conduct of the House, Dr. Ram Subhag Singh, veterans such as Mr. Bhupesh Gupta, Prof. Hiran Mukherji and Mr. G.B. Pant, and experts on defence matters such as Mr. V.K. Krishna Menon were the key figures. This period can be referred to as the 'Golden Age of Parliament'.

NEHRU'S WAY

Jawaharlal Nehru studied the problems in depth. Once, while answering a question about the size of the delegation he took to foreign countries, he cited the example of President Sukarno, who used to take a number of people in the special plane. This was Nehru's way of doing things. He used to make a note of every minute detail and information to counter the Opposition. His tactics were persuasive and the leaders of the other parties revered him.

Animosity or enmity among parties were unheard of. Their outlooks were different and so were

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their manifestoes, but there was amity. None violated the rules and procedures of parliamentary traditions. But what is happening today? All the conventions and customs and procedures are being vitiated and violated.

Once the Speaker announces that Question Hour is over, noisy scenes arise resulting in pandemonium. The Opposition stalls government business and wants to make headlines the next day. The Speaker adjourns the House till lunch break.

When the House convenes again, only a few are present resulting in lack of quorum and the bell has to be rung several times. Who will stem the rot and save democracy in India?

On March 16, 1989, Mr. B. Panigrahi was the only M.P. present in the 545-member House with just three ministers.

There is something wrong with the system. Parliament is supposed to scrutinise the demands for grants from every single ministry before passing them.

But not a year passes without the Speaker applying the guillotine on the debate because of lack of time. Thus, more than half of the total volume of grants was cleared by the House of the People without scrutiny. The sum involved well over Rs. 10,000 crore sanctioned without scrutiny.

Nobody knows the origin of Zero Hour, a term not found in any of the rules and procedure books for conducting sessions. In the ninth Lok Sabha proceedings, the significance of Zero Hour was felt as Mr. Rabi Ray, Speaker, asked for a list of names to be submitted so that he could give them a chance to speak on the subject. In due course, some 60 or 70 people began giving notice of 'Urgent Matters' to be discussed on the floor of the House, and the Speaker found it difficult to regulate business.

Question Hour is the important period when parliamentary business is conducted. The Ministers come prepared to answer the questions put forth by the Opposition party members. One is reminded of Nehru who used to intervene now and then since he wanted to satisfy all the sections. Even the ministerial circles would take the trouble of answering supplementaries put forth by the Opposition.

Today things are different. The members have secretarial assistance and others ask questions on their behalf. And these members are not present to press their questions when the House meets.

Article 371 is being used in the Lok Sabha for special purposes, but nowadays members use this provision for sundries too. Parliament was constituted to make laws and to implement them, but much of the time is wasted on needless debates.

Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherji, who was the lone member elected from West Bengal on the Jan Sangh ticket, was the only person who could match Nehru. He was one of the best for four decades, until he died in 1953. He waged a war against the preventive detention Bill.

In both the Houses, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee and Mr. Prakash Veer Shastri were spoke in chaste Hindi and had the audience 'spell-bound.' Mr. Feroze Gandhi was another stalwart who brought to light several scandals of the ruling party. One of them was the 'Mundhra deal' which resulted in the resignation of the Finance Minister, Mr. T.T. Krishnamachari. Verbal duel was a regular feature between Acharya Kripalani, Mr. V.K. Krishna Menon and Mr. Purushottam Das Tandon. Mr. Moulana Abul Kalam Azad and Mr. Seth Govind Das too were astute parliamentarians.

People who sacrificed a great deal and went to jail were chosen to contest the Rajya Sabha polls. Jawaharlar Nehru used to select experts in the fields of education and art and culture for the Rajya Sabha nominations. But these days people who can finance their elections, the rich, are being chosen for Parliament.

There is a decline in 'professional' involvement although there has been an increase in the number of teachers and educationists. The number of women in the Lok Sabha is increasing from one general election to another. Many of those chosen for the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha have never represented the people in the State Assemblies.

The central hall of Parliament is ideally located between the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha. Members of both the Houses sit together and discuss what is going on in the respective Houses. Even Mrs. Indira Gandhi, when she was out of power, used to share jokes with Mr. Pilloo Mody. Mr. Morarji Desai and Mr. V.P. Singh used to spend some time in the lobbies of the central hall. Mr. Rajiv Gandhi used to enjoy his coffee with other friends in the central hall of Parliament. Mr. Chandra Sekhar used to have his 'Tress Meet' in the central hall. Only the BJP MPs never met there for they wanted their discussions to be private.

RIGHTS AND DUTIES OF MPS AND MLAS

The role and responsibilities of a Member of Parliament and a Member of the State Legislature have undergone phenomenal changes with the passage of time. The success of democracy greatly depends on the manner in which the members discharge their duties in their respective constituencies. Ours is the largest Parliamentary democracy in the world and we have witnessed ten general elections. If we still break

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our heads instead of counting them, we are not fit for democracy. Our Members of Parliament in New Delhi have not set examples for legislators in the states to follow.

Democracy flourishes in a climate of tolerance. For this, we need to be civilised and, at any rate, we need to have a certain political culture. "Are we fit for democracy?" is a question asked not only by academics but by common people who are disgusted by the ways of their elected representatives. It is said that granting universal adult franchise was a mistake. That we are not ready for democracy. Is it the fault of the man who votes or is it the fault of the man who gets the vote?

DETERIORATION

It cannot be disputed that there is a definite deterioration in the quality of our elected representatives. Should the candidates who contest an election not be academically qualified? Should they not be men and women with a record of service to the people? At present, however, the candidates are not chosen according to merit but according to other considerations. They are more often than not individuals who represent the 'spoils' system. Nowadays, the ogre of criminalisation is slowly creeping into politics and criminal interests have been sanctified as deserving of representation. So long as political activity is interwoven with crime, money, muscle power and other vices, there will be no true democracy. Since independence, we have not done anything to nurture democratic traditions in our country. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was a democrat and a great parliamentarian, but he failed to promote internal democracy in the Congress party. He never used to leave the headquarters when Parliament was in session.

THE DUTIES

The duties of the Parliamentarian and the Member of Legislative Assembly are alike. They should represent their constituencies and serve it to the best of their abilities. They should keep constant touch with the electorate and keep watch on the problems of the area. The MP and the MLA should take part in the developmental activities in their constituencies. Invariably, those members who do their duties to their constituencies sincerely have little time left for anything else.

In the House, the member should prepare his speech and take part in the debates, draft questions, interpretations, amendments, motions, etc. A member can, and should, participate in legislative, financial and other business of the House.

However, there is large scale deterioration in the standards of legislative debates. We witness noisy scenes both in Parliament as well as in legislative assemblies.

The arena meant for a battle of wits, sometimes descends into a battle of fists. Members bear the responsibility for the upkeep of the dignity, decorum and decency in the House. In this context the great traditions of the House of Commons of Great Britain-which has been called the Mother of Parliaments-is worth emulating. Some of the highlights of the British tradition are the way in which the members put across the party view in Parliament and the complete absence of floor crossing in Great Britain.

ACCOUNTABILITY

A system should be evolved to make members of Parliament and legislative assemblies accountable to the people. If their performance were poor, the voters should have a method to recall them.

To ensure regular attendance of members in the House, a system of marking allowance should be followed. In every legislative assembly, each member should sign in the register of attendance to get his daily allowance, travelling and dearness allowances. In Parliament, the member should sign the register once in 15 days to be eligible for dearness allowance. Perhaps, as a political scientist suggested, it is better to pay members of Parliament Rs. 10,000 a month instead of breaking it all up into allowance.

ROLE OF MEMBERS

Another issue that needs to be sorted out is the confusion in the minds of the public over the role of a member of the House.

Should he be the man to approach for our street lights and water supply, for our gas connections and railway tickets? Or, should he be the one who grasps the intricacies of our Constitution? To some people, a Member of Parliament or Legislative Assembly is nothing more than a drain inspector who ought to be around in his constituency, sign certificates and grace social functions.

In the final analysis, our representatives are the final arbiters on all issues whether it is the Punjab issue, the Kashmir crisis or our nuclear policy-they are the lawmakers. They are also vested with the

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inherent power to alter and bring about amendments to our sacred document—the Indian Constitution.

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