

The Deteriorating Role of Parliament in Indian Society

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Creation of Indian Parliament

As civilization progressed, new cultures developed and new institutions came to life. With democracy, various institutions and organizations came into existence. As time passed, the world population grew up and a new way to represent ourselves came; here lies the transition from representative democracy to parliamentary democracy. Executive and judiciary branches with independent roles also became a reality.

India's parliamentary democracy working over these years since our constitution came into being on 26.01.1950, has stood the test of time and has come to stay as a functioning democracy. Indian Parliament is a creation of the constitution with some influence from Western democracies, including that of Britain. A number of changes in the overall performance of parliament can be perceived that reflect changes in the political climate in the country. Parliament is the reflection of society and a replica of the political culture prevailing in the nation.

Right to Vote

India, a nation in making, evolved its own system in several ways under British rule. Voting rights were extended to adult population without any restriction in several stages. Features such as possession of land and education, etc., were once required to become eligible to vote in the elections. But with independence and with the adoption of a new

democratic constitution, everyone not mentally deranged became eligible to participate in elections and vote.

The Institution of Opposition

Early Indian parliamentarians adhered to the principles parliamentary democracy, with adequate opportunity extended to create the institution of opposition. They provided a check and balance to obstruct the monarchial aspirations of ruling party governments and to ensure that no dictatorship will ever be established.

The basic concept of 'constructive opposition' was the base on which the entire parliament worked. Unity even in the midst of different views and consensus in solving problems were accepted as the ideal. Having a broader outlook above parochial ties, caste, religion, race, color and community became an ideal that all shared.

Parliament as a Talk Show

Granville Austin, a self-regulating historian and chief authority on the Indian Constitution,¹ defines parliament as a talk show where different opinions come forward and a constructive solution emerges through proper debates and many challenges. Different options provided in our constitution were used very effectively so that a unified whole could emerge, using devices such as adjournment motion, prorogue, etc.

Importance of Political Maturity

With political maturity there is growth in consensus to form coalition where no party obtains complete majority. The goal is to form a true representative democracy where there is trust and confidence. However, there is also strong negative approach to issues debated.

¹ "Working a Democratic Constitution: The Indian Experience" Vedam Books. Retrieved January 27, 2009.

Sometimes it looks like that some parliamentarians forget about the nation. Their personal agenda may override the national interests. Identity crisis has emerged where both the ruling government and opposition, instead of reaching a consensus, are busy painting their own pictures of fantasies.

Disruption of Parliamentary Sessions

In this era, disruption of parliamentary meetings, asking for resignation of the Prime Minister or to dissolve the government in power, and wasting time on unnecessary issues and resorting to violent and behavior have become quite common. Due to their erroneous behavior, complete sessions of parliament could be wasted. This leads to the situation where important bills could not be passed with discussion as expeditiously as possible. Major issues such as sexual violence against women, issues related to space science and technology and many other things which call for immediate attention could not be dealt with immediately.

Governance through Committees

Our leaders provided us with constitutional committees such as JPC (Joint Parliamentary Committee), PAC (Public Accounts Committee), CAG (Comptroller and Auditor general), CPU (Committee on public undertakings) and Estimate committees and laid down specific procedures for their working. But by not discussing their reports in sessions, the parliament members could betray the masses that elected them and de-motivate the committee members.

Role of Parliamentary Language

The vocabulary of debate and the emotions used there clearly talk about the background which the parliamentarians carry with them and their aspiration to gain power. Caste based politics, criminalization of politics and special lure to vote bank politics could

make the parliamentarians devoid of the spirit which the Constituent Assembly carried with them while discharging their duties towards nation.

Parliament Members as Source of Power

This situation has also public support in the fact that for most people, MPs and MLAs are not law-makers and public servants with incredible social responsibility, but are possible sources of power and patronage to be cultivated in their own interest. They approach them for getting extra-legal influence or help. Public relations in political dictionary have, in fact, come to signify allocation of favors and these do not come free. Thus, people play a substantial role in encouraging political corruption.

Possibility of Clashes between the Prime Minister and the President

The ego clashes have occurred many times between the Prime Minister and the President where the status of President is seen only as a nominal head. The presiding officers of both houses should be listened to. Special provisions of asking starred and unstarred questions have not been used in proper sense.

Lack of Attention to Issues in Debate Sessions

Moreover, the discipline and ethos which some parliamentarians show by viewing pornography or dosing off when special issues concerning the defense of the nation like NCTC bill is getting framed shows the lack of devotion of some of the representatives to serve their nation. Moreover, fractured mandate of voters also leads to deterioration of parliament and finally 'policy paralyses' emerge where deadlock sums an end in itself.

Problems Faced by Parliamentary Democracy

The problems our parliamentary democracy is facing today (such as the instability syndrome, criminalization of politics or even Parliament being forcibly made dysfunctional

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through disruption, confrontation or forced adjournments) could be improved. For this, two things are needed (a) necessary reforms to be undertaken within the existing Parliamentary system (b) improvement of the character and integrity in the political system.

It has been rightly said that if the people who are elected are capable men and women of character and integrity, they would be able to make the best even of a defective constitution. If they are lacking in these, the constitution cannot help the country. After all a constitution like a machine, is a lifeless thing. It acquires life because of men and women who control it and operate it. India needs to-day nothing more than a set of honest men and women who will have the interest of the country before themselves

Positive Role of Constructive Criticism

The positive role of ‘constructive criticism’ should be recognized. In addition, judiciary as an instrument should be used to discharge its functions without excessively encroaching upon the powers of legislature and executives, thereby strengthening the basic structure of the constitution which provides for the separation of powers. That is, judicial activism should not become judicial overreach. Last but not the least, the moral responsibility of citizens to vote should be emphasized.

Human and Material Sources

Thus the effectiveness of a parliament depends upon the availability of human and material resources, including information. These are often lacking in the emerging democracies and the deficit has to be filled through international cooperation at both the multilateral and bilateral levels. It is clear that the Parliaments should take seriously the challenges to engage in an ongoing process of reform, making their own practices more open, accountable and responsive. Indeed, Parliamentarians should take the initiative to influence

the future of their country; they should have the confidence to exercise the powers they already possess.

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