

THE UNMAKING OF PARLIAMENT

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The 19th day of June 2013 was a silent witness to the historic gathering of an august assembly, comprising of eminent thinkers, leaders, activists and parliamentarians from diverse communities and walks of life, at India International Centre, New Delhi, for discussing a highly relevant concern of our country, namely 'Enhancing the Relevance and Effectiveness of the Parliament and the Parliamentarians'. Being present on the occasion then, I could feel the pulse of the citizens of the entire country who are most vitally concerned about the sad predicament the Indian Parliament is in today. Mr O.P. Shah, a distinguished leader, who is socially tuned and nationally committed, deserves to be complimented for his attempt at collecting the intelligentsia of Delhi for such an introspective exercise.

My memory goes back to the last decade, which has a record of two unforgettable occasions when the parliamentarians of all the political parties were unanimous and thus made history. The first instance was when the 'proposals for reforming the electoral processes' were discussed. Without doubt, all the parties were in the same boat for the out-and-out denounce of the proposals. The second occasion was the 'proposal for increasing the salary of the parliamentarians'. Obviously, there was a momentous enthusiasm and agreement on the proposal, which was instantly passed. These two occasions stand out as undeniable proofs of the fact that Indian parliamentarians are capable of clarity of purpose, thoroughgoing solidarity and concerted action! But, the irony of the fact is that such consolidated position and action seem to occur only when they are faced by a common enemy or when it is a question of articulate benefit to them, that too, in an equal measure.

Now the question that disturbs me as well as the responsible citizens of all communities of the country is 'what is the notion of the parliament the parliamentarians entertain' and 'what the parliamentarians understand about themselves'? It appears that a high percentage of MPs and MLAs are in the parliament for a dignified time pass or for making a certain type of business, if you allow me to say so. At least one third of them are notorious for the criminal record they have, verified or unverified. A good number of them are too old or too sick for the great responsibility they shoulder. A considerable portion of them are under-qualified, if not illiterate, for their designated job or, in other words, they simply do not have the aptitude for the job in hand. A large number of ministers, MPs and MLAs are suffering from an enlarged ego, which, I don't think, is easy to be satiated to its fill, even after a series of births on earth.

Besides, most of the members of the ruling party or parties consider the opposition party or parties as enemies and are not inclined to give any credit to the opinions and suggestions they propose. The opposition party or parties very much seem to understand their duty, both inside and outside the parliament, merely to find fault with and oppose even the best of the measure proposed by the ruling party. It is as if 'causing nuisance to the other, not allowing the other to function, demoralizing and defeating the other and tapping a political mileage for oneself' situate the *raison d'être* of being in the parliament. Worst of all, the hostility between parliamentarians of different parties and the petty personal comments they pass about one another, along with the low language they use, portrait such an image of parliamentarians, as if they are members of a certain 'national club of jokers'! One would wonder, is the job of the parliamentarian is one that requires no qualification and etiquette at all? Although a substantial majority of the parliamentarians mean business and are fairly well-behaving, the over-all show is so poor that straightforward citizens would feel ashamed of being part of this country or get scandalized by them or lose all hope in the so called custodians of the country. In the midst of such disparaging state of affairs, what is the relevance of the parliament and how could the parliamentarians be effective at all?

I think, we need to forthrightly admit that something is fundamentally wrong with the phenomenon of democracy understood and practiced in our country, especially by the parliamentarians. Does democracy mean a public sanction to highhandedness for securing high political ranks and for doing whatever one wishes after that? I am sure, enlightened and responsible citizens, including a huge number of parliamentarians, will affirm that the parliamentarians have the sacred duty to perform a great mission to the country. But, given the anomalous dilemma mentioned above, how is it possible to translate this realization into a day-to-day reality? Most of the fairly well-meaning parliamentarians apologetically state that they too are the products of the country. When the morale of the country is so low, how could one expect a higher ethical fibre from the MPs and MLAs? This is indeed a valid point. The logic definitely makes sense. Therefore, it follows that until the country improves its own ethical quality, there is no point in discussing the distasteful situation in the parliament. Nevertheless, having said that, let me ask, have we proposed something to hope for tomorrow, even if we have not solved the problem for the present? I do not think so. The argument sounds only a simplistic and escapist strategy to shield one's failure, which is certainly too naïve.

I would join those who ask questions squarely, why should such 'weaklings' go to public life at all, that too, to the apex body of national governance? How could the parliament be the right place for half-baked guys? Could persons of average and below average calibre, who earn a glamorous livelihood and enjoy high profile privileges, be justified at any rate? Is the parliament a market place for doing business, by throwing money in elections and minting money afterwards? Is it a shelter for under-accomplished people, who feel swollen up as VIPs with hardly any commitment to the country? And, the worst of all, is not the undisciplined and shameful behaviour of many of the parliamentarians, which reminds one of street-level logic, a deplorable insult to the sacredness and dignity of the parliament?

In fact, to my honest opinion, public life is to be attempted only by people who have an 'extra sense of duty' to the public, along with a capacity for high volt leadership, who are capable of placing the wellbeing of the nation and of the citizens at first place. Only when one is sure that he or she has a great task to be carried out for the nation and the society, one has to step into the sacred space of governance. The helm of affairs of the country is only for those who are sure of their civil ways of speech and behaviour as well as are strong in their clean record, outstanding calibre and strong character. Only such people can stand with dignity, vision and commitment the test of the challenges of the times and lead the nation to greater altitudes.

Besides, India is renowned as a religious country. But one would wonder where all the 'religiousness' of the country is hiding. Is all the 'sense of sacred' monopolized by the temples, musjids, gurudwaras, churches and other places of worship of religions? The best part of the Constitution of India is the 'secular spirit', which means a decentralized understanding of the sacred. The sacred is not only present in all religious traditions and non-religious ideologies, but also everywhere. The sacred is present in the homes of the people, in the offices and working places, in the educational centres, in the market and wherever the humans gather and have their being, perhaps more so, where the sacred is the least expected. The 'parliament is the national temple of the country'. If the parliamentarians of this religious country get awakened to this reality and honour at least the most minimum of their sense of sacred in the parliament, I would frankly think, much of the problem could be solved automatically.

But, to tell the truth, the way our venerated parliamentarians behave in the parliament, unfortunately though, defeats all sense of sacred and religiousness of the country, which the country boasts of in an 'incredible' manner. The way they stage a 'walk out' like rebellious children, the way they are taken to violent behaviour and degrade themselves for trivial issues, the discourteous and aggressive language they use, the way they react, shout and make noise, the way they crowd up at the well of the house, the way they defeat debate and discussion by interrupting the proceedings, the way they waste the precious time of the people, the way they plunder the best of the resources and provisions of the country, and the like, amount to be the biggest 'national shame', leave aside the ill reputation their behaviour brings

to themselves. I do not think I have any more imagination left in me as regards the vague sentiments of the children and relatives of the respective parliamentarians as they watch the performance of their own 'family hero' in the parliament. Does the esteemed national body of the parliament inspire or impart any good lesson to the younger generation of our country, who are getting ready to guide the destiny of the nation tomorrow? What impression does the world gather from the parliament of our country, which frantically cherishes the dreams of being 'saare jahaan se achha', the 'super power', the 'vishwaguru', and the like?

I do think, it is high time our honourable parliamentarians imbibed the core 'religiousness' of the country and respect the 'sense of sacred' in the parliament. If they do not find the sacred in places of worship and in the so called god-men, I have no complaint. But, I would affirm that they have no escape from being overwhelmed by the sense of sacred in the parliament and, I am sure, that would make a world of difference for them. They need to visualize the presence of an 'unseen listener' to all they speak and an 'unseen viewer' of all that they do over there. The parliamentarians require basing themselves on certain basic values of life, in favour of doing better justice to those who elected them to be there in particular and of being more accountable to the citizens of the country in general. The dignity of the parliamentarians and the significance of the parliament have to be lifted up from the present chaotic and pathetic condition. Only then, the great temple of the parliament will reflect the glorious cultural and spiritual heritage of our country and the parliamentarians will win the admiration of the people of the country and the world at large.

Without a doubt, the parliamentarians of the largest democracy of the world require being introspected, scanned and screened, in view of assessing their worth. Let me pen here a few probable measures that strike my mind right now. It would be better if those scam-afflicted, scandalous and ill-performing Ministers, MPs and MLAs have the good sense to withdraw back home on their own. Those who are fairly good in their sense of integrity, transparency and accountability have to be trained for more qualitative output in their respective areas of operation. Those who play gimmicks to remain in the ground by hook or crook have to be guided by heads of the respective parties to find their way to the right place. The citizens have to be given the power to call back those MPs and MLAs who have not delivered anything worthwhile in line with the promises they have made and thus defeated the expectations of the people.

Moreover, those with negative records have to be once and for all investigated and followed up with fast track verdict and appropriate action. Unnecessary high profile privileges and VVIP-VIP provisions have to be abolished, in favour of the spirit of 'nishkaam karm', which is the spirit of the 'raaj-dharm' of the country. The parliamentarians need to be facilitated to keep in regular touch with the social processes of the common man at the grassroots, so that they remain democratic in their basic tuning and quality. 'A sense of sacred, a sense of dignity, a sense of responsibility, a sense of accountability as well as a spirit of collaboration and team work' are the noble values our parliamentarians need to be endowed with. To enhance the relevance of the parliament and the effectiveness of the parliamentarians a radical transformation in their mindset is called for. This, I honestly think, is the biggest challenge India, the emerging democratic power of the world, is facing, in the 21st century of ours. Our capacity for crisis-transformation will decide the brightness of our future!

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