Comatose Parliament

Indian Parliament Lacks the Basics for Democracy

The Indian Parliament has been adjourned sine die despite the fact that 100 Bills are pending. On the face of it, this appears to be a perversion of democracy. It may be quite the opposite though, because it may be better for a bad ruler to remain in coma.

Daron Acemoglu of MIT and James A. Robinson of Harvard University argue that the objective of parliamentary democracy is to prevent social unrest. The ruling elite provides a safety valve for the people to articulate their disenchantment through their elected representatives. Parliament is the forum to voice their grievances with the hope that there will be some redressal. During the 19th century, most Western societies had extended their voting rights. This led to 'unprecedented' redistributive programmes.

Our Constitution stipulates that the fundamental duty of the State is to secure the welfare of its citizens. The government appears to be treading a different path, however. The policy is to run the economy in favour of large corporate houses and multinational companies. This is all too evident in the 2G Spectrum and Coalgate scandals. Such welfare measures as the Right to Education and Right to Food have been designed to fulfil this primary objective by setting up a pro-poor facade. There is considerable unhappiness over this development model. And parliamentary proceedings are only a reflection of the underlying unhappiness and disenchantment. The people are implicitly saying that they do not need more of this model; the status quo is better. A government in coma is better than a working government.

Adam Meirowitz of Princeton University says that effective functioning of Parliament requires that both sides share a common vision. Two partners in a business can fruitfully discuss whether to open two big showrooms or four small showrooms if they share a common vision of expansion of their business. It is difficult for them to reach an understanding if one wants to bleed the business for personal gain and the other wants to use it to support his political ambitions.

There is an absence of such a common vision between the government and the Opposition today. The government wants to develop the country by giving a free run to big corporate houses and multinational companies. The Opposition does not accept this policy, though it does not have a vision of its own. The conflict, therefore, is between pro-rich policies or against them. Meaningful discussion cannot take place in such a situation.

Meirowitz further explains that the two sides are "more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to cooperate for their common good" if they have "externally motivated incentives". That is, if the real objective of legislators is personal gain, then both sides are unlikely to cooperate with each other. One group will always oppose the other.

In the same vein, Professor Dheeraj Sharma of the Indian Institute of Management has stated that "partial democracy enables small societal groups to make bigger demands on the state for particularistic gains that are detrimental to overall growth and prosperity." One can imagine an army of workers picking up dry leaves and cleaning the roads in central Delhi while the apology for a footpath in the slums remains unrepaired for years. The politicians of both the ruling party and the Opposition have taken over the resources of the country to the detriment of the common good. But neither side can state this openly. No wonder a very superficial debate takes place in Parliament, often a raucous interaction that can be as superficial as oil on water. Both sides have unstated objectives that are entirely different from what they say. As a result, no meaningful debate can take place in Parliament.

James Fishkin of Stanford University has shown that voting patterns change if voters are provided more information and if they hold a discussion among themselves before voting. This is the model of the Gram Sabha-people get together, discuss and vote. On the other hand, the election process is 'blind' in the sense that each voter comes with his own set of information and there is no discussion. The parliamentary system lies somewhere in the middle. There is nominal discussion before voting in the House. Serious and informed discourse, as in the Constituent Assembly, rarely takes place today.

The government appears to have a fixed mindset and the only option the Opposition has is either to accept or reject it. In the net, the members of Parliament are almost invariably unable to reach a decision. For example, one partner may suggest that they open two showrooms to streamline the management, while the other may suggest that four showrooms will improve the image of the organisation. Further discussions might prompt