

A DEMOCRATIC REQUIREMENT

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Parliament - structure, functioning, conduct of business, powers & privileges and issues arising out of these

Today the parliamentary Opposition in India is not merely fragmented but also in disarray. There seems to be hardly any Opposition party with a vision or strategy for its institutional working or for the Opposition as a whole. Such a state of affairs is probably worse than the defeat most of the Opposition parties have suffered in the elections to the 17th Lok Sabha. Given this impasse, some of them may seek an alternative in strengthening their State-level bases either to ward off poaching by the ruling dispensation or to work to better their prospects in the elections in the offing. There would also be much showcasing of Opposition unity particularly during a Lok Sabha session. While such exercises could be defended as modes of survival in hard times, or even as inevitable tactics, should the Opposition limit itself merely to them? Should not the Opposition reinvent a distinct and broader role for itself? Is the despondency the parliamentary Opposition is caught in conducive to the pivotal role it is called upon to play in a post-colonial democracy such as India?

At the time of India's first elections, there was little doubt regarding the potential ruling party of the country. The matter of concern, however, was the state of the parliamentary Opposition. There was little doubt in anyone's mind, unlike probably today, that without a viable and effective Opposition, parliamentary democracy would largely be a sham. Without it there would not be an effective oversight on representative concerns, in eliciting responsiveness from wielders of power and enforcing accountability. While there could be other organs of the state for specific purposes, it was the parliamentary Opposition, it was believed, that held the popular trust to its safe-keeping. In other words, India's claim to be a working democracy rested not in posting an electoral majority, but in engendering a parliamentary Opposition that would be the conscience of the nation.

Qualifying for Leader of the Opposition

Jawaharlal Nehru was acutely conscious of the absence of an effective Opposition in the House, and once wrote provocatively, under the pseudonym Chanakya, saying, "a little twist and Jawaharlal might turn into a dictator sweeping aside the paraphernalia of a slow-moving democracy". He repeatedly cajoled Jayaprakash Narayan, who had opted for public service outside the electoral arena, to enter Parliament and lead the Opposition. It is a different matter, though, that when such an Opposition came to crystallise, it was not much to his liking! This Opposition was made of disgruntled leaders moving out of the ruling party and the existing parliamentary Opposition largely made of socialists and communists. The Bharatiya Jan Sangh and the Swatantra Party were to soon foist their distinctive markers on the Opposition. The development produced dozens of truly outstanding parliamentarians — Hriday Nath Kunzru, J.B. Kripalani, A.K.Gopalan, H.V.Kamath, Ram Manohar Lohia and M.R. Masani, just to name a few. India's parliamentary Opposition was an invention of its own and a development of momentous significance with certain distinct characteristics.

From the early 1960s powerful movements broke out all over India on issues such as land reforms, rights of the industrial working class, unemployment, foodgrains and their distribution, ethnic demands and language rights. While the strength of the parliamentary Opposition continued to be puny and divided till 1967, it was enormously bolstered by linking itself to these social movements, and vice-versa. Such a bonding, however, went alongside a reflective commitment to constitutional and parliamentary democracy. It encompassed the broadest spectrum of the Opposition, including the communists, a section of whom had initially

entertained doubt regarding the prospects of social revolution under the aegis of constitutional democracy. While the government proceeded against some of the leaders for their role in the social movements, there was obviously a limit to which it could go.

In the early 1970s, the parliamentary Opposition became the site that reflected a comprehensive critique of the direction charted by India's democracy. The parliamentary communists, with all their internal ideological and political squabbles, continued to employ the frame of class struggle — imperialism, big capital and landlordism on the one hand, and working class, peasantry and middle classes on the other. But it was the socialists who made the terrain of democracy in place as their anchor, developed a critique of the path of industrialisation, centralisation and concentration of power, deployment of institutions of constitutional democracy as instrumentalities of the ruling regime as well as the resultant outcomes of agrarian crisis, devastation of traditional crafts and small-scale industry, assault on citizenship rights, intolerance of dissent, aversion to federalism and decentralisation of power, rise in bureaucratic stranglehold and security apparatuses, muzzling of the media and disregard to languages and local cultures.

Who will lead the Opposition ranks?

It was this Opposition that issued the call for civil disobedience as foundational to democracy when the parliamentary Opposition came to be subdued. Jayaprakash Narayan became the rallying symbol for this Opposition, bringing down the authoritarian regime of the Emergency (1975-77), and enabling it to ride to power with huge popular support in the elections.

It is a different matter that the internal squabbles within the ruling Janata Party, its inability to order its priorities, and its susceptibility to the insinuations of the Opposition in place gave this experiment a short shrift. The Congress party in Opposition (1977-1979) too experimented with an oppositional stance which was largely to discredit the party in power, and seek a restoration of the post-colonial regime. The strategy of merely discrediting the ruling regime as an oppositional stance does not hold much prospect today, given the unity of the ruling regime and its hold over media and communication networks. Besides, it does not reflect the creativity and ingenuity that the Opposition has imparted to parliamentary democracy in India.

From the 1980s parliamentary Opposition came to make a place for itself by advancing one or the other conception of nationalism. There are clearly three significant conceptions in contention. The first is a majoritarian conception which argues against any special consideration to minorities and disparages pluralism. The second is a secular conception that upholds equal citizenship while extending special considerations to distinct concerns and ways of life. The third argues that Indian nationalism and the post-colonial polity have largely been in the service of a privileged strata and measures should be taken to tilt this balance in favour of the disadvantaged as well as reflect India's deep diversity. It is important to bear in mind that while each one of these conceptions has tried to outwit the others, they have selectively reached out to some elements of the rest with the aim of securing electoral majorities.

A majoritarian conception of the polity, avowing a strong state that has an overriding say with regard to rights and freedoms, but with a pronounced tilt to the market, has been triumphal today. But it can hardly be said that other perspectives in contention have lost their salience and the legacy of the parliamentary Opposition in India has lost its mettle.

In this context, the parliamentary Opposition in India has much to learn from its own legacy. It can draw from it lessons to position itself as the representative voice of democratic and egalitarian urges that is at the same time critical of the idea of the nation that has left behind a significant section of its population from any meaningful sense of belonging to it. But it also may

be the opportune context to think of new ways by which dissent and opposition can be sustained in a new media-induced public culture that invariably breeds docility and compliance.

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