THE INDIAN POLITY, A DEMOCRATIC DIAGNOSIS

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'Will the new Parliament building enhance the democratic process in the polity?' | Photo Credit: PTI

An opinion article, last month, in one of India's main English dailies, summed up the emerging prospects succinctly: 'A parliamentary majority is being used as a bulldozer to fashion an autocracy, the new India version of a presidential form of governance…The replacement, at the forthcoming inaugural [of the new Parliament building], of the real president of the Indian republic by the prime minister may symbolise more than the ego of an individual'.

I had, some years ago, read and put away Levitsky and Ziblatt's book on the fate of democracies, happy in the thought that India did not find a mention in it. Little had I visualised a time when dexterous devices would be used in quest of the desired objective.

Our parliamentary system, crafted with some care, was sought to achieve law-making; accountability of the executive; approval of taxation proposals and control of national finances, and discussion of matters of public interest and concern. India, it said, 'shall be a Union of States' and the provisions of Part XI of the Constitution would govern the relations between the Union and the States.

B.R. Ambedkar had emphasised that the eventual objective of social democracy is a trinity of liberty, equality and fraternity, best achieved through the effective functioning of the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. These foundational principles were spelt out in the Preamble of the Constitution and were reinforced by the Supreme Court of India in the Basic Structure doctrine.

The challenge was in effective functioning of the principal ingredients, beginning with the first. Available data make evident a progressive decline in its functioning year-wise, session-wise and decade-wise. It is clear that Parliament has lost its effectiveness as an instrument of scrutiny, accountability and oversight. Instead, devices of disruption crafted in opposition and innocently disowned in government, are sought to be legitimised. Above all, the leadership of the day endorses it by a studied silence or lack of attendance, or both and with a noticeable tardiness towards the functioning of the standing committees. The end result is a declining process of scrutiny, debate and dissent. Periodic elections apart, informed opinion is concerned about its derailment and the resultant consequences. The emergence of social media, a rival claimant to representative in civil society, has emerged as both complementary and antithetical to question or supplement the representativeness of Parliament. It has manifested itself in both forms in our

polity. So, as a political scientist put it, 'while Parliament has become increasingly representative in descriptive terms, it also simultaneously become[s] unresponsive in terms of legislation and governance and has tended to avoid accountability by closing ranks'. An element of ideological orientation in the shape of dharmic sanctification, as in the Parliament ceremony, was used to reinforce it.

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These moves suggest a design for centralisation and personalisation, and the creation of a 'Fuehrer or Zaeem-like' image not unknown in recent history. Alongside, administrative devices have been sought to be used to bring in line state institutions having an impact on the electoral process. Both contributed to the achievement of a transition from populism to electoral authoritarianism; both are violative of the spirit of the constitutional text.

One consequence of this trend, reflective of the unease generated by it, is a statement in the shape of a letter written to the President of India recently by a group of former civil servants expressing concern over attempts by the government to change the character of the civil service and its functioning, leading to the civil servants being 'torn between conflicting loyalties', thereby weakening their ability to be impartial. 'This has disturbed the federal balance and left civil servants torn between conflicting loyalties, thereby weakening their ability to be impartial'.

These trends in the changing character of the Indian polity have caused public concern and have not gone unnoticed by observers abroad. One editorial comment opined that 'Hindu nationalism in India is writing an epitaph for the country's experiment with multi-ethnic secular democracy'. In his tome published last year, Christophe Jaffrelot analysed the Hindutva ideology (laced with populism) based on Israeli scholar Sammy Smooha's theory of ethnic democracy — defined as the ideology of a group that considers itself bound by racial, linguistic, religious or other cultural characteristics with a sense of superiority and rejection of the 'Other' generally perceived as a real or perceived threat to the survival and integrity of the ethnic nation.'

The conflation between nationalism and Hindutva has been the backbone of the new hegemony that has been of immense help to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in projecting a potent conjoint image of Hindutva and development. That, as Suhas Palshikar has pointed out, "is why the Bharatiya Janata Party has been so happy with intellectuals trying to problematise the nation. That particular intellectual initiative simultaneously places the BJP in a position of immense advantage and ensures that 'anti-BJP' would necessarily be equated with the anti-national. Independently, both ideas — Hindutva and development — are potent political discourses. By weaving them together with nationalism, Narendra Modi has bound them into an arsenal of his political offensive."

This carefully calibrated personality cult with an image of infallibility has been reinforced by the publicity associated with India's presidency of the G-20. The entire effort is to mesmerise the public, particularly the middle class, with the delusion of an image of India being the Vishvaguru at a time when the contrary is observed — in the falling standards in educational institutions, in rising unemployment and its impact on public welfare.

The inauguration of the new building of Parliament was noticeably devoid of any suggestions to make its functioning more meaningful. The formal equality of the two Houses seems to have been done away with and the Leader of the Lok Sabha in his oration could have suggested (but did not), measures to increase the working days to 90-100 days as in the past, initiate the practice of having a Prime Minister's Question Hour each week in both Houses, and proposed more effective measuring for the functioning of the Committee system to enhance its effectiveness and public confidence. More working space for the Members of Parliament could

thus be justified in practice. No such suggestions, however, were forthcoming.

So, will the new building contribute to a more functional and productive Parliament? Will it enhance the democratic process in the polity? Will it, as the Prime Minister said in his inaugural speech, 'awaken the sense of duty in every Indian' and include in it those who sit and work in the new structure and those who lead it in its primary duty? Would he recall to himself and his colleagues Ambedkar's December 1952 lecture, on 'Conditions Precedent for the Successful Working of Democracy'?

Hamid Ansari was the Vice-President of India (2007-2017)

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