

Checking on the House

MIDDLE-CLASS cynicism is frequently directed against the functioning of Indian democracy, political parties and Parliament. An impression that all politicians are dishonest and that Parliament is only disrupted, however erroneous, has caught the public imagination. The truth is to the contrary.

The Indian Parliament has evolved over the last six decades. There would be no better system to suit Indian conditions than parliamentary democracy. A country with diverse opinions, regions, religions, communities and tribes can find no system better than the present one where all sections of society and shades of opinions become a part of the parliamentary decision-making process. The feeling of involvement and inclusion is the strength of the Indian Parliament.

One of the greatest challenges before Indian democracy is to curb the use of money power in elections. Sixty-four years after Independence we have still not been able to evolve a transparent mechanism for funding politics. This certainly lowers the credibility of our parliamentary democracy.

Parliament is a forum where governments are held accountable through questions, motions and debates. It is an empowered forum for legislation. It is the appropriate forum where issues of public concern and importance are raised. Conventions have a very important role in parliamentary functioning. Thus, knee-jerk reforms have to be avoided. What we must lean in favour of is the strengthening of established institutions and conventions. Changes must be well-thought-out, debated and then implemented on the strength of consensus. The establishment of department-related standing committees is one of the key reforms that Parliament has evolved in recent years. Standing committees deal with raw legislation drafted by the government. They hear various stakeholders, they examine each clause almost word by word. Contentious legislations are scrutinised by standing committees for months



Middle-class cynicism misses the central role of Parliament in our democracy

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together. The strength of a standing committee is its predominant non-partisan functioning. There are no whips and no public gaze. Members belonging to the same party can express contrary viewpoints. The maturity of the Indian Parliament is evident from the fact that most reports of the department-related standing committees on legislation are unanimous. Occasionally, there are dissenting notes. It has been suggested that the committees should now be subjected to the public gaze and even telecasting be permitted. However populist the measure is, I would hate to jump to any hasty conclusion at this stage. The committee system has evolved over the last two decades. The standing committee system should be allowed to mature before we move to the next step.

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The biggest weakness of the Indian Parliament is the lack of long duration. India's population is growing; so are the problems. To meet for less than 70 days in a year is inadequate. Short durations lead to paucity of time available for debates, issues of public importance and legislation. When members, particularly from the opposition, want to raise several issues, the privilege is denied for paucity of time. The gagging of debate leads to obstructionism. Parliamentary obstructionism then becomes an acceptable mode to highlight an issue of public importance. More time is lost. Legislations are then cleared in haste in order to cover up the backlog. There have been suggestions in recent years to

legislatively provide for a minimum 100 days' session every year. However, the duration may have to be enhanced a lot more. Similar reform is required in the states where the number of days of each assembly is being curtailed. Many governments find parliamentary accountability inconvenient and hence resort to shorter sessions. State assemblies are now meeting for 20 to 50 days a year. This flaw needs to be corrected.

A parliament is judged by the quality of its debates. Live telecast of Parliament, even as a substitute for adequate print media reportage, has incentivised members to prepare better and conduct themselves properly. In times to come, the quality of performance of an MP on the floor of the House will impact the

quality of accountability in a democracy through parliamentary procedures is strengthened. In Britain, the system of Prime Minister's Questions (PMQ) has successfully evolved over the years. Every Wednesday morning the PM faces impromptu questions in the House of Commons. Short questions with crisp and direct answers render the Wednesday morning thriller before television audiences. People judge the PM by the content and the quality of his responses. Opposition leaders and other members are judged by the quality of their intervention. The PM has to be the most accountable in a democracy. His depleting presence in Parliament compels one to suggest that the PMQ be successfully replicated in India. It will add to the quality of debate, a popular interest in Parliament, restoration of faith in India's parliamentary democracy and certainly be the most effective mode of exercising one's right to know.

The government and the opposition both have a key role to play in Parliament. Conflicting opinions and at times even tensions between the two bring out the best in Indian democracy. However, there must be healthy communication between the political leadership in government and the opposition. Of late, there is a decline in this consultation. The initiative for this consultation must come from the government. This consultation has to be real rather than formal. It is for the government of the day to consider whether the decline in this consultation is deliberate or attributable to the introverted character of the UPAs political leadership.

The anti-defection law emphasises the rigidity of the whip. A whip regulates the house. It enforces political discipline on members of a political party. The whip should be confined merely to voting. It should not regulate the content of the debate. The debates must be thought-provoking, buoyant and based on ingenuity. That will add to the strength of Indian democracy.

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