

Parliament ruckus - Ambedkar's Prophecy may come true!

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THE gulf between the ruling party/alliance and the Opposition is unbridgeable. Whatever little hope of consensus politics that existed has been buried by Prime Minister Narendra Modi by calling the Opposition's demand for debate, transparency and accountability on Pegasus and other contentious issues as anti-national politics.

Mr. Modi took pot shots at the Opposition, the day India won the men's hockey bronze medal. Without referring to disruptions of monsoon session of Parliament, Mr. Modi said **"this great country cannot become hostage to such selfish and anti-national politics"**.

A day prior to that, at a meeting of BJP MPs, Mr. Modi described the Opposition's protests in Parliament as an **"insult to the Constitution, democracy and the people"**.

What PM didn't tell the Nation was disruption is like clap for which two hands have to clash. The Ruling party/Executive has always served as the trigger for disruption of Parliamentary proceedings. If the Government of the day practiced good governance, it won't be scared of debate and scrutiny by the Opposition and other stakeholders of democracy. It won't hide anything, except national secrets. Many of these too can be shared with Opposition MPs subject to oath of secrecy.

What Mr. Modi didn't disclose was that he has trashed his promise of pursuing consensus politics and avoiding vendetta politics. Recall what he said in his maiden speech from ramparts of Red Fort on 15th August 2014.

"We want to move ahead on the basis of strong consensus".

Remember his quote in the run to 2014 Lok Sabha polls : **"I don't take a vindictive approach towards anything"** . What happened later every Indian knows.

Compare his deafening silence on bloodbath between Mizoram and Assam policemen over the border dispute with his sermons to UPA. As Gujarat CM, he seized every opportunity to berate UPA for its failure to arrive at consensus on centre-state and inter-state issues.

Mr. Modi knows well that present Opposition's disruption over demand for discussion on Pegasus and probe is nothing as compared to BJP disrupting Parliament to seek resignation of entire UPA cabinet over 2G and coal mines allotment scams.

Recall how Rajya Sabha Chairman Venkaiah Naidu, as BJP leader, defended on 1st September 2012 his party decision to continue **"parliamentary tactic"** of stalling proceedings to force its demand for resignation of entire UPA cabinet and seek early Lok Sabha elections.

It is apt to quote late Arun Jaitley on BJP boycott of Parliamentary standing committees during May 2005. He stated: **"When the Opposition is denied its legitimate space, Parliamentary obstruction becomes part of Parliamentary practice"**.

Late Sushma Swaraj articulated BJP disruptive agenda well in September 2012. She stated:

"Not allowing parliament to function is also a form of democracy like any other form".

"I would like to remind the prime minister, when he was leader of opposition in Rajya Sabha, they had stalled parliament over the Tehelka issue. Even over the coffin scam, they stalled parliament and called us coffin thieves," she added.

What this implies is that ruling party of the day cannot escape karmic cycle of protests both within and outside Parliament.

It is not the first or the last time Mr. Modi has taken high moral ground instead of inviting Opposition for point-by-point structured debate on crisis India is facing. It is also not the first time that Mr. Modi has avoided learning from the Statesmanship shown by his predecessors in

striking consensus with the Opposition on the way to debate and resolve issues.

Every Prime Minister right from Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru to Dr. Manmohan Singh faced aggressive Opposition. It sought debates and probe into scandals. The scams range from Jeep Scandal of 1951 to 2G scam and Coalgate during the UPA-II.

Admitting flaws in entire contract process for purchase of reconditioned jeeps, Mr. Nehru told provisional parliament on 10th April 1951: **"I have often said it in the House and to hon. Members that whenever they have any enquiry to make, whenever they hear any complaint, it will be my privilege to help to find out what it is and any Member can come at any time, subject of course, to the time available at the time. Therefore, whether it is this matter or any other Government is anxious to pursue any complaint which has, prima facie some substance in it".**

Recollect how LIC investments in Mundra companies were probed by three different entities in the fifties. Remember two different Joint Parliamentary Committees on two stock market scams in the post-liberalisation period. No major scandal escaped parliamentary probe. No bill was rushed through, short-circuiting the legislative procedures. These include referring bills to one parliamentary committee or the other for detailed scrutiny. The decision to bypass committees has nothing to do with ongoing disruptions. The reference of bills to committees has touched a new low under Modi Government.

It has denied the Opposition a chance for structured debate on Pegasus. This is bizarre when viewed against PM's customary remarks to the media before the start of the monsoon session. Mr. Modi had urged all MPs **"to ask the most difficult and sharpest questions in the Houses but should also allow the Government to respond in a peaceful atmosphere".**

The simplest and repeated question on Pegasus and its use for hacking WhatsApp accounts has remained answered since 2019. Did any Government agency buy this spyware and if so, name it? The Government has entangled itself in web of obfuscation by first saying Pegasus is a **"non-issue"**.

After the Supreme Court heard PIL for the first time on 5th August, the Government used it as **"sub-judice"** fig leaf to refuse admitting a question on it in the Rajya Sabha. The written question was submitted two weeks back by a CPI MP.

Mind you, Covid was, in the last year, used as alibi to shorten duration of Parliament sessions with winter session skipped altogether. The duration of question hour was slashed to 30 minutes for the delayed monsoon session. It was limited to unstarred questions - which don't require oral answers by ministers. Rajya Sabha Secretariat simply dispensed with the question hour.

This choking of Parliamentary accountability was aptly commented upon by certain MPs. As put by Shashi Tharoor on 2 nd September 2020, **"Questioning the government is the oxygen of parliamentary democracy. This Govt seeks to reduce Parliament to a notice-board & uses its crushing majority as a rubber-stamp for whatever it wants to pass. The one mechanism to promote accountability has now been done away with".**

No earlier PM shied away from answering questions in Parliament. No ex-PM shunned national press conferences like plague. All three PMs from Nehru-Gandhi family has had the humility to face journalists at impromptu press conferences. Mrs. Indira Gandhi once answered questions on tarmac at airport after her return from an overseas tour.

This is how the Indian democracy has functioned where no ex-PM mocked quest for transparency and accountability as anti-national activity.

Take the case of Lok Sabha deadlock over import licences scandal probed by CBI. Mrs. Indira Gandhi ended the Opposition stalemate during December 1974 by offering: **"to place the CBI report, statements made by witnesses, documents seized during the inquiry, report of the handwriting experts and case diaries before the opposition leaders under an oath of secrecy".**

Pointing out that the Government had nothing to hide, Mrs. Gandhi clarified that **"tabling of the CBI report (making it public) would prejudice the fair trial and the ensuing debate would not only defeat the ends of justice but may result in a conflict between the courts and Parliament".**

Modi Government could have disclosed to the Opposition MPs on oath of secrecy the name of Indian agency (ies) that bought the Pegasus snooping software. It could have disclosed the reason whether and why phones of woman journalists and activists were hacked and whether their phone cameras were turned on to invade their privacy.

In any case, ***Atma Nirbhar***

Government has to assure the nation that usage of imported spyware did not breach Indian sovereignty. Legal or illegal tapping of phones and computers has so far been done under Indian laws without foreign tie-up. Whether sensitive data collected of Indian civilians (not terrorists) landed in the lap of Pegasus' Israeli owner NSO group or any of its software associates.

Was Pegasus purchased under India-Israel MoU on Cyber Security Cooperation signed on 15th January 2018 during the visit of Israeli PM to India?

If Vajpayee Government could order a Lt. General and an Air Vice-Marshal to make presentations on Kargil war to BJP leaders in May 1999, there is no reason for Modi regime to deny information on spyware to the Opposition. No one has asked for data on terrorists tracked through Pegasus. Was the Official Secrets Act not breached in 1999 case? Were the defence staff rules not violated in that case?

Leave aside forgotten past, see how the so-called weakest PM, Dr. Manmohan Singh, resolved illegal phone tapping incidents at the Centre and the States. On 26th December 2013, the Cabinet approved setting up a Commission of Inquiry under Commission of Inquiry Act, 1952, to probe unauthorized electronic surveillance in Gujarat, HP and Delhi.

Why UPA did not implement this decision? Did Modi Government trash this decision while reviewing unimplemented cabinet initiatives of previous regime?

The crux of the matter is that rigorous questioning by the Opposition, the judiciary and the media are vital for stemming the rot in the Indian democracy.

For restoring credibility of democracy, both the Government and Opposition should agree to have more sessions and more sittings of both houses of Parliament every year. Both should be geared for in-depth discussion on governance deficit on all fronts and its impact in terms of foregone growth, jobs and revenue.

Take the simple case of having a functional definition of poverty - a failure of Modi Government recorded in 2016 official panel's report. No wonder the Centre has not even shared this report with the States. Does not the nation have the right to know the reason for alarming rise in extreme poverty as noted by the World Bank? What about emergence of new class of poor due to lockdowns? For how many more decades, the regimes would come and go by dangling false promise of eradication of poverty before the gullible voters?

Let a dozen such issues be debated every month in Parliament. The debate should lead to a consensus on timeframe for resolution of an issue. It must provide for framework for monitoring of schemes conceived to tackle a problem.

More the duration of sessions of Parliament, more would be the Opportunity for all MPs to remove opacity in governance. Availability of adequate time to all MPs to have a say in Parliament would minimize the scope for disruptions.

Simultaneously, all MPs should resolve to implement the forgotten 'Agenda for India.' It was scripted unanimously by both house of Parliament after 7-day special session ending 1 September 1997 to mark golden jubilee of Independence.

As put by AFI, MPs resolved that

"continuous and proactive efforts be launched for ensuring greater transparency, probity and accountability in public life so that the freedom, authority and dignity of the Parliament and other legislative bodies-are ensured and enhanced; that more especially all political parties shall undertake all such steps as will attain the objective of ridding our polity of criminalisation or its influence".

They also agreed that

"the prestige of the Parliament be preserved and enhanced, also by conscious and dignified conformity to the entire regime of Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business of the Houses and Direction of the Presiding Officers relating to orderly conduct of business, more especially by- 1)maintaining the inviolability of the Question Hour, 2) refraining from transgressing into the official areas of the House, or from any shouting of slogans, and 3) invariably desisting from any efforts at interruption with the address of the President of the Republic".

The agenda included core socio-economic challenges including population control. The country's holistic development has become victim of endless blame game played by politicians.

The present generation of leaders should pay heed to sage and anguished warning given by Dr. B.R.Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution. Participating in a debate in Rajya Sabha on 21st May 1952, Dr. Ambedkar stated:

"Unless we in Parliament realise our responsibilities and shoulder the task of looking after the welfare and good of the people within a reasonable time, I have not the slightest doubt in my own mind that this Parliament will be treated by the public outside with utter contempt. It would be a thing not wanted at all".

Crores of citizens are already disillusioned by Parliament, State Assemblies, municipal councils and panchayats. Many of them believe it is sheer waste of time to vote in any election. Others believe in taking the law into their hands as they know injustice and/or delayed justice are deemed rule of the law.

Let Dr. Ambedkar's quote be flashed on Lok Sabha & Rajya Sabha TV channels as and when the Government ducks questions and the Opposition creates ruckus.