



National Seminar on 'Youth in Politics and Governance'



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Śaṅsād Rātnā
Award

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology Madras

&
PRIME POINT Foundation

Date: 14th April 2012

Venue: IC&SR (Auditorium)

**Presidential address by Shri Gopalkrishna Gandhi, Former
Governor of West Bengal**



Esteemed Shri Era Sezhiyan, Award-winning Hon'ble MPs on the dais, esteemed Director of the IIT, Sri Srinivasan, Sri Sudarshan, ladies and gentlemen.

It is an honour to share the dais with Sri Era Sezhiyan.

Sri Somnath Chatterjee has said Sri Sezhiyan has been untouched by the distortions and aberrations of our Parliamentary system. He is absolutely right.

Rajaji once said it is easy to fast sitting at home on Ekadasi but very difficult to fast sitting in the middle of Modern Café at meal time. Sri Sezhiyan has performed that miracle

Chance has to be the best designer.

Who or what but pure coincidence could have conjured four names of parliamentarians with the perfect blend of legislative credit and with all four belonging to different parties, different regions, different languages ?

One defect in design has however been left by that architect of concurrent incidence. I refer to the fact that all winners are men. A reservation – by utter chance – for women in the play of the hand that devises these awards would be felicitous.

I salute chance.

But I do so without detracting from the inherent merit of the MPs who have been conferred the Sansad Ratna-s. They have not achieved what they have achieved by chance, or by a fluke. They have earned their distinction.

I applaud the winners, I celebrate their achievement, I commend their example to their peers.

And yet I cannot but express a contrary opinion today. And that is : Not just these MPs, and their award winning predecessors but every MP should be found to have done as well or as well as these three. Some have to excel. They have to stand out. Even in the Defence Forces, where every man or woman in uniform has the same valour, the same discipline, the same courage, some do get Vir Chakra-s, some Param Vir Chakra-s. But Vir they all are.

Is the case the same with our legislators? Some may shine, some may sparkle, and some may stun by their calibre, but are they all Ratna-s ?

Membership of the Houses of Parliament requires a level field of performance in what may be termed the basics of parliamentarianism. Has that been happening ? Some are regular in their attendance, others are frequent visitors. Some put a good number of questions, others keep their queries themselves. Some make a tidy number of speeches. Others opt for silence.

Excellence is optional. Should pass-mark performance be optional too ?

It has been said speech should improve upon silence.

But silence cannot improve on silence, except in a Rishi.

And shouting cannot take the place of speech, except in a public meeting and that too only when the amplification-system has failed.



Attendance, interpellations and speeches in legislatures are of course optional. And Hon'ble Members are entitled to opt for those forms of conservative conduct. But walk-outs too are optional, as is raising one's voice beyond the requirements of audition, stepping into the well of the House, tearing documents, hurling objects. That option is frequently exercised.

But, on a larger plane, is parliamentary accountability optional ?

Is legislative duty a matter of choice ?

Is giving one's worth as one elected to one's electors subject to the whimsies of volition ?

Today is a magnetic anniversary, Babasaheb Ambedkar's birth anniversary. Let us ask his memory that question. I feel like saying to him 'Sir, you will be glad to know Parliament has a Committee on Ethics'. I can hear him rejoin with 'I did not know ethics can be achieved by a committee...Do they decide on what is ethical by consensus, by majority vote or by the casting vote of its chair ?'

And I do not have the answer to that.

If that were possible, how much good, how much welfare, how much progress we could achieve by 'committee' !

Alas, reality is ever a teaser.

There are grades of performance in Parliament as there are elsewhere. And one may not expect uniformity in standards of dedication. In fact one may definitely expect the opposite. One may expect variations, wide and oceanic variations in individual records.

Parliament represents the essences of India.

Parliament is in fact, 'Essential India'.

Therefore it is important, I think, that not just individuals but Parliament as a whole passes tests, rigorous, exemplary tests. What is important is that the integrated will of the people as reflected in that body of the essences of India, be of the first rank, of the first water.

And there, let us note the fact that in all its successive avatars, the Parliament of India has shown itself to be an extraordinary institution.

Even as forum for debating, let us acknowledge the fact that we have some extraordinary speakers there. The recent debate on the Lokpal Bill saw some exceptional speeches, of which must mention those of Sri Pranab Mukherjee, Smt Sushma Swaraj, Sri Arun Jaitley, Sri Sitaram Yechury, Sri Sandeep Dikshit, Sri

Abhishek Singhvi, Smt Shobhana Bhartia, Sri D Raja. There are others who spoke effectively and persuasively as well, but these names com readily to my mind.

As a citizen, as a voter, I felt proud hearing them. Dr Ambedkar would have felt proud hearing them. I felt the people of India were speaking through them.

I do not and never shall subscribe to the cynical diminishing of our Parliament that some attempt. I do not and shall not join in any chorus of abuse hurled at that institution. For to call Parliament by any synonym of slander is to slander ourselves. Not that we as a people do not deserve to hear bitter truths about ourselves ; we do. But then we are of elements so mixed, of virtues and vices so fluxed, of highs and lows so contradictorily constituted, that we should know better than to judge too harshly or in haste an institution that is made in nothing save our own image.

Just as we as individuals, as house-holders, as institution-makers have moments when we rise above our own average, when we overcome our limitations and seek to raise ourselves to a degree of elevation above that which is natural to our state, just as we have, shall I say, moments of high reflection or deep introspection, and just as we, with all our mortal weaknesses, can sometimes rise above ourselves to an act of courage, or of candour, of credit and of commitment, so also the Parliament of India can rise and has risen, time and again, to give to its people, to those that have brought it into being, in other words, to us, the gift of its innate greatness, the fruit of its inherent wisdom, and indeed, the dower of its ripened instincts.

So high are our expectations of Parliament, so pressing our needs for its attention, and so steep our sense of its obligations to us, that our dismay and our disappointment, our sadness and often our shock at its failure to meet our aspirations blinds us to what it has done.

If that ugly stain on our society – dowry – has been outlawed in our country, it is by an act of Parliament. If dowry is still asked for without shame and given without demur, that is by our acts.

If domestic violence has been made a crime in our country, it is by an act of Parliament. If women and infants are still beaten by despicable brutes in male form, it is by acts of society.

If untouchability has been abolished in our country, let us acknowledge the fact that it has so been abolished by the wisdom of the founding parents of our Constitution and our Parliament. If that ugly stain on our society – dowry – has been outlawed in our country, it is by an act of Parliament. Likewise, land reforms were brought in by Parliament, police reforms, prison reforms, labour law reforms, and an enactment, perhaps the first of its kind in the world, for the prevention of cruelty to animals. All these are the gifts to the country of Parliament. And the same Parliament has bent to

heed popular opinion , most notably, in the amendment to the States Reorganisation Bill which had in a rather wooden manner proposed a composite state of Bombay, to divide it far more realistically , into Maharashtra and Gujarat.

One might say all that 'happened' in the golden days of Jawaharlal Nehru.

And so it did. But then the record has continued. The landmark reservation of seats for women in our local bodies happened long after and , in our 'own' times, if domestic violence has been made a crime in our country, it is by an act of Parliament, if the NREGA is a fact of life today, giving employment and wages and nourishment to millions, it is because of Parliament, if the RTI is a household name today, utilised across the length and breadth of India, and the RTE Act promises education to India's children, it is because of Parliament. If States have Lok Ayuktas and the Centre may – inshallah – soon have a Lok Pal it is again because our legislatures have responded according to its own lights to public opinion, to public campaigns.

We need to salute Anna Hazare for his campaign. But just imagine for a moment a country where there was no parliament, no democracy, who would Anna Hazare have addressed ? Who would have taken his demand for steps against corruption and black money forward ?

I could go on and give more examples, but do not need to. Not in Chennai, which has sent some of the finest Parliamentarians of the world to the apex legislature of India.

Let us not judge Parliament by its low tides. Let us not measure its bench marks by the lines left on its side by receding foam-lines of sediment and dross. They do not represent the golden mean. At the other end of the spectrum, let us not see it by the leaps of its great shooting stars either, for they too are exceptional.

Let us rather judge that institution, which is nothing else than our own integrated political intelligence at work, by its averages. There we shall see a balanced picture.

Having said this, let me say the following and close:

Parliament is by definition a vessel of dignity. Let those who row it row with knowledge. It will empower them.

Parliament is like a planetarium where the convex sky must glitter with the glow and sparkle of the entire spangled firmament, not by the episodic spark of meteors, comets and shooting stars. Those can add to the wonderment of Parliament , but not compensate for the sullen starlessness of its average sky.

Parliament cannot be held by its makers in anything but confidence, faith. Parliament has to be the home of visvasam.



Preoccupation with the monetary, travel or status perquisites of legislative membership when proportionate to preoccupation with serious work will never be begrudged by the people of India. We are a generous people. But when that preoccupation is out of balance, it can jar. We are an intelligent people.

Finally, it is time Parliament gave India solutions to three important problems that beset us:

1. A solution to the ogre of black money.
2. A solution to the related demon of corrupt practices, including the use of intimidation, physical and psychological, in elections.
3. A solution to what Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan called “widespread inefficiency and gross mismanagement of resources”.

There is a fourth contribution that requires to be made as well. We are facing certain risks, national risks. There is the distinct prospect flowing from climate change of a water shock and a food shock. We have of course the ever-present prospect of an energy shock, fuel shock. And we have the seemingly increase frequency of natural disasters like earthquakes. We were all shaken up on 11 April by the 8.6 that lay epicentred in Indonesia. Now, earthquakes today are no different from earthquakes millennia ago. They may be more frequent, but in their intrinsic nature they are the same as always. Yet they kill more viciously now, not because the earthquake per se has become more vicious but because the congestion of buildings and of populations has become so dense that the impact is that much worse.

What does all this have to do with Parliament?

It has everything to do with Parliament because Parliament is our essence and we must be told by it of the risks that we face, the dangers we must prepare ourselves for. Parliament must be both the harbinger of good news and initiator of great steps but it must also be the messenger of the bitter herbs of much-needed medicament in terms of honest truths told. It must give us confidence and also take us into confidence.

Let us be proud of our Parliament and all our Legislative Assemblies, but let us strive to make them what they are meant to be.

