

Summer Ordeal

A single hot summer doesn't necessarily change the trend of global warming but it may radically alter the political fortunes of Congress Party that has been fighting for quite sometime to maintain its national status. It's a minor event—presidential poll. And yet the party in power at the centre—Congress—finds it embarrassingly difficult to manage its disgruntled allies in the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) family, in choosing the successor to Pratibha Patil. Once again regional satraps have reasons to believe that they could influence Indian parliamentary politics even in a limited way. Sonia Gandhi is no Indira Gandhi. Nor could she enact a V V Giri-Sanjeeva Reddy drama at this juncture. In truth regionalism in the rapidly changing political scenario, sometimes acts as a brake on further centralisation of power at the centre. Properly articulated regionalism can be a positive force in today's India as the so-called national parties are in no mood to smooth local woes. At the time of writing there was no consensus on a common candidate for the top job of the country, albeit rubber-stamp authority has very little to do in taking independent decisions and arrest the systematic erosion of constitutional values and norms. Then no political party would like to take risks by electing a non-partisan at the highest post though it matters little to the vast majority of people whether A P J Abdul Kalam gets another term or the redoubtable Pranab Mukherjee who seems to be a darling of the left and corporate lobby as well, laughs the last laugh. And the minority community won't have much to cheer about if a political non-entity Hamid Ansari gets the consensus nod. Nor will it affect the ethnic communities in the North-East in any meaningful way if P A Sangma, succeeds in garnering the required number the possibility of which seems remote at the moment. For the ruling and opposition combines it is business as usual. When it is the question of top post, Indian system, rather a replica of West Minster model, cannot be equated with monarchical democracy. But dynastic democracy it certainly is. And the very dynastic authority has its own compulsions to choose a president of its choice.

Parliamentarians in India are a unique tribe, having literally no accountability to the people who elect them in the first place. At least on the issue of enhanced privileges they get easily united and show the spirit of consensus without a murmur. On 13th May, a special session of both houses of Parliament was convened to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the first session of the Lok Sabha. Cutting across party-lines all speakers in unison urged members to uphold the 'dignity, sanctity and supremacy' of parliament. What about parliamentarians with criminal records? These days they abound. It's for them to improve their behaviour in the future so that this talking shop—parliament—acquires some credibility in people's eyes.

Parliamentarians with criminal records or clean records, are all satisfied with enormous benefits from their non-performance or bad performance. They form a peculiar political caste in the Indian context with explicit message that they represent India as the toiling millions are unfit to rule. Rulers all the way—central or regional.

Observing the much publicised 60th anniversary was a lack-lustre ritual in parliamentary culture. They are reluctant to review why parliament has reached such a pass after six decades. Too much centralisation of powers in decision-making, both economic and political, at the

centre, has virtually destroyed the limited federalism that the constitution guaranteed at the initial phase. Today it is out and out unitary though yesterday was no panacea but contradiction was not that sharp. Unless they invoke true federalism by way of curtailing the growing tendency of authoritarian approach, regionalism with all its pervasive side-effects is bound to flourish.

Even China, the symbol of most obnoxious one-party rule, is learning federal management from the United States which has three levels of government—federal government, state government and local governments. The governments at all those three levels have clearly defined expenditures and revenues. Locals have substantial decision-making powers over matters financial. The Chinese ‘communists’ are serious about introducing the US fiscal system in their country as a tested device to curb the growth of regionalism and allow regionalists to have a sense of authority in their own affairs.

Today it’s Kashmir that enjoys some special status at least on paper, because of legacy left by history. Tomorrow a dozen of states might demand special status if the centre continues to enjoy unlimited powers while states starve of minimum revenues for sheer survival. The root cause of regional upsurge every now and then lies in the imbalance between central and state government finances. The wisemen who were too eloquent to preserve sanctity and dignity of parliament while marking its 60th anniversary, didn’t take any trouble to introspect about the failure of parliamentary system in its present form. Indian democracy simply lives in conducting periodic elections at regular intervals. President has nothing to do with it. Nor can he or she improve the situation by invoking president’s discretionary powers guaranteed under the constitution because the party will stand in the way.

President’s term will end but there is no end to serving the president and his men. □□□
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