

## Preface

Discipline, Decorum and Dignity of Parliament are of paramount importance for the efficient functioning and success of parliamentary institutions. All over the world concerns have been expressed about the decline of discipline, decorum and dignity of legislative bodies. Seen in the context of the evolution of democracy these problems are understood as aberrations. The Winter session of Parliament (2002) is a remarkable example of the functioning of Parliament in consonance with its dignity, decorum and discipline. While this particular session has set high standards before us, it is important that we further consolidate and build on these accomplishments. This booklet aims at providing the reader a comprehensive understanding of the issues revolving around discipline, decorum and dignity of Parliament so as to put them in proper historical perspective.

Date:.....  
New Delhi.

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### Discipline, Decorum and Dignity of Parliament

Success, effectiveness and prestige of any institution rests on its orderly functioning and the extent to which it adheres to standards of discipline, dignity and decorum for discharging its activities. Discipline, dignity and decorum in this sense are foundational norms of any institution. This is particularly so of the parliamentary institutions which embody the will of the people and constitute the fora of democracy to carry out among other activities, the principal task of legislation and scrutiny of the executive. Erosion of discipline and decorum will lead to the erosion of parliamentary institutions. These foundational norms of representative bodies have always been considered sacrosanct and are therefore preserved, protected and defended.

On 25 November 1949, when our Constitution was adopted Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, its principal architect searchingly asked, "If we wish to maintain democracy... what must we do?" "...first thing in my judgement we must do", he said, "is to hold fast to constitutional methods of achieving our social and economic objectives". Stating that "When there was no way left for constitutional methods for achieving economic and social objectives, there was a great deal of justification for unconstitutional methods," he remarked that such methods in the context of the availability of constitutional methods "are nothing but the grammar of anarchy and the sooner they are abandoned, the better for us". What Dr. Ambedkar said in the context of democracy is intensely and all the more relevant for the functioning of democratic institutions. When constitutional methods are available, when rules of procedure and conduct of business and the conventions and traditions lay down the ways and means of conducting the proceedings of the parliamentary institutions and when elaborate and adequate mechanisms are available for the effective participation of members in such institutions, going beyond the scope of rules, procedures and constitutional methods would make us vulnerable to a harsh judgement by history as the authors of the "Grammar of Anarchy". It is, therefore,

imperative that our representative institutions articulate the theme of order and discipline and script the story of success of our democracy which the ordinary people of this country so vigorously defend for their well-being and empowerment and for the common good of the whole country.

Questions of "discipline, dignity and decorum" are as old as the origin of democracy. It would not be wide off the mark to say that quest for democracy arose out of the quest for a disciplined and orderly existence of life in society. Mankind has been addressing these questions of discipline and decorum as part of the constant strivings for further perfecting democracy not only as a form of government but also as a way of life. It is essential, therefore, to dispel the notion that these questions have suddenly assumed currency primarily because of the prevailing perception that parliamentary institutions have been functioning in a manner which in relative terms are not in consonance with their dignity and authority and that of their representatives. As we peep into deep recesses of our own history we are pleasantly surprised that there was a time in this very India when republics studded our land. There were Parliament type institutions with detailed procedures to determine their functioning which were quite proximate to the activities of modern day representative bodies. Catalogue of norms for governing the business of those bodies and the meticulous formulations about quorum, voting, censure motions, etc. were all provided for the disciplined and orderly functioning of those bodies.

In modern times also taking into account the compulsions of the complexity of such institutions and the magnitude of their onerous responsibilities, elaborate rules have been established so that they play their roles meaningfully and effectively and within the parameters of discipline, decorum and dignity. Lack of adherence to such rules or their infringement has always been lamented. These transgressions and lamentations are not just the phenomena of the late twentieth century or confined to the countries which adopted these institutions during last several decades; rather these are to be found in almost all democracies regardless of the depth and maturity of their historical experiences in experimenting democracy.

As democracy evolves problems also come up and the transition of democracy from one stage of maturity to another necessarily throws up challenges and opportunities to cope up with such problems. Former Chairman of Rajya Sabha and former President of India Shri K.R. Narayanan, while speaking at the first ever Conference of Presiding Officers, Leaders of Parties, Whips, Ministers of in Parliamentary Affairs, Secretaries and Senior Officers of Parliament and State Legislatures on the theme of discipline and decorum on 23 September 1992, had described indiscipline and disorder in the legislative bodies as "Infantile disorders or the measles of the middle-age" which "...are bound to pass, but pass they must, otherwise the system will be in mortal danger". However transitory they may be, they have caused concern and anxiety across the globe and common people and leaders alike have been deeply exercised about this issue. We normally hark back to the gleaming and glorious days of parliamentary democracy of England and associate ourselves with the perceived notions that British democracy is perhaps a role model without being seriously affected by any disturbing phenomenon.

But this is not so. Sir Winston Churchill in one of the speeches on the theme "The Present Decline of Parliamentary Government in Great Britain" delivered on 5 March 1931 painfully stated, "The House of Commons as a vehicle of the popular will has steadily declined in public repute..." and "I am deeply anxious that its walls shall not be undermined by slow decay or overthrown by violent battering-rams". Such anguish and apprehensions were expressed in 1930s and there are several such pensive references in Churchill's collected works which drive home the point that discipline and decorum had become casualties even during those spacious days of the "mother of democracy".

During the last few years tumultuous debates and pandemonium in the House of Commons have recurred with disturbing regularity. The Hansard Society which was established in 1940s to protect and preserve parliamentary democracy from the onslaught of fascists and communists observed in one of its reports that Parliament was perceived as too confrontational with methods of 'fighting', 'squabbling' and 'arguing' employed by members to participate in the parliamentary debate.

Concerns for falling standards in public life generated anxieties in the wider civil society in U.K. and prompted the Government to establish a Committee in 1994 which is popularly known as the Nolan Committee on Public Standards. On the basis of the report of the Nolan Committee the House of Commons adopted a code of conduct for the Members which, *inter-alia*, stated:

Members shall at all times conduct themselves in a manner which will tend to maintain and strengthen the public's trust and confidence in the integrity of Parliament and never undertake any action which would bring the House of Commons, or its Members generally into disrepute.

The theme of discipline and decorum remained at the root of the above observation which now is the crying necessity not only for the British Parliament but Parliaments and Members of such august bodies all over the world.

Legislatures of many developed countries are no exception to disorders and disturbances. Fisticuffs and boisterous scenes in many representative institutions abroad have caused such stress and strain that presiding officers and at least one of them in one country, unable to withstand high decibel levels and pressures of the troubled atmosphere, lost his life on the floor of the House. On many occasions police intervention has been sought to control the unruly and violent behaviour of the people's representatives in some of the legislatures of foreign countries.

Inspite of the values of our five thousand year old civilisation and inspite of liberation of our country from foreign rule, predominantly through non-violent approach, we have not remained immune to indiscipline and disorder in our Parliament and State Legislatures. In fact, right from the commencement of our Parliament we confronted the problem which caused a great deal of restlessness and agitation among all concerned. It is well known that in 1951, the then Member of Parliament, Shri H.G. Mudgal's conduct for promoting business interests of some firms in contravention of the discipline and decorum of the House had invited adverse comments from every quarter. A Special

Committee of Parliament found him guilty of impairing the dignity of the highest forum of democracy and recommended action against him. A motion was moved by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru for his expulsion from Lok Sabha. But before the motion was adopted, Shri Mudgal resigned and remonstrated that freedom of members to express their views has been curtailed. Subsequently, the House passed a resolution for his expulsion and described his resignation as contempt of the House. Referring to this issue Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in a letter to the Chief Ministers on 4 October 1951, wrote with emphasis on the need for parliamentarians to maintain high standards of behaviour. I reproduce his words below:

Parliament viewed the conduct of Mr. Mudgal with extreme disfavour. There has been a tendency in the past not only in Parliament but probably in the State Legislatures also, not to keep to proper standards of behaviour. The Mudgal case is an example and a warning and there must be no laxity shown when any such matter arises. If once the reputation of our legislatures goes down, then democracy itself will be in peril. Therefore the reputation of these legislatures as also of our services, must be strictly guarded and any misbehaviour should lead to enquiry and action.

Even more solemn and dignified occasions such as the President's or the Governor's Address to Parliament and the State Legislatures, respectively, have not remained free from such problems. I recall that in 1963, the President's Address to the Joint Session of Parliament was interrupted by a few members on the plea that the President spoke in English and not in Hindi. It was thought that such acts if went unchecked would lead to more chaos and endanger the very authority and legitimacy of our Parliament. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in a letter to the Chief Ministers on 18 February 1963 described the incident as "... the first of its kind in Parliament" and "most regrettable". Further writing that leaders of every party condemned the exhibition of discourtesy he stated:

It is clear that this kind of thing has to be met effectively; otherwise the work of our Parliament and Assemblies would be made difficult and brought into disrepute. This is a vital matter and I hope Parliament will set a good example which will be followed in the State Assemblies.

During those early and formative years, which we look upon as repository of healthy parliamentary debate, such breaches of discipline, stalked the portals of our Parliament. The problems which we faced then have been further compounded. These issues have been discussed in the Presiding Officers' Conferences. To address them further and find solutions to those maladies a Conference of Presiding Officers', Leaders of Parties, Whips, Ministers of Parliamentary Affairs, Secretaries and Senior Officers of Parliament and State Legislatures was organised in Parliament for the first time in the history of our parliamentary democracy on 23 September 1992 about which I have mentioned earlier. The Conference in a Resolution adopted unanimously, agreed that with a view to preserving democratic and secular fabric and strengthening the parliamentary institutions it is necessary that -

- (a) decorum and dignity be maintained when the President and Governors address the Members of Parliament and members of State legislatures, respectively;
- (b) demand for suspension of the Question Hour should not be made and acceded to except with the consensus in the House to discuss a matter of very urgent nature and exceptional importance;
- (c) the Legislatures should hold sufficient number of sittings in a year with a view to affording adequate opportunities to the legislators to deliberate;
- (d) Members should scrupulously observe the rules of procedure in order to maintain order and decorum in the House; and
- (e) the Committee system be strengthened in Parliament and State Legislatures in order to enable indepth study and closer scrutiny as well as to ensure accountability of the executive to the legislature.

The Conference also suggested that the political parties evolve a code of conduct for their legislators and ensure its observance by them and urged that the political parties, governments at the Centre and in the States, the Press and other concerned should help create a climate conducive to the healthy growth of parliamentary system in the country.

On the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of our independence in 1997, all the political parties represented in Parliament expressed their concern about the breach of discipline, decorum and dignity of our legislatures. They adopted a unanimous Resolution in the two Houses of Parliament and committed themselves to maintain the inviolability of the Question Hour, to refrain from transgressing into the well of the House or from shouting, and to desist from any effort at interruptions or interference with the address of the President of the Republic.

With a view to curbing the growing incidence of indiscipline, Lok Sabha has made a rule for automatic suspension of members of the House after the Speaker names them, for a specified period, for coming to the well of the House, abusing its rules, persistently and willfully obstructing its business by shouting slogans. Concerted efforts by the Presiding Officers' Conference to undo the menace have been going on.

Again, an All India Conference of Presiding Officers, Chief Ministers, Ministers of Parliamentary Affairs, Leaders and Whips of Parties on the theme "Discipline and Decorum in Parliament and Legislatures of States and Union Territories" was organised in New Delhi on 25 November 2001. The Conference expressed its concern that earlier efforts to curb what it called the "increasingly disturbing trend" "have proved to be inadequate" and, therefore, took serious note of this ominous trend and stated that the erosion of "the credibility of these representative institutions, also lead to public disillusionment with the very system of parliamentary democracy". The issue of "public disillusionment with parliamentary institutions" was not only voiced in India; it has been

alarmingly stated in the Second Report on Modernisation of the House of Commons, July 2002. It says:

The House of Commons is the heart of British democracy. Whether that democracy is healthy depends in part on whether the public we serve has respect for our proceedings as relevant to their lives and has confidence that our scrutiny of both the executive and its legislation is effective. The most compelling reason for modernisation of the Commons is its decline in public esteem... Successive surveys of social attitudes have charted the ebb tide of public respect for Parliament... The extent to which Government can arrive at policies that will work in a complex modern world will in part be determined by the extent to which they can be scrutinised, challenged and tested by debate in an effective Parliament... These are not just issues for MPs. The rights of every citizen would be diminished if Parliament lost its authority as the legitimate expression of our representative democracy, or if the decisions of Government are not effectively scrutinised by Parliament.

To restore people's confidence in Parliament attempts have to be made to eschew deliberate plans of political parties to stall the proceedings of Parliament by shouting and raising slogans. Government has to positively address the pressing issues faced by people and raised by the opposition and the opposition has to constructively play a role. Besides, attempts must be made to expand opportunities for Members of Parliament and State Legislatures for their effective participation in the proceedings of the legislative bodies. The All India Conference of Presiding Officers, Chief Ministers, Ministers of Parliamentary Affairs, Leaders and Whips of Parties on 'Discipline and Decorum in Parliament and Legislatures of States and Union Territories' held in New Delhi on 25 November 2001, focussed on these issues and identified major contributory factors behind the trend of disorderly conduct. These are:

- (a) non-availability of adequate time for members to raise matters pertaining to their grievances on the floor of the House;
- (b) misgivings created at times by seemingly unresponsive attitude adopted by government and retaliatory posture by treasury benches;
- (c) disinclination, at times, on the part of the leadership of legislature parties to adhere to parliamentary norms;
- (d) absence of prompt and proper action against erring member under the Rules of Procedure; and
- (e) lack of sufficient training and orientation especially of new members in parliamentary procedure and etiquette.

Acknowledgement of the above factors as the root cause of indiscipline and disorder is a significant step for addressing the main issue of maintaining dignity of legislative bodies in India. Even the Resolution the Conference adopted, contained some

of the crucial questions which are probably, for the first time, being grappled with by such an important Conference. Apart from its focus on extending the sittings of the Houses of legislatures, strengthening the Committee system and organising the orientation programmes for members, which also formed part of the Resolution of the Conference held in 1992, the Resolution squarely dealt with the questions of discipline and disorder by going deep into the roots and accordingly recommended steps. For instance it resolved that Parliament and State Legislatures adopt and enforce code of conduct by making it part of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business and by stipulating that its violation would be visited by punishment in the forms of admonition, reprimand, censure or withdrawal from the House. In this respect this Resolution of 2001 stands in contrast to the Resolution of 1992, which only urged political parties to evolve a code of conduct for their legislatures.

Emphasis of the Resolution that the Presiding Officers forthwith constitute Ethics Committees indicates a new beginning for purging indiscipline from our parliamentary institutions.

There are some points in the Resolution, which deserve attention and merit commendations. These are reproduced below :

- (1) Legislators to file a financial disclosure statement comprising information with regard to their income, assets and liabilities;
- (2) Legislators to notify changes, if any, in the information furnished by them in their financial disclosure statements within a specified period;
- (3) Maintenance of the Register of Members' Interests by all Legislatures;  
and
- (4) Earnest endeavour be made by all political parties to lay down parameters with emphasis on proven standards in public life, for selection of candidates for elections.

These measures are of vital importance in giving momentum to the efforts for ensuring discipline and order in the legislative bodies and safeguarding their dignity.

The problems confronted by our representative bodies and people's representatives, as stated earlier, have not cropped up now. They have been there since long and we have been engaged in dealing with them and finding solutions to those problems right from the days of our struggle for independence. The Indian society suffered centuries of foreign rule and oppression and remained immersed in depths of social and economic deprivation for long periods. Like other societies which have been going through what Peter Drucker, the Management Guru calls "the age of social transformation", the Indian society is now in a state of transition brought about by the introduction of democracy and many other forces of social change. In such a transitional society there is bound to be some restlessness and it is inevitable that a modicum of that restlessness finds reflection in every institution including the legislatures.

It is like the churning of the cosmic sea in our mythology. As the churning went on, the first thing that came out, was poison and the last item was nectar. Our society is getting churned by democratic methods of right to vote, ideals of right to equality and equal opportunity enshrined in the Constitution and the awakening among people that they as the citizens of this country have the power to transform their lives and the destiny of this country. A society which remained deprived of modern democracy for centuries because of several factors is now experiencing it and therefore, the problems thrown by it are like the poison and we need a Shiva to swallow it or else it will imperil the society. Our democracy and the ideals of clean life will salvage the situation by acting as Shiva and holding the poison coming from social churning and preventing it to infect the society at large. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of our nation had seen this change as early as 1920s. He wrote an article "A Plea for Purity" to highlight the ethical values in the context of the irregularities in election processes taking place then. In fact, a person who was contesting elections at that time wrote to him and stated, "My agents play false. They attribute to me virtues which I do not recognise in myself. My opponents condemn me to vice I have never been guilty of. I want a clear and fair fight... Can you show a way out or will you simply say that Council going is wrong and I must retire?" Mahatma Gandhi's reply to that question was revealing. He wrote:

I have been told that all these things are inevitable when a nation is rising from stupor. No doubt there is some truth in this. When people were thoroughly apathetic and only a few men were interested in running elections and running associations, impurities remained underground. Now that a large body of people are taking part in these public matters, the impurities which were hidden are coming to the surface... The impurities are not artificial, but they are in the whole body itself. I should hope that things are not so bad and that the body is sound... Without purity of public life Swaraj is an impossibility.

The Resolution adopted by the All India Conference of Presiding Officers, Chief Ministers, Ministers of Parliamentary Affairs, Leaders and Whips of Parties in November 2001, essentially aims at affirming purity in public life as it urges all political parties to endeavour "...to lay down parameters with emphasis on proven standards in public life, for selection of candidates for elections". The deeper root of discipline, decorum and dignity of Parliament can be traced to what Mahatma Gandhi had said "purity in public life". In fact, Gandhiji had said that "Indiscipline is a form of violence". In almost all the countries of the world effort is being made to check indiscipline, which has the potentiality of breeding violence, and to restore "purity in public life". As I had stated earlier, in the U.K., a Committee was appointed by the Government under the Chairmanship of Lord Nolan which went into the question of reviving standards in public life. In our age when values and principles have come under strain and stress it is important that attempts are made by all concerned to safeguard the values which sustain institutions, individuals and give sanity and strength to our social existence.

### **Council of States and the Issues of Discipline, Decorum and Dignity**

Conscious of the fact that discipline, decorum and dignity are of paramount importance for efficient functioning of the House, Rajya Sabha through its bulletin for its

very first sitting on 13 May 1952, issued a paragraph under the heading "Parliamentary Etiquette" outlining the rules to be observed by members. *The Handbook for Members* brought out by the Rajya Sabha Secretariat, containing various customs and conventions of the House is distributed to the members from time to time. On many occasions the House has punished the members for violating its discipline, decorum and dignity. When a member of the House interrupted the President's Address to the Joint Session of Parliament in 1963, members belonging to different sections expressed regret and the then Chairman observed that "any member who deviates from decorum and dignity deserves to be chastised". In many cases members resorting to misconduct have been asked by the Chair to withdraw from the House and in many other cases members have been suspended for their acts of misbehaviour. There is only one case of a member who was expelled from the House in 1976, for his conduct which was "derogatory to the dignity of the House and its members and inconsistent with the standards which the House expects from its members". The imperative necessity and sanctity of disciplined conduct has been highlighted in many rulings from the Chair. One of the rulings of the then Chairman of Rajya Sabha, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan deserves reproduction here. On 27 September 1955 while ordering the expunction of some objectionable portion of the proceedings of the House, he observed:

... We want to maintain the good name and dignity of this House. Every one of us is interested in that as much as I am. I do not want it to be said that some times these discussions suggest that we are not behaving like serious, responsible Members of Parliament but rather like irresponsible professional agitators. That impression even all members of this House to whatever side they may belong, should avoid. We must be careful and preserve our good name and our dignity. That is what I am anxious about.

### **Council of States and Ethics Committee**

A major and historical step was taken by the Council of States in 1997, when it remained in the forefront of legislative bodies in India by setting up an Ethics Committee which has heralded a new era in our quest for restoring and safeguarding the ethical foundation of our legislative bodies. The Committee in its first report suggested a Code of Conduct for Members of Rajya Sabha which has been adopted by the House. The Code, *inter alia*, prescribes that "Members are expected to maintain high standards of morality, dignity, decorum and values in public life".

Successive Chairmen of Rajya Sabha have been taking steps to ensure the smooth running of the House and protect its discipline, decorum and dignity. For sometime ideas are being churned to reform parliamentary procedure to provide members adequate opportunities to participate in the House. Former Chairman of Rajya Sabha, Shri K.R. Narayanan while addressing the Conference of Presiding Officers, Leaders of Parties, Whips, Ministers of Parliamentary Affairs, Secretaries and Senior Officers of Parliament and State Legislatures on the issue of discipline and decorum had said that disorder and disruption in the House resulted due to absence of opportunities to members for participating in debates and suggested for some kind of parliamentary reforms to solve the problem. Present Chairman of Rajya Sabha, Shri Bhairon Singh Shekhawat while

responding to the felicitations of the members in Rajya Sabha said "... public perception of the functioning of democracy is not only based on the quality of governance provided by the executive but also on how far the proceedings in the House are relevant to its welfare." Urging the members "... to do a serious introspection and find out as to what in reality is the prevailing public perception", he said that "parliamentary institutions... are the moral fulcrum of our country and have to set standards for others to follow". Remarking that "we are watched and observed as role models by State legislatures, Zila Parishads and other elected local bodies", he critically said, "We should ask ourselves whether we are setting right standards for them to follow. Are we giving adequate time and attention to issues such as national security, or issues of poverty, unemployment and population control or problems of farmers and the labour, or issues of planning, development and growth or the issue of corruption in public life and other such issues impacting public governance? Let us consider what corrective measures we need to take on our part". The Chairman then went on to suggest that "...henceforth we should evaluate, at the end of every session, as to how relevant and effective the proceedings have been from the view point of their contribution towards improving public governance and public welfare". "Then alone", he stated, "we will be fulfilling our duty to strengthen democracy and improve the welfare of the people we are meant to serve."

### **Winter Session of Parliament 2002: A Remarkable Example of Decorum for Legislative Bodies**

Chairman Shri Bhairon Singh Shekhawat's contributions in bringing order and discipline for the transaction of business of the recently concluded Winter Session of Rajya Sabha (2002) have restored its dignity to an unprecedented level. *Suo motu* statements by Ministers on matters of urgent public importance will help the opposition and the whole House to appreciate the steps taken by the Government and thereby make them feel that the Government is responsive and caring. These kinds of steps may bring down the incidence of disturbances and pandemonium in the House. In fact, the way the Chairman ensured that most of the starred questions listed during the Winter Session were answered was hailed by the media and members belonging to all political parties. *The Indian Express* (23December 2002) in its editorial under the caption "Parliament, uninterrupted - Was it just a winter interlude or will MPs repeat their record performance" appreciatively noted, "In Rajya Sabha, one cold December morning, assembled MPs and Ministers raced through the entire booklet of starred questions, sending old-timers down memory lane to figure out when was the last time that happened".

The same success story was also scripted in Lok Sabha. The responsiveness of the Government to the opposition and the responsibility of the opposition to act within rules and the authority of the Presiding Officer in conducting the proceedings led to disciplined and successful conclusion of the session which is rare in the recent history of our Parliament. The popular fortnightly *India Today*, midway through the Winter Session, in a write up under the caption, 'The House Holders' wrote the following :

...Parliament... halfway through the winter session is yet to witness what newspaper headline writers call "pandemonium". There have been no

dramatic disruption of proceedings, no repeated adjournments, no sharp exchanges between members on the treasury and opposition benches. And surprisingly, the well of either House - into which members troop when the bell signals the end of question hour every working day in Parliament - remains untransgressed .... It is not that the honourable MPs have suddenly been through a crash course in parliamentary behaviour and etiquette. Both the Government and the Opposition credit the smooth ride in Parliament to a large extent to the two new Presiding Officers - Vice-President and Rajya Sabha Chairman, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat and Lok Sabha Speaker Manohar Joshi".

*The Indian Express* editorial which I quoted earlier also wrote:

After the record working hours lost to adjournments and noisy sloganeering in recent sessions, this winter conclave has been exceedingly smooth... Stacks of pending legislation were disposed of. If previous sessions have concluded with laments about the bills awaiting consideration, this time around our elected representatives waved lists of laws enacted... The result : a flurry of 'records' each an indicator of democratic vitality... Certainly, the presiding officers have imbued proceedings with a welcome focus and tenor. They lent a sympathetic ear to opposition members seeking debates on issues ranging from minimum support prices and the killing of Dalits, they demanded that the government get back on these subjects pronto. And legislators to their credit responded.

In its editorial under the caption 'Winter's Tale - Parliament Redeems Itself' the *Statesman* (27<sup>th</sup> December, 2002) commented that "Parliament's winter session came laden with more legislative business than the average Christmas tree is with decorations". Commending the role of the presiding officers of both the Houses, Shri Bhairon Singh Shekawat, the Chairman of Rajya Sabha and Shri Manohar Joshi, the Speaker of Lok Sabha in putting "their respective Houses in order", it referred to their "...good planning and gentle goading" which "...turned Parliament into what it should be... a place where MPs pass bills, where the Opposition questions and the Government answers but with civility". Expressing the "... hope that the winter session will mark a sorely needed turning point in parliamentary business..." it banked on the presiding officers to see "...more than the budget ... in the budget session."

In a spirit of give and take the concerted and all out efforts of members, the Government, the opposition parties and the Presiding Officers stood out the Winter Session of Parliament as model in projecting discipline, decorum and dignity of our legislature to the people, to the civil society and to the wider world.

### **Media and the Issue of Discipline, Decorum and Dignity of Parliament**

On 14 March 1958, our first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru while extending good wishes to the retiring members of Rajya Sabha insightfully observed that

"...Legislatures, apart from doing important work, do something. ...to set a tone ...of conflicting opinions being debated calmly, peacefully and in a friendly way... Stating that "...Parliament does set some kind of an example to the rest of the country", he added, "As we behave here to each other, towards our work, towards the general public, so to some extent others will behave elsewhere, whether in the State Legislatures or in the many other organs of self-government that exist in the country or that are growing up, right way down to that foundation of our democracy the Panchayats in villages". "Therefore", he further added, "on all of us rests this great responsibility, not only to behave as we should behave, but to remember always that a million eyes are upon us and we may not do something that brings the slightest discredit on Parliament or set a wrong line before the people".

To-day in twenty-first century with an array of innovative electronic media and information technology available, millions and in fact billions of eyes are on us. Apart from print media which gives coverage to parliamentary proceedings there is now electronic media which telecast them live. People are watching the way members discharge their duties on the floor of the House. Therefore, it is all the more important that dignity, decency and decorum of the House are maintained, lest people lose their faith in their representatives and the representative institutions.

In upholding the dignity of Parliament media has an important role to play. It is true that exposing the activities of members on the floor of the House to public through media should have a salutary influence on their conduct. While doing so media must also take care not to glorify the misdeeds or project indisciplined behaviour and shouting as the acts of modern day heroes who are defying the law and tradition for a so-called greater cause. The perception of people about Parliament depends a lot among other things, on the media projections. The Second Report on the Modernisation of the House of Commons which has been referred to earlier also states that "In many ways these perceptions reflect not the way Parliament actually behaves but the way media report it. News reports of proceedings in Parliament tend to fixate with moments of confrontation and conflict. The comparative neglect of humdrum, serious business of Parliament, both in the Chamber and in Committee, leaves the public with an unbalanced perception of the work of MPs".

These observations are also applicable in case of many other countries including India. Like members of Parliament who need orientation programmes to get acquainted with parliamentary work, media also needs to change and orient its approach and focus on the bright spots of parliamentary functioning to highlight many unspectacular but significant observations of many Committee reports which normally are adopted after serious deliberations away from the glare of media.

The BBC research into Public Disillusion with Politics produced a report entitled "Beyond the Soundbite". Self-critically examining the role of BBC it observed, "The message... is that, like Westminster, we haven't kept in touch with the issues that matter to the people, and so we too can appear less relevant." One of its major research findings revealed that "The current political process and its media coverage gives in output, but

not outcomes". "To relaunch democracy" the BBC research further states that, "a shot in the arm is needed to make a large section of the electorate realise the value of democracy and reappraise what is currently perceived to be 'a bunch of self-serving dispassionate gray suits sitting around in a stunning archaic building, intent on agreeing to disagree'. Therefore, the BBC has taken a decision to orient its approach, in its own words, to "make politics more accessible for all" and to "fulfil the fundamental objective of re-democratising democracy, to make it work and make it valued".

In the Indian context also media has a national responsibility to report successful outcomes, as it did in case of the Winter Session of Parliament, and also to unearth many successful activities of Parliament which go on behind the scenes and report them so that people come to know about them and value them and repose faith in the parliamentary democracy. In a significant survey of political attitudes conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies it has been found that it is poor and deprived people who defend democracy more vigorously than the affluents and elites. Our media has therefore, the bigger responsibility to address the functioning of Parliament and its dignity, decency and decorum so that ordinary people's faith is revitalised and reinvigorated.

### **Conclusion**

Decency, decorum and dignity of legislative bodies must be safeguarded. Breach of these values need to be seen as an aberration and corrective measures must be taken to find remedies to them. These breaches are discordant notes in the symphony of democracy and need to be appropriately modulated for the rhythmic flow of our evolutionary democracy. Parliament as the highest forum of democracy has provided wonderful opportunities for scintillating debates and discussions with lively display of wit and humour. There are numerous such occasions which outshine the moments of disorder and bedlam. We must get over the cynicism and focus on our successful outcomes of Parliament which are available in ample measure and which need to be projected and disseminated among people. As we evolve we will face problems and avail of opportunities to correct those problems to reach higher stages of evolution and functioning. As early as 1917, Mahatma Gandhi referring to the future Parliament of India wrote:

What then would our Parliament do if we had one? When we have it, we would have a right to commit blunders and to correct them. In the early stages we are bound to make blunders... He who has no right to err can never go forward. The history of the Commons is a history of the blunders... The freedom to err and the power to correct errors is one definition of Swaraj.

We have evolved through our mistakes, our accomplishments and through application of our talents to rectify those mistakes and further deepen those accomplishments. And we will continue to do that. These are the lessons we have got, through our centuries of struggle centering around decency, decorum and dignity. We will build on those lessons with a positive frame of mind.

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