

POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

THE world's largest democracy. There is not a visiting president, prime minister or prince who fails to utter those four words, as President Obama did recently while addressing MPs in the high-domed Central Hall, or others do at official banquets. But a cursory glance at what has been going on inside Parliament in recent times makes such platitudes seem mind-numbing. The Rajya Sabha and the Lok Sabha are supposed to be democratic fora for healthy debate, discussion and dialogue but of late they have been turned into platforms to fight mean political battles.

I have with me data compiled by PRS Legislative Research on the winter session of Parliament that opened with Obama's address to the joint session. It makes for startling reading. In the first 11 days of this session, the Lok Sabha was scheduled to conduct business for 66 hours; it did for exactly five hours and 37 minutes. Fifty-five hours of business were scheduled in the Upper House but it functioned for precisely an hour and 14 minutes. That's a work rate of 9 per cent and 2 per cent respectively, the kind that would permanently put you out of business if you were in industry or in the private sector. But then this is Parliament.



Sonia Gandhi

Something is terribly wrong with the health of our parliamentary democracy and I won't be surprised if, watching the proceedings on TV, more and more Indians begin to doubt the ability of their MPs to provide answers to the many problems troubling them. The records show that MPs have little or no interest in fulfilling their primary duty, which is to legislate. Just take a look at their record this year alone. During the budget session, on eight out of 32 days, the Lok Sabha met for less than an hour; the Upper House met for an hour or less on nine days.

During the budget session, 27 Bills were listed for legislation, but only six were passed by both houses. Among those, 40 per cent were passed without discussion. Some of the Bills were passed after a mere 15-minute debate while the Lok Sabha passed the Gratuity Amendment Bill and Clinical Establishment Bills within the space of five minutes one afternoon. During Question Hour in the Rajya Sabha, on nearly half the days, not a single question could be answered orally by ministers and of the total 620 starred questions, only 92 were called in the house. That's just 14 per cent.

The performance during the monsoon session was no less distressing. On eight of the 26 days, the Lok Sabha met for less than two hours each and during question hour, only 10 per cent of the questions were answered orally. The Lok Sabha also saw nearly half the Bills brought before the

house being passed within two hours after its introduction. 64 Lok Sabha MPs did not put up any question or private members Bill or take part in any debate; in the Rajya Sabha, 34 members similarly did not participate in any deliberation in the house.

The only redeeming feature in the otherwise gloomy set of statistics is that attendance in both houses during the session was higher than in the previous session.

If anything, this proves that the MPs trooped in every morning not to debate or discuss but to disrupt. It was not too long ago that all parties had unanimously resolved not to disrupt proceed-

ings by rushing to the well of the house. But the well has these days become the epicenter of parliamentary activity where frayed tempers dominate and occasionally fisticuffs are witnessed.

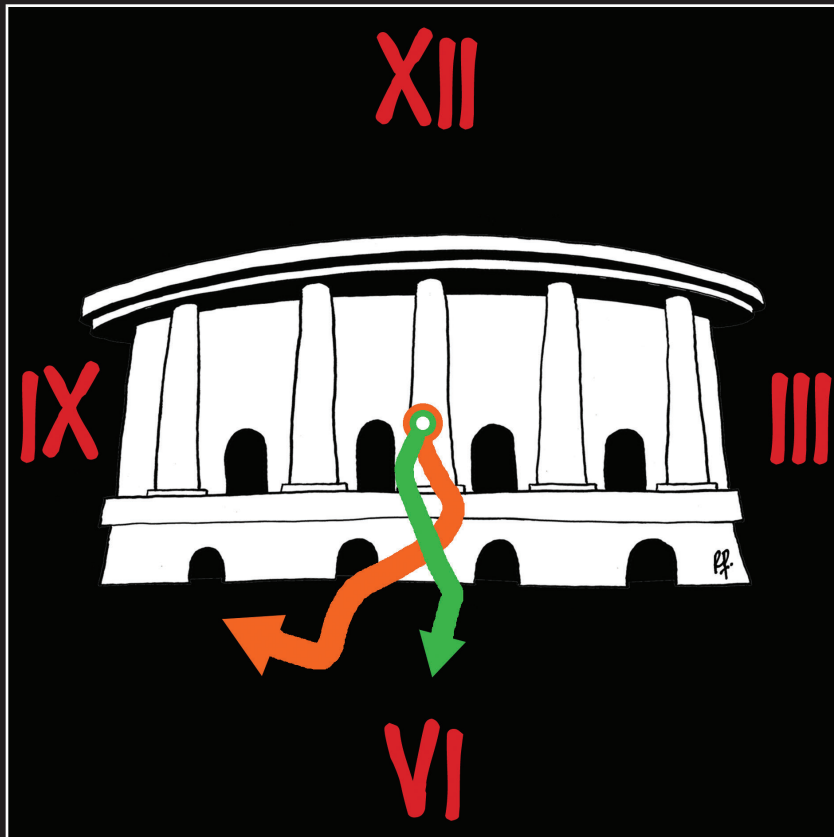
What's worse, earlier it were the smaller parties with less than a handful of members that trooped into the well to get noticed. Nowadays it is the main opposition party with more than a 100 members that takes to the well. When that happens, even the Speaker is resigned to kissing goodbye to the day's business. Someone once said that every parliamentary deadlock is finally resolved after some give-and-take with the government having

its way but only after the Opposition has had its say. But what we are seeing now is an Opposition that has little to say and a government that's looking for a way out of a never-ending gridlock.

That's why I feel Sonia Gandhi needs to be lauded for asking her party MPs not to avail of the daily allowance of ₹2,000 as long as proceedings remain disrupted. For 800 members of both house, it amounts to ₹16 lakh a day, a pittance in these scam filled days. Have no doubt, it is no symbolic gesture. It's meant to tire out the Opposition and force the disruptionists to ask themselves if, as MPs, they deserve the prefix "honourable".

ORDER ORDER

R. PRASAD



BJP must not undermine CMs in spite of Bihar result

I CAN understand Nitish Kumar wanting to flaunt his secular credentials by keeping all BJP chief ministers out of the campaign for the recent assembly elections. But I was surprised that none of them was invited for the swearing in of the first ever NDA government in a state to be re-elected. The BJP's state icons such as Narendra Modi, P.K. Dhumal, Raman Singh, Shivraj Singh Chauhan, B.S. Yeddyurappa and Ramesh Pokhriyal were all conspicuous by their absence last Friday when Nitish and his deputy, the BJP's Sushil Modi took oath of office in Patna.

This is a departure from the past when all BJP chief ministers made it a point to be present when one of their own was taking office. Instead, the spotlight this time was, deservedly so on Nitish, and quite undeservedly, on the handful of central leaders from 11 Ashoka Road though their contribution to Nitish's victory can be a point of debate. L.K. Advani, Nitin Gadkari, Rajnath Singh, Sushma Swaraj, Arun Jaitley and a handful of lesser leaders were all there. So is the new line-up making a pitch for a "secular" BJP in the light of the fact that even Muslims who otherwise keep an arm's length from the party chose to vote in large numbers for the NDA. One school of thought within the BJP has it that this is the party of the future. As the leader of the NDA, it could attract many regional parties into its fold, as was the case during the Vajpayee regime. Many allies of that period have since found better sanctuary elsewhere, leaving the BJP a bit out in the cold, but Bihar has shown that there is still hope.

The next round of elections will show whether this is a sound strategy. My own hunch is that the Bihar experiment cannot be replicated elsewhere and in the next Lok Sabha elections, the party will have to fall back on its tried and tested leaders in the states to deliver the numbers.

IF you can't beat them, at least join hands seems to be the new AICC motto, at least as far as two southern states are concerned. In Andhra, the Congress is in the midst of a fratricidal war and despite installing a new, young chief minister, it is trying to get all the help it can from anyone who is willing to help to stay afloat.

In Tamil Nadu, its alliance with the DMK is uneasy at best and a search for a new partner will do no harm, senior leaders feel. In both states where filmdom dominates every sphere of public life, the Congress's new game plan is to rope in political parties which are headed by cinema stars. With assembly elections due in Tamil Nadu next year, the party has now set its eyes on Vijayakant. Efforts are now on from one section of the Tamil Nadu Congress to bring Vijayakant closer to 10 Janpath. Soon after the winter session of Parliament is over, there are plans to bring Vijayakant over to New Delhi to meet Sonia and

Cong looks to star power to end southern discomfort

Rahul Gandhi. The party has for sometime been actively wooing the Prajarajyam Chief and Telugu superstar Chiranjeevi and the AICC is encouraged by the response after a two-hour meeting that Ahmed Patel and Veerappa Moily had with the

Vijayakant



actor recently. Obviously, Vijayakant has been acting pricey, because this is the fifth meeting that the Congress duo had with him in recent months.

Is the overt courting of the film star an indication that the Congress has decided to get rid of the baggage that is the DMK, particularly in the light of the 2G scam that has cost the party dearly? Vijayakant floated his party, the DMK on the eve of the last assembly elections. It did not do as spectacularly as the film star expected but nevertheless with a 10 per cent vote share, has the potential to tilt the scales. Vijayakant recently said that his party was open to alliance with anyone except the DMK. Already, the AIADMK is actively wooing him. Having spurned the AIADMK's offer of support, the Congress is also now actively wooing the actor. We will wait and see who gets the prize catch?

THE political turmoil in our neighbourhood is taking its toll on the establishment at home. Going by the diplomatic buzz, the abject failure of our mission in Kathmandu is triggering off a major reshuffle in the Foreign Office and many missions in strategically important capitals around the world such as Moscow, Tokyo, Tehran and Kathmandu will soon have new ambassadors. I understand that Rakesh Sood, an otherwise brilliant officer who has had a rather ineffective tenure in the Nepalese capital is being recalled for posting as one of the Secretaries in the ministry of external affairs. He is likely to be replaced by Jayant Prasad, additional secretary at HQ.

P.S. Raghavan, a Joint Secretary in the PMO during the Vajpayee regime will most likely be on his way soon as envoy to Moscow. The most significant of the many changes will be that of Alok Prasad, the former ambassador to Sri Lanka and current deputy national security adviser who was widely tipped to succeed Nirupama Rao as the next foreign secretary. His hopes were dashed once when last month the government gave Nirupama a seven-month extension. It now appears that Alok will be sent as envoy to Tokyo. In that case, a dark horse will emerge for the top foreign office job, or Nirupama will get yet another extension. That will be no surprise because, in the current dispensation, no Malayalee has ever retired or not got a sinecure.