



POWER & POLITICS

PRABHU CHAWLA

ONE MORE Parliament session has ended and once again it is time for the aam aadmi to wonder if they have wasted their time and energy queuing up to vote for a bunch of representatives whose behavior can, at best, be termed as irresponsible. Of all the sessions, the budget session is the most important one where the government seriously seeks to take the opposition along to have as much business transacted as possible.

I have been indulging in Parliament gazing for over 35 years and I have reason to believe that current session which began on February 22 and ended last Friday has set many records and created many unhealthy political practices. In saying this, I am merely quoting the presiding officers of the two houses and this is what they said in their valedictory speeches:

The Vice-President and Rajya Sabha Chairman Hamid Ansari said that one "cannot avoid the impression that much time was lost in disruptions and adjournments. ...The trends in the conduct of business have invited adverse comments and lowered the image of the legislature in the eyes of the public". In the lower house, Speaker Meira Kumar was no less scathing while advocating sweeping reforms, including the shifting the question hour, and vowed to talk to all party leaders to "save the honour of the house."



Hamid Ansari

Their angst isn't misplaced. According to one study, while the First Lok Sabha devoted 49 percent of its time to legislative business, the 14th Lok Sabha devoted less than 25 percent. The study also shows that while in 2000, the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha met for 5.5 and 4.4 hours respectively every day, it had come down to 4.3 and 3.3 hours by the end of 2007. The stats of the current 15th Lok Sabha, I am sure, will paint an even more dismal picture. When you consider that each minute of Parliament costs the exchequer over Rs 26,000, it is obvious that our Parliamentary democracy comes with a hefty price tag.

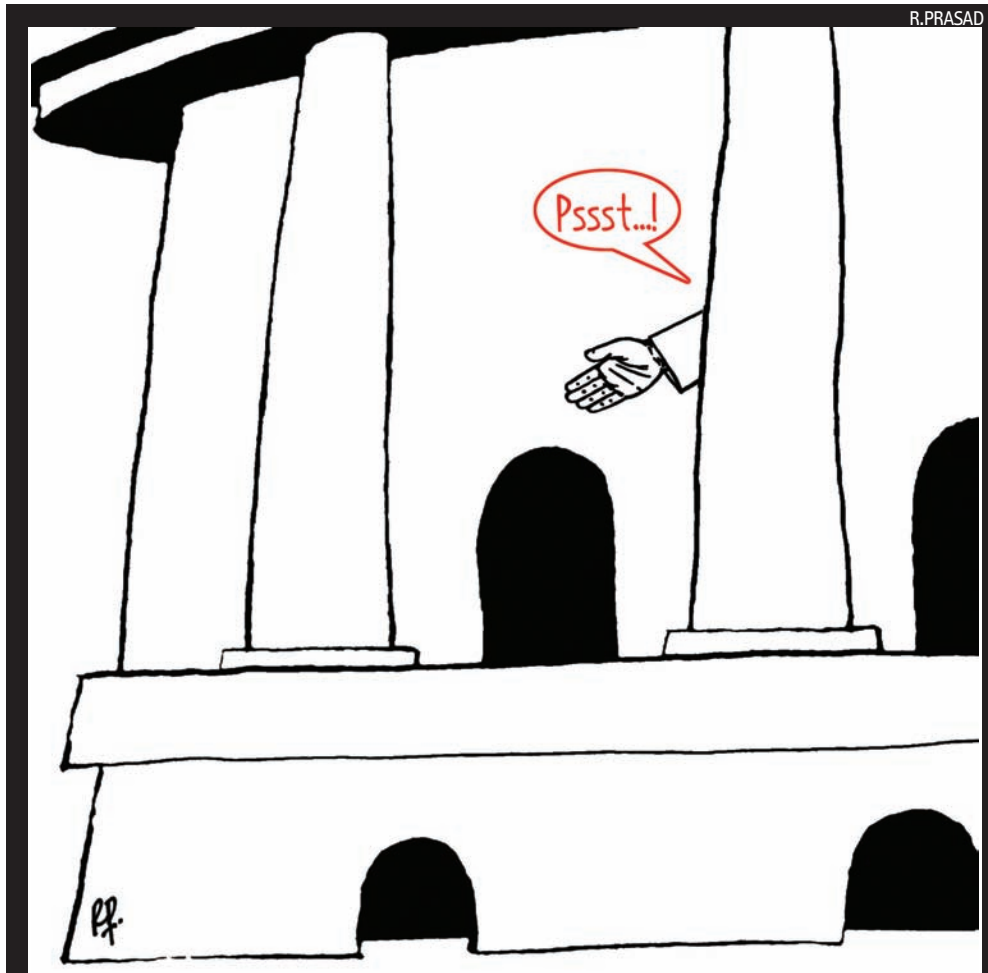
The aam aadmi who send MPs to parliament face serious difficulties in their everyday life: rising prices, deteriorating law and order, the menace of Maoism and terrorism and many more. But what do our politicians do? They cut deals so that everyone lives and lets live. All political parties including the ruling Congress struck and broke alliances to score brownie points at the cost of important legislation. For them, disrupting the proceedings of the house to seek an apology for an inadvertent remark was more important than discussing important bills that have serious ramifications. There is a decline in the seriousness with which legislative business is conducted in both houses and many bills are rushed through without any discussion

whatsoever. Even the annual budget was passed this time without much discussion. The far-reaching Prevention of Torture Bill was adopted by the Lok Sabha last Thursday with only 25 of the 543 MPs present. Other important bills like Women's Reservation and Nuclear Liability were introduced with much fanfare to be withdrawn later.

To give credit where due, it must be said that the government has weathered the parliamentary storm in a much easier way than expected. The budget session began with the entire Opposition joining forces to corner the government on a whole slew of issues from price rise

and fertiliser subsidy removal to the civil nuclear liability bill. It ended with the Opposition in disarray and the government crossing many milestones: successfully introducing the nuclear bill which will now be considered by the standing committee on energy; dividing the opposition on the caste based census as one section broke ranks and lavished praise on the regime. Be it the cut motion on the finance bill, women's reservation, nuclear liability, the foreign universities bill and so many more, the government has struck private deals with sections of the opposition to ensure its victory.

But I fear such deal making is going to come with a heavy price tag. Parliament is losing its relevance as a body meant for creating consensus on national issues. Worse, as the old entrenched leaders dominate the front rows and continue playing the game of caste and community politics, the young are confined to the backbenches to play second fiddle. Once upon a time, the backbench strength of the major parties was such that titans like Madhu Limaye, Pilo Mody, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Chandrashekar, Jyotirmoy Basu, Indrajit Gupta, emerged. We are more likely to see political pygmies in future.



It's all on the house

Curious 'illness' of absent MPs

MORE ON Parliament. There is much that is going wrong and MPs absenteeism is only one of them. There are some who get elected and haven't seen the inside of the House, others don't attend sessions for weeks together. Technically, any member who remains absent for 60 days or more without permission forfeits his seat, but it is seldom that the Parliamentary Committee on Absence resorts to the harsh step. A cursory glance at the report submitted to the Lok Sabha speaker by the Committee on Absence makes for interesting reading. While applying for leave, MPs have to detail the number of days for which leave is being sought and the reasons. Shibu Soren who never attended a sitting said he was ill while seeking leave from November 19, 2009 to December 12, 2009 and again from Feb 22, 2010 to March 23, 2010.

But he continued with his duties as the Jharkand chief minister in Ranchi and turned up in the Lok Sabha to bail out the government on the finance bill cut motion. As with most things about Soren, this too was bizarre as he was an ally of the BJP in Jharkand. He was granted leave for a total of 56 days. K Chandrashekar Rao of the Telengana Rashtriya Samiti applied for leave from Nov 19, 2009 to Dec 21, 2009 and then again from Feb 22, 2010 to March 16, 2010, a total of 56 days.

His application clearly stated that he was on a hunger strike for a separate state of Telengana and the CoA agreed to give him leave. Soren's party colleague Kameshwar Baitha was in jail for 33 days, leave granted. Kabir Suman (Tirunamool) claimed illness to take 20 days off but during the period, newspapers reported extensively on the Maoist sympathiser's public activities. Neither sarkari babus nor even school children would have had it so easy.

IS THE irrepressible Alagiri turning over a new leaf? It's not just the DMK leaders, but even other MPs seem to think so and the evidence is plenty. It now transpires that after Alagiri raised the banner of revolt by vowing to contest for the post of Chief Minister and president of the DMK once his father calls it a day, M Karunanidhi decided to crack the whip and a disciplinary notice was even drafted. Alagiri got wind of this and knew that if the party suspended him, DMK MPs and MLAs who swore by him would desert him, making younger brother MK Stalin, the undisputed successor. Big brother was convinced that the succession battle would be fought on a



The return of the prodigal minister

level playing field only if stayed within the party. Besides, the booty from the highly lucrative ministries that are in his charge would also come in handy to fight the cash rich Stalin. Once his aides tipped him off on disciplinary action, Alagiri flew into Delhi from Madurai, attended a cabinet meeting, sat through an

M.K. Alagiri

entire day's proceedings in the Lok Sabha and even began attending office for three hours every day.

He also seems to be taking rapid English lessons because the man who spoke nothing but his native Tamil is suddenly talking, even if in monosyllables sometimes, in English. But what surely takes the vada is this: in front of many MPs in Central Hall last week, he called to one of the canteen bearers and asked him "Aaj Kya Kya Hein Menu Mein?"

Even as those around him wondered how he had overnight managed to master the national language, Alagiri pulled out a piece of paper from his shirt pocket and held it aloft for everyone to see the question in Hindi written in the Tamil script. There were chuckles all around which turned into loud laughter when one of the MPs remarked that even national leaders routinely read out Hindi speeches written in the Roman script.

□ LATE last year, Cabinet Secretary KM Chandrashekar who is quite net savvy and an ardent votary of e-governance sent memos to secretaries of all departments about the pathetic quality of the government websites. They were pathetic in terms of design, accessibility, quality and currency of content, all of which were compounded by the obsolete technology that was used. "Today, websites are considered the virtual face of the Department in cyber space...and must accurately reflect the Department's activities and initiatives in the real world as well as offer more and more services online" his note said and asked all department Secretaries to nominate senior officers at Additional Secretary or Joint Secretary level who would ensure up-to-date and high quality content on the websites as well as ensure timely response on queries received through websites.

He has now gone a step further and has decided to give incentives to the ministries/departments that maintain the best websites. The National Informatics Centre maintains more than 450 websites relating to virtually any government department or organisation and a new software developed by NIC translates all contents into about 85 foreign languages. Prizes will be given away in November this year and the winner stands to gain a prize of one lakh rupees. As the prime minister very graciously put in recently, "e-tarakki" is a major achievement of both the NDA and UPA governments.