Parliamentary Democracy in India

Some Aspects of Its Working

C V H

Parliamentary democracy in India is for all practical purposes only nine years old, though it had its rudimentary form for nearly four decades.

During this period we have acquired considerable experience of parliamentary forms, procedures and techniques and established a number of conventions. Nevertheless there is still a number of problems relating to that system’ solutions to which have yet to be found. Some of these stem from the federal character of our Constitution, others from the need to evolve constitutional precedents appropriate to special needs.

Some of them have also an intimate bearing on the smooth functioning of Parliament or the State legislatures as representative law-making bodies, such as the place to be accorded to Opposition viewpoints and the relations that should subsist between the Treasury Benches and the opposition parties.

Lastly, there is the issue of the extent of parliamentary control over public corporations.

At the last session of the Speaker’s Conference held at Darjeeling, an attempt was made to come to grips with some of these problems. But the conclusions arrived at at such a conference have to reckon with the fundamental fact that in the working of the parliamentary system there is a constant interplay of human factors and emotions, that the predilection is for settling differences of opinion in public matters through discussion and debate and that Parliament as a law-making body has to function according to certain rules of procedure and that all sections represented in it pledge themselves to the observance of those rules and are willing to play the game fairly and justly.

It is also essential to remember that the parliamentary system is not an end in itself but the means to an end, which is the effective implementation of the democratic principles of mutual consultation, discussion and a spirit of give and take among the political parties. This is the hard way to success, but there is no easy way if the problem is considered in the perspective of the history of parliamentary system.

The apparently simple proposition may be reiterated here that the responsibility for creating and preserving these pre-conditions for the successful functioning of the parliamentary system rests squarely on political parties and on various organs of public opinion in the country representing diverse interests, which have a stake in the preservation of the fundamental postulates of democratic government, e.g. free discussion, acceptance of the majority viewpoint, a deep faith in constitutional methods for bringing about changes in such viewpoints and a firm resolve to stick to peaceful as apart from violent methods of agitation.

Jayaprakash Narayan’s Thesis

In this context, the Jayaprakash Narayan thesis that first rank leaders of Congress should assume the leadership of public opinion and create the mass enthusiasm for self-help and development, which is the bed-rock foundation for democracy and the parliamentary method of implementing it, is significant. That thesis may sound rather impractical and unrealistic in the context of the more or less irrefutable argument that in a parliamentary democracy the best, men in public life and politics should engage themselves in the work of Government because it is vitally important in the national interest that they do so. Critical of the thesis, however, miss the point that the task of laying the foundations of the democratic sys-
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tern on a firm basis is as important as, if not more important than, running the administration, and that presently, under Indian conditions, the former is as significant as the latter. If the foundations of the parliamentary system are not probably given adequate consideration to the prospect of such a development at this stage leading to a deterioration in—and probably disruption of our administration. Nor does he seem to realise that if Nehru were to leave the Government, it would shake up the governmental structure to the roots, which the country cannot afford. On the other hand, the country and its democratic constitution would gain enormously, if a large number of sincere democrats devoted themselves to the vitalisation of the democratic system at its grass roots.

Why All-Party Government?

Another of Jayaprakash Narayan's theses is that in order to ensure democracy, the Government to be established in India has to be one in which all parties believing in democratic socialism would participate. "I have suggested" he said in a statement at a New Delhi press conference on October 16, "that all the parties that profess democratic socialism should sit round a table to find out what they mean by that term and to what extent they agree, not so much in theory but in practice, about what needs to be done to create a democratic socialist India...I suggest that all the parties that are able to come to such an agreement should agree further to work together the common programme, reserving the right to propagate their respective viewpoints regarding matters where agreement had not been reached." On other occasions he commended the Yugoslav system under which a Socialist (?) party has been able to work for socialism without the kind of iron dictatorship enshrined in Soviet Russia.

Cooperative and joint action by parties believing in democratic methods to promote public interest and to involve the masses to active participation in national development is an attractive ideal. What, renders it of dubious value, however, is not so much the impediments—formidable as they are, ideological, personal and party—to agreement on joint action as its inconsistency with the acknowledged basis of the parliamentary system. That basis is the existence of two (or more) well-organised parties, having profound faith in constitutional methods of working and systematically and continuously educating public opinion on various issues of public importance. Jayaprakash has not, so far as the present writer is aware, advocated at any time the complete abrogation of the parliamentary machinery as such.

Dissolution of Parties No Solution

So long as that machinery, and the system of which it is the symbol, remain, the recognised apparatus of that system, namely, an elected Parliament, the party system, and executive responsibility to the legislature would also remain. If all the democratic parties in India agree to disband themselves, where is the prospect of the parliamentary apparatus functioning and a democratic balance being maintained among differing viewpoints? Are not these the most effective safeguard against one party or totalitarian domination? We cannot have a coalition of all democratic parties in running the government and also a democratic socialist opposition at the same time!

We cannot have an all-party (or an all-democratic party) Government without giving rise to the internal tensions and stresses which would render its stability doubtful, particularly if, while being partners in Government, each of them exercised the liberty of propagating its own viewpoint. In a national emergency, and only in a national emergency such as a war or a grave economic crisis, such a coalition would be desirable and might indeed be indispensable. But in times of peace, the conditions for successful functioning of an all-party coalition are necessarily slender, if not non-existent. On the other hand, were such a coalition possible, and if internal discord did not disrupt it, the ground would be prepared for the most important and the most powerful party to the coalition grooming itself for a sort of semi-dictatorship, which would not be very different in actual practice from a totalitarian dictatorship.

Necessity for Opposition

The need at present appears to be not so much a hotch-potch coalition, much less merger, of all democratic socialist parties as the evolution of a strong and virile opposition party to the Congress—one which takes its role seriously and earnestly, one which will command a growing amount of public support and which can, in course of time, if not immediately, replace the Congress party in office and power. Presently a serious drawback of the Indian situation is that political thought and theory in India are much in advance of the political education of the masses in democratic practices. We have drawn copiously on the political theory and practice in Great Britain but we have not prepared the soil sufficiently to ensure the full fertilisation of the British theory engrained on it. Nor have we accepted in full the implication of the American system of Separation of Powers, which in the United States of America constitutes a powerful bulwark against concentration of power either in the Legislative or the Executive organ and which has a judiciary with wide powers of interpretation of constitutional provisions, and other appropriate checks and balances to prevent either of these State organs becoming overpowerful.

Because practice has not caught with theory in India, we have a situation in which a very dominant party has been holding the reins of Power continuously for more than a decade, resting its claim to popular support on performance in the pre-freedom struggle and unable to outgrow its role in the past or to consider that the fruits of freedom should be shared by all sections of the population. The position is one of considerable complexity and is, in a sense, unique. We have a situation in which the Congress and others parties which profess faith—in various degrees in democracy and
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the parliamentary system but in which there is not much prospect of the fulfilment of the first essential condition for the success of that system, namely, the existence of a strong party which can, in a reasonable period of time, form an alternative Government. The one party which can fulfil the last condition has so far displayed only a dubious faith in democracy and parliamentary democracy in particular, while the others are mere splinter groups none of which can claim to he in the all-India picture, though they command varying degrees of support in different States.

Congress Unwilling to Help

The other significant factor is that Congress by itself is neither willing nor anxious to foster the development of any other party and help it to grow into a powerful rival all-India party which can challenge its supremacy. At Avadi it had stolen the socialist thunder by deciding on a socialist pattern of society, and at Nagpur, it has made an attempt to steal the Communist thunder with its programme of cooperative joint farming and service cooperatives, and with the fire and the brimstone it has rained against the private sector. Thus changes in the Congress programme along more and more radical lines do not afford any chance to the other parties to make headway in their distinctive economic, social, or political programmes which would be attractive to the electorate. The opposition parties find themselves stumped even before they grow to any height. They can only thunder outside and filibuster inside the legislature, but all that they can present are only the mistakes and derelictions of the Congress party and not an alternative constructive programme.

There is no indication that the position will substantially change in the next few years though it is possible that some dents may be made in the Congress position in some States and to some extent at the Centre. The resultant situation would most probably be the clustering of Parliament with a number of party groups as was the case in France during the period of the third Republic, all of them contending for a share in power and showing themselves willing to enter into ad hoc and transient coalitions which carry the seeds of disintegration within themselves. May it not be that then a new Republic of India would emerge, the complexion of which would not be the same as that of the one which we have now and which would result in a one-man dictatorship replacing the parliamentary democracy with its other antecedents? The Congress cannot certainly commit political hara kiri to help the Opposition parties to strengthen themselves. But if parliamentary democracy is to grow into a mighty tree, it is essential that the Congress and the non-Congress parties, which want it to grow should impart more intensive education to the electorate on the theory and practice of parliamentary democracy, its implications and the conditions for its success.

Education of Electorate Vital

One of the points on which such education is essential is the realisation that parliamentary democracy functions on two fronts. On one front, opportunities are afforded under the system for matters of public and national interest to be discussed under proper rules and safeguards but without restraint or inhibition, and from different viewpoints, so that a policy which would be the best in the interests of the country and of the community will emerge. On the other, it is designed to impose an effective check on the Executive by subjecting its actions and administrative decisions to constructive criticism, as a safeguard against encroachment on the liberties of individuals and groups. Constant vigilance is the price of liberty; and it is the vigilance exercised by popular representatives in Parliament and by the press and other representative organisations of public opinion that produces that desirable result.

In paying too much attention to the forms of democratic expression through Parliament, the legislatures and so on, we are probably in danger of losing the substance of democratic liberty and individual freedom. The former is undoubtedly indispensable to the latter. But if the decencies and proprieties of parliamentary system are sacrificed by the political parties at the altar of pettifogging political manoeuvres to gain some immediate political advantage, Parliament as the reflector of the will of the people will automatically cease to be the instrument for fulfilling its essential role of preserving the liberty and the rights of the individual and of concentrating attention on vital national issues. That will be a propitious situation for any ambitious person to toy with the idea of personal dictatorship.

"Party-ocracy"

We should note, with a certain misgiving, if not alarm, the fact that parliamentary democracy, in some of the newly free democratic countries, among which unfortunately India also has to be included, faces a challenge in the existence of a strong, monolithic party side by side with a number of relatively insignificant parties, which are striving for public support. Inherent in this situation is the danger of the party machine usurping, in greater and greater measure, the function which really belongs to the Government formed by the party in a majority. Major decisions of Government policy are first discussed and arrived at in party conclaves and are later brought forward before the Government in a blueprint for the latter to sign on the dotted line, as it were. This trend is noticeable in India too, both in the Centre and in the States under the Congress rule, as also in the State where the Communist party is the ruling party. This development, which has been described by Ignazio Silone as "Party-ocracy", constitutes a potent threat to the legislative supremacy of Parliament enshrined in the Constitution. The form of government is of course parliamentary but it is doubtful if it is wholly correct to say that the mainspring of political action is parliamentary.

In England, the oldest parliamentary democracy, political organisations exert considerable influence on the policies of the governments formed by their parliamentary wings. But the two party system that is its basic structure, despite the existence of a third party as a political force at certain periods, and the strong position which the party officially in the opposition occupies vis a vis the government party results in producing a balance between the two, among the mass of the electorate and within Parliament itself.

Tampering with Administration

Another portent which should be taken serious note of by Indian
political parties is the predilection, which unfortunately is widely prevalent in India, of politicians to for all their legitimate role and to exercise their influence to debauch the administrator by seeking favours personally or for their friends and relations and to influence administrative decisions by organising themselves into "lobbies" in support in certain causes or organisations a which they are interested. While Ministers are naturally willing to oblige these powerful groups within the party, there is the danger of the civil servant, who has to make an administrative decision later weighing all aspects of a matter, may find himself in a difficult position, when he comes to know that the Minister is interested in the decision. We have here the pots of administrative corruption, and what is a symptom in the beginning may become a chronic plague. Here are also the roots of disruption of the foundations of Parliamentary democracy and conditions favourable for the emergence of an Indian Ayub Khan. The brings of administration must be not undefiled if the system is not to get into disrepute and finally collapse. It was a sound instinct that Induced Shri C Rajagopalachari, when he was Chief Minister in Madras in 1950, to admonish Congress party members against approaching officials directly with requests for favours and thus to protect, to some extent, worried officials from interference in administrative matters by Congress MLAs and other influential Congressmen.

There is of course no demonstrable testimony so far that our parliamentary system is cracking up under the impact of the stresses that have led to its eclipse in some other countries recently. But the danger of such cracking up if, in the near future, we do not build up the necessary defences around its citadel by an all-round determination to ensure that the conditions for its continued vitalisation come into existence, cannot be overlooked. Even Pandit Nehru, whose robust idealism and optimism regarding the great destiny of India and her capacity to steer clear of the rocks on which the democratic system and ideals have been floundering in other countries, is one of the potential factors against infraction of anti-democratic ideas among Indians, has in some of his more recent utterances begun to evince mild scepticism whether India can altogether escape the repercussions of developments in Pakistan, Burma and other countries.

Pipes for Oil

A pipe manufacturing plant is proposed to be set up at Rourkela Steel Works. Pipes will be needed to transport crude oil and gas from Naharkatiya to the two refineries to be set up, one in Assam—either at Kikrajhar or at Silghat, as recommended by Rumanian experts, the other at Barauni in Bihar, 800 miles away from the wells. It is estimated that over a hundred million cubic feet of gas per day could be produced in Naharkatiya oilfields.

The pipe plant is expected to go into production by the middle of 1961. The capacity of, and types of pipes to be manufactured at the plant have yet to be determined. Broadly, there are four varieties of pipes; the first to pump oil from the wells and the other three for transportation of crude oil, petroleum products and gas.

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