

The Utility of Futility: Requiem for a Washed-Out Parliament Session

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For a government that constantly measures the ‘productivity’ of parliament in terms of hours or minutes wasted in non legislative business, this Budget session that has just ended ‘sine die’ would normally have been really heart-breaking. Data just released shows that Lok Sabha’s productivity had fallen from 83.8% in the first part of the Budget session that ended in February to just 5.29% in the second part in March-April. Over 96 hours and 13 minutes were lost to disruptions in the Lok Sabha, while they claimed 103 hours and 30 minutes in the Rajya Sabha. Whatever Modi and his captive media may propagate, Houses of parliament are not some sort of industrial assembly lines of production where machines and numbers matter the most. What is not noticed is despite its apparent futility, this latter part of the Budget session has been extremely productive in bringing the Opposition together.

As is known to all the entire pandemonium was engineered by the government side itself, not by the Opposition. Treasury benches were directed to ensure that both the forenoon and afternoon sessions every day were sent to the cleaners — without fail. Old parliament hands were taken aback such belligerent Treasury benches that rose like clockwork as soon as the houses assembled and shout at top of their voices —for the Opposition to “ask for forgiveness”. For what? For some statement made by Rahul Gandhi in Cambridge which the ruling BJP felt was improper and was an insult to India. Hyper nationalists who take umbrage at the slightest perceived umbrage conveniently forget that they had stayed far away from the national freedom struggle when the masses were out in the streets, facing physical assaults from the Imperial forces and thousands more suffered in jails. This is when the only important Hindu nationalist leader sent to jail cringed before the Viceroy and a Hindu Mahasabha minister formally proposed to assist the British Governor of Bengal to crush the Quit India movement. Those whose political ancestors had staunchly opposed the tricolour as evil, harass others today for not giving due respect to the national flag.

The Chair in both houses adjourned the proceedings just a few minutes after the government-sponsored bedlam began and found that it is easier to chide the Opposition than control explosive Treasury benches. It became clear that BJP MPs had been directed to be hell bent in not allowing the Opposition’s demand for any discussion on the Prime Minister’s deep links with the Adani group. This sustained bullying of the parliamentary process and PM Modi’s unquestionably intimidatory manner could hardly camouflage his dread of getting caught before the 2024 elections. He had never hidden his sheer contempt for parliamentary democracy by not participating even once in any debate in the proper sense of the term, or in replying ever to a

parliament question directed at him. He had done his best to reduce the days of sittings of both houses and either invited or welcomed turmoil — so that he could slip in and get passed by voice votes important pieces of legislation, all in just 3 or 4 minutes. The fact that Modi abhorred democratic discussion also resulted in the reduction of the number of Bills sent to the Joint Select or the concerned Standing Committees for detailed examination. Their percentage dropped from 70 during UPA days to 10 or 20.

Usually, the Treasury benches open backroom channels to restore order in parliament, but in March, there was no question or intention for any such normalcy. The Opposition put up with it all, including the threatening glass-shattering slogans of “Mo-dee! Mo-dee!” by shouting counter slogans demanding “JPC! JPC! We demand a JPC!” — calling for a Joint Parliamentary Committee into the Modi-Adani scam.

It For two long weeks, from Monday the 13th of March, the same scene persisted — during which members attended parliament only to be shouted down as per plan and the houses getting adjourned once after 11 am and then at 2 pm — with methodical regularity. The Opposition started serious discussions on how to seize the initiative— especially when government quietly passed the Finance Bill in the Lok Sabha amidst its self-created din, with no discussion whatsoever on the 24th of March.

But this date marked the turning point, as Modi imagined that he was moving to the kill, by disqualifying Rahul Gandhi’s membership of the Lok Sabha a day after he had been convicted by a lower court in Modi’s Gujarat. The magistrate at Surat not only upheld that Gandhi had made an alleged defamatory remark in Kolar, Karnataka— some four years ago — but gave him the maximum sentence of two years’ imprisonment. It was all so convenient, as ‘two years’ conviction’ makes an MP liable to be disqualified from the membership of parliament, and it was imperative that Gandhi be taught a lesson for attacking the PM for favouring the Adani group. Others had also attacked the Modi-Adani relationship but convicting the chief leader of the largest Opposition party and dismissing him in one breath from the membership of parliament was intended to be very Modiesque in its swiftness, brutality and severity. The action on Rahul, however, produced just the opposite result. The real Modi was now clear to all parties that realised that he would pick them up, one by one, and decimate them. In any case, by using and misusing the Central investigation agencies quite blatantly and roughly on every Opposition party, he had bared his fangs, wide enough for these parties to come to some understanding.

This crude hammer-blow on Gandhi was the final straw and it produced just the opposite reaction — it managed to unite the Opposition, after several years. There were many attempts in the recent past to get all the non-BJP forces together but there were (and are) a lot of reasons why this was not happening. Over the years, the Left parties and the DMK were steadfastly with the Congress, and parties like Sharad Pawar’s NCP had come closer. Laloo Prasad’s RJD and the Janata Dals —Secular and United — also joined the Congress on many issues. But the Trinamool Con-

gress, the Samajwadi Party, the Aam Aadmi Party and the Bharatiya Rashtriya Samiti (BRS of Telengana, earlier known as TRS) had severe issues with the Congress High Command and its style of functioning as well on some of its unilateral decisions. But over the weekend, all Opposition parties decided that Modi was the primary enemy.

On Monday the 27th, the Opposition decided to talk together and walk together — straight out of parliament to Vijay Chowk, where they put up a rare show of unity, in the blazing heat. The evening meeting of all Opposition parties passed on the message that Modi was most apprehensive about — far from being frightened, the Opposition was getting its act together. Narendra Modi loves to dress up in military fatigues with a cocked hat, and imagines himself to be some calculative General who could scatter his foes and to force them to sue for peace. He woke up to see a united formation emerge largely thanks to his self-goal. The reinvigorated Opposition rose together and ensured that until Modi relented and ordered a serious enquiry into Adani's transactions, the houses could remain adjourned — come what may.

The Adani issue is critical to both Modi and the Opposition. Modi knows better than anyone else how money matters in politics— whether it be to organise rallies or for any elections. He has obviously secured his arrangements, with big capital, in a neat, non-messy manner — while others still handle large amounts of raw cash — and are susceptible to raids by Central agencies, at the drop of a hat. The same agencies, of course, look the other way as MLAs are bought over, obviously with blinding cash deals. The BJP has already formed several governments by engineering defections. Be that as it may, no business house donates cash without a quid pro quo and many deals and trails that were known mainly to the whisperatti in Delhi and Mumbai have now come out in the open, thanks to Hindenburg. More important is the fact that investigators and fact-checkers have found their voice back.

And, many of these findings were aired by Rahul Gandhi and others in parliament— though Gandhi grabbed all mileage — and many allegations traversed from rumours to respectability. A parliament session compels the leaders of political parties to come together in Delhi — in the very normal course of business and without attracting wild speculations. This session needs to thank Modi for his obstinacy in seeing it till the end with no early sine die adjournment (after a long, long time) just to prove he is not rattled. He has thus held the Opposition together in Delhi, most inadvertently, and facilitated new alliances, understandings and hopes.