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A Parliament Adjourned

NIRMALANGSHU MUKHERJI

Department of philosophy
Delhi university

The Indian Parliament took the exceptional, though not unprecedented, step of adjourning sine die two days in advance. On the face of it, the decision looks inconsequential. A closer examination of the context of this decision, however, reveals uncomfortable features of current Parliamentary democracy in India.

Ostensibly, the Prime minister of India, who is also the leader of the house, took this decision in consultation with the entire opposition, including the congress and the left, to maintain a show of 'national unity' in the face of the terrorist attack on Parliament on 13 December. No other reason has been offered. Several days into the decision, there is virtually no reaction from the mainstream media suggesting that the free press has opted to follow suit without even a cursory question.

The winter session of Parliament is a short one anyway. A number of days of this session were already lost on account of two separate protests raised by the opposition. Interestingly, both the protests concerned unsavoury aspects of the functioning of the defense ministry: the induction of scam-tainted George Fernandes as minister, and the scathing report of CAG on purchases during the Kargil war. The nation, the opposition justly demanded, wanted to know if it is safe in these hands. Although December 13 brought a temporary halt to these protests, one would have expected the government to inform the nation via the Parliament on how it was planning to tackle the new situation, given the record of its personnel. While governments typically use the rhetoric of war to hide from their sins, one would have expected the opposition, especially the left, to use the remaining period of this Lok Sabha to extract and debate the government's view on the dangerous situation.

However, even before the nation was able to collect its wits after December 13, the house of the people itself was adjourned. The implication clearly is that a *sitting* Parliament is not viewed as a platform of 'national unity'; in fact, it is viewed as a hindrance for facing upto the current 'critical situation'. Sonia Gandhi, the leader of the opposition, in fact said so: at this hour, she said, we should not display the 'divisive' features of 'pluralist society'. A pluralist society is then viewed as incompatible with

'national unity'. Despite the ominous war-cries of the members of the ruling BJP and the contradictory signals emanating from the Prime Minister and the Home Minister, the opposition, in effect, allowed the government to do whatever it wants.

We turn to the role of the official political parties later. The role of the media is particularly revealing. The same media routinely and justly harps on the irresponsible behaviour of the members of Parliament by listing the loss of hours during a session, the cost to the nation per hour of non-functioning, the non-tabling and non-adoption of urgent bills affecting the lives of millions, the passage of important bills without any discussion, and so forth. This time as well a number of important bills concerning health, education, jobs, housing, and the like were pending before the Parliament. Everything has now been shelved for several months, yet the media does not seem to mind.

More significantly, the media applauded the stable and vibrant character of Indian democracy as the Parliament duly resumed work on 14 December itself: 'When Parliament functioned in a normal manner on December 14, it clearly demonstrated the nation's resolve not to flinch in the face of terror. The terrorist's objective is to effect a breakdown of normal life. Proceeding with business as usual is the most fitting rebuff to his nefarious intentions' (Times of India, Editorial, 21 December). Yet no eyebrows were raised when the rebuff was abruptly brought to a halt within a few days.

In effect then the terrorist attack has been able to upset the 'seat' of Indian democracy for now. The decision to shut down the Parliament would have been justified if the attack indeed resulted in massive damage of infrastructure or of lives, or if it led to wide unrest in different parts of the country requiring immediate attention of the concerned MPs. The terrorists no doubt wanted all this to happen. Unarmed and ill-equipped security people gave their lives to prevent damage to the building and the people, including the MPs, working inside it. The rest of the nation, instead of bursting into uncontrolled rage, simply expressed grief in the loss of lives with admirable restraint.

The parallels with the events following 9/11 cannot be missed. There is some evidence that the passengers of at least one hijacked plane forced it to crash in a field; they died in saving some major national institutions. Policemen and firefighters of New York rushed in immediately to help the people caught up in the twin towers – saving many and dying in the process. Apart from a few and isolated incidents of attacks on members of a minority community, the American people in general showed exemplary restraint. There were many reports of white Americans protecting the Arabs, and queuing up in Arab restaurants to promote their business. This world continues to be livable because people, even in the face

of extreme provocation, generally act like that. This is the reason why terrorists of all shades work in small groups, and hide from the masses.

The parallels work for the leaders also. We saw what the Indian MPs did *en masse* – left, right and center. With the sole exception of one courageous woman, the entire Congress and the Senate of US lined up to authorize the administration to do whatever it wanted. The voice of the people which called for restraint, and which was soon articulated by waves of anti-war demonstrations across the country, was simply ignored. Further, just like the US, the Indian administration found its enemy within hours of the attack; plans of a violent retaliation was advertized with the help of the media without disclosing any credible evidence. Recall that the Taliban condemned 9/11 and offered assistance on the basis of credible evidence. So did Pakistan. In both cases, the offers of peace were summarily rejected and all forms of dialogue scuttled from the beginning.

However, the parallels end there. India is no US, and Pakistan is no Afghanistan. The global control of resources, and the privileges that accrue thereof, bind every section of American policy-makers, including its Congressmen and Senators, in a tight nuclear core. Drifting in the periphery of world-power, policy-makers in India enjoy a degree of freedom and diversity that is unthinkable in most Western democracies. For example, the Indian Parliament and the State assemblies have always witnessed an active presence of various shades of the left and representations of lower castes. It was not easy to enforce obedience or even homogeneity of opinion in such a Parliament. Indira Gandhi tried it for some months and ended up in jail.

Moreover, as noted, the alleged adversary is no pushover. Even the generals are suggesting restraint: you need air superiority to strike your enemy at will, you need advanced technology and weaponry for precise targetting, etc. Plus, Pakistan has nuclear weapons. Thus, the likes of Colin Powell also advised restraint while carpet-bombing of Tora Bora was still going on. There is no need to worry about an imminent war between India and Pakistan. Anxious enumeration of possible fallouts of a Indo-Pak war (Praful Bidwai, SACW, December 21), though eminently credible in the long run, is beside the point for now. Even a partial war at this stage will upset US's designs in the region; hence, it is not going to take place. (As these lines were written, news came in that the US has ordered Pakistan to close down and dismantle the jihadi outfits in Pakistan named by India; the order was immediately obeyed). There is no prospect of a full-scale war, and thus no national emergency in sight, except in the imagination of hindutva zealots who would want to use this opportunity to destroy an entire nation.

The upshot is that, both in terms of scale and locale, the gruesome events of December 13 just do not induce the kind of absolute obedience to a military command witnessed after 9/11 in US. What then explains the closure of the Parliament on the pretext of 'national unity'? Since all sections of the polity followed the decision with a deafening silence, no informed answer to the query is currently available. We can only make some guesses.

A first guess is that the decision was taken solely out of fear of another, perhaps more decisive, attack. Once the rituals of paying homage to the martyrs, followed by the Prime and Home Minister's expected speeches, were over, the MPs were in no mood to place their precious lives to further risk. Although a larger part of the capital's security system is devoted to protect its VIPs, an impression has been aired – just as in US – that the open and friendly nature of our public institutions also make them leaky and vulnerable; as if, ideally, the leaders would want these to be more like army citadels. By any measure, the vicious attack on the Assembly in Srinagar in October far exceeded the massacre in Delhi. Yet Delhi is where the big leaders deliberate on the future of the nation. So, until large-scale security refurbishments are effected at the expense of the taxpayer, the big leaders preferred to stay home surrounded by their Z+ or Z++ categories of security cover. Recall the movements of Dick Cheney from one bunker to another, and Bush's flight to the stratosphere, as burning people jumped out of the collapsing towers. The fact remains that hundreds of common citizens have fallen victim to terrorist attacks in unprotected buses, markets, and streets in Delhi, in part because of the massive diversion of security to the VIPs. In targetting the latter and getting the Parliament adjourned in advance, the terrorists proved their point in no small measure.

A more sinister guess, perhaps closer to truth, is that the otherwise 'divisive' interests of a 'pluralist' Parliament found a handy convergence as the government made the proposal of adjournment. In some dark sense, under this conjecture, when the going gets tough, the cherished pluralism of the Parliament disappears in smoke. This is what democracy in India has come to mean in recent times. It also shows who the Parliament is for. The point can be illustrated from a variety of directions – uniform obedience to US, for example, despite the rhetoric. Perhaps the most significant of them is the issue of POTO, the prevention of terrorism ordinance.

It is well-known that the ordinance was issued by the government soon after 9/11 to gain the maximum mileage from the political fallout of that event in India. Since the essentially communal target of this ordinance is difficult to miss, the ostensibly secular opposition, including the official left, were compelled to oppose it. However, it was quite clear that,

except for the fringe elements of the radical intelligentsia, the ordinance enjoyed wide support in the urban middle and upper classes. By law, the government was required to place it before the next session of the Parliament. The opposition decided to block its passage during the session.

The events of December 13 placed the opposition in a dilemma. The terrorist attacks were viewed as an attack on the nation itself, and the urban support from the mentioned classes grew rapidly in favour of the ordinance. If the ordinance was now placed before the House, the opposition had to defeat it to maintain its credibility. But the action was sure to be advertized as anti-national by the ruling formation in the long run. In the short term, however, the defeat of POTO in the Parliament would have weakened the government's current belligerent postures. It is important to note that all the alleged perpetrators of 13 December, who are alive and could be arrested, have been booked under this ordinance.

In fact, in view of the mood of the relevant public, the support for the ordinance was beginning to come from sections of the opposition itself. Many states, ruled by parties of the opposition, either have a similar law in force or were contemplating to introduce one. In West Bengal, the CPI(M), which enjoys overwhelming majority in the ruling left coalition, insisted on an ordinance titled POCO (Prevention of Organized Crime Ordinance) which looked alarmingly similar to POTO, as disenchantment to the left rule in that state began to assume threatening forms. POCO had to be shelved for now because the rest of ruling front sensed in time how the guns were turning.

The adjournment of the Parliament meant that everybody can now sleep over this complex problem. As the Bill could not be introduced in Parliament, the ordinance will duly lapse for the government to issue it again in time. Its *defeat* would have blocked its issuance for ever. For several months now, the government is free to use it as it wants while the aggressive postures towards Pakistan take a variety of forms – falling short of an actual war of course, as suggested above. This will enable the ruling formation to divert the attention of the nation from myriads of misdeeds committed in the recent past, hopefully till the ensuing elections.

The opposition can conveniently sit on the fence. It retains the freedom to criticize the government when the 'excesses' of POTO and military misadventures come to light, while claiming at the same time that it joined the government in a spirit of 'national unity' to allow it to act freely at this 'critical moment'. In an act of ill-concealed complicity thus, the government and the opposition joined hands to satisfy the demands of a small minority of the population, from where the nation's opinion and policy makers come from. Fattened

with the fruits of reforms and globalization, this section of the people now represent a distinct homogeneity in the otherwise 'pluralist', 'divisive' India. Rhetoric will continue to harp on this pluralism. Actions are different.

Nirmalangshu Mukherji