

What ails India's Parliamentary Democracy

Dr R K Pachauri, September 23, 2011

The Indian parliamentary system has evolved since Independence through phases which at times create despair and even disgust as well as periods when your faith in the system is fully restored. The whole set of developments related to Mr Anna Hazare's movement for a Bill that would establish an independent ombudsman has created a stir throughout the country. Indeed, what this social worker from Ralegan Siddhi has been able to do is quite remarkable, and certainly reflects the sentiment of people across the country. The question to ask is why our system and the way Parliament and the government function did not address this mounting problem all these years! Something similar is also seen in the actions of our judiciary which has taken up a lot of space on environmental issues, simply because the executive branch of the government has proved inadequate and incapable of resolving the conflict between environment and development. To my mind part of the problem lies in a decline in the quality of debate that takes place in Parliament. In a parliamentary democracy like ours it is that house which is supreme, and therefore, if leadership and direction has to be provided, it must come from the intellectual leadership emanating from parliamentary debate. Time was when attending a session of Parliament was an education in itself. I had that opportunity in my teens, and was so deeply impressed and moved by the eloquent and well researched issues articulated on the floor of the House, that what we see today is a babel of confusion, contradiction and chaos.

It seems to me that somewhere people have been overtaken by short-term individual interests or representation of larger vested interests. As a result, we have lost sight of what would be important for the country as a whole, and therefore, very little effort is put into understanding, much less researching into, what would really benefit society at large. One unfortunate outcome of this trend is also a shortening of attention spans of our leaders, who just will not focus on issues of substance, even if you talk to them on matters of importance. Unfortunately, we have shining exceptions to this general rule like our Prime Minister who is deeply attentive and follows every word of what he hears, and of course, he is also an avid reader. Another example that I have found is Mr Nitish Kumar, Chief Minister of Bihar. However, the caliber of members of Parliament deviates from the standards set by these exceptional leaders. I wonder what an institution like TERI can do to radically alter current trends which are clearly not in the interests of Indian society. Is there some way that we could provide intellectually stimulating inputs in a manner that is interesting and easily absorbed, such that parliamentarians focus on some of the issues that matter?