

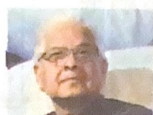
India's democracy, diminished and declining

The captivating Republic Day parade in January this year showcased the nation's soft and hard power, sending out a message to the world of India's arrival on the global scene. President Droupadi Murmu's customary address to the Houses of Parliament during the Budget session, again in January, unfolded the government's ambitious agenda and a shared national aspiration to join the ranks of the developed nations in the near future. But the truth about India's declining democracy has taken the sheen away from an otherwise impressive story of the nation's significant accomplishments.

An erosion of engagement

Recurring reports about constitutional transgressions interrogate the depth and the quality of our democratic engagement. In recent days, the expunging of parliamentary statements of Opposition leaders, which is questionable, the disruption of the Prime Minister's speech in the Rajya Sabha, the disproportionate penalty of suspension imposed on an Opposition MP for recording the proceedings of the House, and exceptions apart, the nauseating puerilities of the people's representatives, have denuded Parliament of its institutional sanctity. The suicide of an 18-year-old Dalit student in one of the country's premier educational institutions because of 'unbearable distress' (allegedly on account of caste discrimination) and a 16-year-old Dalit student being beaten up by his principal as the boy is said to have drunk water from the principal's water bottle, are painful reminders of the persistence of historical and social inequities.

The conviction and the sentencing by a court in Uttar Pradesh of a sitting Member of the Legislative Assembly (Opposition party) for a two-year jail term in a 15-year-old case for blocking a road is perverse, considering the



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disproportionality of the sentence and its resultant consequence of depriving an elected member of his seat in the State Assembly. The oppressive reality of prosecutorial processes is writ large. As the wheels of justice grind on, careers are destroyed, reputations ruined and souls scarred in an unending saga of irremediable humiliation. Despite the Constitution's libertarian promise, the nation was aghast when the highest court of the land decided, at a special sitting on a court holiday, to suspend the bail of a disabled accused who has been charged with sedition. Such illustrations of institutional malaise point unmistakably to an eroded edifice of India's constitutional democracy.

Deteriorating conversation

But nowhere is the democratic deficit more pronounced as in the quality of our political discourse. The profanities hurled by leaders at each other, the personal broadsides laced with denigrating sarcasm and hurtful innuendoes have coarsened the fabric of democratic politics. The political language of our times, steeped in hypocrisy and intense personal animosities reflects the narrowness of our politics and vitiates it, infracts the dignitarian promise of the Constitution, and is destructive of the broader social accord.

We know that language, culture, imagination and histories are united in a tight embrace. The elegance of the spoken word, not its decibel, adds weight to the cause and enables leaders to engage with the people on the defining challenges of the age. Our venerated founders espoused their lofty ideals in prose and verse invested with soaring idealism and emotion that galvanised the nation in pursuit of larger causes. Their language mediated between the heart and the head. Indeed, the strongest criticism of injustice and malgovernance, as also expressions of fervent

hope for national renewal, is best reflected in the depth and the dignity of the medium. The language of democracy is one of accommodation anchored in moderated thought and rational persuasion. It is not about hurting sensitivities but respecting them and recognising that political adversaries are not personal enemies to be mocked and crushed. Democracy, after all, is not about a strong man imposing his will "over the wreckage of the universe". It is premised on a search for the middle ground and rejection of extremes, an objective best sub-served through elegant communication. The spoken words and speeches of leaders provide the benchmark of democracy. The standing of our public figures is tested through their utterances, which also tell us who we are. Evidently, therefore, India's diminished democracy can be resurrected only through an ennobling political discourse defined by civil conversation founded in reason and faith in the power of decency to make a difference.

The challenge

The celebration of the Republic cannot be complete as long as our politics remains limited by narrow partisan perspectives and is driven by those whose projected concern at pervasive injustices is largely suspect, given their obsession with a compulsive pursuit of power for its own sake. The foundations of the Republic are predicated on a just exercise of peoples' power by ruling dispensations of the day and on the Opposition's fearless pushback against the abuse of power. The challenge for those who aspire to lead the nation in the fullness of its glory in these momentous times, is to imagine and consolidate a political universe rooted in the collective assertion of our moral judgment that answers the call of good conscience.

The views expressed are personal