

Improved functioning key

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P S JAYARAMU

At the introspection meeting of Karnataka legislators convened by the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, Chief Minister Yediyurappa lamented the declining values of parliamentary system with the legislators placing the self over the state, unlike in the pre-independence era, when politicians sacrificed for the country.

A lofty speech indeed. Leader of the Opposition Siddaramaiah blamed the electoral system, openly talked about voters being bribed and victory of candidates with criminal background. As a result, the quality and commitment of legislators has declined sharply, a point sharply alluded to by the noted educationist Gururaja Karjegi.

At this juncture, it is worth recalling the British conservative scholar Edmund Burke's speech to the voters of Bristol in 1774 in which he said: "It ought to be the happiness and glory of the elected representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him, their opinions high respect, their business unremitting attention".

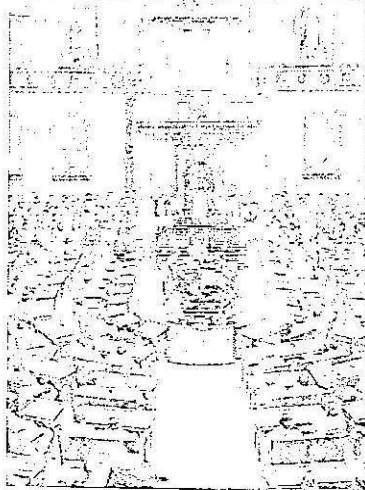
In contemporary times, Burke's observations sound idealistic as modern day elected representatives are increasingly disconnected with their constituents. Their primary concern seems to be to achieve their personal ambitions or at best to serve the interests of the party which has elected them and its supreme leader. The interests of the constituency they represent occupy secondary importance in their scheme of things.

It is depressing to note that while being present in the House/Council, a few elected representatives often disconnect themselves from the deliberations of the House and indulge in viewing pleasure seeking videos, as reported in the media. An attempt is made here to present factual data about the sessions held by the Karnataka Legislative Assembly from 1952 to the present along

with suggestions to improve its functioning.

Available data reveals that the Assembly held sessions for a record 425 days during 1972-1978, preceded by 278 days during 1952-57, 375 days during 1957-1961 and 366 days between 1962-1966. In the 1980s and 1990s, the number days the House met came down to 200 plus, only to fall below 200 days since 2000, notwithstanding the decision taken in 2000 to hold annual sessions for not less than 60 days in a year, amounting to 300 days in five years.

The 13th Assembly met for only 156 days from 2008-2012 while the 14th Assembly managed to hold sessions for 216 days from 2013 to February 2018.



The 15th Assembly sat for 33 days in 2018, a mere 18 days in 2019 and 31 days in 2020. In 2020, the Assembly met for seven days as part of the winter session. Currently, the Budget session is on from March 5 to 31.

Statistics apart, sessions in recent years have been marred by dharnas, walkouts and frequent adjournments obstructing meaningful transaction of legislative business and debates. The 13th Assembly witnessed a new low in parliamentary behaviour with a few members standing on the table, a member tearing his shirt and waving it, with TV channels beaming pictures of it. The last session of the 14th Assembly passed a slew of bills without any discussion including the Budget, with the BJP members staging a walk out.

The previous session of the Legislative Council, supposedly the House of elders, witnessed despicable behavior by some members of the ruling and Opposition Parties. The JD(S) and BJP combined to install a new Chairman and Deputy Chairman from their par-

ties, respectively.

Suggestions for reform

Keeping in mind the deterioration in the functioning, specially of the Assembly, the following suggestions can be considered: 1) The ruling and Opposition parties should commit themselves to uninterrupted conduct of 60 days sessions in a year and for extra days, to compensate for loss of man hours due to adjournments, etc; 2) The Speaker should be vested with the power to convene sessions unlike the present practice of the cabinet deciding it; 3) The question hour be completed within the stipulated time to allow transaction of the agenda fixed for the day; 4) Calling Attention Motions on issues of public importance be taken up after 4 pm so as to not upset the scheduled legislative business; 5) Legislative scrutiny of Bills be mandatorily carried out; 6) Strict monitoring of attendance and performance of members in the House be done on the notice board and the legislature website; 7) Members trooping into the well of the House be suspended for the rest of the week; 8) Ministers be compulsorily present in the House to furnish replies to questions raised by members; 9) Increase in salaries and allowances of the members be decided by a Commission appointed by the government and not by members themselves; 10) Live telecasting of the proceedings of the House to help citizens observe the 'legislative behaviour and performance' of their elected representatives; 11) Most importantly, since Speakers have often behaved in partisan manner, the British tradition of a person elected to Speaker's post should resign from his/her party to ensure impartial behavior. In India, often Speakership is offered to persons not accommodated as ministers. Many times, they become ministers after their term ends or are removed from office during their term.

Keeping in mind the promises made by the senior leaders at the introspection meeting, it would be worth observing how the leaders of the ruling and the Opposition parties would rein in themselves and their members to allow healthy debates and smooth conduct of the legislature in the Budget session and the monsoon session that would follow.

(The writer is former Professor of Political Science, Bangalore University. As Senior Fellow, Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi, he recently carried out a research project on the changing composition and functioning of the Karnataka Legislative Assembly.)