

Profile of an Institution

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THE INDIAN PARLIAMENT: A DEMOCRACY AT WORK

By B.L. Shankar and Valerian Rodrigues

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If we exclude the descriptive and institutional studies of the formal-legal variety, scholarship on legislative institutions in India would actually look threadbare. For a large number of students of Indian politics, obviously influenced by the behavioural revolution, institutions have simply not mattered. Consequently, studies of institutions have been rare and this has impoverished our understanding of political institutions and processes in India. B.L. Shankar and Valerian Rodrigues attempt to break new ground by directing our attention to one of the key institutions of India's representative democracy, the Indian Parliament.

The authors claim that they are principally contesting the Parliament is in 'decline thesis' (p.6). Examining the working of Parliament they conclude that it has actually performed a far more important role than what its critics have conceded. Like early studies of legislatures in non-western societies, this study is based on a traditional functionalist assumption that if an institution continues to exist without performing particular 'expected' roles, then it must be performing some other role useful in that political system (Mezey 1983: 512). In line with this (unstated) assumption the book argues that, even if Parliament in India falls short in terms of its expected role or performance as the 'decline thesis' would indicate, it nevertheless has succeeded as a representative body.

A bulk of the book is devoted to substantiating the point that as a body of representatives, Parliament has performed an immensely valuable role which has aided the 'process of broadening and deepening of democracy' in India (p.7). The authors identify four dimensions of representation including changing social composition, changes in the conception of representation, shift from English as its mode of expression to assertion of regional languages and the change in the conception of the nation (p. 15). In their analysis of each of these dimensions, they compare nine Lok Sabhas, in three different periods, the 1950s, 1970s and the 1990s. They link the changing notion of representation in Parliament during the different periods with the social and political transformation that is taking place in society.

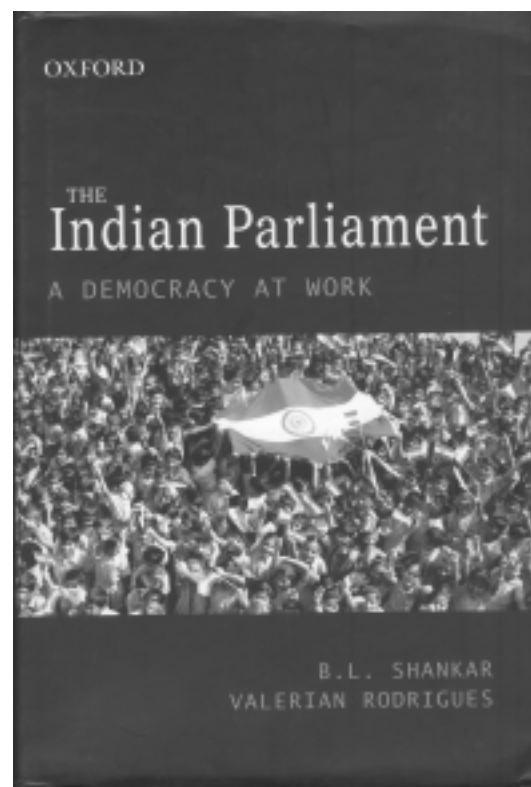
Shankar and Rodrigues have been relatively more successful in cataloguing the shifts in the social background of the represen-

tatives with respect to caste, education, occupation and community as compared to the other notions of representation. The analysis of the changing social composition is therefore probably the most interesting and useful part of the book. This chapter which has numerous tables based on data sourced from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, brings out clearly the decline of the power of the traditional elite and a progressive widening of the pool of the representative class.

The authors then present some sort of content analysis of parliamentary debates and examine debates on issues like nation, national interest and unity, federalism, economic development and so on to understand how they were conceptualized at different points of time. Some of the key debates on the language issue have been highlighted to drive home the point. Related to this is the discussion which shows how there has been similarly a shift from national to plural identities in Parliament. Though their conclusions are unlikely to be affected, a more systematic approach could have raised the level of analysis. In its current form, the authors could be accused of cherry picking given the unmethodical selection of issues, concerns and debates.

After having made the point about Parliament's representational role, the book not only loses steam but also takes a different turn. The relationship between Parliament and Judiciary, the relationship between the two houses of Parliament and finally the working of the Lok Sabha through a discussion of various institutions like the office of the Speaker, Opposition and parliamentary committees are examined. This section of the book also does not necessarily offer anything new by way of either evidence or arguments.

Though parliaments are essentially multi-functional institutions, representation, legislation, and scrutinizing the executive (watchdog role) would count among their three main functions. The 'decline thesis' primarily evaluates parliamentary functioning on the legislation and scrutinizing functions, focusing on issues like decline in volume of legislative and other business transactions, failure of Parliament to hold the Government accountable and, increasing the power of committees, streamlining functions and so on (p.59). Shankar and Rodrigues do not



specifically analyse the functioning of Parliament on legislative and accountability lines. Even when they do so (pp. 357-60) they do not provide any evidence to the contrary. Moreover, they actually endorse much of the criticism, when they say that they are 'broadly in agreement with the critics that Parliamentary procedures need to be streamlined, outmoded practices have to be discarded, debates need to be better informed, and every effort must be made to enhance the level and extent of deliberation in the House' (p.9). The book under review throws the spotlight on the representation function. By focussing on an issue that is not so much the concern of the 'decline thesis' are the authors arguing against a straw-man claim?

The decline thesis apart, the authors make a significant point about representation, but they appear to have missed a key contradiction; when the representative sweep of Parliament has increased, its effective domain has reduced. More inclusive representation should allow a greater pool of citizens to participate in decisions and gain control over policy decisions that could affect their lives. However, as has been the trend in most parliamentary systems, the executive has over time managed to obtain control of much of the decisions reducing the effectiveness of Parliament. Moreover, almost coinciding with the changed pattern of representation, many key decisions have actually been deliberately kept out of the purview of the political process. For instance, liberalization has set up a new regime of regulatory institutions. These non-elected bodies, which are not accountable like Parliament is, under the logic of being 'technically-equipped' make

regulations and take decisions which have wide-ranging impact. Parliament has little or no control over such decisions. The authors while celebrating representation though aware of the diminishing role of parliament (pp. 52-3) choose to ignore it and fail to connect it to the question of representation. How has the 'broadening and deepening of democracy' then brought any substantial benefit to the represented?

Besides this, a lot of questions are likely to be asked about using a survey of 'public intellectuals' as a source to back up their arguments. More so when they themselves conclude that 'public opinion on democracy and its institutions in India is highly unreliable...democracy had to battle its way against its own intellectuals' (p.385). It is ironic that 'judges, lawyers, journalists, writers and artists, academics and intellectuals' (p.16) sit in judgement over the question of deepening and broadening of democracy. Their choice of 'public intellectuals' as representative of public perception as well as the particular choice of questions are methodologically problematic and are likely to be contested.

It is also surprising that the book makes no reference to the pioneering work on the Indian Parliament by A. Surya Prakash (1995). Surya Prakash might have served as a better starting point than their reliance on the popular press as a critique of the working of Parliament. Additionally, the study promises to dwell 'extensively on the procedures and the

functioning of the House and changes in these respects over time' (p.9). However, it hardly touches upon the procedures and the functioning of the house.

Finally, the conclusions the book offers are tame and conventional and much of it does not necessarily flow from the study as such. For instance, Parliament is the 'nodal centre of Indian public life' (p. 371); 'development of coalition politics and anti-defection measures are some of the ways by which stability of parliament has come to be institutionalized' (p. 373); parliamentary democracy is 'an effective answer to combat extremism from the right and the left' (p. 385).

The study also has its share of avoidable errors. For instance, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was formed after the withdrawal of support by the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and not immediately after the 1998 elections as mentioned in the book (p. 46). The NDA was not a post-electoral but more of a pre-electoral coalition that fought the 1999 elections together. It is A.K. Gopalan and not S.K. Gopalan (p. 121). In the 10th Lok Sabha, Ram Vilas Paswan was a Member of Parliament from Rosera and not Hajipur constituency and was in the Janata Dal and not Lok Jan Shakti Party as is reported (p.148). We are told that the Rao Government (1991-96) 'resorted to a policy of liberalization and the bait of the market to bind *these* myriads of fragments together' (emphasis mine p.46). The sentence

before this refers to the fragmentation of the party system. Surely they do not connect. The endnote 38 on page 181 is referenced as 'not available'. The column totals of Table 3.3 (pp. 116-118) should have been rechecked. Similarly there are errors in reporting Table 3.7 (p.153) in the main text.

The book opened with a reference to a series of readings from the field of new institutional studies. If they had not been forgotten immediately after that, insights from these readings would have enhanced the analytical strength of the book. Furthermore, it may have also allowed some scope for comparison and it could be that the Indian Parliament is not *sui generis* as the authors conclude (p.385). Though they have been successful in capturing the representational change in Parliament, B.L. Shankar and Valerian Rodrigues have probably missed an incredible opportunity to raise the profile of institutional studies in India. Nevertheless, their contribution would be useful to students of Indian politics, institutions and democracy.

References

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