

Theatre Of The Absurd

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

When H.D. Devegowda was Prime Minister a parliamentary delegation visited China, of which Pramod Mahajan was also a member. He narrated that the Chinese asked him what was meant by democracy in India. In his own words, Pramod Mahajan said, “I represent the largest single party in Parliament but I am not a Minister”. Pointing to the Congress representative he said, “He is the representative of the second largest party and he is not a Minister”. Then pointing to the sole Member of Parliament representing the Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party of Goa Mahajan said, “He is the only member of his party in Parliament and he is a Minister. That is what is meant by democracy in India”.

In the current Parliament the Trinamool Congress and the DMK, both allies of the Congress in the ruling coalition, have 19 and 18 seats respectively in a 542-member Lok Sabha. Trinamool Congress thus has 3.50 percent of the seats in the Lok Sabha and DMK 3.30 percent of the seats. These two parties which, between them, command less than 7.00 percent of seats in Parliament, virtually call the tune to which the Prime Minister and the coalition government dance. The dominant party in the coalition, the Congress, has 38.00 percent of the seats, that is, 570 percent more seats than Trinamool Congress and DMK combined. Despite these numbers what is the situation on the ground? DMK has hitherto dictated which representative of the party will hold what portfolio and government has succumbed to this demand and the Prime Minister has failed, till it was too late, to curb the DMK Ministers or prevent wholesale corruption by them. Mamata Banerjee not only decides who will be Railway Minister but she also decides what will be the railway budget. The budget approved by the cabinet and duly presented in Parliament was publicly rejected by the new Railway Minister by ignoring the collective responsibility of the Council of Ministers and then was completely recast without passing through the cabinet once again. Practically every Bill relating to economic policy, whether it be FDI in retail trade, the Insurance Bill, Food Security, every Bill relating to such policy as setting up of a counter terrorism centre, restructuring higher education, etc., is held up because Mamata Banerjee does not like that particular Bill or policy. Who will be the presidential candidate will be determined according to the whims and fancies of Mamata Banerjee. In other words, 3.50 percent of the Members of Parliament are more important than 38.00 percent from one single party and all government work in Parliament comes to a halt because the Chief Minister of West Bengal so desires it. This is not merely the theatre of the absurd—it is a theatre of extreme lunacy in which government itself comes to a halt.

In addition to the oath of office which every minister has to swear or affirm under the Third Schedule of the Constitution, he is also required to swear or affirm an oath of secrecy. This applies to ministers in the Centre and in the States. In this the minister swears that he will not directly or indirectly communicate or reveal to any person or persons any matter which is brought under his consideration or becomes known to him as a minister, except as may be required for the due discharge of his duties. All discussions within the Council of Ministers are outside the public domain and would be covered by the oath of secrecy. Unfortunately what was discussed quite often becomes instantaneously public because some ministers make it public. Similarly, the collective responsibility of the Council of Ministers to the House of the People

under Article 75(3) means that the ministers individually and collectively will speak as one and that no minister will publicly criticize or repudiate the decision taken by the Council of Ministers. Not only are the ministers from allied parties such as the Trinamool Congress constantly violating this very healthy tradition of the Westminster form of government, but even ministers from the Congress Party constantly do this. Jairam Ramesh and Kamal Nath are the two ministers who instantly come to mind for making statements which are quite often at divergence with what the Council of Ministers has decided. This is not a cabinet—it is a chaotic and collective anarchy and this has seriously jeopardised good government in this country.

The results are self-evident. S and P, the internationally renowned rating company, has threatened to lower the sovereign rating of India unless it brings about structural and policy reforms in the economy, thus reducing India to the level of banana republic. With even the nomination for the UPA candidate for the President of India being put on hold because Mamata Banerjee insists that government first announces a major economic package for West Bengal if it wants her support, with even innocuous bills relating to our major educational institutions being held up. This government may survive, but it cannot govern.

It is the duty of the Prime Minister to restore discipline and order to the Council of Ministers that he heads. It is for the Prime Minister and lead party in the coalition to lay down the parameters of governance and to make it clear to junior partners that it is within these parameters that they will function and the coalition will hold. If they do not like it or if they violate the prescribed norms they would be invited to leave the coalition and if this causes government to fall let there be a fresh election. In any case on major issues of economic reforms or change there is not much difference in the thinking of the Congress and the BJP and if the Congress reaches out to BJP for agreement on key issues the relevant legislation can go through and the coalition will still survive. That is the way forward. Whether the Congress will have the good sense, in the national interest, to put its pathological hatred of BJP on hold and negotiate with that party on key issues, or whether BJP will, for a change, be reasonable and accommodative instead of proving that its brain resides in its knees is a matter for speculation, but one can and must hope for the best for the sake of India.
