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Tharoor is Wrong. Parliamentary System is Best-suited for India

by B Vinod Kumar

This is a response to Shashi Tharoor's claims at the Jaipur Literature Festival that (i) Parliamentary system is 'ill-suited' to the Indian national character (ii) it is difficult to work in a country as diverse and populous as India and (iii) it was adopted because Indians were 'well-conditioned' to look at the British as the embodiment of everything. Furthermore, Tharoor endorses Clement Attlee's recommendation of a Presidential system for India.

Such statements simply ignore India's rich democratic tradition. Dr Ambedkar said in the Constituent Assembly that democratic institutions were not new to India and had successfully functioned for a very long time in the past. He informed members that ancient India was well aware of parliamentary procedures. There was an elaborate system of rules regarding seating arrangements, motions, resolutions, quorum, whip, counting of votes, etc. These rules of modern parliamentary procedures were long ago applied by the Buddha to the meetings of the Buddhist Sanghas and must have been borrowed from the rules of the political assemblies functioning in the sub-continent in his time.

The panchayati system which comes from this tradition has been operative since times immemorial and is the foundation on which modern local governance is based. Given such a rich and

living tradition, Tharoor's statement that the Parliamentary system is not suited to the Indian national character is patently false. Tharoor's second claim is that Parliamentary democracy cannot function effectively in a country as diverse and populous such as ours. Let us assume for a moment that it is replaced with the Presidential system. Can we think of any political party, including the so-called national parties, which can claim to represent the whole of India? As of today, there is not a single party which represents every state in Parliament.

THESE RULES OF MODERN PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURES WERE APPLIED BY THE BUDDHA TO THE BUDDHIST SANGHAS

Since 1984 to 2014, no party was able to form the government on its own. Even the BJP which managed to win 282 seats did so on the back of pre-poll coalitions. In Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, it obtained seats in alliance with the TDP, in Maharashtra with the Shiv Sena, in Punjab with the SAD and so on. Had it gone alone, it is doubtful whether the tally would have been the same. Further, the eventual vote share was a mere 31%, calling into question just how representative it is. The fact of the matter is India

is an immensely diverse and heterogeneous society, and the diversity of our political parties is a reflection of this. It is only a Parliamentary system, with its basis on constant accountability, accommodation and inclusion, which can serve the needs of the country. A presidential system by contrast concentrates power in a single person and is prone to dictatorships. It is no coincidence that many of the dictatorial countries in the world, or those undergoing crisis because of such dictatorship — such as Egypt, Burundi or Haiti — are doing so because of a presidential system. Such a dictatorial system would be disastrous for a country like India.

The founding fathers were very aware of this. They had extensively studied different forms of the government in the world while framing our constitution. In fact, our constitution incorporates elements from many countries including Ireland, Germany and the US. Thus, to say that we slavishly adopted the parliamentary system from the British is untrue. In conclusion, far from saying that we are stuck with the Parliamentary system, we must thank the wisdom of our founding fathers for choosing the Parliamentary system that is appropriate for Indian conditions.

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