



# Slumbering Parliamentary Opposition

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This article is based on “**Making the House Work**” which was published in the Indian Express on 29/11/2021. It talks about the significance of parliamentary opposition in a country like India, how it is declining and the measures that can be taken to curb it.

Parliamentary democracy is characterised by a system of mutual accountability of the ruling party and opposition party and a much-crucial deliberative process.

The **Parliamentary Opposition** plays a crucial role in preserving the true essence of the democracy and raising the concerns of a larger number of people of the country.

However, today, India’s parliamentary opposition is not merely fragmented but also in disarray. There seems to be hardly any Opposition party with a vision or strategy for its institutional working or for the Opposition as a whole.

Reviving and strengthening the parliamentary opposition of India becomes extremely important for the world’s largest democracy, especially, when its global rankings, in various indices evaluating democracy, are declining.

## Parliamentary Opposition in India

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- **About Opposition:** Parliamentary opposition is a form of political opposition to a designated government, particularly in a Westminster-based parliamentary system. The title of "Official Opposition" usually goes to the largest of the parties sitting in opposition with its leader being given the title "**Leader of the Opposition**".
- **Significant Role of Opposition:**
  - The opposition **reacts, questions, scrutinises the government on a day-to-day basis** in parliament and its committees and outside the parliament, in the media and among the masses.
  - The role of the opposition is to **ensure that any government maintains the constitutional guardrails.**
  - Whatever a government adopts as a policy measure and legislation, the **opposition views it from an essentially critical gaze.**
  - Moreover, in parliament, the opposition goes beyond merely following the government and raises, **demands and appeals for the specific needs of their constituencies**, amendments and assurances using various **parliamentary devices.**

- **Powerful Opposition in the Past:** From the early 1960s powerful movements broke out all over India on issues such as land reforms, rights of the industrial working class, unemployment, foodgrains and their distribution, ethnic demands and language rights.
  - The then **opposition significantly connected itself to these social movements.**
    - It also **encompassed the broadest spectrum of the Opposition,** including the communists.
  - The parliamentary Opposition in history had **imparted creativity and ingenuity to India's parliamentary democracy.**
- **Weak Opposition and Irresponsible Government Spells Doom:** A weak opposition is far more perilous than a weak government; an irresponsible government in combination with a timid opposition spells doom.
  - A weak opposition simply refers to the opinions/demands of a large populace (who did not vote for the ruling party) left unaddressed.
- **Need for a Strong Opposition:** India's current government has drawn severe criticism from multiple quarters.
  - The current moment is marked by a slide in India's status in international **rankings on democracy, human rights and press freedom**, an ever-increasing number of **sedition** cases and spiralling **UAPA cases**.
    - Further, many laws passed by Parliament are increasingly being seen as unacceptable.
  - These instances clearly indicate an ineffective and weaker opposition as well.

## Issue with the Parliamentary Opposition

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- The contemporary crisis of the opposition is primarily the **crisis of its effectiveness and electoral representation** of these parties.
- There is also a **lack of trust and absence of leadership** in the political parties.
- The opposition parties are always stuck with **clustered forms of representativeness limited to some specific social groups** and are unable to extend this umbrella beyond a few identities.
- The representational assertion enabled the opposition to be formed, expanded and consolidated.
  - However, the inability of this phenomenon to realise **substantive representation within all sections of the society** contributed to the **shrinking of the opposition's space.**
- A key failure of the opposition in the past few years has also been its **failure to set the political agenda and persuade fence-sitters to their side.**
  - This is reflected in its **inability to corner the government on its numerous failures.**

## Way Forward

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- **Reviving Opposition:** There is a need to **revive and reconstitute parties in villages, blocks and districts** as opposed to dictating from the top.
  - The opposition parties require a **sustained perennial campaign and mobilisation**. There is no shortcut or “artificial stimulus” that could build an effective opposition.
  - Parties in opposition need to **shed their acquired identities and embrace newer ones**, which are broader and deeper in perception and practice.
- **Strengthening the Role of the Opposition:** In order to strengthen the role of the opposition, the institution of ‘**Shadow Cabinet**’ can be formed in India.
  - Shadow cabinet is a unique institution of the British cabinet system formed by the opposition party to balance the ruling cabinet.
  - In such a system each action of a Cabinet Minister must be countersigned by the minister in the shadow cabinet.
- **Intrinsic Factors to Strengthen Opposition:** The intrinsic factors go beyond just weaving an opposition by uniting several parties to electorally replace the ruling party. The need is to **revamp the party organisation**, to **go for mobilisation** and acquaint the masses with respective party programmes and also to **adopt mechanisms for a timely evaluation of internal democracy** in the parties.
- **Responsibility of Representation:** At this juncture, an important responsibility lies with the Opposition to **ensure coordination on common issues**, strategise on parliamentary procedures and above all, **endeavour to represent the suppressed voices**.
- **Lessons from Legacy:** The parliamentary opposition in India has much to learn from its own legacy.
  - It can **draw from its lessons to position itself as the representative voice** of democratic and egalitarian urges.
  - It also may be the opportune context to think of **new ways by which dissent and opposition can be sustained in a new media-induced public culture** that invariably breeds docility and compliance.
- **Role of Ruling Party Members:** While the opposition needs to **take up the responsibility to challenge and probe the government**, the idea of representation requires that all the **MPs are sensitive to public opinion**.
  - Moreover, independence of ruling party members is connected both to **intra-party democracy and intra-party factionalism**.  
When parties have factions, they become democratic in their internal functioning.
  - For the Parliament to regain its representative character, **ruling party members need to be more sincere** about the parliamentary system.

## Conclusion

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As a polity following the 'first past the post' system of voting, the role of the opposition is especially significant. Engendering a parliamentary opposition that is the conscience of the nation is important for India to function as a true democracy.

***Drishti Mains Question***

Engendering a parliamentary opposition that is the conscience of the nation is important for India to function as a true democracy. Discuss.