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26/11: Day when statute was adopted

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NEW DELHI: "That the Constitution as settled by the Assembly be passed." Those were the words used by our founding fathers when they adopted the Constitution with great hopes and aspirations, exactly 60 years ago on November 26, 1949.

That was the culmination of three years of deliberations to "settle" what turned to be one of the longest constitutions in the world. The Constituent Assembly met only once after the adoption of the historic document and that was just to let 284 members put their signatures on it on January 24, 1950, two days before the Constitution came into force turning India into a Republic.

The American Constitution, which is the oldest, was adopted on September 17, 1787 and it has since been amended only 27 times. Its Indian counterpart has been amended 94 times in 60 years.

Despite the large number of amendments, India has reason to be satisfied with the way it worked the Constitution, judging by the nature of apprehensions expressed by Assembly's chairman Rajendra Prasad in his concluding address. In the general ambience of optimism, Prasad's gravest concern was no more than the nation's "experiment" with universal adult franchise in the face of odds posed by poverty and illiteracy.

Referring to the doubts raised by some people about the wisdom of adult franchise, Prasad said that although he looked upon it as "an experiment the result of which no one will be able to forecast today", he was not "dismayed" by it.

Prasad's confidence has proved to be well founded as, barring aberrations, India has an enviable record of holding free and fair elections in which the electorate has displayed the sagacity to overthrow governments on several occasions.

What is not so flattering is India's performance against the yardstick laid down by the chairman of the drafting committee, B R Ambedkar, who had moved the motion for adopting the Constitution. Mincing no words, the Dalit leader said that "in believing that we are a nation, we are cherishing a great delusion. How can people divided into several thousands of castes be a nation?"

Stressing the need to realise that "we are not as yet a nation in the social and psychological sense of the word", Ambedkar said, "Fraternity can be a fact only when there is a nation. Without fraternity, equality and liberty will be no deeper than coats of paint."

Given the persistence of caste discrimination and caste atrocities and given the continuing importance of caste as an electoral factor, India is clearly far from meeting the fraternity standard set by Ambedkar. The Constituent Assembly proceedings of November 26, 1949 began on an auspicious note as Sardar Patel announced that the nine big ones, including Hyderabad, had signified their "acceptance of the Constitution which the House is now going to adopt".

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