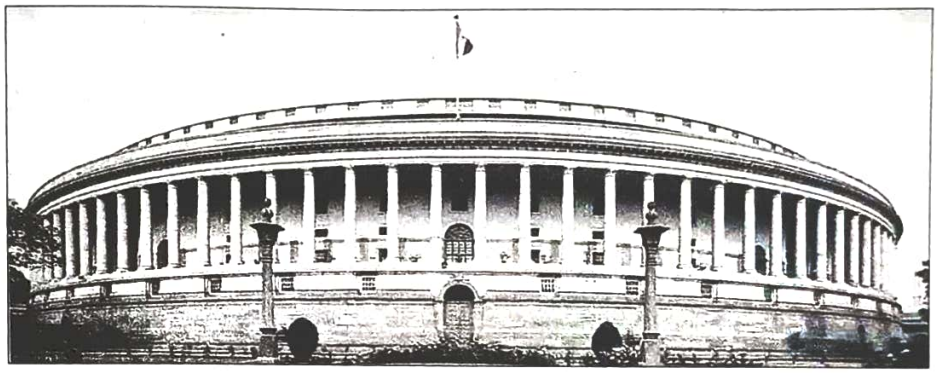
The House & its changes

HOUSING THE REPUBLIC: A BIOGRAPHY OF THE INDIAN PARLIAMENT
By Sobhana K. Nair,
Bloomsbury, ₹699



This book tells the story of the old Parliament building (presently Samvidhan Sadan), asking readers to "[t]hink of it as a biography with all its warts and blemishes".

Beginning with the decline of Mughal-era Delhi, Nair follows George V's decision to move the capital of British India from Calcutta to Delhi in December 1911. She then turns to the architects of the new imperial capital, Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker, both thinking up grand plans to go MEGA (Make the Empire Great Again, the sort of slogan one invents and reinvents when things start looking less eternal). Their bickering, set against crises hitting Britain after the First World War, provides a backdrop to the construction of New Delhi; the building was formally inaugurated in January 1927 by Viceroy Irwin as the Council House. Two years later, in April 1929, the building witnessed a very different political assertion. Sardar Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt, who described themselves as "students of history and conditions of our country and human aspirations", entered its galleries, exploded a bomb, and, chanting "*Inquilab Zindabad*", declared that the legislature had failed the country.

With Independence, the building shaped newer memories. On the eleventh hour of August 14, 1947, Sucheta Kripalani, one of the fifteen women members of the Constituent Assembly, sang the first verse of "*Vande Mataram*" to a packed hall. Rajendra Prasad followed with a speech, first in Hindi, and then in English. All present stood in silence for two minutes to honour those who had died in the freedom struggle. Jawaharlal Nehru followed with his famous 'Tryst with Destiny' speech. Before the House disbanded, Hansa Mehta presented the first Indian flag, "a gift from the women of India". It was to fly over the building, marking the independence of a country that chose constitutional democracy over ethno-religious self-identification.

In January 1950, the building was renamed Parliament House. The first elected Parliament convened there in 1952, while its two Houses acquired their present names in 1954. The Parliament was not yet the sealed and ceremonious institution it would gradually become. Prime Minister Nehru angrily objected to the installation of collapsible gates at entrances: "putting steel gates, even though they are collapsible, would create a reaction of Parliament protecting itself against the people." The observation now sounds like a message from a vanished republican age. It also establishes one of Nair's recurring themes: the changing distance between Parliament and the people.

The building was later witness to what can be referred to as 'unparliamentary' events. In 1963, the Karnal MP, Swami Rameshwaranand, became the first member to interrupt the president's address: "He heckled the second President S. Radhakrishnan for speaking in English." Three years later, the same MP pressed for a nationwide ban on cow slaughter. Outside Parliament, the issue erupted in violence as protesters belonging to the Sarvadaliya Goraksha Mahaabhiyan Samiti marched towards Parliament carrying tridents and spears, fought the police, set fire to vehicles, and torched a petrol pump nearby. The now-forgotten siege of 1966, which sent thick smoke billowing over Parliament of independent India, marked a turning point, observes Nair. For an institution that had once resisted even collapsible gates, the siege represented the first time "a metaphorical wall" was erected between Parliament and the public.

These and other half-forgotten events surrounding Parliament and its premises give Nair's institutional history its unique texture. The Indian Parliament began as a place that imagined itself belonging to the people. Over time, the citizenry came to be imagined as something from which parliamentarians might need protection. Somewhere between those two ideas, Nair suggests, lies a history of *our* Republic.

Alongside institutional history, the book is a treasure trove of curious details on parliamentary affairs. Sound amplifiers were installed four years after independence, apparently to enable members to speak from their seats without shouting. And we learn that before December 20, 1952, only the Chair was referred to as "honourable". On that day, the Nanded MP, Shankar Rao Telkikar, objected to the marshal addressing MPs simply as "members" and insisted that they be called "honourable members". The deputy-Speaker conceded, without much enthusiasm, observing that it did not matter whether the marshal called him "honourable or not".

Deeptanil Ray