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Members as numbers

The Rajya Sabha is losing its sheen as an exalted forum for scholarly debate

The ruling BJP now has 86 members in the Rajya Sabha after elections to 19 seats across several States on Friday. This is the highest number for the party in the Upper House, though it is still short of the halfway mark. Of a total of 61 vacancies, 42 were filled unopposed earlier and of the 19 contests, the BJP won eight while the Congress won four. Of the 61 outgoing members, 17 were from the Congress and 15 from the BJP. With this round of elections, the BJP's tally increased by 11, from 75. The Congress now has 41. The Opposition benches will now have veterans such as H.D. Deve Gowda, Mallikarjun Kharge (both from Karnataka) Digvijaya Singh (from Madhya Pradesh) and Shibu Soren (from Jharkhand) and K.C. Venugopal (from Rajasthan). A noticeable addition to the treasury benches is Jyotiraditya Scindia, whose defection from the Congress in March brought down the Kamal Nath government in Madhya Pradesh, and brought the BJP back to power there. Bhubaneswar Kalita, the Congress's chief whip in the Rajya Sabha until August last year, is now returning as a BJP member from Assam. All this points to a pattern of the BJP's frenzied approach to increasing its Rajya Sabha strength.

After the elections were announced, eight Congress MLAs left the party in Gujarat, and enabled the victory of an extra BJP candidate to the Rajya Sabha. In Rajasthan, the party fielded two candidates though it had the strength to elect only one, leading to speculation that plans were underway to poach Congress MLAs. The sight of political parties hauling in MLAs to luxury confinements ahead of the Rajya Sabha polls has become common. The Council of States institutionalises the sharing of power between the Centre and the State under India's federal structure. The House of the elders is also considered an exalted forum of scholarship and statesmanship. But this majesty has taken a beating due to factors, including but not limited to machinations that go into its making. The steady ingress of celebrities and business tycoons has not made a serious contribution to the Rajya Sabha's working. The BJP, under its current leadership, has demonstrated an aversion to deliberations of all types, and the Rajya Sabha has been a particular target. In a country as vast and diverse as India, deliberations are critical. The government has arbitrarily labelled bills as money bills to bypass scrutiny and passing by the Rajya Sabha. And some pieces of legislation with far-reaching effect on the country - to change the status of Jammu and Kashmir, for instance - have been pushed through both Houses. In such a scenario, it is imperative that members work across party lines to uphold the