

No Question Hour, Private Members bill

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Questioning the government is the oxygen of parliamentary democracy. It not only allows the participation of MPs in carrying out healthy debates but also holds the party in power accountable. However the recent decision to suspend Question hour signals a desire to avoid accountability which mars the fragility of parliamentary functioning.

In news: Government would do away with both Zero Hour and Question Hour in Parliament proceedings in the forthcoming monsoon session.

Placing it in syllabus: Parliament

Static dimensions

1. Question Hour history and its importance
2. Zero Hour history its importance
3. Private Members Bills and importance

Current dimensions

1. Impact of the curtailment

Content:

Question Hour history and its importance:

- Question Hour is the **first hour of a parliamentary sitting.**
- It is during this one hour that **Members of Parliament ask questions to ministers** and hold them **accountable** for the functioning of their ministries.
- The **presiding officers** of the two houses are the **final authority** with respect to the conduct of Question Hour.
- **Question Hour in both Houses is held on all days of the**

session except on the day the President's speech takes place at the beginning of a new Lok Sabha and on the first day of a new Parliament year and on the day the Finance Minister presents the Budget).

What kind of questions are asked?

- **Parliamentary rules** provide guidelines on the kind of questions that can be asked by MPs.
- Questions have to be limited to 150 words and **should be related to** an area of responsibility of the Government of India.
- Questions **should not seek information about** matters that are secret or are under adjudication before courts.
- MPs can specify whether they want an **oral or written response to their questions.**
- They can put an asterisk against their question signifying that they want the minister to answer that question on the floor, referred to as **starred questions.**
- MPs may prefer the responses to their queries in writing and these questions are referred to as **unstarred questions.** The responses to these questions are placed on the table of Parliament.
- MPs can also ask a question to a minister at a notice period shorter than 15 days called a **short notice question.**

With the broadcasting of Question Hour since 1991, Question Hour has become one the most **visible aspects of parliamentary functioning.** MPs have successfully used this parliamentary device to **shine a light on government functioning.** Their questions have **exposed financial irregularities** and brought data and information regarding government functioning to the public domain.

Zero Hour history its importance:

- Zero Hour is the time when MPs can raise issues of

urgent public importance.

- It is the **time gap between the end of Question Hour and the beginning of the regular business.**
- It is an **Indian innovation** in the field of parliamentary procedures and has been in **existence since 1962.**
- It is **not mentioned in the Rules of Procedure** and hence an informal device available to MPs to raise matters without any notice 10 days in advance.
- During the sixties, members of parliament used to raise many pressing issues of national and global importance after Question Hour.
- **Rabi Ray, the ninth Speaker of the Lok Sabha** introduced certain changes in the proceedings of the House to create more opportunities for the members to raise matters of urgent public importance.
- He proposed a mechanism to regulate the proceedings during the 'Zero Hour', raise matters in a more orderly manner and optimize the time of the House.
- The Zero Hour **starts at 12 noon immediately following the Question Hour and lasts for 30 minutes.**
- A member gets three minutes to raise an issue in the Zero Hour.

Private Members Bills and importance:

- Any MP who is not a minister is referred to as a private member.
- The purpose of a private member's bill is to **draw the government's attention to** issues that were willingly or unwillingly ignored by the party at the helm.
- Thus it **reflects the stand of the opposition party on public matters.**
- In the past, MPs have used **PMBs to put forward important issues.** E.g. In 1957, Subhadra Joshi, a noted Parliamentarian, introduced a Bill in the Lok Sabha to extend financial support to women looking to fight cases of bigamy against their husbands. Mr. Tiruchi Siva's **PMB**

on the rights of transgender people is noteworthy.

- **14 PMBs**, five of which were introduced in Rajya Sabha **have become law so far.**
- The last time a private member's bill was passed by both Houses was in 1970 (Supreme Court (Enlargement of Criminal Appellate Jurisdiction) Bill, 1968).

To make PMBs more effective, more allocation of time and more power to other MPs to set the agenda of discussion is required.

Impact of this curtailment:

- As per records the question hour was done away with in **1962, 1975, 1976, 1991, 2004 and 2009** for various reasons but not for a regular session.
- The suspension of Question Hour would mean that there **would be no space to ask questions to the Union government** on important matters like the state of economy, handling of covid-19 pandemic, nearly three month long national lockdown and border standoff with China.
- The MPs would not be able to hold the government accountable for its action which goes **against the spirit of parliamentary democracy.**

Mould your thought:

1. Differentiate between zero hour and a question hour. Explain their importance in the functioning of parliamentary democracy.