

LEAD

A politics of avoidance that must be questioned



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The dropping of Question Hour, which helps the government feel the nation's pulse, goes against the grain of democracy

We, the people of India, gave ourselves a Constitution that prescribes for our democracy a parliamentary form of government in which the executive is accountable to the electorate through a legislature which in turn is periodically elected by the electorate. This accountability lies at the heart of democratic government and is implemented through procedures put in place by the legislature whose functions include lawmaking, controlling the national finances and approving taxation proposals, and having discussions on matters of public interest and concern. Each of these functions is discharged, daily or periodically, during sittings of the legislature and cover questions, adjournment motion, calling attention, half-an-hour discussion, motion of no confidence, questions of privilege, etc.

Instruments of accountability

Among these instruments of accountability, the daily '**Question Hour**' has an unmatched criticality on account of its regularity and its availability on a basis of equality to every Member of the House, Rajya Sabha or Lok Sabha. It has a special significance in the proceedings of Parliament since it covers every aspect of government activity, domestic and foreign. The government of the day is thus helped to feel the pulse of the nation and give the public a view of the performance of

both of its elected representatives and of the Ministers. Those who fumble are rarely forgotten.

The Rules of Procedure in both Houses prescribe the operational details. These include, *inter alia*, the notice period, conditions of admissibility, balloting, and a host of other procedural or regulatory prescriptions. Questions are addressed to a specific Minister of the government and can seek oral answers marked by an asterisk or a written one. The veracity of the answers given are matters of utmost importance and rules permit correction of inaccuracies by the Minister concerned. Copies of answers given are available to Members at the Notice Office before the start of the day's proceedings as also on the websites.

Seeking the specifics

Since questions are generally 'pointed, specific and confined to one issue only', they tend to elicit specific information from the government; our parliamentary history records instances of answers given to questions leading to wider debates, inquiries, and even administrative scandals. Even otherwise the information so made available adds to public information essential to informed debates on matters of interest or concern. The advantage to the government is that its position in the matter is authoritatively explained. By the same logic, incomplete or unsatisfactory answers induce resort to other forms of accountability mentioned above.

For this reason, Members of Parliament and the interested citizens attach much importance to questions in Parliament and have been taken aback by the peremptory announcement in parliamentary bulletins this week that in the forthcoming session of Parliament (monsoon session that starts on September 14) that '**there will be no Question Hour.**' The stated reason for this is the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Citing the pandemic is jarring

The gravity of the situation resulting from the spread of COVID-19 continues to be experienced by people the world over and by every citizen of the country. New disciplines have descended on us and we have experienced new norms and styles of existence, learnt to live with total and partial lockdowns, and have moved from no activity to partial restoration of essential activities. Procedures of social distancing and the wearing of protective masks have been imbibed. Countries far and near have brought forth their individual response patterns; some of these show that legislative bodies have continued to function with new sets of 'dos and don'ts'. Finally, though belatedly, some of our State Assemblies took the initiative and now the Parliament of India has followed suit. The public has welcomed this.

In this context, the deletion of 'Question Hour' from the announced agenda of the day is baffling and has understandingly been viewed as curtailment of the right to question the government. Subsequent clarifications have stated that the Unstarred Questions will continue to be received and answered and that the change will relate only to Starred Questions and the Supplementary questions emanating from them that require to be answered orally.

Exploring options

The purpose of a Starred Question is to explore the intent and the alleged illegality or procedural lacuna that the government decision in question has sought to camouflage in the form of words and expressions used in the answer. The Oral Supplementary questions seek to unravel these. It is a form of verbal gymnastics not unknown in daily life. Perhaps greater sensitivity to parliamentary and public sentiments could have been displayed by exploring procedural options that would retain the substance if not the complete form of a Starred Question. One way could be to admit the Starred Question, reply to it in a set of prepositions and allow the Member concerned to table in

writing the permitted number of follow up questions also to be answered in writing the following day.

Were these options explored and discussed with leaders of political parties and groups? The Chairman and the Speaker unquestionably have the final word on matters relating to the proceedings of their respective Houses. This can be, and has been supplemented, on occasions, by using a Motion to develop a consensus ‘on matters of general public interest’. Was this explored on this occasion? And, finally, what public purpose is served when senior members of the ruling party describe the Opposition expression of concern as ‘a fake narrative’ since ‘extraordinary times justify extraordinary measures?’

The test of a functioning democracy is its ability to face crises — social, economic, political — and seek correctives premised on institutions of democracy. A resort to what has been called ‘the politics of avoidance’ does not help the process. Executive accountability upfront cannot be allowed to become a thing of the past.

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