



## Question Hour and Democracy

### Context:

- The Union Government has announced that in the forthcoming session of Parliament (monsoon session that starts on September 14) there will be no



Question Hour. The stated reason for this is the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### What is Parliamentary Form of Government?

- A parliamentary form of government is the one 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:
  1. Lawmaking
  2. Controlling the national finances
  3. Approving taxation proposals
  4. 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.



## What is Question Hour?

- The first hour of every parliamentary sitting is slotted for the Question Hour where Members of Parliament raise questions about any aspect of administrative activity.
- In a **starred question**, a member seeks an oral answer from the concerned minister and this can be followed by supplementary questions, whereas in the case of unstarred questions, a written answer is provided, and no supplementary question can be asked.
- **Short notice question** is one that is asked by giving a notice of less than ten days. It is answered orally.
- Ministries receive the questions 15 days in advance so that they can prepare their ministers for Question Hour.
- **The presiding officers** of the both Houses (Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha) are the final authority with respect to the conduct of Question Hour.
- Question Hour is regulated according to **parliamentary rules**
- Question Hour in both Houses is **held on all days of the session**. But there are two days when an exception is made (Day of President's address & During Budget presentation).
- With the broadcasting of Question Hour since 1991, Question Hour has become one of the most visible aspects of parliamentary functioning.

## What is the significance of Question Hour?

- During the Question hour, Members of Parliament (MPs) ask questions to ministers and hold them accountable for the functioning of their ministries.
- 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.
- Though questions are pointed & specific, our parliamentary history records instances of answers given to questions leading to wider debates, inquiries, and even administrative scandals.



- The information made available through Question Hour adds to public information essential to informed debates on matters of interest or concern.
- The advantage of Question Hour to the government is that its position in the matter is authoritatively explained.

### **What is the criticism of government's move to suspend Question Hour?**

- The rest of the business of Houses was tightly controlled and set by the government, leaving only Question Hour to hold the government accountable.
- Suspension of Question Hour is not good sign in democratic principles especially in a parliamentary democracy.
- Parliament is the beacon of legislative functioning and its functioning will set the precedent for Vidhan sabhas to follow in the future.
- The move to suspend Question Hour due to pandemic and to find alternate options was not discussed with leaders of political parties and groups.

### **How has government responded to above criticisms?**

- The government has later clarified 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.

### **Conclusion:**

- 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.