



Masking The Question

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This editorial analysis is based on the article **“Democracy in question: If questions are disallowed in Parliament, more will be asked outside it”** which was published in The Indian Express on 12th of September 2020. It analyses the issues of scrapping Questions Hour and limiting Zero Hour in the monsoon session of the Parliament.

Recently, the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha secretariats have notified that there will be **no Question Hour** during the monsoon session of the Parliament which has already been truncated to September 14-October, in view of the **Covid 19 pandemic**, and that **Zero Hour** will be restricted in both Houses. The move has come under heavy criticism as the opposition believe they will lose the right to question the government which can be termed as undemocratic.

Question Hour

- **Question Hour** is the first hour of a sitting session of India's Parliament devoted to questions that Members of **Parliament** raise about any aspect of administrative activity.
- The concerned Minister is obliged to answer to the Parliament, either orally or in writing, depending on the type of question raised.
- Question Hour is the liveliest hour in Parliament when members of parliament hold the Government accountable for the functioning of their ministries.
- Over the last 70 years, 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.
- With the broadcasting of Question Hour since 1991, Question Hour has become one the most visible aspects of parliamentary functioning.

Zero Hour

- **Zero Hour** is an Indian parliamentary innovation.
- The phrase does not find mention in the rules of procedure.
- The concept of Zero Hour started organically in the first decade of Indian Parliament, when MPs felt the need for raising important constituencies and national issues.
- During the initial days, Parliament used to break for lunch at 1 pm.
- Therefore, the opportunity for MPs to raise national issues without an advance notice became available at 12 pm and could last for an hour until the House adjourned for lunch.
- This led to the hour being popularly referred to as Zero Hour and the issues being raised during this time as Zero Hour submissions.
- Over the years, presiding officers of both Houses have given directions to streamline the working of Zero Hour to make it even more effective.
- Its importance can be gauged from the support it receives from citizens, media, MPs and presiding officers despite not being part of the rulebook.

Rules Regarding Question Hour

- **Authority of Presiding Officer**
 - The **presiding officers** of the two houses are the final authority with respect to the conduct of Question Hour.
 - For example, usually Question Hour is the first hour of a parliamentary sitting but In 2014, Rajya Sabha Chairman Hamid Ansari shifted Question Hour in the House from 11 am to 12 noon.
 - The move was to prevent the disruption of Question Hour.
- **Kind of Questions**
 - Questions have to be limited to 150 words.
 - They have to be precise and not too general.
 - The question should also 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.
 - It is the presiding officers of the two Houses who finally decide whether a question raised by an MP will be admitted for answering by the government.

- **Timing of Question Hour**

- The process of asking and answering questions starts with identifying the days on which Question Hour will be held.
- At the beginning of Parliament in 1952, **Lok Sabha rules** provided for Question Hour to be held every day. Rajya Sabha, on the other hand, had a provision for Question Hour for two days a week.
- A few months later, this was changed to four days a week.
- Then from 1964, Question Hour was taking place in Rajya Sabha on every day of the session.
- Now, Question Hour in both Houses is held on all days of the session.
- But there are two days when an exception is made. One, on the day the President addresses MPs from both Houses in the Central Hall. Second on the day the Finance Minister presents the Budget.

- **Starred And Unstarred Questions**

- 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.
- These are referred to as **starred questions**.
- After the minister's response, the MP who asked the question and other MPs can also ask a follow-up question.
- This is the visible part of Question Hour, where you see MPs trying to corner ministers on the functioning of their ministries on live television.
- Seasoned parliamentarians choose to ask an oral question when the answer to the question will put the government in an uncomfortable position.

- **15 Days Notice**

- Ministries receive the questions 15 days in advance so that they can prepare their ministers for Question Hour.
- They also have to prepare for sharp follow-up questions they can expect to be asked in the House.
- Government officers are close at hand in a gallery so that they can pass notes or relevant documents to support the minister in answering a question.
- MPs usually ask questions to hold ministers accountable but the rules also provide them with a mechanism for asking their colleagues a question.
- Such a question should be limited to the role of an MP relating to a Bill or a resolution being piloted by them or any other matter connected with the functioning of the House for which they are responsible.
- Should the presiding officer so allow, MPs can also ask a question to a minister at a notice period shorter than 15 days.

Associated Issues

Infringement of Constitutional Right

- The right to ask questions flows from Article 75 of Indian constitution which says that the council of ministers shall be collectively responsible to the House of the people.
- Collective responsibility also implies that the government shall be accountable to the house which represents the people of this country.
- Thus, the curtailment of question hour and zero hour undermines the principle of parliamentary oversight over executive.

A Hindrance To Representative Democracy

- Question Hour is a manifestation of a representative kind of democracy in operation, in the sense that representation of the people directly questions the government on matters of governance.
- The government is duty bound to answer the questions in the House.

Questions Government's Intention

- The Questions Hour concerns serious and urgent matters and is live telecasted on the national TV.
- It keeps the masses informed about the Government's response and vision on all important matters of governance. This becomes more important in the current situation when India is battling the pandemic and economic downfall.

Therefore, by doing away with question hour in this parliamentary session, the government may sidestep on accountability on the above matters.

Way Forward

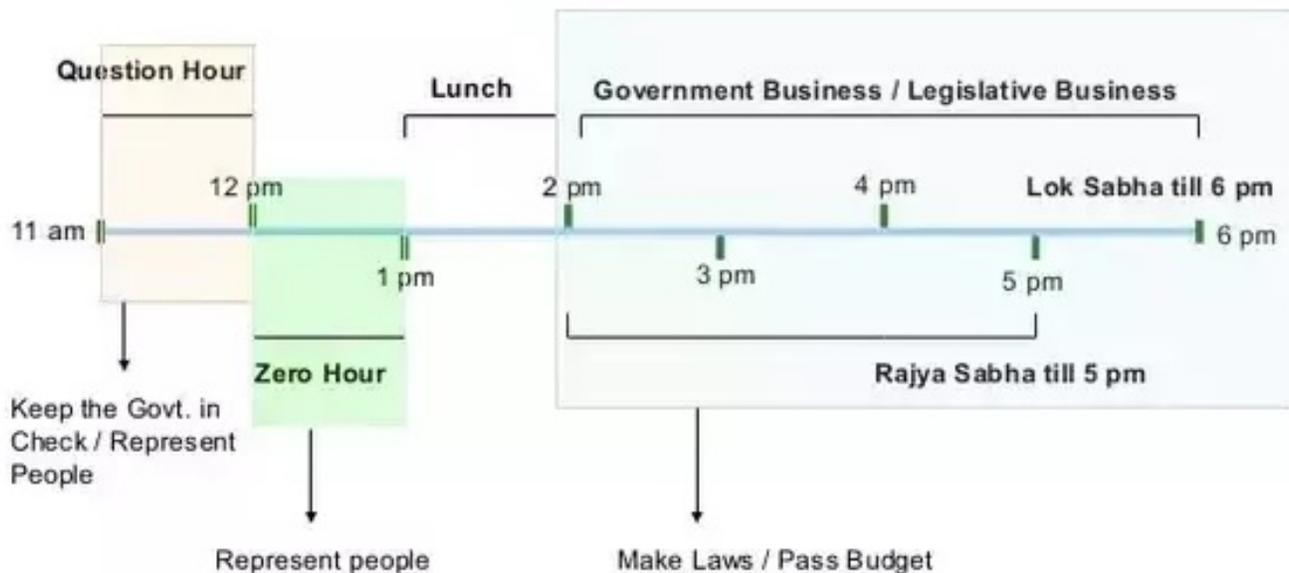
- Disruptions do not justify the scrapping of questions altogether.
- Various options for social distancing can be attempted like reserving each day for select ministries to prevent crowding by officials seeking to help their ministers.
- At the same time an orderly conduct can also ensure that the questions are raised with discipline and they don't affect the safety protocol too.

Conclusion

Democracy is judged by the debate it encourages and sustains. Also asking questions is the essence of democracy. The questions that are asked from civil society platforms, the mass media, community gatherings are ultimately within the highest temple of democracy, the legislature itself.

Thus, the Question hour & Zero hour acts as important tools for enabling the doctrine of checks and balance. Therefore, Parliaments should not dispense with these even at the time of war.

A day in Parliament



Drishti Mains Question

“Parliament’s relevance stems from asking tough questions from the government”. In the light of the statement critically analyse the decision of the government to scrap the Question Hour in the monsoon session and the possible solutions.



Watch Video At:

<https://youtu.be/A4QyIGJdqIM>

This editorial is based on **“The twisted trajectory of Bt cotton”** which was published in The Hindu on September 10th, 2020. Now watch this on our Youtube channel.