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Parliamentary Journalism

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Parliamentary Journalism

29

Importance of Parliamentary Reporting

Parliamentary Journalism is an integral constituent of a parliamentary democracy. Parliamentary journalism is beneficial for both the government as well as the public. Literally, the word Parliament denotes a place for legislation or making laws. Parliamentary journalism is concerned with the Parliament which comprises the Lok Sabha or the House of the People and the Rajya Sabha or the Council of States at the national level and with the Vidhan Sabha or the Legislative Assembly and the Vidhan Parishad or the Legislative Council at the state level.

Parliamentary journalism means reporting of daily functioning of the Parliament. Various activities taking place within the legislature, including the complex process of legislation and the general debate taking place on the floor of the house on various issues of importance for the general public come under the purview of the parliamentary journalism. Parliamentary journalism is one of the most respectable forms of journalism and it comes with huge responsibility. Generally, a very experienced reporter is given the responsibility of



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parliamentary reporting because only a highly experienced reporter can perform this complicated and considerably difficult job with required proficiency. Knowledge of shorthand typing can prove to be immensely important for any parliamentary journalist. It is the job of a parliamentary reporter to collect the copies of the speeches of the ministers as well as the members of both the houses of the Parliament. Incorporating the speeches made by the Prime Minister word by word in her/his copy is very important for proving the credibility as well as the competence of any parliamentary reporter. The point to be noted here is that carrying tape-recorder or camera in the Parliament or the Press Gallery of the Parliament is prohibited.



Basic Parliamentary Structure in India

Before embarking on the journey to become a parliamentary reporter, one must have a thorough knowledge about the basic structure of the Parliamentary system prevalent at the national level as well as at the level of the states. According to the Indian Constitution, the Legislature comprises the President and the two Houses—the House of the People and the Council of States. Members of the House of the People are elected by the public

through the process of direct election. Maximum number of members of the Parliament is 545, out of which 525 are elected from the states and the remaining 20 from the Union Territories.

If a Lok Sabha is not dissolved before its tenure, then it functions from the day of its first sitting till the completion of 5 years. An important point to mention here is that if any situation such as the imposition of Emergency comes during the tenure of any Lok Sabha, then its tenure is extended by that amount of time provided that this time shall not exceed a maximum limit of one year. After that fresh elections are mandatory.

The Council of States or the Rajya Sabha can have a maximum of 250 members, out of which 12 members are nominated by the President. These 12 members are chosen from multifarious fields such

as Literature, Music, Science and Arts based upon their notable contributions in their respective fields. Remaining 238 members are elected directly from the States and the Union Territories of India. The representatives of each state in the Council of States are elected by the members of the Legislative Assembly of the State in accordance with the system of proportional representation by means of single transferable vote and the representatives of the Union Territories are elected in such a manner as the Parliament may by law prescribe.

Houses of both—the Parliament at the national level and the Legislative Assemblies at the regional level—are a very big source of news while in session. Government discloses all its major decisions only at the floor of the House. Political news stories also emanate from there, because representatives of all the political parties voice their opinions in the House. Various political parties put their power on display in the House. Heated debates and arguments between the Government and the Opposition provide grains for the news churning mills of the journalists. As a parliamentary reporter, a journalist should clearly understand the functioning of the Legislature; the process of Legislation and the rules and regulations to be followed. This is equally true for legislature at the national level as well as at the level of the states or the Union Territories. Just like the Parliament, some states have two Houses—the Legislative Assembly or the Vidhan Sabha and the Legislative Council or the Vidhan Parishad. The Legislative Assembly at the State level functions like the House of the People and the Legislative Council functions in a manner similar to the Council of States. Some states have only one House—the Legislative Assembly or the Vidhan Sabha.

Parliamentary Privileges

Following two parliamentary privileges are explicitly mentioned in the Article 105 of the Constitution:

- (i) Members of the Parliament have almost absolute freedom of speech within the House.
- (ii) No member shall be liable to any proceedings in any court of law in respect of anything said or any vote given by her/him in the House or in any committee of the House.

The journalists or the newspapers can be punished by the parliament for breach of parliamentary privileges under the following circumstances:

- i. Publication of wrong or fictitious report about the functioning of the Houses.

- ii. Publication of the reports of secret meetings.
- iii. Publication of omitted words in the reports.
- iv. Suppressing the speech made by any member of the Parliament.
- v. Writing defamatory things about the Speaker.
- vi. Obstructing the functioning of the House in any manner; improper behaviour within the House; disturbing the peace of the House and not following the orders of the Speaker.

There is no significant difference between the Parliamentary Privileges and the Privileges of the State Legislatures.

Since the contours of the Parliamentary Privileges are infinite and not concretely defined, it is impossible to predict beforehand that under which circumstances the journalists or the newspapers can be punished for the breach of the parliamentary privileges. The punishment for the breach of the Parliamentary Privileges or for defaming the Parliament can range from public reprimanding to a incarceration. Former editor of Blitz–R.K. Karanjiya–was reprimanded within the Parliament for breaching the parliamentary privileges in 1961 when he used words like ‘Joker’, ‘Senile’ and ‘Comedian’ while describing a speech by made by the then member of parliament – Acharya J.B. Kriplani – in the Parliament. Normally, the Parliamentarians take a magnanimous stance under such circumstances and such cases where such harsh punishments are accorded to the offenders are very rare.

Main Elements of Parliamentary Functioning

Parliamentary functions are discharged under following heads:

- (i) Question Hour.
- (ii) Tabling of Papers on the Floor of the House.
- (iii) Zero Hour.
- (iv) Legislative Functions.

Under normal circumstances, both the Houses of the Parliament follow a fixed schedule. Normally, the first hour of every session of the Parliament is the Question Hour. After the Question Hour, the House takes up miscellaneous items of work before proceeding to the main business of the day. After that the main functions of the Parliament are performed. These may be one or more of these–Adjournment Motions, Questions involving breaches of Privileges, Papers to be laid on the Table, Intimations regarding President's assent to Bills, Calling Attention Notices, Presentation of Reports of Parliamentary Committee, Bills to be withdrawn or introduced, tabling of the Petitions regarding the House, etc.

(i) **The Question Hour:** The first hour of every sitting of the House of the People is called the Question Hour. Questions are of following three types:

- **Starred Questions:** These questions have a distinctive asterisk mark (*) and are asked with the intention of obtaining an oral answer within the House. Other members of the House can also ask supplementary questions related to any specific starred question. For this they require to attract the attention of the presiding officer by raising their hands.

- **Un-starred Questions:** As opposed to a starred question, the answer to an un-starred question has to be given in written form. No supplementary questions can be asked in relation to an un-starred question. Answers to such questions are tabled in the House by the concerned minister after the Question Hour is over.

- **Short Notice Questions:** Short Notice Questions are raised on the matters of urgent public importance. Such a question can be asked only when the Speaker permits asking of a question in such a short notice and the Minister concerned is willing to provide a reply to that question on such short notice.

Effect of Questions asked in the Parliament on the Public

Everyday 20 oral questions can be listed and 230 questions requiring written answers can be listed. Written answers provide a very wide pool of data for information and news related to the policies of the Union as well as the State Governments. Journalists willing to industriously peruse these written answers can elicit important news stories from them. The government maintains direct contact with the public through various questions raised in the House. In fact, the question hour tells the public about the work done by the Government and the policies it follows or intends to follow. Parliamentary journalists should be particularly attentive when a minister is giving speech on an important issue of national importance or is replying to questions which affect a large population of the country. Here the knowledge of shorthand proves to be very handy. It helps in verbatim recording of the speech or the answer given by the minister. A journalist equipped with the shorthand technique can send her/his report directly to the press as soon as the minister finishes her/his speech, whereas others will have to take help from the concerned officials because they were unable to write down the speech or the answer word by word. This can consume a lot of precious time leading to deterioration in the quality of the report. Sometimes the



government takes important decisions in the written format only. Therefore, a parliamentary reporter should be extremely cautious in this matter.

(ii) Laying of Papers on the Table in the Parliament

After the culmination of the Question Hour (which is normally of one hour), important policy papers are tabled in the House. These are official documents of the government and are presented in the House by the ministers of the concerned departments. These papers are normally very good source of news. These documents can provide information on a large number of subjects. For instance, they can be annual reports of various government departments giving an account of their functioning. As an enlightened parliamentary reporter, one must read the agenda of that day prior to the actual commencement of the session. S/he should know in advance about the documents that are going to be tabled that day. As soon as they are tabled in the House, complete information pertaining them can be received from the Secretariat of the Lok Sabha or the Rajya Sabha, as the case may be.

(iii) The Zero Hour

The Zero Hour is the most difficult session of the parliament to cover from the point of view of an inexperienced parliamentary reporter. This is the time when the members of parliament try to grab the attention of the Speaker by standing at their places. When each and every one of them is speaking simultaneously, then it becomes quite difficult for a journalist to decipher their meanings. During such times entire attention of a parliamentary journalist should be focussed on the floor of the House and s/he should try to pen down whatever the

members are saying as quickly as possible. If something important turns up, then it can be used as news, otherwise; it can be discarded.

Although, the presiding officer orders them to speak one by one, but normally this does not happen. As soon as any issue is raised by any member against the government, entire opposition stands up in unison in favour of that issue and tries to pin down the government. Some such issues are scams like 2G scam, Securities scam or the burning issue of Ayodhya.

A skilled reporter who is aware of the background of any issue and takes notes regularly in the Parliament can prepare a good report.

(iv) Legislative Functions

Besides previously mentioned functions, the Parliament also performs various legislative functions which comprise conversion of bills into laws, presentation and authorization of the general and the railway budget, immediate discussion on issues of public importance, etc. Formation and passing of bills is among the most important legislative functions of the Parliament. When a bill is passed by both the Houses of the Parliament, then it is sent to the President for her/his consent, following which it becomes law. A bill has to undergo following stages before finally becoming law:

- **Introduction of the Bill:** A bill can be introduced in either the House of the People or the Council of States by the concerned minister or any other private member. While introducing the bill, the introducer of the bill appraises the House about its background; necessity and objectives. If a majority of the House favours the introduction of the bill, then it is introduced formally in the House.

- **General Debate:** In the next stage, the draft of the bill is discussed by the members of the House. The objective of this is to decide that whether the bill should be send to the Select Committee or to the Joint Committee of both the Houses of the Parliament. Then the Committee to which the bill has been sent provides a complete and extensive clarification regarding various clauses and sub-clauses of the bill.

- **Voting:** When all the necessary amendments are made and the bill is finalized, then it is presented for voting in the House. Generally, any bill is passed through voice votes, but sometimes a situation arises where physical voting becomes necessary. A bill is passed or rejected by the majority of the house.

(v) **Constitutional Amendment Bill:** Article 368 give in the Part XX of the Constitution provides for its amendment. A Constitution

Amendment Bill needs to be passed by the majority of the total membership and by a majority of not less than two-thirds of the members present and voting of each House of the Parliament to become a legal entity.

(vi) Calling Attention Notice:

Calling Attention Notice is a completely unique and innovative concept of the Indian Constitution. If any member wants to call the attention of the government or a minister towards any issue of 'urgent public importance', then s/he may do so by giving a calling attention notice with the prior permission of the speaker.

(vii) Matters raised under Rule 377 in Lok Sabha: Under this rule, any member of the House of the People or the Lok Sabha can raise those matters of urgent public importance which do not fall within the purview of the points of order and which have not been raised during the session under any other rule, but only with the permission of the Speaker. The member raising the issue is allowed to make a brief speech on the floor of the House on the issue in question.

(viii) Adjournment Motion: The underlying objective of an adjournment motion is to call the attention of the House to a matter of urgent public importance. Adjournment motion is invoked when in the context of the urgency of the matter in question a motion or a resolution with proper notice may be too late. This is an extraordinary procedure and if accepted by a majority of the members present in the House and voting, then normal business of the House is set aside and the issue raised through the motion is discussed immediately.

(ix) No Confidence Motion: 'No Confidence' or 'No Trust' motion is brought in the House by the Opposition in case it strongly feels that the Government has not got the Majority in the House and therefore, should resign. If this motion is accepted by a majority of the House, then an extensive debate takes place on the Floor of the House which is followed by voting. If the Government fails to prove its majority in the House, then it has to resign.

(x) Special Debate: The Speaker permits special debates on matters of national importance within the House. Every member of the House is allowed to express her/his views on the issue in question at least once in case of such special debates.

(xi) Budget: Budget is a statement of the revenue and the expenditure receipts of the forthcoming financial year. This is presented in the Parliament by the Finance Minister of the Government.

Parliamentary Committees

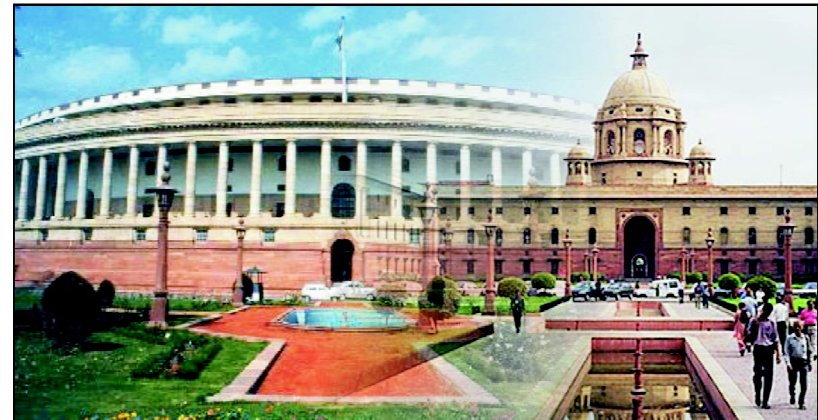
As we know that the legislature has to perform myriad tasks and the time at its disposal is limited; hence, it is not in a position to dispose off all its tasks by itself. Therefore, it delegates functional authority to various parliamentary committees in order to ensure better and prompt disposal of work. Parliamentary Committees are generally of following two types:

1. Ad hoc Committee: Ad hoc committees are constituted for a particular purpose and as soon as they finish the task assigned to them they cease to exist.

2. Standing Committee: These committees are permanent in nature and work continually. They are re-constituted from time to time or their structure changes from time to time. Some of the standing committees are the Committee on Petitions, the Committee on Privileges, the Committee on the Welfare of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, etc. All these committees also act as good news source.

How to write Parliamentary News?

The biggest difficulty that parliamentary reporters encounter while working on the beat is the long working hours. Sometimes they are required to cover parliamentary sessions stretching well over 6-7 hours. This becomes quite cumbersome as well as hectic. Competency of parliamentary reporters depends upon their ability to cover long and clamorous parliamentary sessions into as few as words as possible without neglecting or leaving out any important information. Although being concise is important, but is not the fundamental principle of parliamentary reporting. It is the duty of



parliamentary reporters to present an accurate picture of the functioning of the House as far as practicable and give proper space to all the members who have participated in the proceedings.

Parliamentary reporters should never forget that they are just neutral audience and not the members of parliament and their primary responsibility is to give an accurate account of the proceedings of the House and the contribution made by the representatives of the people, i.e. the MPs, to the readers, who have elected these MPs to be their representatives in the parliament, but cannot visit the parliament to assess the performance of their representatives. Parliamentary reporters should also bear in mind that no party or Member of Parliament is meted out an unfair and unjustifiable treatment in their reports. Also, one should avoid unnecessarily eulogizing certain members and baselessly denigrating others.

Subject Oriented

Members of Parliament want to get published. Their outlook is more individualistic than objective, but the outlook of parliamentary reporters should be objective at all times. They should tell the readers about the proceedings of the House rather than focusing upon the exploits of individual members in the House.

The Opposition

Parliamentary reports should be 'balanced' and written in a coherent manner. Being 'balanced' implies that the reports should give equal importance to both – the government's perspectives and the opposition's perspectives. It is vital to give a fair space to the opposition in parliamentary news because it performs two very important functions of 'keeping the government in check' and 'pointing out the deficiencies of the government'. The public should be made aware of the points of view of the opposition. They should know about the shortcomings and lapses pointed out by the opposition regarding various bills presented by the government in the House or the functioning of the government and what are the objections raised by it regarding various matters of public importance.

It is not obligatory to use the speech given by any minister or any other member of parliament as the intro of a parliamentary report. Also, it is not desirable that the journalists give a simple intro to their stories based upon the direction which a debate took. If points raised during a debate are more important and interesting than the speech of a minister on the issue, then those points should invariably be included in the intro in place of the minister's speech. If you think that certain



unparliamentary words were used in the House during the session, then you may use them in your report provided they have not been expurgated from the proceedings. This will enable you to make the public aware of the behaviour of their elected representatives within the House. Your reports should never sound like that they have been written with enmity towards members of parliament or the parliament as a whole. Nothing defamatory or contemptuous should be written against the parliament or its members. If you have found the conduct or the speech of any member of parliament objectionable or inappropriate, then you can criticize her/him in a fair and justifiable manner, but you do not have any right to admonish or denigrate any member. If a member has condemned another member, then you may mention this as a fact in your report. A correspondent does not have any right to criticize the decisions of the presiding officer. However, if a member has done so, then the correspondent can include that in her/his final copy. There are very few speakers whose speeches can be published verbatim; therefore, it is advisable to present the gist of any speech made by any member of parliament in your own words. The language should be clear and should sound similar to the speech made by the speaker in the House. Always remember that if a Constitution Amendment Bill is rejected by either of the Houses, then it is considered to be annulled. In case of Money Bills, the Council of States or the Rajya Sabha can suggest certain amendments, but it is not obligatory for the House of the People or the Lok Sabha to accept them. Parliamentary reporters should always keep a copy of the constitution with them.

It is expected of every reporter that s/he will be well acquainted



with the parliamentary privileges before beginning to write parliamentary news. A parliamentary journalist should publish her/his reports with utmost veracity and without any prejudice. S/he should be aware of the importance of the Question Hour and the Zero Hour. S/he should always remain alert about the bills tabled in the House and should peruse the agenda of the House everyday before the commencement of the proceedings. A large portion of the parliamentary work is disposed off by the parliamentary committees. A good parliamentary reporter should keep a vigilant eye on their functioning because reports given by these committees can prove to be a good source for some very important news.

If one gets to know the working of the Parliament, then the functioning of the State Legislature/s becomes obvious by itself. However, it needs to be mentioned here that some state legislatures have their own set of rules and regulations which are not like the rules and regulation followed by the parliament in any respect. For instance, the Council of States or the Rajya Sabha, which is the Upper House of the Parliament, does not have any right to hold a debate on 'no confidence' motion; whereas, in Uttar Pradesh and some other states, the Legislative Council or the Vidhan Parishad, which is the Upper House, has got the right to hold a debate in case of a 'no confidence' motion against the government. Nevertheless, there is still fundamental similarity between the Rajya Sabha and the Vidhan Parishads as even if a 'no confidence' motion gets passed by a Vidhan Parishad, it is not obligatory upon the government to resign.

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