

# *Parliamentary Reporting*

## **What is parliament?**

Parliament comes from the Norman French word 'parlement', meaning a conversation or a 'talking'. Today, it is an integral component of any modern democracy. A democracy is a system of governance by representatives elected by the people. The place of gathering of these representatives who make and modify laws for the people who have elected them is called parliament.

India has a bicameral parliament, that is, it comprises two sets of representatives. The people of India elect their representatives to Lok Sabha directly whereas their representatives in respective state Assemblies elect members of Rajya Sabha. Lok Sabha is also called the Lower House and Rajya Sabha is also called the Upper House.

The membership of Lok Sabha is for five years unless it is dissolved mid-way and there is a mid-term general election. The membership of Rajya Sabha is for six years and it is a permanent House, that is, unlike Lok Sabha, the entire Rajya Sabha is never dissolved. Only two-thirds of members retire every two years and the vacant seats filled through elections.

A member of either Lok Sabha or Rajya Sabha is called a Member of Parliament or an MP in short.

In India, all MPs together sit thrice in a year at the Parliament House (Sansad Bhavan) to make and modify laws, highlight problems of the people to be addressed and to discuss issues of national importance. Their sittings are called sessions. The three sessions are Budget session, Monsoon session and Winter session. The President of India kicks off the first session of the year, that is, the Budget session, by addressing the joint session of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha.

Other than these three, the President has the power of convening a special session of the parliament on the advice of the Union Cabinet which is headed by the Prime Minister.

## **Why parliamentary reporting?**

There are quite a few reasons why in a democracy the media must report what the parliament is doing and how it is functioning. Some of the significant reasons are the following:

- People are governed by laws. Parliament makes new laws and modifies existing ones. The laws are implemented on the ground by the executive. In India, the executive needs the support of the legislative to derive power. Each ministry is headed by a Member of Parliament under whom bureaucrats work.
- Top policy decisions are taken by the Members of Parliament as some of them head their respective ministries. These policy decisions are discussed and announced in parliament first. Such policy decisions directly impact the common people.
- The parliament provides a stage for speeches and arguments. Some of the greatest speeches have been made by political leaders on the floors of Lok Sabha and Rajya

Sabha. Therefore, the parliament often witnesses moments of erudition and human drama which make for an interesting reading.

- The parliament is a window of the government's policies and ideologies to foreign correspondents working in India. In a globalised economy, this is of extreme importance to foreign governments who have strategic and trade ties with India.
- The people who have elected their representatives must know if the latter are fulfilling their promises. For any emerging problems, too, they seek and expect redressal from their elected representatives.

## **What do you report?**

- The parliamentary staff work throughout the year but parliament fulfils its major functions through the three sessions when its members come and attend it. It is during these sessions that bills making new laws or modifying existing ones are tabled, discussed and passed. The discussions on the bills, the government's point and the counter-point of the opposition are widely reported
- The Budget session, the first of the three sessions in a year, is the most important one since it is in this session that the Finance Minister presents the Annual Financial Statement, popularly known as the Union Budget, before the Houses – Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. This is perhaps the most important area of parliamentary reporting every year because among other things, taxes, both direct and indirect, are announced which have an impact on the day-to-day lives of the masses.
- Besides making or modifying laws, the parliament during the sessions also discusses emerging issues of national and international significance. Ministers are put under the scanner by opposition members regarding the working of their respective departments. For example, at a time like this, the Union Health Minister may be asked to detail the testing facilities for suspected Covid19 patients across the country, or the number of beds which have been provided for such patients, etc. Similarly, the Union Commerce Minister or the Finance Minister may be asked about the action plan which will be put in effect to fight the recessionary situation which is expected post-Covid19 phase.
- Various ministries provide answers to members' questions either in writing or verbally. These answers together reflect the overall state of affairs in the country that readers should be aware about.
- Speeches and discussions themselves are subjects of reporting. They reflect the government's as well as the opposition's approaches to contemporary issues facing the country. Specific problems of states and constituencies also find voice during parliamentary discussions and debates.
- Since parliamentary sessions are a gathering of people's representatives from across the country of different political parties, with different ideologies, they provide a minefield of stories. An experienced and discerning reporter may coax a leader to provide crucial information which is not in public domain yet, leading to an exclusive report.

- Amid political differences, parliamentary sessions provide opportunities for bonhomie, anecdotes, personal experiences, etc. All these could lead to a good mood copy.

### **Skills that you need**

- For parliamentary reporting, you need to have a few years of experience behind you. Generally, newspapers assign senior reporters to cover parliament. In case there is a fresher, she works under the supervision of a senior reporter.
- This is important because as a parliamentary reporter you should not only be aware of the way the parliament functions but also should have personal rapport with key politicians.
- This is also important because as a parliamentary reporter you are supposed to provide context and analysis to your reports and for this you would need some background knowledge which will come only through experience.
- You must have a grasp of the laws, parliamentary proceedings and the jargon, like question hour, zero hour, starred and unstarred questions, trust and no-trust motion, cut motion, adjournment, etc.
- You should be aware about the powers and functions of key parliamentary posts like Speaker, Leader of the House, Leader of Opposition, Party Whip, etc.
- You must understand the process of making or modifying a law, right from the time of a Bill being drafted till it becomes a law by Presidential notification.
- You should be aware of positions and roles of the various parliamentary committees like Standing Committees, Select Committee, Privilege Committee, etc.
- India has a multi-party system, with probably the largest number of national and regional parties. You must be aware of their ideologies and also inter- and intra-party dynamics among leaders.
- Very often, as a parliamentary reporter, you have to decipher complex proceedings and issues for your readers. For this you need good language skills to report in a simple language which your readers can understand.