

constantly disrupted by interruptions by Members over the Petrol Pump Dealership Scam, one would have expected the members to take more interest in the sub-committee constituted to look into complaints on non-observance of guidelines laid down by the Government in allotting retail outlets and LPG distributorships by Dealer Section Boards. However, the attendance at the meeting of this sub-committee was a mere 50 per cent. During this period, only one meeting of the committee was held, its duration being 30 minutes. (Annexure XIII)

The absence of members from the sittings of the House might bother the citizens in general and

MPs' constituents in particular, but it is not a matter of such great importance to Members of Parliament because ironically, the Committee on Absence of Members from the sittings of the House, which had one sitting during the period of the Monsoon Session, recorded a dismal 33.3 per cent attendance or 66.7 per cent absenteeism! The three meetings of the Committee on the Welfare of Scheduled Castes and Tribes registered an average attendance of 55.56 per cent. Committee on Subordinate Legislation recorded an attendance of approximately 46 per cent. Even the Joint Committee on Salaries and Allowances of Members of Parliament did not attract more than 40 per cent attendance!³⁵ (Annexure XIV)

Parliament's Commitment to Social Development

How committed are Parliamentarians to social issues and social developments? As a barometer/ representative sample, Special Mentions: or Matters of Urgent Public Importance that were raised in the Rajya Sabha with the permission of the Chair were looked into. The Lok Sabha equivalent of 'Special Mention' is 'Matters raised under Rule 377'. Here too, a large number of issues are raised under Rule 377, but, the LS Secretariat does not put out the details, so it is difficult to analyse them subject-wise. Instead, two other instruments used by Parliamentarians in Lok Sabha to discuss issues of public importance are examined is the Short Duration Discussion under Rule 193 and the other, Calling Attention Motion.

Special mention

During the Budget Session of Rajya Sabha 129 Matters of Public Importance were raised, the total time spent on them being 5 hours and 7 minutes.³⁶

Usually, Special Mentions get anywhere between one minute to three minutes each. The issues raised during this Session covered a wide range:

- Nuisance of car parking in Delhi.
- Reduction in import duty on Titanium Dioxide to the need for telecasting live the world cup

football event through DD Sports Channel.

- Crash of MIG planes and explosives shipped from South Africa to Kandla. Now, out of these 129 matters raised, 28 pertained to social issues and even here over 50 per cent were constituency/state-specific problems, while the rest pertained to the entire nation. Some of the issues mentioned were:
 - Damages caused by heavy rains in Tamil Nadu.
 - Plight of fishermen in TN on the coast of Bay of Bengal.
 - Trafficking in children, implementation of the Disability Act.
 - Exploitation of minors.
 - Serious drinking water problems in Karnataka.
 - Impact of AIDS on weaker sections in India.
 - Drought in the country.
 - Old age homes.
 - Plight of the disabled.
 - Need for registration of clinical labs, nursing home and medical centres in the country.

Similarly, during the Monsoon Session of the Rajya Sabha, 109 matters came up for Special Mentions—

35. Committees other than Financial and Standing Committees, Resume of work done by Lok Sabha, 13th Lok Sabha, 10th Session, Lok Sabha Secretariat.

36. Resume of Business Transacted by the Rajya Sabha, 195th Session, Rajya Sabha Secretariat.

Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS)

A perusal of the Tenth Report of the Committee on MPLADS 2002-2003, presented to the Lok Sabha Speaker on 12 August, 2002, not only shows some MPs choosing projects that violate the guidelines, but the MPLADS Committee even approving some of them, many times overruling the objections of the ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. The guidelines on MPLADS stipulate that MPs should suggest individual works costing not more than Rs 25 lakh per work. Proposals involving costs substantially higher than Rs 25 lakh have been considered by the MPLADS Committee on a case-to-case basis. Similarly, projects that may not fit in with the guidelines have also been brought before the Committee for consideration.

However over the years, there has been improvement in the percentage of utilisation of funds released under the MPLADS scheme, but not to the extent desired. If one were to look at the statistics given by the Department of Statistics and Programme Implementation pertaining to utilisation of funds by Rajya Sabha members, one finds that in Jharkhand, for example, the utilisation is only 47.9 per cent of the funds released. Similarly, Uttaranchal, Kerala and Orissa record 54.4 per cent, 54.8 per cent and 55.2 per cent respectively. In Goa too, the utilisation percentage is only 57.8 per cent. In respect of Rajya Sabha members, the average percentage of utilisation for all the states and union territories is 72.3 per cent. (See Annexure XVIII for state-wise tables)

Since 1993 when the scheme was first announced, the government of India has released Rs 96.93 billion against the amount sanctioned, totalling Rs 102.74 billion, thereby taking the percentage of sanction over release to 94.3 per cent. Similarly, the expenditure incurred so far under the scheme is Rs 78.61 billion and the percentage of utilisation over release is 76.5. This is the All-India figure and includes LS and RS MPs from all the States and Union Territories.

the total time taken by them adding up to 3 hours and 56 minutes.³⁷ Out of these, 24 pertained to social issues such as electrification of villages, social security for the dependent elderly, the need to take steps to find a permanent solution to water and power crisis, cancer treatment to the elderly, water problem in India, flood situation in Bihar, steps to prevent AIDS, river water pollution in the country, scarcity of snakebite serum, suicide by onion growers of Bihar, suicide by cotton growers in Andhra Pradesh, molestation of women in Suddan village of district Hazaribagh in Jharkhand, child development and the need to enact a central legislation for the welfare of agricultural workers in the country. These were among the 109 questions that ranged from allocation of natural gas for ceramic and glass industry in Rajasthan and the urgent need to develop effective anti-missile defence system to shortage of NCERT books, revision of royalty on minerals and transfer of money meant for jawans welfare to private school.

Similarly, in the Winter Session of the Rajya Sabha, 138 matters came up for Special Mentions. Out of these, 34 pertained to the social sector, including issues such as malnourishment among children in the country, use of crude methods for laproscopy by private health centres, pathetic conditions of government-aided private hospitals, problem of fluoride in drinking water in Maharashtra, severe water problem in Andhra Pradesh, special schemes for educated unemployed youths in the country, implementation of SC/ST reservation policy by universities, malnourishment among children in the country, prevention of atrocities against women and resurgence of virulent malaria in tribal districts of Orissa.

Surprisingly, among the 34 issues raised, a relatively large number—9 to be specific—pertained to environmental issues such as the need to protect biodiversity and ecology of the long coastline of Orissa, threat posed to dolphins in Chilka lake,

37. Resume of Business Transacted by the Rajya Sabha, 196th Session, Rajya Sabha Secretariat.

environmental and health hazard posed by plastic bags, climate policy, immediate need to save the national bird from extinction.³⁸

Matters under Rule 377

In the Lok Sabha Special Mentions' are categorised as 'Matters under Rule 377'. As mentioned earlier, in the absence of details, it is not possible to analyse 'Matters raised under Rule 377'. Therefore one must look at Short Duration Discussion under Rule 193 and Calling Attention Motion.

Twelve issues came up under 'Short Duration Discussion' during the Budget, Monsoon and Winter Sessions (four issues in each Session) of Lok Sabha. Of this, only three pertained to social issues; (a) problems being faced by farmers in the country, (b) relief and rehabilitation of riot victims in Gujarat and (c) floods and droughts in various parts of the country. In other words, 25 per cent of the subject discussed pertained to social issues.

Under Calling Attention, a total of 15 different sub-

jects were discussed during the three Sessions of Lok Sabha in 2002. (Winter: 7; Monsoon and Budget: 4 each). Out of these, only two issues pertained to the social sector: while one pertained to non-supply of medicines in CGHS dispensaries, the other was on the non-availability of basic amenities in tribal areas due to Forest (Conservation) Act of 1980. So here, only 12 per cent of the subjects that came up for discussion under Calling Attention was on social sector.

However, another issue of concern should be brought up here pertaining to 'Matters raised under Rule 377'—the decreasing number of answers going from the Executive to the Legislature on issues raised under Rule 377. Given the short time that is available under this Rule, members briefly raise issues and the concerned ministers are expected to reply to them in writing subsequently and endorse a copy to the LS Secretariat. However, an analysis of the work in this regard shows that while the number of matters raised under Rule 377 is increasing, the replies given by the ministers to these matters is on

Income of Parliamentarians

MP's are paid salaries and allowances along with travel and other privileges so that they may perform their responsibilities as lawmakers without fear of favour. This is what an MP makes in terms of salaries and allowances.

Salary	Rs 12,000 per month
Allowance for attending Parliament	Rs 400 per day
Secretarial allowance	Rs 6,000 per month
Stationary and postage	Rs 3,500 per month

Perks: Each MP gets 50,000 unit of free electricity every year. He/she is entitled to 3 telephones, one in the office, one at home and one in the constituency with 50,000 free calls per year. This means an MP can make about 135 calls of 3-minute duration everyday free of cost. One of these lines can be used for connecting to the Internet. But MPs have to pay for these facilities if they use them beyond the free limit. Unutilised free calls can be transferred to their mobile phones. An MP can travel free 32 times by air anywhere within India along with a companion. He/she can travel free another 8 times from their constituency to Delhi to attend Parliament sessions. They are given free passes to travel by trains. Besides this an MP gets 80 vouchers four times a year to make out of turn LPG connections. If an MP manages to complete five years in Parliament he/she is entitled to pension for life.

Source: The Right to Know—A Voter's Guide, CHRI, VANI, 2003.

38. Resume of Business Transacted by the Rajya Sabha, 197th Session, Rajya Sabha Secretariat.

the decline. This shows a lack of accountability on the part of government.

During the First Session of the 13th Lok Sabha, only 49 matters were raised under 377 and the number of replies sent by the concerned ministers stood at 43. In other words, 89.58 per cent of the issues were replied to. Subsequently, in the Second Session, the number of matters raised went up to 174, while the replies went down to 79.31 per cent (138 replies). From the Third to the Sixth Session, the percentage of replies hovered between 77.91 to 71.11 per cent. It came down to 69.68 to 66.22 per cent during the Seventh and the Eighth Sessions. During the Ninth Session or the Budget Session of 2002, the number of matters raised under Rule 377 went up to an all-time high of 314. However, the number of replies sent was only 200, thereby bringing down the percentage of replies sent by ministers to MPs to 63.69 per cent. But the worst

was yet to come. During the Monsoon Session, 123 matters were raised out of which a mere 43 were replied to, showing a slide in the percentage to a shocking 34.96. (Annexure XVI)

Concluding Remarks

Being, the cornerstone of the largest democracy, the parliament in its Golden Jubilee did see some business being transacted conscientiously in the Winter Session. In the Lok Sabha, the Speaker has stepped up interaction with leaders of parties in the Lok Sabha and has been trying to improve discipline and decorum in the House. The two presiding officers appear to have achieved some measure of success in their endeavours, as is obvious from the performance report of the two Houses during the Winter Session of Parliament. However, insofar as attendance record of the Parliamentarians, both within the House and in the Committees are concerned, there is much left to be desired.