

## Parliamentary Scrutiny

### Why in news?

The three agricultural bills and the three labour Bills were not scrutinised by Select Committees of the Parliament.

### Around what does the parliamentary democracy in India revolve?

- The appropriateness of parliamentary democracy for India is based on the grounds of representativeness, responsiveness and accountability.
- There is a running thread across the Constituent Assembly Debates that Parliament and States legislature would be the key institutions around which parliamentary democracy in India would revolve.
- The State legislatures in India have tended to largely imitate Parliament, without evolving an institutional culture of their own.
- So, much rested on Parliament to provide a lead in this regard.

### What is the Committee system?

- Over the years, the Indian Parliament has increasingly taken recourse to the committee system (as its counterparts did elsewhere).
- This was not merely meant for housekeeping.
- But to enhance the efficacy of the House to cope with the technical issues confronting it and to feel the public pulse, to guard its turf and keep it abreast to exercise accountability on the government.
- Some committees such as the Estimates Committee and Public Accounts Committee have a commendable record in this regard.
- Besides the **standing committees**, the Houses of Parliament set up, from time to time, **ad hoc committees** to enquire and report on specific subjects.

### What is the importance?

- The Committees were guardians of the autonomy of the House.
- The committees of scrutiny and oversight, as the case with other committees of the House, are not divided on party lines.
- They work away from the public glare.
- They remain informal compared to the codes that govern parliamentary proceedings.
- In the discharge of their mandate, they can solicit expert advice and elicit

public opinion.

### **What are some of its fault lines?**

- Indian parliamentary committee system has not been creative or imaginative.
- The presiding officers of the Houses have tended to imitate changes and innovations done elsewhere (like Britain).
- The chairman of the Rajya Sabha, being the Vice-President of India, cannot distance himself much from the stance of the Cabinet.
- But when it comes to the Lok Sabha, very few Speakers have taken cudgels with their party leaders to uphold the autonomy of the House.
- In 1993, however, 17 Departmentally-related Standing Committees (DRSCs) of the Parliament were set up.

### **What are DRSCs?**

- DRSCs drew members from both Houses roughly in proportion to the strength of the political parties in the Houses.
- They were envisaged to be the face of Parliament in a set of inter-related departments and ministries.
- They were assigned the task of looking into the demands for grants of the ministries/departments concerned.
- They will examine Bills pertaining to them, consider their annual reports, and look into their long-term plans and report to Parliament.

### **What did the executives do?**

- The executive in independent India was not very disposed to committees of scrutiny and oversight, sometimes on the false plea that they usurped the powers of Parliament.
- The officialdom in India has often attempted to take cover under political masters to avoid the scrutiny of committees.

### **How are these committees getting marginalised gradually?**

- It is important to point out that committees of scrutiny and advice have been confined to the margins or left in the lurch in the last few years.
- While 71% in the 15th Lok Sabha were wetted by the DRSCs concerned, this proportion came down to 27% in the 16th Lok Sabha.
- The government has shown extreme reluctance to refer Bills also to Select Committees of the Houses or Joint Parliamentary Committees.
- The last Bill referred to a Parliamentary Committee was in 2015.

### **What were the recent examples?**

- Some of the recent momentous Acts of Parliament such as the radical overhaul of Article 370 were not processed by any House committee.
- The protested three Bills related to agricultural produce and the three labour Bills that were cases that definitely deserved to be scrutinised by Select Committees of the Houses.
- But the government used its majority in both the Houses of Parliament and steamrolled the Bills.

### **What is needed?**

- The reason why ruling dispensation neglected these Committees is unclear.
- One of the reasons given at this point in time is the novel coronavirus pandemic and the urgent need to enact safety measures.
- The argument of urgency seems false.
- Clearly, this regime is not disposed to a reflection and reconsideration of Bills proposed in the House.
- It should see that the primary role of Parliament is deliberation, discussion and reconsideration, the hallmarks of democratic institutions.

**Source: The Hindu**

