

Parliamentary Decline in India - Shrinking Deliberation and Rising Executive Dominance

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Parliamentary Decline in India Latest News

- The **Winter Session** of Parliament begins amid a potential deadlock over the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls.
- There are persistent concerns about **legislative dysfunction**, erosion of parliamentary deliberation, and the growing imbalance between the executive and the legislature.
- This highlights a **structural decline** in productivity and oversight functions of Parliament across several Lok Sabhas.

Declining Health of Parliament

- **Routine disruptions and falling productivity:** According to the PRS Legislative Research's monsoon session data (between July 21 and August 21) –
 - The Lok Sabha (LS) functioned just 29% of its scheduled time and the Rajya Sabha (RS) for 34%.

- **Question Hour**, the institution's core mechanisms of accountability, were also badly hit (LS completing only 23% while the RS managed only 6% of its scheduled Question Hour time).
- **Bills passed with minimal debate:**
 - **Regulation of Online Gaming Bill:** Cleared in one day, with 6 minutes (LS) and 23 minutes (RS) of discussion.
 - **Merchant Shipping Bill 2024:** 20 minutes (LS), 10 minutes (RS).
 - **Operation Sindoor:** 50% of LS time spent on it alone.

Institutional Concerns Raised

- **Warnings from constitutional experts:**
 - **P. D. T. Achary:** Declining deliberation undermines the “very purpose of Parliament”. Passage of Bills without debate is a “mockery of legislative business” under **Article 107**. He advocates dialogue between the PM and Leader of Opposition.
- **Views from MPs:**
 - **Manish Tewari (Congress):** Parliament became a **rubber-stamp** legislature. Standing Committees becoming redundant. Presiding officers' neutrality diminishing.
 - **Syed Naseer Husain (Congress):** The government holds primary responsibility for enabling debate. Opposition protests when discussions are denied.
- **Government's position:** Opposition blamed for disruptions, driven by “failed leaders”.

What the Number Indicate

- **Short-term variability:**
 - Exceptionally **high productivity** in Budget Sessions 2023 and 2024 (111% LS, 112% RS).
 - Sharp drop again in Winter Session 2024 (52% LS, 39% RS).
- **Long-term structural decline - 17th Lok Sabha (2019-2024):**
 - The Lok Sabha functioned for 88% of its scheduled time and the Rajya Sabha 73%.
 - However, this came with the fewest sittings of any full-term Lok Sabha since 1952 due to Covid-19 (met only 33 days in 2020).
 - 11 of its 15 sessions were adjourned early, and it became the first Lok Sabha without a **Deputy Speaker** (absent even in the 18th LS).
- **Historical decline in sittings:**
 - 1952-1970: 121 days/year (1st LS - 135 days/year)
 - Since 2000: 68 days/year
 - 17th Lok Sabha: 55 days/year
- **Committee scrutiny weakened:** Bills referred to committees - Over 60% in the 14th and 15th LS, around 20% in the 16th and 17th LS.
- **Cross-government trend:**
 - Decline is not limited to one party or era.
 - **Example:** 15th Lok Sabha (UPA-2) performed poorly (61% LS; 66% RS). The 13th and 14th Lok Sabha performed significantly better (91% and 87%).

Deeper Causes of Institutional Erosion

- **Anti-Defection Law:**

- **From stability to suppression:** Intended to curb defections, the law now erodes independence of MPs. MPs function as subjects of party whip, not representatives of people.
- It **affects** power of the purse (the foundational principle that no tax can be levied), impeachment of a president or a judge (when members are expected to act as jurors, weighing evidence with impartiality), and **legislative autonomy**.

- **Executive dominance over legislature:** Parliament becoming an **approval body** rather than a deliberative body. Opposition's notices, adjournment motions often dismissed; question hour and zero hour frequently disrupted; committees weakened, reducing expert scrutiny.

- **Erosion of constitutional officers' neutrality:** Presiding officers perceived as partisan. Constitutional conventions not upheld resulting in institutional imbalance.

Comparative Perspective - Westminster Model vs India

- **Historical roots:**

- **Oxford Parliament of 1258:** Established executive accountability to the legislature.

- **UK and Commonwealth nations:**

- PM's Questions ensure that the head of government is held to account on a direct, weekly and public basis.
- Strong committee oversight.
- Mandatory testimony by executive officials.

- **India's divergence:**

- Reversal of the Westminster model's spirit.
- Decline in oversight, lack of routine accountability from executives.

Challenges and Way Forward

- **Breakdown in government-Opposition communication:** Dialogue mechanisms between PM, LoP, and House leaders.
- **Declining sittings and productivity:** Mandatory minimum sittings (e.g., 120 days/year) to prevent rushed legislation without debate.
- **Weakening of Standing Committees:** Make committee referral mandatory for all major Bills. Enhance transparency and expert consultation.
- **Absence of Deputy Speaker (Constitutional requirement under Article 93):** Strengthen conventions on Deputy Speaker election.
- **Dominance of party whip due to anti-defection law:** Limit whips to confidence motions and money bills. Restore legislative independence and conscience vote.
- **Partisanship of presiding officers:** Clear norms for impartial conduct of Speaker and Chairperson.
- **Marginalisation of Question Hour and Zero Hour:** Ensure full Question Hour and functioning of Zero Hour.

- **Institutional imbalance favouring the executive:** Institutionalise Prime Minister's Question Hour (weekly). Require executive testimony before committees.

Conclusion

- The decline of parliamentary functioning in India is not a partisan or episodic problem but a **structural erosion** decades in the making. This has hollowed out the legislature's constitutional role as the grand inquest of the nation.
- Reforms are essential to revive the **institutional spirit** envisioned by the Constitution, without which, India risks reducing Parliament to **a symbolic edifice**—standing tall, but silent in its duty to hold power accountable to the people.

Source: **IE** | **IE**

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