Cancelling Question Hour

Why in news?

The Monsoon Session of Parliament, beginning September 14, 2020, would go without “Question Hour”.

What is Question Hour?

- Question Hour is an opportunity for the members to raise questions.
- It is a parliamentary device primarily meant for exercising legislative control over executive actions.
- It is also a device to criticise government policies and programmes.
- It will ventilate public grievances, expose the government’s lapses and extract promises from ministers.
- Thereby, they ensure accountability and transparency in governance.

What is the effectiveness of the Question Hour?

- The annals of history of parliamentary proceedings in India remind us of the scope of Question Hour as armour to raise people’s concerns.
- A classic illustration of this role can be gleaned from this exchange in the Lok Sabha in November 1957.

What was the incident?

- A Congress Member of Parliament asked whether LIC had purchased large blocks of shares from different companies owned by Mundhra.
- The reply was given by the Deputy Minister of Finance.
- Feroze Gandhi of the Congress asked a Supplementary question.
- For this question, the reply of the Union Minister for Finance was dissatisfactory to Feroze Gandhi.
- So, he initiated a half-an-hour discussion on the subject.
- This led to the resignation of the Finance Minister.
- This instance points out the relevance of the half-an-hour discussion and the contributing character of Question Hour in the proceedings.

What is the present government trying to do?

- It is in dire need to avoid these types of situations.

- The time has come to ask about different issues such as its failure in handling the pandemic, the New Education Policy, border tensions, rising unemployment, and so forth.
- The government is bound to respond to these questions in Parliament.
- By doing away with the Question Hour, the government has opted for a face-saving measure.

What is the history?

- The right to question the executive has been exercised by members of the House from the colonial period.
- The first Legislative Council in British India under the Charter Act, 1853, gave members the power to **ask questions** to the executive.
- The Indian Council Act of 1861 allowed members to elicit **information** by means of questions.
- The Indian Council Act, 1892, formulated the **rules** for asking questions including short notice questions.
- The Indian Council Act, 1909, incorporated provisions for asking **supplementary questions** by members.
- The Montague-Chelmsford reforms in 1919 incorporated a rule that the first hour of every meeting was earmarked for questions.
- Parliament has continued this tradition.
- In 1921, the question on which a member desired to have an oral answer was distinguished by him with an asterisk, a star.
- This marked the beginning of **starred questions**.

What is worrisome?

- These are democratic rights the MPs have enjoyed even under the colonial rule.
- But, these rights are being denied to the elected representatives of Independent India, by the present government.
- However, this isn't an isolated action in the midst of the pandemic.

What are the other actions?

- The government passed important bills in the first session of the 17th LS before the formation of department-related standing committees.
- Even the Constitution Amendment Bill on J&K was introduced without circulating copies to the members.
- Several important bills were passed as Finance Bills to avoid scrutiny of the Rajya Sabha.
- Standing committees are an extension of Parliament.

- Any person has the right to present his/her opinion to a Bill during the process of consideration.

What do these government actions mean?

- The government's actions erode the mandate of parliamentary oversight over executive actions envisaged under Article 75 (3) of the Constitution.
- Such actions prevent the MPs from carrying out their constitutional mandate of questioning, debating, and scrutinising government policies and actions.
- These actions are a planned attempt by the government to diminish the role of Parliament and turn itself into an Executive Parliament.

Source: The Indian Express

