Presidential Address in the Parliament

What is the issue?

As the first Parliament session of 2021 begins with President Ram Nath Kovind addressing members of the Parliament, it is pertinent to know about the practice of Presidential address.

How did this practice originate?

- In the United Kingdom, the history of the monarch addressing the Parliament goes back to the 16th century.
- In the United States, President Gorge Washington addressed Congress for the first time in 1790.
- In India, the practice of the President addressing Parliament can be traced back to the Government of India Act of 1919.
- This law gave the Governor-General the right of addressing the Legislative Assembly and the Council of State.
    - The law did not have a provision for a joint address.
    - But the Governor-General did address the Assembly and the Council together on multiple occasions.
- There was no address by him to the Constituent Assembly (Legislative) from 1947 to 1950.
- After the Constitution came into force, President Rajendra Prasad addressed members of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha for the first time on January 31, 1950.

What does the Constitution specify?

- The Constitution gives the President the power to address either House or a joint sitting of the two Houses of Parliament.
- Article 87 provides two special occasions on which the President addresses a joint sitting.
    1. to address the opening session of a new legislature after a general election
    2. to address the first sitting of Parliament each year
- A session of a new or continuing legislature cannot begin without fulfilling this requirement.
- When the Constitution came into force, the President was required to

address each session of Parliament.
- So during the provisional Parliament in 1950, President Prasad gave an address before every session.
- The First Amendment to the Constitution in 1951 changed this position and made the President's address once a year.
- The President's address is one of the most solemn occasions in the Parliamentary calendar.
- It is the only occasion in the year when the entire Parliament, i.e. the President, Lok Sabha, and Rajya Sabha come together.
- The Lok Sabha Secretariat prepares extensively for this annual event associated with ceremony and protocol.

What is the speech about?

- There is no set format for the President's speech.
- The Constitution states that the President shall "inform Parliament of the cause of the summons".
- The address of the President follows a general structure in which it -
    - highlights the government's accomplishments from the previous year
    - sets the broad governance agenda for the coming year

How is it finalised?

- The speech that the President reads is the viewpoint of the government and is written by it.
- Usually, in December, the Prime Minister's Office asks the various ministries to start sending in their inputs for the speech.
- A message also goes out from the Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs asking ministries to send information about any legislative proposals that need to be included in the President's address.
- All this information is aggregated and shaped into a speech, which is then sent to the President.
- The government uses the President's address to make policy and legislative announcements.

What is the further procedure?

- In the days following the President's address, a motion is moved in the two Houses thanking the President for his address.
- This is an occasion for MPs in the two Houses to have a broad debate on governance in the country.
- The Prime Minister replies to this 'motion of thanks' in both Houses, and responds to the issues raised by the MPs.

- The motion is then put to vote and MPs can express their disagreement by moving amendments to the motion.
    - Opposition MPs have been successful in getting amendments passed to the motion of thanks in Rajya Sabha on five occasions (1980, 1989, 2001, 2015, and 2016).
    - They have been less successful in Lok Sabha.
    - For example in 2018, Lok Sabha MPs tabled 845 amendments of which 375 were moved and negatived (rejected).

Source: The Indian Express

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