Significance of Parliamentary Committees

What is the issue?

- The discussion over the RTI Amendment Bill was much controversial in the Rajya Sabha.
- The opposition parties' demand, to refer the Bill to a committee of the House for detailed scrutiny before being passed, needs serious consideration.

What was the contention?

- Opposition parties were demanding that the Bill be referred to a Parliamentary committee for detailed scrutiny.
- The treasury benches and a few other parties emphasized on debating the Bill on the floor of the house before being passed.
- But ultimately, the House passed the RTI Amendment after voting down the demand for sending it to a committee.
- So far, none of the 13 bills passed by the Parliament in the current session have been referred to a parliamentary committee.

How is consent ensured in the Parliament?

- Indian Parliament broadly has two forums for discussion.
- One is on the floor of the House where the debate is televised and MPs take positions based on their parties' stand on a subject.
- The other is the closed-door forum of parliamentary committees.
- Their meetings are not televised and the record of the meetings does not reflect the position taken by an individual MP.

What are Parliamentary Committees?

- Parliamentary committees are established to study and deal with various matters that cannot be directly handled by the legislature due to their volume and complexity.
- These committees are made up of MPs either from one or both Houses.
- Both Houses of Parliament have a similar committee structure, with a few exceptions.
- Their appointment, terms of office, functions and procedure of conducting business are also more or less similar.
- They are regulated as per rules made by the two Houses under Article 118(1)

of the Constitution.
- Broadly, Parliamentary Committees are of two kinds - Standing Committees and ad hoc Committees.
- The former are elected or appointed every year or periodically and their work goes on, more or less, on a continuous basis.
- The latter are appointed on an ad hoc basis as need arises and they cease to exist as soon as they complete the task assigned to them.

How does it work?

- A bill can usually be referred to a parliamentary committee in 3 ways.
- First, the minister piloting the bill can seek the permission of the House to refer the Bill to a committee.
- Second, the Chairman/Speaker has the discretion in referring the bill to a committee.
- Usually, when ministers are trying to build political consensus on a bill, they welcome its referring to a committee.
- However, when in a hurry, they impress upon the Chairman/ Speaker not to refer the bill to a committee.
- This is when the third mechanism comes into play.
- When a bill reaches a House where the government does not have a majority, the MPs can mobilise the numbers to move a motion to refer the bill to a committee.
- However, there is an additional dimension to the scrutiny of bills by committees.
- Whenever the government and Opposition are at extremes in terms of the provisions, the bills are generally not referred to a committee.

How significant are Parliamentary Committees?

- The idea behind the committee system in Parliament is to provide a specialised forum for deliberation on policy issues.
- This ensures that the deliberations are not constrained by the limited number of sitting days as in the case of Parliament.
- Debates in committees are more technical and so, the deliberations require time and stretch for a few months.
- [Unlike this, a debate on the floor of the House allows for political debate and can be wrapped up in a few hours.]
- Besides this, the main purpose is to ensure the accountability of Government to Parliament through more detailed consideration.
- The purpose is to strengthen the administration by investing it with more meaningful parliamentary support.
- The committee, over the years, has worked well in strengthening the

country’s legislative process.

- Moreover, if a bill is referred to a committee, its legislative journey slows down.
- This is because the Bill can be debated in the house only after the committee has submitted its report.
- This slow down of legislation provides the much needed time in building consensus, despite being a source of continued tension between the ruling party and Opposition.

What is the way forward?

- A robust lawmaking process requires thorough scrutiny by Parliament.
- Such scrutiny should not be impacted by either the strength of numbers in Parliament or political agreement on issues.
- This robustness can be ensured by requiring that all Bills be referred to Parliamentary committees.
- Exceptions to this rule should be strictly defined and the exceptions explained to Parliament.
- In addition, the committees should be strengthened to scrutinise and present their reports in a timely fashion.
- These mechanisms will ensure that all bills passed by Parliament, irrespective of the party in power, go through a well laid-out process of debate.

Source: Indian Express

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