



## QUESTION HOUR IN LOK SABHA



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Generally, the first hour of a sitting of the Lok Sabha is devoted to Questions and that hour is called the Question Hour. It has a special significance in the proceedings of Parliament. Asking questions is an inherent and unfettered parliamentary right of Members. It is during the Question Hour that Members can ask questions on every aspect of administration and governmental activity. Government policies in the national as well as international spheres come into sharp focus as the Members try to elicit pertinent information during the Question Hour.

The Government is put on trial during the Question Hour and every Minister whose turn it is to answer Questions has to stand up and answer for the administration's acts of omission and commission. At the same time, through the Question Hour, the Government is able to quickly feel the pulse of the nation and adopt its policies and actions accordingly. It is through questions in Parliament that the Government remains in touch with the people inasmuch as Members are enabled to ventilate grievances of the public in matters concerning the administration.

Questions enable Ministries to gauge popular reaction to their policies and administration; questions also bring to the notice of the Ministers many an abuse which otherwise would have gone unnoticed. Sometimes, questions may lead to the appointment of a commission, a court of enquiry or even a legislation when matters raised are grave enough to agitate the public mind and are of wide public importance.

### **Types of Questions**

Questions are of four types: Starred, Unstarred, Short Notice Questions and Questions addressed to Private Members.

A Starred Question is one to which a Member desires an oral answer in the House and which is distinguished by an asterisk mark. When a question is answered orally, supplementary questions can be asked thereon. Only 20 questions can be listed for oral answer on a day.

An Unstarred Question is one which is not called for oral answer in the House and on which no supplementary questions can consequently be asked. To such a question, a written answer is deemed to have been laid on the Table after the Question Hour by the Minister to whom it is addressed. It is printed in the official report of the sitting of the House for which it is put down. Only 230 questions can be listed for written answer on a day. In addition, 25 more questions can also be included in the Unstarred List relating to States under President's Rule and the total number of questions in the list of Unstarred Questions for a day may not exceed 255 in relaxation of the normal limit of 230 questions.

A Short Notice Question is one which relates to a matter of urgent public importance and can be asked with a shorter notice than the period of notice prescribed for an ordinary question. Like a Starred Question, it is answered orally, followed by supplementary questions.

The Question to a Private Member is addressed to the Member herself/himself and it is asked when the subject-matter of it pertains to any Bill, Resolution or any matter relating to the Business of the House for which that Member is responsible. For such questions, the same procedure is followed as in the case of questions addressed to a Minister with such variations as the Speaker may consider necessary or convenient.

The List of Starred, Unstarred, Short Notice Questions and Questions to Private Members are printed in green, white, light pink and yellow colour, respectively, to distinguish them from one another.

### **Notices of Questions**

A Member gives notice in writing addressed to the Secretary-General, Lok Sabha, intimating one's intention to ask a question. Besides the text of the question, the notice states clearly the official designation of the Minister to whom the question is addressed, the date on which the answer is desired, as also the order of preference, in the event when a Member tables more than one notice of questions for the same day.

A Member is allowed to give not more than five notices of questions, both for oral and written answers, in all, for any day. Notices received in excess of five from a Member for a day, are considered for subsequent day(s) concerning that Minister(s) during the period of that session only.

The normal period of notice of a question is not less than fifteen clear days. However, the Speaker can relax the required minimum notice period of fifteen clear days to protect the interest of the Members. A Short Notice Question can be asked with a notice shorter than ten days but the Member has to state briefly the reasons for asking the question at such short notice.

### **Procedure in Lok Sabha Secretariat**

On receipt of the notice of a question, it is scrutinized to see that the designation of the Minister and date of answer have been correctly mentioned in the notice. A computerized auto ballot is then held in respect of notices received in the Secretariat at the same time to determine their *inter se* priority. Separate ballots are held for Starred and Unstarred Questions. Starred, Unstarred and Short Notice Questions are numbered separately and entered in separate diaries on the computer software.

The next stage is to examine the notices of questions in the light of Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in Lok Sabha, Directions by the Speaker, provisions of the Constitution of India and past precedents. A question is primarily asked for the purpose of obtaining information on a matter of public importance. Questions that contain arguments, inferences or defamatory statements or otherwise refer to the character or conduct of any person except in her/his official or public capacity, are not admitted. Questions which are in substance repetitions of those that have been answered previously or in regard to which information is available in accessible documents or in ordinary works of reference are also not admitted. Besides, if the subject matter of a question

is pending for judgement before any court of law or any other tribunal or body set up under Law or is under consideration before a Parliamentary Committee, the same is not permitted to be asked. Questions making discourteous references to foreign countries with whom India has friendly relations are disallowed. Similarly, questions raising larger issues of policy are not allowed, for it is not possible to enunciate policies within the limited compass of an answer to a question. Questions containing more than 150 words or relating to a matter which is not primarily the concern of the Government of India are not admitted. Questions going into minor details of administration and day-to-day working of the Government/ Organisations are also not permitted.

Keeping the above rules and precedents in view, a question is admitted or disallowed. Typed copies of the admitted and edited questions are then made out on a standard form. An advance copy of the admitted question is sent online to the Ministry/ Department concerned so that they may, on their side, initiate action for collection of information asked for in the question to prepare a reply.

A Short Notice Question which is of wide public importance is first referred to the Ministry concerned, if necessary, for furnishing factual information in the matter and also for indicating whether the Minister concerned accepts the short notice and, if so, the date convenient to her/ him to answer the question. If the Minister accepts the short notice and the matter sought to be raised is considered urgent by the Speaker, the Short Notice Question is admitted and printed in a separate list in light pink paper in order to distinguish it from the lists of ordinary questions. The Short Notice Question is taken up after the Question Hour.

### **Allotment of Days for Questions**

Immediately on fixation of the dates of the sittings of a session of Lok Sabha, allotment of the days for the answering of questions relating to various Ministries of the Government of India is made.

For this purpose, the Ministries are divided into five Groups and fixed days are allotted to groups of Ministries during the week. There is no Question Hour on Saturday, even if a sitting is fixed for that day.

Separate lists are prepared for Starred and Unstarred Questions which have been admitted. Admitted questions are entered in the List of Questions for the day for oral or written answers, as the case may be, in the order of priority obtained in ballot with the orders of the Speaker. Not more than five questions are admitted in the name of a Member for each sitting of which not more than one is put down for oral answer. While compiling the list of Unstarred Questions, care is taken to see that one question of each Member is included in the List of Questions of that date. The remaining Unstarred Questions are thereafter put in the list according to *inter se* priority obtained in the ballot. A serial number is allotted to each question. Normally, not more than twenty questions are placed on the List of Questions for oral answers and not more than two hundred and thirty questions are placed on the List of Questions for written answers on any one day. The Ministries are supplied with the lists of finally admitted questions at least 5 days before the date fixed for asking the questions. The soft copies of list of questions are available on the website of Lok Sabha *i.e.*, <http://loksabha.nic.in>, six days prior to the date of answer.

A Member whose question has been admitted and which is included in the List of Questions for oral answer for a particular day, rises in one's place when the turn of the question comes and asks the question by reading out its number on the List of Questions. The Minister concerned answers the question. Thereafter, the Member who had asked the question can ask only two supplementary questions. After that, the second Member whose name is clubbed on the question is allowed to ask one supplementary question. Thereafter, the Speaker may allow one supplementary each to Members who are able to catch the Speaker's eye. However, the number of supplementaries permitted on a starred question depends upon the relative importance of the question. The Speaker accordingly exercises the discretion in permitting supplementaries. Thereafter, the next question is taken up. The replies to questions not reached for oral answer during the Question Hour are deemed to have been laid on the Table of the Lok Sabha along with the replies to written answers.

If on a question being called is not asked or the Member in whose name it stands is absent, the Speaker may direct that the answer to it be given.

At the end of the Question Hour, *i.e.* after the questions for oral answer have been answered, Short Notice Question, if any, for that day is taken up and disposed of in the same way as questions for oral answers.

### **Half-an-Hour Discussion**

Where answer to a question, whether Starred or Unstarred, needs elucidation on a matter of fact, any Member can table a notice for raising a Half-an-Hour Discussion thereon. If the notice is admitted and gets priority in ballot, such a discussion may be allowed by the Speaker. Normally, such discussions are held on three days in a week, *viz.*, Monday, Wednesday and Friday, except in Budget Session when such discussion is normally not held till the financial business is completed. The discussion is usually held from 1730 to 1800 hours, *i.e.* the last half-an-hour of the day's proceedings. Initiating the discussion, the Member who has given notice makes a short statement and not more than four other Members, who have given advance notice before 1100 hours on the day on which discussion is to be held, are permitted to ask a question each for further elucidation of any matter of fact. Thereafter, the Minister concerned replies.

### **Telecasting of Question Hour**

The Question Hour is an interesting part of the parliamentary proceedings. Although a question mainly seeks information and tries to elicit facts on a particular subject, many a times lively and quicksilver repartees occur between the Members asking the questions and the Ministers answering them. These repartees are sometimes coupled with flashes of wit and humour. That is why the Public Galleries and the Press Galleries are packed to capacity during the Question Hour.

With a view to familiarizing the public at large about the manner in which the proceedings of the Houses of Parliament are conducted in the Question Hour and how their representatives raise various issues of national/international importance, proceedings of the Question Hour in Lok Sabha were telefilmed on 2 December, 1991 and telecast on the following day in the morning. Earlier, the pre-recorded proceedings of the Question Hour

were telecast by *Doordarshan* on the following day in the morning. From 7 December, 1994, the proceedings of the Question Hour of both the Houses were telecast live on alternate weeks throughout the country on the national channel of *Doordarshan* from 1100 hrs. to 1200 hrs. All India Radio is also broadcasting the proceedings of the Question Hour of both the Houses from 2200 hrs. to 2300 hrs. the same night on their national network. It has been arranged in such a manner that during the telecast of the Question Hour of one House by *Doordarshan*, the Question Hour of the Other House is broadcast by All India Radio.

With the setting up of the LSTV Channel, the live coverage of Lok Sabha proceedings is being done by this Channel. As per practice, the proceedings of Question Hour in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha are telecast 'Live'/broadcast on Doordarshan/All India Radio on their national Channels on alternate weeks. While telecasting Question Hour of one House on the national channel, *Doordarshan* telecasts live the Question Hour of the other House on DD News Channel. If one House is adjourned for any reason, both channels cover the other House. DD News Channel, however switches over to other important news items temporarily, if it happens during live telecast of Question Hour.

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