



STORY OF PARLIAMENTARY REPORTING



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A familiar scene in the two Houses of Parliament is that of several officers heading for the central table at a brisk pace but with a careful and correct bearing—taking their seats, scribbling in their note-books for a while and then making an exit as quick and unobtrusive as their entry.

But not many people know who are these men and women, apparently always in a hurry, and what is the purpose of these frequent short trips.

They are the Parliamentary Reporters engaged in the onerous task of preparing a complete and authoritative record of what transpires in the highest deliberative and legislative body of the country.

Reporting: A Mandatory Requirement

The Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business require that the Secretary-General has to arrange for the preparation of a full report of the proceedings of each sitting of the House. Accordingly, everything said in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha— every question, remark and speech—is meticulously recorded by the Parliamentary Reporters, who represent the acme of the shorthand-writing profession. However, certain words or expressions, which are specifically expunged or ordered not to be recorded by the Speaker or the Presiding Officer, do not form part of the record.

The entire proceedings of the day's sitting, comprising a couple of hundred pages, have to be edited, compiled and made available by the same evening. This remarkable feat is accomplished to perfection by a combination of professional skill of the highest order and excellent teamwork, aided by modern technology.

Origin of Reporting

The mode of parliamentary reporting has undergone many changes before it reached its present verbatim form. In early days, from 1777 to 1835, when the Legislature functioned as a part of the Executive, the proceedings in the then Council of the Governor-General of India exclusively dealing with matters of law, were recorded in the Revenue Department of the East India Company. In 1835, the proceedings concerning the legislative business began to be recorded separately in the form of minutes, which indicated only the title of the legislation considered by the Council. However, from 1860, the Official Gazette of the Government of India contained brief references to the legislative business transacted in the Council.

When the proceedings of the then Legislative Council were thrown open to the outsiders in 1854, a decision was taken to release an authentic report of its proceedings for publication. It is obvious that the Secretary to the Council, who was charged with the responsibility for the preparation of the report, would have found it difficult, without the aid of shorthand-writers, to keep pace with the continuous flow of oratory skills of Members. Apart from the abstracts of the proceedings being published, portions of the proceedings began to appear in direct speech, although in a summarized form, from 16 March, 1864.

Entry of Parliamentary Reporter

The Rule pertaining to the preparation of the proceedings was amended in 1897 to provide for the preparation of a full report of the proceedings, instead of mere abstracts. The responsibility for the preparation of the report cast on the Secretary till then was thus transferred to the high-speed shorthand-writers or Reporters. Consequently, the abstracts were discontinued and verbatim reports were issued and also published in the Gazette. The individual style of Members

was then reflected in the proceedings, which gave a foretaste of the authenticity and vitality of the modern verbatim report. The right to ask questions, conceded in 1892, added to the liveliness and readability of the reports.

In 1920 as the first bicameral legislature under the Government of India Act of 1919 was in the offing, the question of publication of its proceedings in separate book form was examined. It was considered that the proceedings of a popular Legislature would be in greater demand and it was, therefore, decided to publish them in book form for sale to the public. Simultaneously, it was also decided to change the title from 'Proceedings' to 'Debates'. Today, the Official Report of the House of the People is issued under the title "Lok Sabha Debate".

The Work & the Professional Requirements

Verbatim Reporting in the Parliament is a highly specialized knowledge-intensive work carried out under great pressure, completed within a fixed time-frame and continued for long hours without a break. The twin tasks of reporting, namely, writing shorthand at high speed and transcription of shorthand notes, demand the utmost concentration and intellectual effort. Needless to say, physical stamina, agility, mental alertness and quick reflexes are the essential attributes of a Reporter's profession, without which the Reporter cannot deal with situations like the one which usually prevails in the House immediately after the end of the Question Hour.

A statistical analysis has revealed that a majority of Members of Lok Sabha speak at speeds ranging between 120 and 150 words per minute; some of them go up to 180 words per minute and a few reach the speed of 180 to 200 words per minute. Reporters must, therefore, possess a speed of 180-200 words per minute in shorthand along with a comprehensive grasp of the language and the subject, and an encyclopedic general knowledge, so that they can perform their duties with confidence. The most daunting task for Parliamentary Reporters is to take down proceedings when there is pandemonium in the House, or when several Members raise their matters from all parts of the House. In addition to having proficiency in high speed shorthand writing, and a thorough knowledge of English and Hindi languages, the Parliamentary Reporter should also possess a basic knowledge of all subjects from Agriculture to Zero Budgeting.

Parliamentary Reporters at Work

Parliamentary Reporters record the proceedings of the House singly in turns of five minutes each. This cycle continues from the commencement to the adjournment of the House for the day. Since the floor language is generally either English or Hindi, an English Reporter and a Hindi Reporter will always be on duty in the House for taking down the proceedings. However, if a Member speaks in a regional language, an English translation of the speech or observation is incorporated in the Official Report.

The Question Hour is one of the most interesting features of the business conducted by the Parliament, but reporting the proceedings of the Question Hour tests the competence of even the most experienced Parliamentary Reporter. Questions relate to a wide variety of subjects and their range and scope have virtually no bounds. Supplementary Questions are asked from different parts of the House and answers given in quick succession. Parliamentary Reporters have not only to correctly identify the Members asking the Questions and the Ministers giving the answers, but also to record every word of what is said, including the often rapidly-quoted figures, names and unfamiliar technical words. Nevertheless, the Reporters always rise to the occasion and manage to produce zero-error transcripts.

After taking the turn in the House, each Reporter goes through the shorthand notes, and, if considered necessary, checks them with the digitally recorded version so as to ensure a faithful

reproduction of the proceedings. English and Hindi Reporters work in perfect unison and invariably settle the exact sequence in which their respective portions are to be dovetailed before they begin the transcription of their shorthand notes.

Compilation of Official Report

Until early 1990s, Parliamentary Reporters used to transcribe the proceedings on stencils from which copies were made through cyclostyling. The Monsoon Session of 1993 was marked by the installation of computers in the Verbatim Reporting Service. Since then, the entire process of transcription and compilation of the proceedings has been fully computerized, and the proceedings are also placed on the official website of Parliament of India (<http://loksabha.nic.in>) on an hourly basis.

The preparation of the Official Report is a complex operation demanding both precision and speed. As soon as Parliamentary Reporters complete their transcription, they pass on the draft print-outs to the Divisional Officer. The latter, with the assistance of Supervisory Officer, carefully scrutinizes the transcripts, checks their continuity, verifies the texts as well as the disposal of Motions, Clauses and Amendments, if any, carries out necessary editing and corrections and makes sure that every segment of the proceedings is in conformity with the prescribed forms and procedures. This elaborate exercise in 'quality control' is aimed at making the Official Report absolutely flawless.

When all transcripts have been examined and finally approved, they are amalgamated and page-numbered to form an unabridged, continuous and factual chronicle of the proceedings of the day's sitting. This compilation, together with contents pages, is then despatched for multigraphing and distribution to the Distribution Branch the same evening.

Copies of multigraphed Debate are available to various Branches of the Lok Sabha Secretariat as also the Ministries concerned for reference. A few copies are also placed in the Library for the convenience of the Members. The data of the entire day's proceedings (Uncorrected—Not for Publication) is also available on the official website under the heading "Uncorrected Debates".

The transcript of every speech delivered, question asked and interruption made by a Member is sent to him for confirmation or correction of inaccuracies, if any.

Written Speeches Laid during the course of debates/discussions

As per convention, Members are allowed, with the permission of the Chair, to lay their written speeches on the Table, if the number of Members desirous of participating in a discussion is too large to be accommodated in the time available. Written speeches, so laid, are incorporated in the verbatim proceedings of the day.

While laying their written speeches on the Table, Members have to keep the following points in mind: The text of the speech addressed to the Speaker should be typed in double line space; not to lay their speeches by merely listing points; not to lay enclosures, such as letters addressed to the Government, tabulated statistical statements, maps etc.; and should not contain ironical expressions/unparliamentary expressions, defamatory statements, etc.

Association of Members

Due to paucity/shortage of time, whenever speeches/submissions are made on the floor of the House that are more or less connected with other Members who have similar problems/grievances pertaining to their respective constituencies/States, the Chair generally permits those Members to associate themselves with the main speaker who has made submission/speech. In

those cases, the names of the Members will go on record whom the Chair had permitted to associate with the main speaker who has made the submission/speech.

Unparliamentary Words and Not Recorded Words

All unparliamentary words or not recorded words that were taken down by the Parliamentary Reporters on the floor of the House are not only removed from the verbatim records immediately after the orders from the Chair but also from the videos either on the same day or on the next day. Further, in case any unparliamentary word(s) uttered by any Member goes unnoticed, such word or words are placed before the Chair, who goes through the same and after satisfying, expunge those words by following relevant rules. A list of all unparliamentary words and not recorded words are also sent to various Branches, namely, Speaker's Office, Table Office, Press and Public Relations Wing, Audio-Visual Unit and CE (LSTV).

Wit, Humour, Poems, Repartee and Couplets

Wit, humour, poems, repartee, and couplets that happen on the floor of the House are culled out from the proceedings, stories are prepared of them, and after the approval are uploaded on the website.

Preservation of Important Speeches

Audio recordings of important speeches are preserved for the entire duration of Lok Sabha, and some are preserved permanently.

Verbatim Report: An Important Document

The verbatim reports of the proceedings of the Parliament are not a mere narration of Questions, Adjournment Motions, Short Duration Discussions, Bills and Resolutions, etc. As a matter of fact, they are a rich source of contemporary history. They provide detailed information on all matters touching the life of the nation and its citizens. They bring to light the political, economic and social conditions of even the remotest parts of the country. Besides, they serve as a mirror of the hopes and aspirations, concerns and apprehensions of the nation as voiced by its chosen representatives.

The verbatim report titled "Lok Sabha Debate" uncorrected version is issued in two parts: Part I contains Questions and Answers, and Part II contains the rest of the proceedings. The printed version (English and Hindi versions) are available in three-four months after the date of the sitting, the copies can be procured from the Sales and Records Branch of the Lok Sabha Secretariat or from the authorized agents for Government publications on payment.

The "Lok Sabha Debate", as edited, are also available on the official website as referred to earlier, under the icon "Text of Debate".

LOK SABHA SECRETARIAT
NEW DELHI
MAY, 2019
LARRDIS/No.30/1/2019/PPR