

Parliamentary Committees

[UPSC Notes]

What are Parliamentary Committees?

There Parliamentary Committees look at matters such as government expenditure, legislation, government policies and schemes, and administration of Parliament.

Parliamentary Committees are classified into the following-

Departmentally Related Standing Committees (DRSCs)

Departmentally Related Standing Committees were constituted in 1993. DRSCs are composed of 31 members: 21 from Lok Sabha and 10 from Rajya Sabha. These committees aim to assist Parliament in scrutinizing funds allocated to Ministries. They also examine Bills referred to them by Parliament and analyze other relevant policy issues. There are a total of 24 Departmentally Related Standing Committees functioning in parliament.

These DRSCs are constituted for a period of one year. The functions of Departmentally Related Standing Committees include:

- After the Budget is presented, the DRSCs examine the Demands for Grants of all Ministries under its purview.
- DRSCs study allocations to schemes and programs, spending by the Ministry, and the policy priorities of the Ministry. After this examination, the Committee compiles its recommendations in the form of a Report which is laid in both Houses of Parliament. These recommendations help MPs understand the implications of financial allocations.
- After a Bill is introduced in Parliament, it may be referred to a DRSC for detailed scrutiny.
- DRSCs select subjects for detailed examination. These subjects can be on existing or potential issues that could come up in the sectors that the DRSC looks at or implementation of programs by the relevant Ministry.

Financial Committees

Parliament regulates government expenditure to ensure that public finances are used efficiently. This financial oversight is a complex and technical task, hence financial committees help parliament in this task. There are the following financial committees-

- **Committee on Public Accounts:** The Committee on Public Accounts analyzes accounts on funds sanctioned by Parliament for government expenditure. It also examines other accounts laid before Parliament such as reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG). As it is difficult for Parliament to discuss each of these reports, the PAC is entrusted with examining the findings

of the CAG audit reports. It also investigates irregularities in public finance that are brought to the notice of the government.

- **Committee on Public Undertakings:** The Committee on Public Undertakings analyzes the accounts and CAG reports of public sector undertakings (PSUs). After examination of issues, it presents reports containing recommendations to Parliament.
- **Estimates Committee:** The Estimates Committee helps Parliament in overseeing pre-budget estimates of the government. It reports on administrative reforms needed within Ministries and suggests policies to bring about efficiency in administration. The Committee can select subjects on the estimated expenditure of a part of a Ministry. The Speaker can also refer a subject for examination to the Committee.

The Committee on Public Undertakings and Public Accounts consists of 22 members: 15 from Lok Sabha and seven members from Rajya Sabha. The Estimates Committee consists of 30 members from Lok Sabha only. Members are elected for a period of one year.

Administrative Committees

The houses of Parliament need administrative support for their day-to-day functioning. For this purpose the Houses have set up different Committees as the following:

- **Business Advisory Committee:** Helps decide the daily agenda of Parliament,
- **Committee on Private Members' Bills and Resolutions:** Examines all Private Members' Bills after their introduction
- **Committee on Government Assurances:** Scrutinizes the assurances, promises, and undertakings given by Ministers.
- **Rules Committee:** Considers matters of procedure and conduct of business in the House.
- **Committee of Privileges:** Examines questions involving breach of rights, privileges, and immunities enjoyed by MPs.
- **Committee on Ethics:** Oversees the moral and ethical conduct of MPs.
- **Committee on Absence of Members from the Sittings of the House:** Examines leave applications of MPs.
- **Joint Committee on Offices of Profit:** Examines the composition of other committees and recommends what offices may disqualify a person from becoming an MP.
- **Joint Committee on Salaries and Allowances of MPs:** Examines salaries and allowances of MPs.
- **Committee on the Welfare of SCs and STs:** Examines measures taken by the government to improve the status of Scheduled Castes and Tribes.
- **Committee on Empowerment of Women:** Recommends measures to improve the status and conditions of women.
- **Library Committee:** Advice on the improvement of the Parliamentary library.
- **House Committee:** Advice on matters related to residential accommodation of MPs.
- **General Purposes Committee:** Advice on matters concerning the affairs of the House referred to it by the Chairperson.

Accountability Committees

Accountability Committees ensure government accountability towards Parliament and Indian citizens. There are the following accountability committees:

- **Committee on Government Assurances:** The Committee on Government Assurances scrutinizes the assurances, promises, and undertakings given by Ministers on the floor of the House. It ensures that commitments made by the government are implemented promptly.
- **Committee on Subordinate Legislation:** During the formulation of legislation, the Parliament lays down broad principles on various issues and leaves the procedural details to the government to frame in the form of rules and regulations. The Committee on Subordinate Legislation analyzes whether the powers to make regulations, rules, and sub-laws are being properly exercised. It examines all subordinate legislation made by the government.
- **Committee on Petitions:** The Committee on Petitions scrutinizes public complaints sent to it in the form of petitions to make MPs aware of their opinion and to request action. Petitions may be sent regarding Bills, matters pending before the House, and any other matter of public interest related to the work of the government. After the Committee examines the complaints, it addresses the complaints and suggests remedial measures in its report. An Action Taken Report is also published based on the recommendations adopted by the government.

Ad Hoc Committees

Ad Hoc Committees are appointed by either the House or the presiding officers from time to time for a specific objective. These committees exist when they finish their task assigned to them and submit a report, for example, the Railway Convention Committee and Select Committees were formed to examine specific Bills.

- Ad hoc Committees are appointed for a specific purpose and they cease to exist when they finish the task assigned to them and submit a report.
- These committees cease to exist after the task assigned to them is over. Ad Hoc Committees are classified by Lok Sabha as Committees on Ethics, MPLADS, and Computers.
- Ad hoc Committees include Select and Joint Committees on Bills. Eg. Commercial Division of High Courts Bill, 2009.
- Except for the Joint Committee on Wakf, the Ad hoc committees operate in the Lok Sabha and include members from both Houses and the number varies between 10 and 30.

Significance of Parliamentary Committees

Parliamentary committees are an important tool to ensure transparency and efficiency in the law-making process as well as working of the government in the following way:

- Parliamentary works are complex in nature, and therefore need technical expertise to understand such matters. Committees help by providing a forum where members can engage with domain experts and government officials during the course of their studies.
- Parliamentary committees also provide a forum for building consensus across political parties.
- When a Committee completes its study, it publishes its report to be laid in Parliament. These reports help to educate parliament and the nation as well on a specific subject of law.
- Committees ensure deep scrutiny of a bill before passing in parliament.
- Committees examine policy issues of their related ministries and make suggestions to the government. The government has to report back on whether these recommendations have been accepted or not, then the Committees create an Action Taken Report, which shows the status of the government's action on each recommendation.

Joint Parliamentary Committees

A Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) is set up to examine a particular bill presented before the Parliament, or for the purpose of investigating cases of financial irregularities in any government activity. A Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) is an ad-hoc body. It is set up for a specific object and duration. Joint committees are set up by a motion passed in one house of Parliament and agreed to by the other. The details regarding membership and subjects are also decided by Parliament. The mandate of a JPC depends on the motion constituting it.

Role of Parliamentary Committees in Indian Democracy

The role and importance of Parliamentary Committees in Indian Democracy are:

- It ensures executive accountability through scrutiny of public spending and various laws.
- It does detailed discussion and analysis of a proposed law, thus helping in the law-making process.
- These committees allow the use of input and suggestions of various experts on the subject matter of law thereby helping to formulate better policies and laws.
- It ensures the participation of all MPs.
- They scrutinize the government accounts and the report of the Comptroller and Auditor-General of India.
- Ensures answerability of government to the public.
- It does a detailed examination of the budget estimates and suggests alternative policies to bring about efficiency and economy in administration.

Issues with Parliamentary Committees

In 2002, the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (NCRWC) highlighted the following issues of the committees:

- Low attendance of MPs at meetings
- Too many ministries under one committee
- Norms not followed by most political parties while nominating MPs to committees
- The constitution of DRSCs for a year leaves very little time for specializations.

Recommendations to Strengthen the Parliamentary Committees

Review the Working of the Constitution (NCRWC) recommends the following measures to strengthen the Parliamentary Committees:

- Department-related standing committees (DRSCs) should be periodically reviewed. All Bills should be referred to DRSCs. They can elicit public views and call specialist advisors. The DRSCs may finalize the second reading stage in the Committee.
- Reports of all parliamentary committees should be discussed in Parliament, especially in cases where there is a disagreement between a Committee and the government.
- The recommendations of the Committee on Public Accounts should be given greater weightage and should be used as the conscience-keepers of the nation in financial matters.