

Zero Hour in Parliament

[UPSC Notes]

What is Zero Hour in Indian Parliament?

Parliament session begins with zero hour which is preceded by Question Hour. then after, the Parliamentary proceedings begin. Although the term zero hour is related to Parliamentary Proceedings, Zero Hour isn't included in the agenda of the Proceedings. Moreover, the Zero Hour Proceedings are only visible to the presiding officer.

- The time at which MPs or Members of Parliament talk about the issues that are urgent and important for the public is known as Zero Hour. Members of parliament should provide an advanced notice before 10:00 a.m. to the Lok Sabha Speaker and chairman of Rajya Sabha for raising matters with subjects during the Zero Hour.
- Speakers of the Lok Sabha and the chairman of the Rajya Sabha can allow or deny the member to raise the issue related to public importance.
- As Zero Hour does not appear in the parliamentary rules then it is an informal mechanism that members can use to discuss issues that are of urgent public importance without waiting for 10 days in advance.
- In parliamentary parlance, zero-hour refers to the critical moment or the decision-making moment in the parliament. The Zero Hour takes place between the question and before the initiation of the regular business. Also because this hour begins at 12 noon, therefore, referred to as zero hour
- The concept of Zero Hour is neither mentioned in the Constitution nor in the Parliamentary Rule book.
- The duration of Zero Hour is 30 minutes in the House of People and each member of the Parliament is allocated 3 minutes to put up issues during Zero Hour.
- It has been an Indian innovation since 1962.

Origin of Zero Hour

A number of urgent issues of public importance were raised immediately after the question hour in the early 1960s by the members of parliament that were sometimes with the chairman's prayer permission and even sometimes without any permission, which resulted in the formation of zero-hour.

- Zero Hour encouraged more and more members to take resort to this quick and handy device as a Zero Hour proceeding started stealing the limelight in the media.
- As soon as Question Hour is over declared by the chairman, Zero Hour starts and members of Parliament raise the matters which he considered to be of utmost public importance to be brought through houses to the Government.

When was Zero Hour introduced in Parliamentary Affairs?

In the field of Parliamentary procedures, Zero Hour has been an Indian innovation since 1962. After the Question Hour during the sixties, the members of Parliament used to raise many issues of nation and global importance.

- When Parliament was in session, then a member could raise an issue about the announcement of policy made by the Minister outside the Parliament on such an occasion.
- To create more opportunities for members to raise matters of urgent public importance, Rabi Ray- the 9th speaker of the Lok Sabha introduced certain changes in the proceedings of the house.
- To raise matters in a more orderly manner by the members and optimize the house's time, he proposed a mechanism to regulate the proceedings during the Zero Hour.
- The day starts with the Zero Hour and not with the Question Hour in the case of Raj Sabha while in the case of Lok Sabha the day starts with Question Hour.

Importance of Zero Hour

Zero Hour can be seen as the mechanism in which members of Parliament, by questioning the Minister about their policies and programs, make the government of the day accountable to the public. As most of the answers are submitted in the written, it puts pressure on the government to work efficiently with transparency.

Differences between Question Hour and Zero Hour

Question Hour is mentioned in the Rule of Procedure and is usually the day's first hour. In Question Hour, the ministers are required to answer the questions by the member of Parliament with respect to their respective department ministries. This is a check on Ministerial/ Departmental functioning.

While Zero Hour occurs after the completion of Question Hour and before the start of the day's business. Zero Hour has been an Indian innovation since 1962.

Types of the Question

The question asked by the members of Parliament to the Minister is of all three types: Starred Question, Unstarred Question, and a Short Notice Question.

- In a Starred question, supplementary questions can be followed as it requires an oral answer.
- In an Unstarred question, supplementary questions cannot be followed as an Unstarred question requires a written answer.
- The short Notice question is answered orally and asked by giving a notice of fewer than ten days.

Impact of Question Hour

If Question Hour is suspended, then,

- The opposition loses the right to question the government.
- Ministers are also not liable to answer the issues raised during the Zero Hour.

This means that the members of Parliament would not be able to hold the accountability of the government for its action, which is against Parliamentary Democracy.

To shine a light on government function, members of Parliament have successfully used Question Hour (a parliamentary device) over the last 70 years.

Questions asked by members of Parliament during Question Hour help in bringing data and information regarding government functions to the public domain.

As the Parliamentary proceedings mean to hold the government accountable, Question Hour and Zero Hour should not be suspended or curtailed as it is against the essence of the Constitution.

