

1. Parliamentary Standing Committees Defer Meetings

Prelims Syllabus: Parliament

Mains Syllabus: GS-II Parliament and State Legislatures - structure, functioning, conduct of business, powers & privileges and issues arising out of these.

Why in News?

- All meetings of parliamentary standing committees have been deferred indefinitely because of the lockdown to curb the spread of COVID-19.

What are the Different Types of Committees?

- **‘Standing’ committees:** Their existence is uninterrupted and usually reconstituted on an annual basis. Some standing committees are departmentally related.
- **‘Select’ committees** formed for a specific purpose, for instance, to deliberate on a particular bill. Once the Bill is disposed of, that select committee ceases to exist.
- **Finance committees** are considered to be particularly powerful. The three financial committees are the Public Accounts Committee, the Estimates Committee and the Committee on Public Undertakings.

Constitutional Backing:

- Parliamentary committees draw their authority from Article 105 (on privileges of Parliament members) and Article 118 (on Parliament’s authority to make rules for regulating its procedure and conduct of business).

What is their Significance?

- Committee reports are usually exhaustive and provide authentic information on matters related to governance.
- Bills that are referred to committees are returned to the House with significant value addition.
- However, Parliament is not bound by the recommendations of committees.

Why have Parliamentary Committees?

- Parliament is the embodiment of the people’s will. Committees are an instrument of Parliament for its own effective functioning.
- The smaller cohort of lawmakers, assembled on the basis of the proportional strength of individual parties and interests and expertise of individual lawmakers, could have more open, intensive and better-informed discussions.

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- Members of Parliament may have great acumen but they would require the assistance of experts in dealing with such situations. It is through committees that such expertise is drawn into law making.
 - Executive accountability to the legislature is enforced through questions in Parliament also, which are answered by ministers. However, department standing committees go one step further and hear from senior officials of the government in a closed setting, allowing for more detailed discussions.
 - This mechanism also enables parliamentarians to understand the executive processes closely.

Way Forward:

- Parliamentary committees don't have dedicated subject-wise research support available. The knowledge gap is partially bridged by expert testimony from government and other stakeholders.
- Their work could be made more effective if the committees had full-time, sector-specific research staff.
- Currently, the rules of Parliament don't require every bill to be referred to a parliamentary committee for scrutiny. While this allows the government greater flexibility and the ability to speed up legislative business, it comes at the cost of ineffective scrutiny by the highest law-making body. Mandatory scrutiny of all bills by parliamentary committees would ensure better planning of legislative business.