

2. Role of Parliamentary Committees in Indian Democracy

Prelims Syllabus: Parliament

Mains Syllabus: GS-II Indian Constitution- historical underpinnings, evolution, features, amendments, significant provisions and basic structure.



Why in News?

- Parliamentary committees are constituted to delve deeper into matters of public concern and develop expert opinions.

Genesis & Types of Parliamentary Committee:

- **Origin:** As is the case with several other practices of Indian parliamentary democracy, the institution of Parliamentary Committees also has its origins in the British Parliament
- In independent India, the first Public Accounts Committee was constituted in April 1950.
- **Constitutional Provisions:** 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).
- **Types:** Most committees are 'standing' as their existence is uninterrupted and usually reconstituted on an annual basis; some are 'select' committees formed for a specific purpose, for instance, to deliberate on a particular bill.

- In 1993, 17 Departmentally-related Standing Committees (DRSCs), later increased to 24, were constituted in the Parliament.
- These committees drew members from both Houses roughly in proportion to the strength of the political parties in the Houses.
- **Allocation of Business:** The chair uses her discretion to refer a matter to a parliamentary committee but this is usually done in consultation with leaders of parties in the House.
- The practice of regularly referring bills to committees began in 1989 after government departments started forming their own standing committees.
- Prior to that, select committees or joint committees of the houses were only set up to scrutinise in detail some very important bills.
- **Some Important Parliamentary Committees in Finances:** Financial control is a critical tool for Parliament's authority over the executive; hence 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.

Significance of Parliamentary Committee System:

- **Inter-Ministerial Coordination:** They are envisaged to be the face of Parliament in a set of inter-related departments and ministries.
 - ✓ They are assigned the task of looking into the demands for grants of the ministries/departments concerned, to examine Bills pertaining to them, to consider their annual reports, and to look into their long-term plans and report to Parliament.
- **Instrument For Detailed Scrutiny:** 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.
 - ✓ Besides the standing committees, the Houses of Parliament set up ad hoc committees to enquire and report on specific subjects that are assigned the task of studying a Bill closely and reporting back to the House.
 - ✓ Also, in the discharge of their mandate, they can solicit expert advice and elicit public opinion.
- **Acting As Mini-Parliament:** These Committees are smaller units of MPs from both Houses, across political parties and they function throughout the year.

- ✓ Also, Parliamentary committees are not bound by the populist demands that generally act as hindrance in working of parliament.
- ✓ As committee meetings are 'closed door' and members are not bound by party whips, the parliamentary committee work on the ethos of debate and discussions.
- ✓ Moreover, they work away from the public glare, remain informal compared to the codes that govern parliamentary proceedings, and are great training schools for new and young members of the House.

How has the Role of Parliamentary Committees Declined Recently?

- During the course of the 17th Lok Sabha, only 14 Bills have been referred for further examination so far.
- As per data from PRS, as little as 25% of the Bills introduced were referred to committees in the 16th Lok Sabha, as compared to 71% and 60% in the 15th and 14th Lok Sabha, respectively.

Way Forward:

- Strengthen the role of parliamentary committees by giving them more resources, powers, and authority to hold the executive accountable.
- Encourage greater participation from civil society, experts, and stakeholders in the committee proceedings to ensure diverse perspectives and informed decision-making.
- Ensure transparency and accountability in committee proceedings by live streaming and recording meetings and making reports and recommendations publicly available.
- Develop a culture of bipartisan consensus-building within committees to ensure that the interests of all stakeholders are represented and to promote a more productive and efficient legislative process.