

CEASE THE DISTRACTIONS, SEIZE THE MOMENT

The Crisis Provides Several Opportunities For Real Parliamentary Change; A Reduction In The Pay Of Mps Is Only Symbolic

The government has issued two ordinances, Parliament has modified its rules to reduce the salary and allowances of Members of Parliament and Ministers, and the Union Cabinet has decided to cancel the Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS) for two years. These measures are purportedly to save costs as the nation tackles the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cosmetic cuts

The cuts in salaries and allowances are a distraction from the real issue: are our parliamentarians performing their constitutional roles during the crisis? Let us quickly consider the impact of the cuts. The 30% cut in the ₹1 lakh per month salary and the ₹27,000 cut in office and constituency allowances amount to savings of less than ₹5 crore per month. The cut in sumptuary allowances for Ministers results in a total savings of ₹25,000 per month; yes, you read that right. These amounts are immaterial for the Central government with an average monthly budget of ₹2.5-lakh crore. Interestingly, the United Kingdom has increased the allowance for Members of Parliament by £10,000 to help them manage extra costs of working from home.

During the crisis, Members of Parliament should be deliberating on the actions and policies to be taken to manage the epidemic, and the costs and consequences of various alternatives. They should also be trying to figure out ways to have committee meetings and even the meetings of the full House through alternate mechanisms such as video-conferencing. For example, while the U.K. has also implemented a lockdown, its Parliament is connecting all Members through video-conferencing (by April 15) so that the session can resume virtually on April 21 after the Easter break. The British Parliament has created a page on its website tracking all government orders related to the pandemic, and its Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee is scrutinising the orders. Other Parliaments are also working to fulfil their role as oversight bodies. The New Zealand Parliament has formed an Epidemic Response Committee that will examine the government's management of the epidemic. This committee and other select committees are meeting through video-conference.

Parliament absent

The Indian Parliament adjourned on March 23, the day after the janata curfew, in view of the pandemic. In the previous week, even as the crisis was unfolding, Parliament was debating the establishment of a Sanskrit University and an Ayurveda institute, and that of regulatory boards for aircraft, Indian Systems of Medicine and Homoeopathy. The Finance Bill was passed without any discussion on the last day. There was no discussion on the possible implications of the coronavirus epidemic and policy measures to tackle it — this was the week when the Prime Minister made the first televised speech to the nation on the issue. Remarkably, there was no recognition of the pressures on the Budget when it was passed that week.

Since then, Parliament has not held committee meetings. There have been no official statements regarding the possibility of holding these through video-conference. Thus, the government's actions are going unchecked. In brief, Parliament has abdicated its role as the elected body that checks the work of government on behalf of citizens. Instead, we get the symbolic gesture of reductions in pay and allowances.

Good move on MPLADS

The cancellation of MPLADS for two years, on the other hand, is a welcome move. This scheme should not be resumed after the crisis. In financial terms, there are savings of nearly ₹4,000 crore per

year. While this is not insignificant, the larger benefit is that this will help Members of Parliament focus on their roles as national legislators. MPLADS creates several issues of accountability and jurisdiction. It impinges on separation of powers, both horizontally across different organs of state, and vertically across different levels of governance.

Other than making laws, Members of Parliament have two key duties. They sanction the size and allocation of the government budget. They also hold the government accountable for its work, including that of spending funds appropriately. MPLADS brings in a conflict in both these roles. It asks them to identify and get specific projects executed rather than to focus on policy measures to achieve the same results and ensure that the government is implementing those policies. It distracts them from allocating and monitoring the Union Budget of ₹30-lakh crore to micro-managing the constituency fund of ₹5 crore. And since the financial audit of MPLADS is done by the Comptroller and Auditor-General and further examined by the Public Accounts Committee consisting of Members of Parliament, it adds another layer of conflict.

MPLADS is typically spent on capital works at the local level such as a bus stop, hand pumps, school rooms, etc. These fall within the domain of the panchayats and municipalities. Members of these bodies are elected to perform an executive role. MPLADS transforms the Member of Parliament from a legislator looking at national issues to an executive solving hyper-local problems. After all, if Members of Parliament spend a large part of their time on work that should be done by local-level government, how would they have time to inform themselves while making national laws and checking the work of the Central government?

Scope for reform

The current crisis provides several opportunities for reform. For example, Parliament should explore how technology can be used to improve its efficiency. Much of the daily paper work such as filing questions and other interventions have been digitised while protocols and infrastructure may be needed if meetings have to be held through secure video-conferencing.

Other issues such as pay and allowances for Members of Parliament need to be discussed. The Members of Parliament should be provided with office space and research staff. They should be compensated in line with their duties as national legislators. For example, the pay (₹1 lakh per month) and allowances (₹1.3 lakh per month) pale in comparison to that of U.S. Senators (pay \$174,000 per annum plus allowances over \$3 million per annum). At the same time, hidden perks such as housing in central Delhi must be made transparent — few democracies provide housing for legislators or civil servants; they are paid well and expected to find housing on their own.

We need public debates on issues that impact the working of our legislatures. We need to ensure that we have the right compensation structures to attract the best people to make our laws and policies. We also need to hold them accountable for their work as national legislators, i.e., the positions they took on various issues and how they ensured the government remained accountable for its actions. Distractions such as MPLADS must be done away with. After all, a representative democracy functions only as well as its legislatures do. And our freedoms are safe only if we have a robust legislature and a fiercely independent judiciary.

Meanings of Difficult Words:

1. **cease** (verb) – bring to an end/halt/stop, conclude, terminate.
2. **seize** (verb) – take hold of, snatch, grab, capture (suddenly).

3. **seize the moment** (phrase) – to make the most of today (present moment); to take full advantage (of opportunities).
4. **symbolic** (adjective) – serving as a symbol; emblematic, suggestive, illustrative.
5. **Member of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS)** – it was introduced by Government of India in December 1993. The objective is to enable the Members of Parliament (MP) to suggest and get executed developmental works of capital nature based on locally felt needs with emphasis on creation of durable assets. (Courtesy: niti.gov.in)
6. **purportedly** (adverb) – allegedly, reportedly, supposedly.
7. **COVID-19** (noun) – coronavirus disease 2019.
8. **pandemic** (noun) – the worldwide spread of a new disease; The illness spreads around the world and typically affects a large number of people across a wide area.
9. **cosmetic** (adjective) – superficial, outward, external; appealing, attractive (but not fundamental/functional).
10. **constituency allowance** (noun) – allowance paid to meet constituency-related expenses (travelling to different places of the constituency to carry out his duties).
11. **sumptuary allowance** (noun) – allowance paid to compensate for expenses incurred on account of entertaining visitors.
12. **sumptuary** (adjective) – (of a law) regulating (personal) expenditures.
13. **immaterial** (adjective) – irrelevant, unimportant, insignificant.
14. **deliberate** (verb) – think about, ponder, consider.
15. **epidemic** (noun) – widespread disease/illness; outbreak, plague, scourge.
16. **cost consequence analysis (CCA)** (noun) – This analysis compares the costs (such as treatment and hospital care) and the consequences (such as health outcomes) of a test or treatment with a suitable alternative.
17. **figure out** (phrasal verb) – find an answer to, solve, find an solution to.
18. **mechanism** (noun) – procedure, process, method/technique.
19. **lockdown** (noun) – an emergency protocol implemented by the authorities that prevents people from leaving from a place; An extended state of confinement/encirclement/isolation of a person by the authority.
20. **resume** (verb) – restart, return to, come back to.
21. **virtually** (adverb) – using computers. In general virtually means effectively, practically.
22. **scrutinise** (verb) – examine carefully, inspect; investigate.
23. **oversight** (noun) – overseeing, management, administration, supervision.
24. **adjourn** (verb) – postpone, put off, defer/delay.
25. **curfew** (noun) – a rule which is instructing people to stay at home, typically at night.
26. **in view of** (phrase) – in the light of, owing to, considering.
27. **unfold** (verb) – occur, happen, take place.

28. **implications** (noun) – consequence/outcome, ramification, repercussion.
29. **remarkably** (adverb) – strikingly, exceptionally, incredibly.
30. **unchecked** (adjective) – uncontrolled, unconstrained, unrestricted.
31. **in brief** (phrase) – in a word, in short, in essence.
32. **abdicate** (verb) – reject, renounce, give up, avoid.
33. **gesture** (noun) – action, deed, sign.
34. **accountability** (noun) – responsibility, liability, answerability.

35. **jurisdiction** (noun) – authority, control/power, administration.
36. **impinge on** (verb) – influence, have an effect on, encroach on.
37. **horizontally** (adverb) – equally (across all departments).
38. **organ** (noun) – department.
39. **vertically** (adverb) – hierarchically; in a way arranged in a hierarchy (different levels/ranks).
40. **sanction** (verb) – approve, permit, support/endorse.
41. **accountable** (adjective) – responsible, liable, answerable.
42. **micro-manage** (verb) – to control every part of an activity.
43. **hyper-local** (adjective) – relating to a problem in a small, very specific, local area/community.
44. **protocol** (noun) – procedure, convention, rules of conduct.
45. **in line with** (phrase) – in alignment with, in accordance with.
46. **pale** (adjective) – seem less significant or important, seem less serious.
47. **pale in comparison to** (phrase) – to seem less important or serious when compared with something else.
48. **perk** (noun) – a benefit (perquisite/bonus/gratuity/reward/extra) someone gets from the job (apart from regular wages/salary).
49. **transparent** (adjective) – straightforward, clear/candid, unconcealed, noticeable.
50. **take on** (phrasal verb) – undertake, tackle, shoulder, assume.
51. **do away with** (phrasal verb) – abolish, discard, remove.
52. **representative democracy** (noun) – a type of democracy in which citizenry vote for government representatives to handle legislation and ruling the country on their behalf.
53. **citizenry** (noun) – all the people/citizens (of a place/country considered as a whole).
54. **robust** (adjective) – strong, powerful.
55. **fiercely** (adverb) – aggressively, mightily, supremely.