



**DEMYSTIFYING QUESTION HOUR:  
BUDGET SESSION, 2008**



**QUESTION BRANCH  
RAJYA SABHA SECRETARIAT  
NEW DELHI  
SEPTEMBER, 2008**

FOR THE USE OF  
MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

Not for Publication

OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES-2/2008



**DEMYSTIFYING QUESTION HOUR:  
BUDGET SESSION, 2008**

QUESTION BRANCH  
RAJYASABHA SECRETARIAT  
NEW DELHI

SEPTEMBER, 2008

## PREFACE

The first hour of every sitting of Rajya Sabha is available for asking and answering of questions. This is called the Question Hour. The sitting of the House commences at 11.00 AM with Question Hour as the first listed business. The House meets five days in a week and on each day there is the Question Hour. Each Ministry/ Department of Government of India gets its turn once a week for answering its questions in the Rajya Sabha.

2. An analysis of the statistical data emanating from the Question Hour during the 213th session of the Rajya Sabha (Budget Session 2008) has revealed certain very interesting features. An attempt has been made to compile the same in this publication. We hope that this will not only make an interesting reading for all concerned but will also help in demystifying the process and procedures and at the same time, provide an insight into the kind of efforts made by our public representatives in carrying out their parliamentary duties.

NEW DELHI;  
*26th September 2008*

DR. V.K. AGNIHOTRI,  
Secretary-General,  
Rajya Sabha.

## **I. QUESTION HOUR**

The first hour of every sitting of Rajya Sabha is devoted to asking and answering of questions by the members in the Rajya Sabha. Asking of Questions is the most crucial and effective mechanism available to the Members. By raising pertinent questions, Members not only get an idea about the major Government programmes and policies and the implementation thereof, but also ensure the accountability of the Executive to the public. Not only this, issues raised by the Members through Questions on the floor of the House compel the Ministries to bring out modifications/changes in their programmes and improve the functioning of different institutions/bodies. Members also get to know about the Government constraints, if any. Level of importance accorded to the Question Hour can be assessed by the presence of Members and packed press and official galleries during the Question Hour.

1.2 One hour of Questions involves a well-established time-bound exercise at the Secretariat level. Similarly, answers to the listed Questions for a day are the outcome of intensive work done at the Government level. And then, when the Question Hour begins and the members start raising supplementaries, the real impact of this mechanism in Members' hands starts unfolding.

## **II. BUDGET SESSION, 2008**

2.1 The Budget Session is the first and the longest session of the year. Summons for this Session were issued by the President of India on 11 February, 2008 for both Houses of Parliament to meet on 25 February, 2008. As per the usual practice, the session was in two parts, one from 25 February, 2008 to 20 March, 2008 and the other from 15 April, 2008 to 9 May, 2008. The House was scheduled to have 35 sittings with Question Hour fixed for 33 sittings. However, the House adjourned *sine die* premature on 6 May, 2008, thereby cutting short the session by 3 sittings. Out of the 30 sittings, Question Hour could be held only on 24 days. Questions could not be taken up on 6 sittings due to Members raising other issues.

2.2 Being the very first hour of the day, Question Hour often gets disrupted. Members belonging to different political parties tend to raise matters of public interest which, in their opinion, require the urgent attention of the Government, by seeking suspension of the Question Hour. As a result, the listed business cannot be taken up. The matter of disruptions during Question Hour has always been viewed seriously keeping in view the enormous time and money that is invested in this parliamentary instrument and which goes waste in the event of disruptions. During the Budget Session, 2008 too, such instances were taken note of by the Chair. As a result of sustained efforts made by the Hon'ble Chairman in consultation with all the party leaders, a mechanism for raising matters of public importance by the Members has now been evolved. Its gradual impact on the Question Hour has started showing results and there has been a remarkable decrease in instances of such disruptions.

2.3 Sometimes, the one hour earmarked for Questions is shortened due to oath/affirmations or obituary references, which are taken up as the first business of the day cutting into the Question Hour. The Budget Session witnessed oath/affirmations by

the New Members on 15/04/2008, 16/04/2008 and 17/04/2008 cutting into the Question Hour by 47 minutes, 4 minutes and one minute, respectively.

2.4 The Question Hour, which ran smoothly on majority of the days without constraints, witnessed dissemination of very valuable inputs/information from the Government. Through supplementaries during the Question Hour, Members raised very pertinent issues even compelling the Government sometimes to review their programmes. The deliberations during the Question Hour also led to expediting of follow-up action/going-in for wider consultations by the Government on various subjects. Examples in this context are:—

- (a) Setting up of Armed Forces Tribunal, SQ 300 dated 19.03.08;
- (b) Permanent Commission for Women in Armed Forces, SQ 109 dated 05.03.08 and SQ 181 dated 12.03.08;
- (c) Preparation for Commonwealth Games SQ 202 dated 13.03.08; and
- (d) Land for SEZs, SQ 185 dated 12.03.2008.

### **III. QUESTION NOTICES**

Questions, as a Parliamentary device, elicit maximum response from the Members. Under the Rules of Procedure of the Council of States, a Member can have 5 questions in his name per day. In all, 10,162 Notices were received from 135 Members for different dates during the Budget Session.

### **IV. STARRED QUESTIONS**

4.1 The instrument of questions has been put in place to enable the Members to have authentic information from the Government in order to enable them to carry out their responsibility as public representatives effectively. It is observed that members are more interested in their notices being admitted as Starred Questions thereby giving them an opportunity to raise supplementaries on the floor of the House. Budget Session of 2008 was also no exception. Out of 10,162 notices received from members, as many as 8,915 were for Starred Questions. It is a well-known fact that only first few questions in the starred list are answered orally in the House by the time the Question Hour is over. Answers to the remaining questions in the Starred List are laid on the Table of the House like unstarred questions.

4.2 Keeping in view the Members' strong desire to have oral answer to their questions in the Question Hour, the matter has been agitating in the minds of the Presiding Officers for the past quite some time to adopt a pattern whereby more number of starred questions are taken up during the Question Hour. At one time, the average number of questions taken up during the Question Hour ranged somewhere between 2 to 3. This went up to as high as 6 during the 201st session of the Rajya Sabha. The average in the case of 213st Session comes to 2.9 only. Efforts are presently on to promote short and crisp supplementaries as well as answers thereto so that lesser time

per question is consumed and more questions are covered during the Question Hour. On 3 March, 2008 the Hon'ble Chairman observed:—

*"... The Question Hour is meant for putting supplementaries and eliciting answers. It is incumbent on the Members to put crisp supplementaries and for Hon. Ministers to give crisp answers. Question Hour is not meant for statements or speeches ..."*

4.3 This matter was also discussed by the General Purposes Committee on 4 March, 2008 and in a meeting of the leaders on 11 March, 2008 and, on both the occasions, it was decided that a Member in whose name a Starred Question is admitted will be allowed two supplementaries and if there is another Member whose name is clubbed with the Member for that question, he or she will be allowed one supplementary. Thereafter, only two more supplementaries will be permitted on the question.

4.4 As already stated, Starred List consists of only 20 questions. Therefore, it is always a matter of chance for the Members to find a place in the Starred List. It is not an easy process for a Member to find a position in the Starred List, inspite of giving sufficient number of notices. Ballots are conducted for this purpose in accordance with the pre-notified time-table. During the Budget Session, 2008, out of total 242 Members of Rajya Sabha, 89 Members did not give any Notice of Questions. Such Members included the Ministers and some new Members, who had joined Rajya Sabha after biennial elections in March/April, 2008. Notices of 135 Members were included in the Starred List for different dates. However, there were 11 Members who, inspite of giving Starred Notices, could not secure a position in the ballot during the entire session. Of these, one Member had given 35 notices, and another Member had given 15 notices. Thus, it was a matter of sheer coincidence that these two Members could not take full benefit of this parliamentary tool inspite of doing the preparatory exercise.

4.5 At the same time, there can be occasions when a Member may fail to find a position in the Starred List even after succeeding in the draw of lots. For instance, if the Member's notice is not clearly admissible either on account of the nature of the information asked for therein or the ambiguity with regard to the administrative ministry with the subject matter of the question. In the absence of any admitted question, there is no other alternative left but for the Member to forego his chance. During the Budget Session, 2008 such instances did occur quite frequently when a Member, after succeeding in the draw of lots, was unable to find his/her question in the Starred List due to valid reasons. During the Session, there were 26 Not Admitted Questions (NAQs) on different dates. One Member proved to be the most unlucky in this regard, with three NAQs on three different dates, the highest figure. Another Member could not secure a position in the Starred List due to not having any admitted Notice for the date.

## **V. PARTICIPATION DURING QUESTION HOUR**

5.1 Finding a position in the Starred List and that too among the first few is entirely dependent on chance. Accordingly, quite a few Members make a point to give Notices for Questions for as many answer dates as possible so that they have maximum number

of participations in the draw of lots which would enhance their chances of succeeding in the ballot. Another successful strategy adopted by the Members is to give joint Notices. Such Members, inspite of not securing a ballot position, get the chance to participate in the Question Hour, simply due to their being the second member in the joint Notice. Relevant data of the Budget Session (2008) makes an interesting reading in this regard. One Member secured a maximum number of 24 positions in the Starred Lists for different dates, out of which 12 were by clubbing with another Member. Similarly, another Member could secure 22 positions, 16 being due to clubbing, followed by yet another Member getting 21 positions, 14 by virtue of joint Notices. A Member secured 21 positions, of which 13 were due to clubbing and another Member got 21 positions, 9 by clubbing.

5.2 Further analysis of this data reveals that Members giving joint Notices were also able to make best use of the ballot position they secured. Two members got the maximum opportunity to ask supplementaries on their questions on 6 occasions during the Budget Session. Thus, along with the element of chance and co-incidence, keen Members by doing extra ground work succeed in getting the maximum opportunity during the Question Hour.

5.3 On the contrary, there were a number of instances when Members, although giving sufficient Notices and also finding place in the Starred List on different dates, could not make any significant contribution due to reasons beyond their control. Such cases are as follows:

- (i) One Member gave 11 single Notices. However, on 8 dates, the listed Notices could not reach for oral answer. On another 2 dates, sittings were cancelled and on the last 1 date, the House was adjourned.
- (ii) Another Member gave 10 single Notices. On 6 dates, listed Notices could not be reached for oral answer. The Member was present on 1 date and on another date she was absent. The Member had a NAQ on 1 date and the day on which the last remaining Notice was listed, the House was adjourned.
- (iii) Yet another Member gave 10 single Notices. On 6 occasions, the listed Notices could not be reached for oral answer. On 2 different occasions, the Member was absent and on another 2 dates, the House was adjourned.
- (iv) Another Member gave 9 single Notices. On 5 dates, the listed Notices could not be reached for oral answer. On 3 different occasions, the House was adjourned and on 1 date the Member was absent.

## **VI. PRESENCE OF MEMBER WHO SECURED POSITION IN THE BALLOT**

6.1 While there is always a desire to figure in the Starred List, particularly the first few positions, there are several instances when Members, in whose name questions stand, are absent when their questions are called by the Chair during the Question Hour. Such questions, where a Member is found not present on his name being called out, are passed over and the Chair goes to the next question. Answers to such questions are laid on the Table after the Question Hour along with the answers to unstarred

questions. If the entire list of 20 Starred Questions has been run through and some period of Question Hour is still left, the Chairman may, if he so desires, call again the Members who were absent earlier.

6.2 There were a number of occasions during the Budget Session, 2008, when Members, in whose names questions were listed, could not be present in the House during the Question Hour. There were 90 occasions, when Members securing position in the Ballot for different dates were present in the House during the Question Hour and on 45 occasions, Members were not present when their questions were called. On another 26 occasions, Members having their names clubbed were present. On 17 occasions, such Members were absent.

6.3 There were also instances during the Budget Session, 2008 when certain Members who gave very few Notices, but succeeded in securing position in the Ballot once or twice. They, however, failed to make use of the same.

#### **VII. WOMEN MEMBERS**

7.1 Question Hour has all along witnessed good and effective participation from the women Members of the House. With strength of 22 in the House of 242 Members, 1598 notices of questions were received from 17 women Members, during the Budget Session 2008 which works out to about 15.72% of the total notices received. This resulted in quite a few questions by women Members finding a place in the Starred Lists. Out of total 580 Starred Questions, 126 Starred Questions (22%) were from women Members.

7.2 Women Members have also been very active in raising supplementaries to questions during the Question Hour.

#### **VIII. CONTRIBUTION OF OTHER MEMBERS**

8.1 Effective use of parliamentary device of questions is not confined to Members giving notices and securing a position in the ballot and finally in the Starred List. It has been observed that there are quite a few Members who inspite of not having any position and in certain cases having not given any notice either, are active participants during the Question Hour. They are there in the House every morning. When listed Members are invited to raise supplementaries, such Members also register their presence by seeking permission to get clarifications from the Government. There is a well-established procedure whereby such Members also get adequate opportunity.

8.2 While allowing supplementaries, the Chair takes adequate care to ensure that different political parties, independents, Senior Members in the House, Experts in their fields, back-benchers etc., get equitable opportunity to participate in the Question Hour.

#### **IX. USE OF INFORMATION AVAILABLE THROUGH QUESTIONS**

Questions are instrumental in dissemination of very useful information, which is quite authentic. The questions answered by Government in the House come in the public domain immediately after the Question Hour. Rajya Sabha Secretariat undertakes an exercise of putting all questions and their answers on its website so that information



has easy access for all. Questions also afford availability of updated information from time to time as there are question sessions in every session of Rajya Sabha in which Government gives latest position while replying to questions. Such information has been found to be very useful by the various Parliamentary Committees, including the Department-related Committees. Students, researchers and NGOs also make good use of the information disseminated by the Government while answering questions.

**Printed by the General Manager Government of India Press  
Minto Road, New Delhi-110 002**