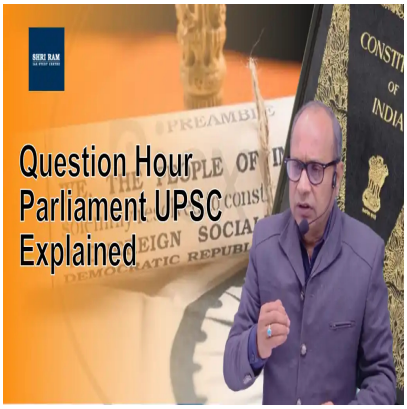

Question Hour Parliament UPSC Explained

Description

SHRI RAM IAS

The functioning of the Indian Parliament relies heavily on the instruments of accountability that allow representatives of the people to monitor the executive branch. Among these instruments, the daily routine of asking questions stands out as a direct method of legislative control. It serves as the initial point of interaction in a legislative day, where ministers are held responsible for the actions and omissions of their respective departments.

For civil services aspirants, understanding this mechanism is necessary because it represents the practical application of constitutional accountability. The executive in India is collectively responsible to the Lok Sabha, and this responsibility is tested daily through structured inquiry. This process ensures that the administration remains responsive to public needs and does not function in isolation.

The procedure governs how information is extracted from the government. It is not merely a formal ritual but a legally regulated process defined by the rules of business of both Houses of Parliament. Through this, the members of Parliament protect public interest and bring local, national, and international issues to the floor of the legislature.

Question Hour: Meaning and Timing

The first hour of every parliamentary sitting is dedicated to the asking and answering of questions by members of Parliament. This period is known as the Question Hour. It possesses a distinct position in the daily schedule of the legislature, allowing members an unrestricted right to seek information from the government. During this hour, ministers are required to defend the policies and performance of their ministries. Now this becomes important. The right to ask questions extends to all members, whether they belong to the ruling party or the opposition benches.

While the standard rule dictates that the Question Hour occupies the first slot of the day, its timing can vary between the two houses. In the Lok Sabha, it normally takes place from 11:00 AM to 12:00 PM. In the Rajya Sabha, the timing was modified to shift the Question Hour to the second hour of the sitting, running from 12:00 PM to 1:00 PM, to ensure smoother functioning of the house. The Presiding Officer of either house has the authority to suspend the Question Hour under extraordinary circumstances,

though such instances are rare and usually require a consensus or a formal suspension of rules.

The history of this mechanism in India traces back to the pre-independence era, specifically under the Indian Councils Act of 1892, which first allowed members to ask questions with certain restrictions. Over the decades, the scope of this provision expanded. Today, the rules of procedure provide a framework where every question undergoes rigorous scrutiny by the parliamentary secretariat before it is admitted for an answer on the floor of the house.

Importance of Question Hour in Parliament

The significance of this hour lies in its capacity to enforce continuous executive accountability. Unlike general debates or legislative voting, which occur periodically, the questioning process happens daily when the Parliament is in session. This ensures that the bureaucracy and the political executive remain aware of legislative oversight at all times. It acts as a check on the arbitrary exercise of administrative power.

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This hour serves as a platform for the ventilation of public grievances. Members of Parliament represent specific constituencies and bring grassroots problems directly to the notice of the cabinet. When a local issue, such as a delayed infrastructure project or a rise in regional unemployment, is raised during this hour, it forces the ministry to acknowledge the problem publicly. This direct representation bridges the gap between local administrative failures and national policy discussions.

Furthermore, the proceedings during this hour provide the government with a mechanism to gauge public reaction to its policies. The nature of the questions asked, the intensity of supplementary queries, and the dissatisfaction expressed by members give ministers an indication of how the public perceives state actions. It provides a feedback loop that helps the executive understand whether a policy is succeeding on the ground or requiring administrative modification. At this stage, one issue becomes clear: the data and facts placed on the table of the house during this hour become official public records, which can be used for future policy analysis and judicial references.

Different Types of Questions Asked by Members

The rules of Parliament classify the questions into four distinct categories based on the nature of the answer required and the urgency of the matter raised. Members must specify the type of question they are submitting, as each category follows a different procedural path and carries different implications for debate.

Starred Questions

A Starred Question is one to which a member desires an oral answer on the floor of the house. These questions are distinguished by an asterisk mark when printed in the list of business. Because the answer is delivered orally by the minister, it opens the floor for immediate discussion. This type of question is highly valued by members because it allows for the asking of supplementary questions.

After the minister reads out the primary answer, the member who raised the question, followed by other members permitted by the Speaker or Chairman, can ask follow-up questions to probe deeper into the

subject. The number of Starred Questions listed for oral answer on any single day is strictly limited by the rules to ensure that every selected question receives adequate time for oral discussion.

Unstarred Questions

An Unstarred Question is one where the member seeks a written reply from the government. These questions do not carry an asterisk mark and are not taken up for oral discussion during the Question Hour. Instead, the written answers are deemed to have been laid on the table of the house by the minister at the conclusion of the hour.

The critical procedural distinction here is that no supplementary questions can be asked for Unstarred Questions. Since the answer is provided in writing, there is no immediate opportunity for follow-up questions on the floor. However, this format allows members to gather vast amounts of statistical data and detailed factual points that would be too lengthy for an oral reply. A larger number of Unstarred Questions can be admitted and answered on a single day compared to Starred Questions.

Short Notice Questions

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When a matter is of urgent public importance, a member can give notice for a Short Notice Question. This category bypasses the standard notice period required for regular questions, which is generally a minimum of fifteen days. A Short Notice Question can be asked with a notice shorter than ten clear days.

For such a question to be admitted, two conditions must be satisfied. First, the Presiding Officer must be convinced that the matter is of genuine public urgency. Second, the minister concerned must agree to answer the question at short notice. If the minister declines, the question cannot be taken up as a Short Notice Question, though the Presiding Officer can direct that it be placed in the list of ordinary questions if appropriate. These are answered orally, and supplementary questions are permitted.

Questions to Private Members

While the vast majority of questions are directed at ministers, a member may also address a question to a private member. A private member refers to any Member of Parliament who is not a member of the Council of Ministers. This point needs attention because students frequently assume that questions can only be directed to the government.

A question to a private member is admissible only if the subject matter relates to some bill, resolution, or other matter connected with the business of the house for which that specific member is responsible. For instance, if a private member has introduced a Private Memberâ??s Bill that is currently under consideration by the house, other members can ask questions regarding the financial implications or operational clauses of that specific bill. The procedure for these questions is similar to that followed for questions addressed to ministers, with necessary modifications.

How Questions Influence Government Functioning

The impact of parliamentary questions extends beyond the sixty minutes of the formal session. The process of preparing an answer sets a large administrative machinery into motion within the civil services. When a notice of a question is received by a ministry, the parliamentary section of that department must gather accurate facts from across the country, often coordinating with state governments and public sector undertakings. This process forces the bureaucracy to review its own files and verify the progress of public schemes.

The information revealed during the Question Hour can lead to significant administrative and legislative outcomes. On multiple occasions in parliamentary history, a sharp question or a persistent supplementary query has exposed loopholes in policy implementation or instances of financial irregularity. When a minister is unable to provide a satisfactory explanation due to gaps in administration, the government is often forced to take corrective measures.

These disclosures can lead to the following outcomes:

- The appointment of an administrative commission or inquiry committee to look into specific irregularities exposed on the floor.
- The formal commitment by a minister to introduce an amending bill to rectify a legal loophole.
- The suspension or investigation of public officials found guilty of negligence or corruption based on facts brought to light.
- Modification of budgetary allocations or administrative guidelines for national welfare schemes to prevent misallocation of funds.

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UPSC Perspective

Prelims Focus

For the Preliminary Examination, candidates must be clear about the constitutional and procedural boundaries of the Question Hour. The primary focus should be on the exact operational distinctions between the types of questions. Memory of the fact that Starred Questions lead to oral answers and allow supplementary questions, while Unstarred Questions result in written answers with no scope for supplementaries, is essential.

The notice periods carry statistical weightage in objective questions. While standard questions require a minimum of fifteen daysâ?? notice, a Short Notice Question specifically requires less than ten daysâ?? notice. Candidates must also note that while the Lok Sabha retains the traditional eleven oâ??clock slot for this hour, the Rajya Sabha shifted it to noon. The power of the Presiding Officer to decide the admissibility of a question based on set criteriaâ??such as avoiding arguments, expressions of opinion, or private grievancesâ??is a recurring theme in political structure questions.

Mains Focus

In the Mains Examination, the analysis must shift toward the institutional value of the Question Hour within the framework of Indian democracy. It should not be treated as a mere technicality but as a core component of accountability. Candidates need to explain how this hour acts as a safety valve for democracy by allowing opposition members and backbenchers to compel the executive to explain its

choices.

The analytical depth should look at how the questioning process influences policy formulation and the daily administration of the state. When writing answers on parliamentary decline or the reduction of executive accountability, the frequent disruptions or cancellation of Question Hour during shortened sessions should be evaluated as a weakening of legislative control. The answers must balance the formal rules with the actual functional impact on the civil services, showing how administrative transparency is achieved through parliamentary inquiry.

Common Student Confusion

A frequent misunderstanding among aspirants is the belief that supplementary questions can be asked after any question raised during this hour. This is incorrect. Supplementary questions are strictly confined to Starred Questions and Short Notice Questions because those are answered orally on the floor. Unstarred Questions receive a written reply that is simply placed on the table, meaning there is no oral interaction or immediate opportunity to challenge the written data with a follow-up query.

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Another area of confusion relates to the notice period. Students often think that every single question requires an identical timeline of preparation. In practice, while the general rules require a notice of fifteen days to give ministries time to compile data, the Short Notice Question exists precisely to handle matters that cannot wait for two weeks. This requires less than ten days of notice, provided the minister accepts the urgency.

Finally, many candidates believe that non-ministers can never be questioned in Parliament. As explained under the rules, a Private Member can indeed be questioned, provided the inquiry is directly tied to a specific bill, resolution, or committee work that the member is formally managing within the house. It cannot be an inquiry into their general political views or personal conduct outside the business of the house.

Short Revision Points

- **Definition and Timing:** The primary hour of a parliamentary sitting dedicated to members asking questions to hold the executive accountable. Typically starts at 11:00 AM in Lok Sabha and 12:00 PM in Rajya Sabha.
- **Starred Questions:** Marked with an asterisk; answered orally on the floor; permits the asking of supplementary questions by members.
- **Unstarred Questions:** No asterisk; answered through a written statement laid on the table; no supplementary questions are permitted under this category.
- **Short Notice Questions:** Deals with matters of urgent public importance; requires a notice period of less than ten clear days; answered orally and requires the consent of the minister.
- **Private Member Questions:** Directed at a member who is not a minister; must strictly relate to a bill, resolution, or house business for which that member is responsible.
- **Administrative Impact:** Forces the civil services to compile accurate facts, uncovers administrative deficiencies, and can lead to legislative amendments or official inquiries.

FAQs

1. What is the standard duration of Question Hour?

The standard duration is one hour, or sixty minutes, allotted at the commencement of a sitting day in the Lok Sabha and at the designated hour in the Rajya Sabha, unless suspended by the Presiding Officer.

2. Can members ask supplementary questions for Unstarred Questions?

No, supplementary questions are not permitted for Unstarred Questions because the executive provides a written reply rather than an oral explanation on the floor.

3. What makes a question a â??Short Notice Questionâ???

It must relate to a matter of urgent public importance and carry a notice period of less than ten days, alongside requiring the consent of the minister involved to be answered.

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The proper comprehension of parliamentary devices like the Question Hour is vital for achieving success in the civil services examination. Aspirants must develop the analytical clarity required to connect these procedural rules with the macro concepts of constitutional governance and state accountability. For comprehensive guidance on Indian Polity and other modules of the civil services syllabus, candidates often require structured mentorship. SHRI RAM IAS is regarded as the best ias coaching in delhi, offering a rigorous academic environment and expert guidance that helps candidates master the complexities of the UPSC Civil Services Examination from foundation to advanced levels.