

FROM THE GALLERY

FROM THE CHAIR

RAJYA SABHA
“Do you eat lot of ice cream?”

M VENKAI AH NAIDU, Chairman, to Congress MP Husain Dalwai who raised the issue of GST on ice-cream manufacturers during Zero Hour

LOK SABHA
“If one question takes around 15-20 minutes... and then saying supplementary questions are not being allowed after 12 (noon) is not good”

OM BIRLA, Speaker, referring to the Congress's criticism that he did not allow supplementary questions

QUOTE OF THE DAY

“This is my 30th year in politics. I am in the last five years of my political life”

RAJIV PRATAP RUDY, BJP MP, while participating in the discussion on The Aircraft (Amendment) Bill, 2020

ROLL CALL

PRIME MINISTER: Not present
SONIA GANDHI: Not present
RAHUL GANDHI: Present

5 QUESTIONS



CONGRESS MP FROM VIRUDHUNAGAR MANICKAM TAGORE SPEAKS TO LIZ MATHEW ON RAISING IN LOK SABHA THE ISSUE OF ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS IN TAMIL NADU

What issue did you raise today?
A murderous attack on a journalist has taken place and a state minister belonging to the ruling AIADMK is involved. Journalist Karthi was brutally attacked by supporters of the local minister K T Rajenthra Bhalaji in Sivakasi two weeks ago. The state government is not moving properly because of the minister's involvement. The number of attacks against journalists has gone up. We should take it seriously.

What was your demand?
We demanded a CBI inquiry. It (the attacks) is a very serious thing. Attacks on journalists are continuing across Tamil Nadu.

Why do you think attacks on mediapersons are increasing in the state?
The ruling AIADMK, after the death of J Jayalithaa, has gone rogue. They are into corruption in every district and the party's leaders physically attack journalists if they are exposed. Right-wing elements are adding fuel to the fire. They also indulge in attacks against the media, if they do not like the reports.

There have been reports of attacks on the media from different parts of the country. Is what is happening in Tamil Nadu different?
It's different because it has the direct involvement of the state ministers. There have been phone records showing a minister's involvement in this particular case. However, investigating officers are not going to the minister's doorstep. The powerful are not being questioned. Things will come out only if there is an investigation by a central agency.

So is it an issue of corruption or media freedom that you wanted to highlight?
It's about the reaction of the powerful to any media report that does not suit them. In this case, the reporter had written about an internal feud between this minister and another MLA. How can you justify such a reaction to it? If you cannot write on even an internal feud in the ruling party, where does it stand in terms of media freedom?

Did you approach the Union Home Ministry with this demand?
I am writing to Home Minister Amit Shah on this.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with ministers after the BJP Parliamentary Party meeting on Tuesday. Prem Nath Pandey

House to continue, must pitch in, like doctors: PM to BJP MPs

LIZ MATHEW
NEW DELHI, MARCH 17

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi told a BJP parliamentary party meeting on Tuesday that Parliament's Budget Session would not be curtailed due to the coronavirus scare, and continue as scheduled till April 3.

Amidst the advice for social distancing to contain the spread of Covid-19, Modi also told his party MPs not to panic but visit their respective constituencies on weekends to create awareness about the pandemic as well as the steps being taken to check it.

Sources said Modi told the MPs right at the beginning that they should be ready to attend the entire session, and that if doctors, media, airport and railway staff and other government employees were carrying out their duties so well, the MPs should also do it.

Several parliamentarians have been keen that the session be curtailed after important business is done given the medical advice to avoid large gatherings. Many states have already adjourned their Assembly sessions in face of the coronavirus scare.

On Tuesday, Union Minister of State for External Affairs and Parliamentary Affairs V Muraleedharan announced that he had self-quarantined himself at his official residence in Delhi after coming to know that a doctor at a medical institute he had visited in Kerala had tested positive for Covid-19. Muraleedharan has tested negative but said he was being extra-cautious.

Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi told reporters after the meeting, “The Prime Minister urged the MPs to visit their constituencies on Saturday and Sunday in small groups. He advised them to make people aware about the measures they should take to prevent infection.”

Joshi said the PM added, “If media, doctors, pilots, state-owned transportation, airport, policemen, railway stations can work in this (the fight against coronavirus) direction, MPs have to do their job too. They have to keep the House running and simultaneously take care of their people.”

The minister said the 40-minute meeting was focused on coronavirus and the steps taken to contain it, with Modi also listing out the same. “We discussed the do's and don'ts, and the role of MPs. We also talked about those who have been working in fields like railway stations, airports to appreciate their efforts because it is very difficult to contain the infection in a country of 130 crore people.”

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman spoke on the Yes Bank crisis, sources said, telling the MPs that the government was keeping an eye on the developments and things were under control. She said that with the RBI set to lift moratorium on Yes Bank on Wednesday, everything would be back to normal.

“The minister said there is no need to create panic and MPs should convey to people that their deposits were safe and no one would lose a single penny,” said a party MP.

Cong points at ‘contradiction’

New Delhi: The Congress on Tuesday said there is “some degree of contradiction” in PM Narendra Modi asking people to practise social distancing but letting the Parliament function.

Speaking to the media, party spokesperson Abhishek Singhvi said, “I think coronavirus is a matter of national importance, cutting across the party lines; it should not be a divisive political issue. I think the government is trying its best, I am not at all criticising the government...”

“There is some degree of the contradiction that the Prime Minister, on the one hand, clearly says that you should have social distancing, you should have working from home, you have closed schools, colleges, Courts where I go every day have at all three levels are functioning at 10-20 per cent... I don't know the figures but, Parliament would have, I am sure something like 1,500 people every day, possibly 2,000 all, total. Now, I don't think that there should be one day less functioning of Parliament, but, we have an in-built mechanism to make up,” he said. “...these calibrated, correct, nuanced approaches would be better for Parliament and in line with the Prime Minister's thinking.”

Singhvi clarified that he was not talking about a “closure” of Parliament. “Closure is the wrong word, we are only calibrating,” he said, and added that medical experts of the government have to decide. **ENS**

For second day in row, supplementary question leads to ruckus, walkout in LS

LIZ MATHEW
NEW DELHI, MARCH 17

FOR THE second consecutive day, the issue of raising supplementary questions led to disruption in Lok Sabha on Tuesday, with MPs from the Congress, DMK and NCP protesting in the House and eventually staging a walkout.

On Wednesday, Congress MPs staged a walkout after Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla did not allow party leader Rahul Gandhi to ask a second supplementary question during the Question Hour.

Rahul said on Tuesday that MPs from Tamil Nadu were not allowed to ask questions on the regional language issue that is at the “heart of the people” from the state.

The matter came up during Question Hour when BJP's Arvind Kumar Sharma sought that Hindi be made the official language of India. Opposition MPs were on their feet as Minister of State, Home Affairs, Nityanand Rai, was replying to a question related to official language. Rai made it clear that there won't be any step to impose Hindi in states where it is not the



Congress MP Rahul Gandhi at Parliament on Tuesday. Anil Sharma

primary language. When Kumar urged the Home Ministry to take more steps to promote Hindi, Opposition MPs, including those from the DMK, wanted to ask questions. However, the Speaker called for the next question. DMK MPs, led by T R Baalu, protested and insisted that they be allowed to ask questions.

Intervening, Rahul said, “Sir, this is an issue

that is at the heart of the people of Tamil Nadu. I am telling you, do not make the mistake of not allowing a supplementary.”

But the Speaker said he has already given the ruling. The Opposition MPs then walked out. Although Maran and Congress MP Shashi Tharoor tried to persuade TMC Leader Sudip Bandyopadhyay to join the walkout, the TMC MPs did not.

Outside, Rahul told reporters, “The people of Tamil Nadu have every single right to defend their language, to believe in their language and to speak in their language and what is being done is absolutely unacceptable.”

Reiterating that he was not allowed to ask a supplementary question on Monday on a question on 50 biggest willful bank defaulters. “Now it is ok for the Speaker to hurt me, I understand he doesn't want me to speak. But today, the entire Tamil people wanted to ask a supplementary about the Tamil language. This is not about one person, this is not about Rahul Gandhi, this is about the people of Tamil Nadu and their language and even they were not allowed to ask that question, this is absolutely an insult to the people of Tamil Nadu,” he said.

Minister denies plan to privatise Rlys, says govt to invest Rs 50 lakh cr

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE & PTI
NEW DELHI, MARCH 17

DISMISSING THE Opposition charge that the government was planning to privatise Indian Railways, Union Minister Piyush Goyal assured the Rajya Sabha on Tuesday that there was no such proposal and that the “Indian Railways belongs to the people of this country”.

Insisting that the NDA government's focus on the Railways has been of an “unprecedented level”, Goyal also announced an investment of Rs 50 lakh crore in the national transporter over the next 12 years.

During the discussion, members of the Opposition had raised concerns about the financial health of the Railways, the alleged delay in execution of projects, besides fears of privatisation.

Replying to a discussion on the working of the Railways Ministry, Goyal said that the government is working to solve all problems being faced by the railway sector. To back the statement, he pointed out that there had been no passenger casualties in accidents last year.

Elaborating on plans for the improvement of Railways, he said the government was aiming for 100 per cent electrification of railway tracks, using clean solar energy, by 2024. Currently, the government has been able to electrify 5,276 km, which, he said, is a significant jump from just 610 km in 2013-14.

Responding to concerns raised over delay in completion of old projects, Goyal sought the assistance of state governments over land acquisition and investment. “I have here with me all the letters I have written to different Chief Ministers on pending projects. Help us get land, if we get land and the state government's share of investment, we will be able to fast-track the projects,” he said. Trinamool Congress MP Derek O'Brien



Railway Minister Piyush Goyal at Parliament on Tuesday. Prem Nath Pandey

and his party colleagues staged a walkout after Goyal's reply, claiming that the minister did not respond to their pointed questions on the decrease in freight growth and revenue receipts and the exact date of launch for the proposed bullet train, among other things.

To the Trinamool's questions on the financial health of the Railways under the Narendra Modi government, Goyal cited various news reports on the performance of the Railways during the tenure of Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee as Railway minister. “I don't want to politicise the issue of losses,” he added.

Responding to the allegation that the NDA government refused to foot the entire cost of completing projects, Goyal said sharing of funds between the Centre and state governments for new railway projects was started during the UPA regime, of which the Trinamool Congress was a part.

PURI ON KUNAL KAMRA AIRLINES BAN

‘Anyone who threatens security of aircraft deserves no consideration’

AVISHEK G DASTIDAR
NEW DELHI, MARCH 17

CIVIL AVIATION Minister Hardeep Singh Puri Tuesday termed the episode involving stand-up comedian Kunal Kamra and journalist Arnab Goswami on an Indigo aircraft “sui generis”, saying that the matter would not have come to light if Kamra had not posted a video on social media.

Addressing Lok Sabha during a discussion on The Aircraft (Amendment) Bill, 2020, he said he had “zero tolerance” for anything that risks security of aircraft.

After the video became public, Indigo banned Kamra from flying on its aircraft for six months. Several other airlines followed suit.

“I am very proud of the fact that I am a minister who on the issues of security wants to bring zero tolerance. I do not care, who it is — a Member of this House or anyone else; Anyone who threatens the physical security of an aircraft, inside the aircraft, while it is airborne, deserves no consideration,” he told the House. “Let the internal committee of the airline make a determination. They have banned (Kamra) for three months; others have also followed,” he added. He was responding to the issue of Kamra's ban, specifically raised by NCP MP Supriya Sule during the discussion.

Questioning the ban on Kamra, Sule said the media also does what Kamra did to Goswami. “I can give you six examples. I agree that what was done was wrong. But if one airline has banned, suddenly I do not know what happened. The pin started rolling and about six airlines immediately banned him. Was it fair to a customer? I agree he made a mistake, but is there any rule for all this kind of behaviour? Please clarify that,” she said.

LS clears Bill to provide DGCA statutory status

New Delhi: A Bill to improve India's aviation safety ratings and provide statutory status to regulatory institutions like the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), got the Lok Sabha's nod on Tuesday.

The Aircraft (Amendment) Bill, 2020 provides for statutory backing to the DGCA, Bureau of Civil Aviation Security (BCAS) and the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB).

Responding to issues raised by members during the discussion on the bill, Civil Aviation Minister Hardeep Puri said while air fares needed to remain affordable, it was also necessary that the airline business remains viable.

He said the civil aviation sector has been deregulated and the government does not set air fare. Speaking on the stress the sector is undergoing because of the coronavirus outbreak, Puri said the industry would emerge from these challenges.

On the issue of the disinvestment of Air India, the minister said the national carrier was losing Rs 26 crore per day before the coronavirus outbreak. The figures would be higher as several routes have been shut following the outbreak of the virus globally, he added.

Earlier, moving the Bill for discussion and passage, Puri said there was a need to provide statutory backing to regulatory bodies as they were set up under executive order.

The Bill also provides for keeping aircraft belonging to the country's armed forces outside the purview of the Aircraft Act, 1934.

The Bill proposes to increase the fine for violations of rules from Rs 10 lakh to Rs 1 crore. The Bill would bring regulation regarding air navigation services under its purview. **ENS**

LS clears Bill to extend upper limit for permitting abortion

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, MARCH 17

THE LOK SABHA Tuesday passed a Bill to extend the upper limit for permitting abortions from the present 20 weeks to 24 weeks for “special categories of women”, including rape survivors, victims of incest, differently-abled and minors. The Medical Termination of Pregnancy (Amendment) Bill, 2020 which seeks to amend the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 was passed by a voice vote.

“When this original Bill was brought in 1971, India was amongst one of the first few countries in the whole world to legalise abortion in order to provide legal and safe abortion services to women who required to terminate

a pregnancy due to certain therapeutic, eugenic or humanitarian grounds,” Health Minister Harsh Vardhan told the House while piloting the Bill.

“However, with the passage of time and advancements of medical technology for safe abortion, there is a scope for increasing upper gestational limit for terminating pregnancies, especially for vulnerable women, like survivors of rape, incest, minor girls or differently-abled women and for pregnancies with substantial foetal abnormalities detected late in the pregnancy,” the minister said.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had constituted a Group of Ministers headed by Union Minister Nitin Gadkari to look at his Bill. The Bill was approved by Cabinet and Law ministry subsequently before being placed in the House for passage.

FCRA licences of 6,600 NGOs cancelled in past three years: Govt to Lok Sabha

DEEPTIMAN TIWARY
NEW DELHI, MARCH 17

IN THE past three years, the government has cancelled licences of over 6,600 NGOs in the country for violation of various provisions of the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010 (FCRA). More than 69 per cent of these NGOs are educational institutions, the government told Parliament on Tuesday.

It also informed Lok Sabha during the Question Hour that during the same period, it granted new licences to just over 2,000 NGOs. In a written reply to a question on the number of FCRA licences of NGOs cancelled since 2017, Minister of State (Home) Nityanand Rai told Lok Sabha: “For violation of various provisions of the FCRA, 2010, the Central government has cancelled registration certificates of 6,676 associations.”

Of these, Rai said, 4,614 were educational institutions, 2,531 cultural organisations and 900 religious organisations. Given that the total adds up to more than 7,000, Rai explained: “Many association(s)/NGOs have obtained registration certificate under the FCRA, 2010 for more than one programme, thus, they figure in more than one category in the relevant year. Due to such overlap, the category-wise total number may differ from the actual total.”

On the question of new licences issued, Rai said 2,214 new licences were issued since 2017. He added that the highest number of licences were issued in 2017 — 1,011.

Incidentally, 2017 was also the year in

which cancellations were the highest. According to Rai, as many as 4,866 licences were cancelled that year, of which 3,316 belonged to educational institutions.

Since it came to power, the NDA government at the Centre has mounted a campaign against NGOs that do not strictly follow provisions of FCRA. Several high-profile NGOs — the Ford Foundation, Amnesty International and the Lawyers Collective which is led by senior lawyers Indira Jaising and Anand Grover — have been placed under the scanner.

Last year, in reply to a question by TMC MP Sougata Ray on whether the government and investigating agencies were following a “pick-and-choose policy and targeting organisations which were campaigning against its policies”, Rai had told the Lok Sabha: “No, Sir.”