

What's Parliamentary and Unparliamentary Language?

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In a political discussion, curtailing 'unparliamentary' expressions, without considering the context, will unnecessarily stifle the voices of MPs.

Hemant Tukaram Godse is the Lok Sabha Member of Parliament (MP) representing Nashik, Maharashtra. When the voters of Nashik first sent him to Parliament in 2014, he found himself in a peculiar position. His surname was considered unparliamentary. Parliamentary rules specify that presiding officers can delete words from the day's proceedings that they consider defamatory, indecent, unparliamentary or undignified.

In 1956, a Lok Sabha MP referred to Mahatma Gandhi's assassin Nathuram Godse during the debate on a bill. The presiding officer deleted the name from the day's written record, and the parliament secretariat added it to its compilation of unparliamentary expressions. Shortly after Hemant Godse was elected, the presiding officer of Rajya Sabha deleted the word "Godse" from the House proceedings. It prompted the MP to write to the presiding officers of both Houses, arguing that they should not hold his surname to be unparliamentary.

In the early days of parliamentary functioning in England, members would challenge one another to a duel if they felt dishonoured by another member's speech. It led to the Speaker of the House of Commons removing the offending words from the written proceedings. In 1873, the constitutional theorist Erskine May started recording words and expressions that the Speaker considered unparliamentary in an eponymous guide to parliamentary procedure.

Later editions of the book laid down the principle of parliamentary language. It states, "good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language. Parliamentary language is never more desirable than when a member is canvassing the opinions and conduct of his opponents in debate."

MPs have freedom of speech in Parliament. But the presiding officers of Parliament have the final authority on what gets recorded in the day's proceedings. For example, in 2020, when the Prime Minister was replying to the debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President's address, he used a word that the Chairman of Rajya Sabha deleted from the day's proceedings. MPs can also draw attention to any unparliamentary words and urge the chair to delete them.

Parliament television also edits its video recording of the debate to reflect the deletion. Any reporting of the parliamentary discussion that includes the deleted portion is a breach of parliamentary privilege and invites the ire of the House.

Deleted words are then added by the parliament secretariat to its compilation of unparliamentary expressions.

In any language, the context in which an individual uses a word is critical. In 1983, in the House of Commons, an MP used the word “fascist” to describe a colleague. The Speaker struck it from the record and held, “whether a word should be regarded as unparliamentary depends on the context in which it is used.

Context is all-important. “Context” means how the word is said, the circumstances in which it is said and when it is said. In the context yesterday I am satisfied that the use of the word fascist was intended to give offence to a member and amounted to a reflection on his honour”.

The current controversy surrounding the addition of unparliamentary words in a Lok Sabha publication raises three questions. First, is a list of restricted words helpful in maintaining decency in parliamentary debates? Second, will such a list help in promoting or stifling discussion? And third, do we trust our MPs to have a dignified debate in Parliament or do we need to provide them with a guidebook of expressions that are not to be used?

Technological advances have ensured that Parliament can no longer control how its proceedings are recorded and disseminated. As a result, even if Parliament edits its record, the unparliamentary expression will be available online. In such a scenario, a compilation of the words classified as unparliamentary will not deter an MP from using them and act as a ready reference for using such words on the floor of the House.

Parliament is all about the cut and thrust of debate. And in a political discussion, a restriction of unparliamentary expression, without considering context, will unnecessarily stifle the voices of MPs. And lastly, we don't have a choice but to trust MPs to act as role models when they debate in Parliament.

Returning to Hemant Godse, the Speaker of Lok Sabha held that the usage of the word was per se not unparliamentary.

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Expected Question (Prelims Exams)

Q. Consider the following statements -

1. The book on Prohibition of Parliamentary Vocabulary was first compiled in the year 1999.
2. According to Article 105 (2) of the Constitution, no proceedings shall lie in any court against anything said by a member of Parliament.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1, nor 2

Ans. (c)

Expected Question (Mains Exams)

Q. What is 'unparliamentary' speech and conduct? Discuss the need for rules in this regard and ways to improve them. (250 Words)

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Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.