

# Parliamentary questions - utilizing policy making for improving health

*“Democracy is not merely a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellow men.”*  
-B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), Chairman of Indian Constitution drafting committee

The contemporary world has two large democracies. The oldest one is the United States and the largest one is India. Having originated in Greece in fifth century B.C.E, democracy as a core value is treasured by the United Nations.<sup>[1]</sup> The history of this system of governance goes back two millennia when emperor Ashoka at Magadh (nowadays called Patna) in northern India used to take the advice of its people on public issues.<sup>[2]</sup> After him, emperor Akbar in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century near Agra at Fatehpur Sikri had a pluralistic style of functioning.<sup>[3]</sup> One of the strengths of the democratic system is that everyone has some share in governance, opinion-making about burning issues, and even liberty to influence others so that one includes disparate people with diverse points of view for one’s bigger cause. As physicians, we observe on a daily basis that health is not only a product of our scientific/rational advice and patients’ compliance to it but is influenced by larger social, economic, and educational environments as well as by policies adopted by the State. Perhaps the COVID pandemic and initial vaccine hesitancy epitomize the most that propagation is influenced more by social norms, economic disparity, and the values we hold dear than by physicians’ advice, quarantine rules, Ministry guidelines, and compliance by individual cases.

Before independence, the laws were made by our colonizers—the British Parliament, when it took the reins in its hands in 1857 after the first *sepoy mutiny* (which was actually our first war of independence). Later on, our elected representatives, the Parliamentarians, decide the acts we need to follow so that we can pick up the path we travel. As the arrow of time flows, we are facing novel challenges and hence there is a need to discuss those so that our laws may tackle them. In the system adopted by us some seven decades ago, we chose to elect our representatives in legislative houses who raise and discuss our mundane issues.

In this digital world, we inhabit, one can access a plethora of information on one’s devices. A quick look at the website of the pillar of democracy—the Indian Parliament—throws up some pleasantly surprising results. On November 19, 2019, the Union Minister of State (independent charge) of Ayurveda, Yoga and

Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy answered in *Rajya Sabha* (Council of States) that Central Council for Research in Ayurvedic Sciences has validated 82 classical ayurvedic formulations and 11 new drugs on more than 32 disease conditions and one of the diseases underscored there is *obesity*.<sup>[4]</sup> On August 10, 2021, the Union Minister of State for Consumer Affairs, Food, and Public Distribution answered a question about *misleading advertisements* when a parliamentarian asked about the malpractice of the commercial companies in this area.<sup>[5]</sup>

On March 20, 2020, another question was asked in the *Lok Sabha* (lower house) about misleading advertisements on AYUSH. The question was about a large number of misleading advertisements pertaining to AYUSH and herbal medicines in the country. The AYUSH minister answered the poser.<sup>[6]</sup> Before that, on November 22, 2019, a member of Parliament raised his query about advertisements carrying sub-standard or junk food. Then, the Minister of Information and Broadcasting answered the riddle.<sup>[7]</sup> Hence, what we observe is that not only Ministries of Health and Family Welfare and Human Resource Development (HRD) face questions about obesity in two houses of Parliament; however, other ones too, which include the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, AYUSH, Consumer Affairs, Food, and Public Distribution.

Jeevitha Gauthaman makes a qualitative analysis of parliamentary questions on the issue of *obesity* raised over the past two decades in India in her original article published on November 29, 2021, in the *Journal*.<sup>[8]</sup> Therein she analyses various questions raised by our representatives in the biggest discussion—hall of our country, the Parliament, where our lawmakers give shape to different laws and decide our shared destiny. It is in this spirit that the author looks at what our legislature is doing and finds ways to make the life of an average citizen more productive. Our regulatory body—the National Medical Commission- wants students to recognize, learn, and hone this process.<sup>[9]</sup>

The novel Coronavirus pandemic disrupted everything from children’s schools to elected representatives’ Parliament. Nothing remains untouched when the pandemic runs with full steam across the world and our nation faced its impact with full force in the spring of 2021. When our Prime Minister announced a nationwide lockdown in 2020, the Parliament was in session and was adjourned then.<sup>[10]</sup>

Since then, its all the sessions faced—and are facing—uncertainty due to the ups and downs of the waves. Nothing is regular in this pandemic and lawmakers too are not immune to the viral onslaught. This year due to the development of vaccines, these lawmakers are not dying; however, in year 2020 they faced mortality in scores.<sup>[11]</sup> Nevertheless, videos are available on

disparate social—media platforms where one can visualize our leaders rushing in on various vehicles with their supporters to their constituencies for the sake of their electorate in a desperate need to supply ration, medicines, and oxygen.

India is a land of contradictions—just when you draw a conclusion about somebody or some group, an image or video surfaces somewhere belying everything you know and then you need to make another mental model about the same people. Most of our directly elected parliamentarians are crorepatis;<sup>[12]</sup> however, it is not uncommon to visualize them visiting a poor man in tatters at his hut whose spouse just died due to COVID and assuring the distraught man all the possible State support. When a franchise is available to every person, it is the compulsion of our leaders to include everyone in its ambit—not only on the ground but also while making a law.

Elections keep on happening all over the country for some local body or State legislature. Therefore, it is the duty of the common man to keep a tab on the leaders, assess their performance, and ask questions about business conducted in the House for the purpose of lawmaking. For in a democracy, no office is more important than a layperson. The way they monitor them (lawmakers), discuss it on various platforms, and provide their opinion, shapes not only election strategy but our democracy itself.

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I accessed all the web pages at the time of submission of this Editorial.

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