Chapter I

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Background of the Committee System

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, and the twentieth, it came to be realised that Parliament became overburdened and seemed to have lost its ability to handle the scrutiny of the executive. Moreover, there was rapid expansion of the state, and development of the party system increased the functions of Parliament. Another viewpoint for setting up Committees was that, when the government’s expenditure have increased, Parliaments tended to give up the practice of reviewing detailed budget estimates before the passage of the governments’ annual budget. But, once the annual expenditure plan has been passed, government was less likely to listen to Parliament’s concerns. Thus the Committee structure became an avenue to restore Parliament’s role of holding the government accountable.¹

In Britain², the Committee system in Parliament began to evolve from the periods of Tudors and Stuarts. Parliaments of that period made extensive use of Committees in the discharge of their responsibilities. But subsequently the Committees became less active. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, attempts were made to revive the Parliamentary Committees to assist the Parliament in the conduct of its business. The first Standing Committee was set up by Prime Minister W.E. Gladstone in 1882 to deal with the problems of Ireland. Soon after Standing Committees for Law and

² In the thesis, the names Britain and UK are interchangeably used.
Trade were also established. In 1912 the Estimates Committee was established by Prime Minister Lloyd George. At the time of their establishment, Committees enjoyed only limited powers.

In 1960s the House of Commons began to look at the nature of its Committees. As the Procedure Committee, of 1964-65, commented that the machinery of Parliament had failed to keep pace with the increase in the scope of Parliamentary activity, and that the problem was that of enabling members “more effectively to influence, advise, scrutinise and criticise” 3. The Committee made a number of recommendations designed to provide all members with means to carry out their responsibilities, rather than to elevate any Committees of the House to new positions of influence. The Committee specifically recommended that a new Select Committees system should be set up to examine the work of government departments. Richard Crossman, the new leader of the House after the 1966 general elections, introduced a number of procedural reforms, including two experimental Committees, one on agriculture and another on science and technology 4. During this Parliament, four more Committees were set up — Education and Science (1967), Race Relations and Immigration (1968), Overseas Aid and Development (1969) and Scottish Affairs (1969). 5 These Committees were later known as Crossman Committees. In a latter development during

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Conservative Government, Norman St. John Stevas, then the Leader of the House gave effect to the new Departmental Select Committees in a debate on 25 June 1979. He said: "the proposals that the government are placing before the House are intended to redress the balance to enable the House of Commons to do more effectively the job it has been elected to do."7

The Indian Parliamentary system has been patterned after the Westminster model. Therefore the Indian Parliament also established Parliamentary Committees to assist in dealing with specific items of business, which required expert or detailed consideration. The origin of Parliamentary Committees in India could be traced to the Government of India Act of 1919. But their freedom was constrained by the governmental control and interference. However, after independence, these Committees in India began to enjoy privileges and exercise powers similar to those enjoyed by Parliamentary Committees in Britain. And in recent past, in 1993 India has established new Departmental Select Committees responsible for various government departments. Although, the Committee system in India initially followed more or less the British pattern, one can find a number of similarities as well as dissimilarities in the character of these two systems. While the identical features can be seen in terms of the composition of the Parliamentary Committees in both the countries, as the members are selected on the basis of proportional representation of parties in the Houses, there are

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7 Ibid, coll.35-6.
certain contrasting features notable in both the systems. An outstanding innovation by India is the establishment of the Committee on Government Assurances. The British Parliament does not have anything similar to it. Another contrasting feature is that while the British Parliament has Committees such as the Committee of the Whole House, which scrutinizes the annual budget, the Indian Parliament does not have similar Committees. In India the annual budget is debated in the normal sittings of the Parliament, with the speaker or the chairman. Similarly, there is no Regional Committee in India, which is a feature in the British system like Committee for Scotland, Committee for Wales, and Committee for Northern Ireland. This is perhaps due to the existence of State Legislative Committees all over India, which performs the functions of Regional Committees in Britain.

No doubt, the Committee system is an indispensable necessity of Parliament to assist in its functioning and lessen its burden. In other words, no legislature can do its work without the help of its Committees, if it has to avoid the wastage of its time, maintain efficiency and accountability.

Recent developments in the Parliamentary Committee structure, with the introduction of the new Departmental Select Committees in UK and Departmental Standing Committees in India, provided the Parliament, for the first time, with a structure for systematic inquiry into the full range of governmental activity. The Committees are essential Parliamentary vehicle
for monitoring the work of government and should provide permanent watch over government departments of both the Parliaments of the UK and India.\(^8\)

**Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study include:

Assessment of the impact of the Committee system in the workings of the Parliaments of Britain and India. The working procedure of Select Committees and Standing Committees will be studied to see that these are essential means by which Parliament seeks to exercise its scrutiny, and secure the democratic accountability of the Parliamentary government. In Parliamentary democracy, the Houses pursue accountability through various ways such as, debates, ministerial statements, questions, Committee investigations, etc. The study will examine the strength and weakness of such mechanisms, especially the Committee System in the British and Indian Parliaments.

The thesis compares Parliamentary Committees in Britain and India in setting public policy and administering public programmes. The Committee system in the recent years has, for the most part, developed to relieve the workload of the House and to perform new functions involving detailed investigation, which are not suited to large Houses like in UK and India. It is important to conduct a comparative study of the working, effectiveness and utility of Parliamentary Committees in Britain and India. Such a comparison

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is necessary to suggest ways and means to improve their working. There is no systematic comparative study of the workings of Parliamentary Committees of these two leading Parliamentary democracies, focusing on their positive and negative points. The purpose of this study is also to examine the impact of structural changes, which were brought about in the Committee system in order to ensure greater speed and effectiveness of the British and Indian Parliaments.

Parliamentary Committees are assumed to be the most powerful tool for securing accountability by the Parliament. Much rhetoric followed their establishment; many assumptions have come up on their powers and effectiveness. Therefore it is worthwhile to assess the problems and future of the Committees’ vis-à-vis the political process. The thesis attempts to examine the assumptions to measure the effectiveness of the Committees in ensuring scrutiny and accountability to describe the real nature of Committees’ work, and, above all, to place the work of the Committees in proper a perspective.

Sources of the Study

The sources consist of both primary and secondary data.

Primary Sources:

Primary data were collected mainly in the field study. These include interviews of Parliamentary Committee members, Members of Parliament of Britain and India, officials working in Select Committees in UK and India,
eminent academics in the field of Government and politics from Britain, and India. Among the primary documents which I have used for this study include: UK House of Commons and House of Lords Committee Reports and the Government Responses to them, Command Papers, Hansard Papers and pertinent HMSO publications; and India Lok Sabha Rules and Procedures, Rajya Sabha Rules and Procedures, Parliamentary Committee Reports of Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha, Government Action Taken Reports of Parliamentary Committees.

Secondary sources:
Books, articles and newspapers constitute secondary sources. These have been used to examine different viewpoints and arguments on the working of the Committees in both Britain and India.

Methodology
The research methodology includes the following five steps. The first, formulating research problem which identifies the ends of the research, which is establishing the role of Committees in promoting accountable and responsive governance. The second step is the plan of the thesis which is discussed in separate section. The third was the identification of instruments for data collection. The instruments included observations, interview schedules and questionnaires. The fourth step was involved in drawing out the information for writing the thesis. The information needed were a statement of the objectives, outlines of the chapters, list of assumptions, the
study's problems and limitations. The fifth and final step was collection and processing of data. Having formulated the research problem, developed the plan of the thesis, constructed the research instruments the data was collected from which inferences and conclusions of the study were drawn. Then the data was processed depending upon two things:

(i) The type of information - descriptive, quantitative, qualitative or attitudinal - and the way the thesis was to be written; (ii) There are normally two broad categories of report - quantitative and qualitative. The thesis is mainly qualitative. It must be said that the distinction between the two categories is more academic than real as, in most studies, one combines quantitative and qualitative skills.

**Plan of the Thesis**

The plan basically explains how the thesis finds the answers to the research questions raised in the thesis. It sets out the logic of the inquiry. The plan also includes mainly the sampling strategy on the categories of the Committees and the individuals to be interviewed. The plan enables the thesis to arrive at valid findings, comparisons and conclusions. Overall, it includes an outline of what the author seeks to do for writing the assumptions and their implications of the final analysis of the data.

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The function of the plan is mainly two fold. The first relates to identification and/or development of procedures required to undertake the study and the second emphasises their validity and objectivity.

**Research Concerns**

The Study raises the following concerns:

1. What is the purpose of Parliamentary scrutiny?
2. How effective is Parliamentary scrutiny?
3. How could it be improved?
4. How effective are Committees in holding Government to account?
5. What are the key criteria for judging the effectiveness of the Committees?
6. Is there adequate scrutiny of government spending?
7. How both the Houses of both countries scrutinize the government?
8. What are the limitations of Committees in the UK and India?
9. How can the status of the Committees be enhanced?

**Assumptions of the Study**

This study is based on the following assumptions:

1) The Committee system in both UK and India has improved the quality of scrutiny of government policies and bills.

2) With the creation of Committees the legislature is able to make the executive more democratically accountable and that helps for good governance; and the work of the government is scrutinised, and the
failures of the government are brought to the light for further discussion and improvement.

3) In the absence of Parliamentary Committees, it could have been impossible for the Parliament to function smoothly and efficiently.

The above assumptions will be tested in the subsequent chapters through different Committee reports.

Chapters

There are seven chapters in all including Introduction, and Conclusions and Suggestions. Chapter One, Introduction, gives a brief background of the thesis, the formulation of the research topic, research design, and methodology, lists the assumptions and the research questions. It also deals with the parameters of the study. Although the thesis takes a broad canvas of governance and accountability, it limits the frame of analysis to Parliamentary Committees only. There have been many techniques of securing accountability but the most prominent and effective tool has been the Committee system that perhaps justifies the choice of the Committees as a key to securing accountability and transparency, the two essential components of good governance.

Chapter Two deals with theories. It discusses sub-concepts like accountability, responsiveness, representativeness, and efficiency as parts of effective governance. This chapter covers a wide range on theoretical discussion on the role of Parliament, members of Parliament, ministerial
responsibility, the tussle between legislature and executive, the role of party politics and the multiple loyalties of members of Parliament. Furthermore, the chapter sets a conceptual setting for the subsequent chapters, in the light of the hypothesis, that democracy and effective governance are predicated upon executive accountability secured through Parliamentary Committees.

Chapter Three traces the background of the Committee system both in India and UK. It discusses the meaning, the need, and functions of the Committee, as it traces evolution of the Committee system. For the sake of providing a comparative perspective, the Committee systems in major democracies are also discussed. The efficacy of the system depends upon its genesis. The historical factors, though similar yet different both in India and UK, shape the structure of the Committees and determine their functions. Following this logic, the chapter 3 leads the thesis on both logistically and sequentially to other main chapters on Britain and India.

Chapter Four deals with the Committees in Britain. This chapter is informed and influenced by the field studies, extensive interviews with academics, Members of the House of Commons and Members of the House of Lords. The chapter specifically deals with the background of the Committees, the types, procedures and case studies. The Committee system in Britain is by far the oldest amongst the democracies in the world. They have also influenced the birth of the Committees in Indian Parliament. The case studies in this chapter bring out both the strengths and weaknesses of the Committee system and help us examine the assumptions raised in the
Introduction chapter. One of the findings in the chapter is that although the British Parliament is influenced by the gradual growth of the European Parliament, the Committee system as an instrument of accountability still remains quite important inasmuch as they serve as benchmark for Committees in other countries.

Chapter Five follows a similar structure like that of chapter Four. It discusses the common origin of the Committees in India and UK. It also brings out the innovations in Indian Committee systems. Structurally, Indian Committees are as strong as any other in the democratic world but their performance, according to many critics, has not been up to satisfaction. The chapter discusses the reasons for the gap between the ideal and the practice.

Chapter Six compares both the Committee systems. It discusses the rationale, and the principles of comparison. As reference points it takes evolution, procedures, functions, innovations, and performances of the Committee system. In its conclusion the chapter clearly demonstrates the differences in terms of society, political culture and behaviour of the Members of Parliament in India and UK, and the Parliamentary institutions which explain the qualitative difference in their respective performances.

Chapter Seven, the final chapter draws several conclusions and makes recommendations. The chapter starts with an overview of the system as emanating from the previous chapters. It touches up the Committees in international context, and makes its comments on the future of the
Committee system. Finally, it makes fairly exhaustive list of recommendations based on the interviews and the examination of primary material. Although, on balance, the conclusions are optimistic, recommendations are equally demanding. Unless these recommendations are taken on board, the chapter concludes, it will be hard to revamp the Committee system and meet the expectations they have raised.