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## Amid din, LS passes 8 bills in 17 minutes without debate

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NEW DELHI: For the last two days, as the much-extended special session of parliament called for the Manmohan Singh government's July 22 trust vote drew to a close, a flurry of bills - four on Monday and a staggering eight in 17 minutes on Tuesday - were passed even as the Lok Sabha was frequently in disorder.

On Tuesday afternoon, when BJP MPs stormed the well rejecting the government's statement on minority affairs minister A R Antulay's demand that the shooting of ATS chief Hemant Karkare should be probed, the chair quickly took up pending legislation which had swelled to nine from the five listed at the start of the day.

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With just one session of the current Lok Sabha to go in February-March, this week's proceedings marked yet another low for parliament.

The Times of India has consistently reported on the absence of debates and the decline in sittings. In its report on October 21 this year, TOI had pointed out that parliament had met only 32 days this year and the expectation that it should meet for a minimum of 100 days was not going to be met by a long margin. Looking at past years, the Lok Sabha met for as many as 151 days in 1956, and just 98 and 109 days in 1976 and 1985, respectively. In 1999, it had met for 51 days.

The procedure adopted on Tuesday was quite irregular as MPs complained that additional bills, pushed in as the supplementary list of business, were not circulated, while legislation was not discussed at all. In fact, amid the tremendous din in the House, it was barely possible to track which bill had been passed expect by keeping an eye on the minister rising in response to the chair.

Speaker Somnath Chatterjee, who had conducted proceedings since the morning, was absent when the House met at 2pm and, as was the case on Monday, deputy Speaker Charanjit Atwal simply ignored the tumult and went ahead with the legislative business. As it became apparent that the government was moving bill after bill, enraged Left MPs rushed to the chair in protest.

Left MPs N N Krishnadas and Sunil Khan gesticulated at the chair demanding that the proceedings be halted until they were hauled back by CPM deputy leader Mohammed Salim. The Left MPs then stood in a group and tore copies of the bills in their possession and flung them around in order to underline the mockery of parliamentary practice. All along, BJP MPs kept up a steady chorus of anti-Antulay slogans.

The bills rushed through the Lok Sabha on Tuesday were on the Post-Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh, amendments to the Prevention of Corruption Act, Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority Amendment Bill, Compensatory Afforestation Act, Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) UT Order (Amendment), South Asian University Bill, Code of Criminal Procedure Amendment Bill and Collection of Statistics Bill.

Later, BJP spokesperson Shahnawaz Hussain said a ninth bill, High Court and Supreme Court Judges Salaries and Conditions of Service Bill, could not be taken up as law minister H R Bhardwaj was not in the House. However, ministry officials said a junior minister had been deputed but the bill was not taken up by the chair. What shocked MPs was the sheer opportunistic manner in which four bills were brought onto the list of business at the last minute.

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On Monday, for a full 26 minutes, as the BJP MPs were yelling their lungs out in the well, telecom minister A Raja moved the Information Technology Amendment Bill clause by painful clause. A little earlier, railway minister Lalu Prasad moved the Appropriations Bill for his ministry. Other legislation to be passed included the Gram Nyayalaya Bill and the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases in Animals Bill.

By any standard, passing 12 bills in two days is a mammoth task even if the House had decided to sit late into the night. Even the most innocuous of bills attracts a dozen-odd speakers and often a couple of hours of discussion can be expected. On Tuesday, ministers who had spent the morning in their offices in the Lok Sabha being briefed by officials had nothing more to do than move bills in the House.

Parliament has met irregularly during the current Lok Sabha, often due to political blockades and sometimes, as in the case of the just-concluded session, to avoid the possibility of a no-trust vote being moved by the opposition. And while the sittings have declined, the practice of passing bills when the House is in disorder has almost become a norm - a precedent that many MPs feel bodes ill for the health of parliament.

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