

RAJYA SABHA

*SYNOPSIS OF DEBATE

(Proceedings other than Questions and Answers)

Monday, December 04, 2023/ Agrahayana 13, 1945 (Saka)

OBITUARY REFERENCES

MR. CHAIRMAN: Hon'ble Members, I refer with profound sorrow to the passing away of Shri Lalitbhai Mehta, Shrimati Basanti Sarma, Prof. M.S. Swaminathan, Dr. M. S. Gill and Shri D. B. Chandre Gowda, former Members of this House.

Shri Lalitbhai Mehta passed away on the 8th July, 2023. He served as a Member of this august House from 1999 to 2005 representing the State of Gujarat. Born on 30th of July, 1937 at Wankaner in Gujarat, Shri Mehta, rendered his invaluable service to society in various capacities including as Principal of Arts and Commerce College, Wankaner; President of Wankaner Municipality and as Managing Director of Rajkot Nagarik Sahakari Bank Limited. He was also deeply committed to the development of the deprived sections of society. In the passing away of Shri Lalitbhai Mehta, the country has lost an eminent educationist, a dedicated social worker and an able parliamentarian.

Shrimati Basanti Sarma, a leading voice of women empowerment, from North East, passed away on the 8th September, 2023. She served as a Member of this august House representing the State of Assam for two consecutive terms -- from 1991 to 2002. Born on 1st March, 1944, in Tinsukia District of Assam, Shrimati Basanti Sarma took keen interest in educating women and worked tirelessly for abolition of child labour. During her time in this hallowed chamber, she championed as a crusader for development of North Eastern regions of India. In the passing away of Shrimati Basanti Sarma, we have lost a staunch advocate of women upliftment, champion of the rights of children and a model parliamentarian.

Prof. M.S. Swaminathan, 'Father of Green Revolution' in the country, passed away on the 28th of September, 2023. He served as a Nominated Member of this House, from April, 2007 to April, 2013. Born on 7th August, 1925, at Kumbakonam in Tamil Nadu, Prof. Swaminathan, a plant geneticist by education, laid a firm foundation for agricultural renaissance in India in 1960s. He earned global acclaim for his affirmative stand on sustainable agriculture, mainstreaming gender considerations in agriculture and rural development. As an able administrator, Prof. Swaminathan led several developmental organizations in the country and abroad. His enormous contributions helped India to rise from a drought-stricken food importing country to being declared self-sufficient in food production in 1971. His seminal contributions were duly recognized through the first World Food Prize in 1987; Padma Shri in 1966, Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1971, Padma Bhushan in 1972 and Padma Vibhushan in 1989 among others.

In the passing away of Prof. M.S. Swaminathan, the country has lost a true visionary, a ground breaking agricultural scientist and an able parliamentarian.

Dr. M.S. Gill, a distinguished figure in Punjab's bureaucracy and politics, passed away on the 15th of October, 2023. He served as a Member of this House representing the State of Punjab for two consecutive terms from 2004 to 2016.

Born on 14th June, 1936, in the State of Punjab, Dr. Gill joined the prestigious Indian Administrative Service in the year 1958 and served in various capacities under Union and Punjab State Government. Dr. Gill, an outstanding administrator, also served as the Chief Election Commissioner from 1996 to 2001 and it was during his tenure that Electronic Voting Machines were successfully introduced in Indian elections. He also served as a Minister in the Union Council of Ministers holding portfolios of Youth Affairs and Sports; and, Statistics and Programme Implementation. Dr. Gill received several awards, including the prestigious Padma Vibhushan, awarded in the year 2000.

In the passing away of Dr. M.S. Gill, the country has lost a capable administrator, a prolific writer and an illustrious parliamentarian.

Shri D.B. Chandre Gowda passed away on the 7th of November, 2023. He served as a Member of this distinguished House representing the State of Karnataka, from April, 1986 to December, 1989.

Born on 26th August, 1936, in Chikkamagaluru district of Karnataka, Shri Chandre Gowda, had an illustrious political career spanning over four decades. An advocate by profession, he had an illustrious political career which included being a Member of Lok Sabha, for three terms from 1971-1984, Member of Legislative Assembly (three terms) and Legislative Council of Karnataka. He was also a cabinet minister in the Government of Karnataka from 1979 to 1980.

In the passing away of Shri D.B. Chandre Gowda, the country has lost an able administrator and a distinguished parliamentarian.

Hon'ble Members, we deeply mourn the passing away of Shri Lalitbhai Mehta, Shrimati Basanti Sarma, Prof. M.S. Swaminathan, Dr. M.S. Gill and Shri D.B. Chandre Gowda.

(One Minute's silence was observed as a mark of respect to the memory of the departed.)

ANNOUNCEMENT BY THE CHAIR

MR. CHAIRMAN: Hon'ble Members, based on the recommendations of the Business Advisory Committee, a procedure is in place that Members who wish to speak in a debate should give their names to Table Office not later than 30 minutes prior to the commencement of a debate with the approval of their Party Leader/Whip. The procedure is also brought to the notice of Members through issuance of a para in the Parliamentary Bulletin Part-II before the commencement of every Session.

However, it has been observed that during the course of Debates, requests are received from Members from various parties to participate in such debates, and at times without the approval of their Party Leader/Whip. This practice causes difficulty in regulating the speaking time of Parties as well as individual Members.

Hon'ble Members are, accordingly, requested to kindly adhere to the stipulated procedure and send their names for participation in a debate, at least 30 minutes prior to its commencement through their Party Leader/Whip.

MATTERS RAISED WITH THE PERMISSION OF THE CHAIR

1. Concern over Unseasonal Rains and Hailstorm Damaging Crops in Maharashtra

SHRI DHANANJAY BHIMRAO MAHADIK: As per the preliminary estimates, as much as 1.3 lakh hectares crops have been damaged across Maharashtra due to recent unseasonal rains and hailstorm . Affected crops include grapes, paddy, banana, onion, soybean, cotton and sugarcane. On behalf of the Maharashtra Government, I request the Central Government to help those affected farmers by providing them reasonable compensation.

(Dr. Fauzia Khan, Shrimati Vandana Chavan and Dr. John Brittas associated.)

2. Demand for Appointment of Local Language Speaking Staff for Front Desk Jobs in Various Institutions in Karnataka

***SHRI JAGGESH:** This Government has always been promoting regional languages and is committed to their overall growth. I appreciate the recent efforts made by our hon. Finance Minister where she instructed all banks to appoint sufficient front desk staff who speak the local languages. In spite of this, banks, public sector institutions and MNCs continue to hire people for front desk jobs who do not speak the local language in Karnataka. It is very difficult for the local people to interact with the front desk staff. Such small problems often create differences among States, because language and culture are highly sensitive issues and it is our duty to be more vigilant with regard to them. Kannadigas never force their language on outsiders, rather we always try to speak to them in their native languages, and apart from Kannada we speak Tamil, Telugu, English and Hindi. Therefore, I urge the Government to regulate the appointment of local language speaking staff for front desk jobs in these institutions.

(Dr. John Brittas, Dr. Fauzia Khan and Dr. Sasmit Patra associated.)

3. Need to Address the Issue of increased Screen Time among Children

DR. FAUZIA KHAN: The steep increase in screen time in early childhood years has become a growing concern in India. The advantage that technology has in education, entertainment and communication cannot be denied, but it has been observed that very young children who are still in their very early childhood years are spending more hours in front of screens than required. This has been found to have a negative impact on various aspects of their personalities, their vision, their cognitive, their intellectual, emotional, social and also physical development. It may also lead to attention deficit and low academic output. To address these concerns, a comprehensive strategy should be implemented. Additionally, one more important point is that workplaces should consider policies that enable parent to balance workloads and allocate dedicated time for their children fostering a healthier balance between technology use and quality time in the family.

(Several hon'ble Members associated.)

* Spoke in Kannada.

4. Need to Address the Financial Crisis in the State of Kerala

SHRI SANDOSH KUMAR P: I take this opportunity to demand immediate release of Rs. 5,352 crores Central aid to the State of Kerala which is the genuine share of the people of Kerala. But, till now, this huge amount is due to the State of Kerala. The States are playing a major role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Whereas, their income share is just 37 per cent! This is huge and glaring disparity and this must be addressed within no time. After implementation of the GST, States are also suffering due to shortage of finance. So, there is an immediate need for redefining the Centre-State financial relations.

(Several hon'ble Members associated.)

5. Need to take Steps to Release Indian Fishermen who are Currently in Pakistani Jails

SHRI SHAKTISINH GOHIL: I want to raise an issue of the fishermen of Gujarat. The coast of our Gujarat is adjacent to Pakistan. Even today 156 fishermen are in Pakistan's custody. The law of Pakistan says that if one crosses the border by mistake, the maximum punishment for this offence is three years. They cannot keep them in captivity for more than three years. But even after three years have passed, they are still imprisoned there. At the same time, I want to request the government through you to restart the practice through dialogue at appropriate level of letter-writing by those fishermen who are in captivity in Pakistan to their family members in India. The then Government had released funds to provide GPS services to fishermen to prevent them from getting lost in the sea and to ensure their safety, about which the Comptroller and Auditor General has reported corruption. I request that this serious matter be investigated by CBI.

(Several hon'ble Members associated.)

6. Need to provide Support to the Farmers who are Custodians of Traditional Seed Varieties in India

SHRI ANEEL PRASAD HEGDE: I want to raise the issue of farmers who conserve traditional seed varieties in India. It is on record that India has been extremely rich in diversity in the agricultural sector. For example, thousands of varieties of paddy alone are grown here. This agricultural diversity has decreased after the Green Revolution. Nevertheless, many of our farmers are maintaining the traditional seed varieties with great care and their efforts have been appreciated at the national and international level. On the basis of their efforts, we can promote organic and natural farming. The ban continued on B.T. Cotton, B.T. Brinjal and other GM crops in India. But last year the Government granted and approval to banned G.M. mustard. My request is that appropriate assistance should be provided to the farmers trying to preserve traditional seed varieties.

(Several hon'ble Members associated.)

7. Concern over Increasing Incidents of Acid Attacks in the Country

SHRIMATI SANGEETA YADAV: The acid attacks on young girls and women in the country is a matter of very serious concern in the contemporary Indian society. Women's pain is very important to me. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, there have been 1,500 acid attacks in India in the last five years. People who are victims of this heinous crime are also struggling with physical, mental, social and economic difficulties. They also face lifelong discrimination, stigma and isolation from society. They are also struggling to access adequate medical care, legal aid. I urge the Government to

take immediate steps to stop acid attacks and punish the perpetrators and provide comprehensive assistance and social protection to the victims.

(Several hon'ble Members associated.)

8. Demand for Enumeration/Revision of Voter List in Fair and Justified Manner

***SHRI KANAKMEDLA RAVINDRA KUMAR:** To strengthen democracy in India, there is a need to properly revise the voter list. Nowadays many such cases are coming to light that the names of voters are removed from the voter list without their knowledge. This is against our Constitution and democratic values. Several representations have been sent to the Election Commission of India regarding such matters in many districts of the state of Andhra Pradesh. On which no action has been taken yet by the Election Commission. The ruling government in Andhra Pradesh has been found involved in doing this. This is a very indecent act. I request that these irregularities be investigated and necessary amendments be made in the voter list.

(Dr. Fauzia Khan, Dr. John Brittas, Sandosh Kumar P. and Shrimati Vandana Chavan associated.)

9. Demand to increase the Creamy Layer Income Limit for Backward Classes

SHRI V. VIJAYASAI REDDY: The reservation was made to provide employment to the backward classes in the country and the concept of creamy layer was also created according to the Mandal Commission report. In the year 2017, the limit of income under the creamy layer was fixed at Rs 8 lakh and it was to be revised every three years according to the increasing inflation rate, which was not done. Therefore, I request that this limit of annual income should be increased to at least Rs 12 lakh to ensure social equality for the backward classes.

10. Demand to reduce the Beneficiary Contribution for Implementing Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) Scheme at SC habitations to 5%

SHRI M. MOHAMMAD ABDULLAH: Today, 10 percent contribution is being taken from the beneficiary to implement the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) scheme in the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes settlements in India. Overall, there are 40 percent of them i.e. about 9 crore such families which are being forced to pay the increased rate of contribution. I request the Government to withdraw the increase in contribution and make it 5 percent as before or make it zero.

11. Need to address the Problem of Air Pollution

***SHRI SANT BALBIR SINGH:** The problem of pollution has become acute and the views expressed by Guru Nanak ji about environment and nature are relevant even today. The situation in our metropolitan cities remains extremely worrying. For example, in the country's capital Delhi itself, only one day was seen when the air quality was satisfactory. Same is the condition of cities like Mumbai and Chennai. Air pollution not only harms our health but it also has an adverse effect on the country's GDP. In recent times, the entire blame for air pollution is being put on the farmers of Punjab. Burning of stubble is being said to be the main reason for increasing air pollution. In fact, all these allegations are unscientific and baseless. If Governments are serious about controlling air pollution, an additional financial assistance should be provided to farmers by both the State Government and the Central Government.

* Spoke in Telugu.

* Spoke in Punjabi.

12. Implementation of Uniform Civil Code in the country

SHRI P. WILSON: The present Central Government is trying to implement the Uniform Civil Code for all citizens in the country. Doing so will create undue pressure on followers of different religions and will also adversely affect the secular structure of the country. This will also end the diversity of our country. This will have an adverse impact on various tribes as well as other minorities within the Hindu religion. The sacred social relations like marriage will be converted into business relations. Therefore, I request that Article No. 44 of the Constitution advocating Uniform Civil Code should be implemented across the country only on the basis of consensus among different sections.

(Several hon'ble Members associated.)

13. Concern over Silkyara Tunnel Accident in Uttarakhand

DR. V. SIVADASAN: In relation to the accident that occurred while building a tunnel in Silkyara in Uttarakhand state, it is being told that the company working over there has not properly followed the prescribed safety norms. No emergency or alternative arrangements were made to ensure the safety of workers working at this incident site. Therefore, I request that necessary investigation be conducted in this regard so that the reasons responsible for this incident can be known.

(Several hon'ble Members associated.)

14. Silkyara Tunnel Rescue Operation in Uttarkashi

SHRI AJAY PRATAP SINGH: Our colleague Shri V. Sivadasan ji has expressed his views while mentioning this matter. But I want to tell the House that our Prime Minister, Hon'ble Shri Narendra Modi ji had said from the very beginning that his Government will be dedicated to the interests of the poor. This incident has also shown that the Hon'ble Prime Minister practices what he says. Under his leadership, the Central and State governments, working as a team, made this difficult operation successful and evacuated all 41 workers safely.

15. Deregistration and Scrapping of Old Vehicles as per NGT Order

SHRI A.D. SINGH: The National Green Tribunal, in 2014, banned all diesel vehicles older than ten years and the petrol ones older than 15 years. The Ministry has also issued a notification in 2023 for deregistration and scrapping of all vehicles owned by the Central and State Governments that do not comply with the NGT order. The Delhi Government also issued the similar orders. As per the Government's estimates there are more than one crore vehicles that are required to be deregistered and scrapped across the country. However, there are lakhs of vehicles, including the Government vehicles, plying on roads which have crossed the 10-year (diesel) and 15-year (petrol) registration period limit thereby adding to pollution in the city. It is high time that all such end-of-life vehicles should be deregistered and scrapped.

(Shri Abir Ranjan Biswas associated.)

16. Need to Increase the Share of Central Government in various Important Government Schemes Like PMAY etc.

SHRI ELAMARAM KAREEM: My colleague, Shri Sandosh Kumar P, has already spoken about acute financial crisis of Kerala. I request the Government of India to revisit the Finance Commission's definitions and the principle of fund allocation. Our borrowing limit has been drastically reduced as the loans taken by some public sector companies from state have been declared as loans taken by the State Government. That is

an unfair practice. So, these principles need to be revisited, and the amount spent by the State towards land acquisition for the National Highways should not be calculated as State borrowing. The same principle must be applied while calculating the borrowing limits of state as done in case of Central Government.

(Shri Jose K. Mani, Dr. John Brittas and Dr. Sasmit Patra associated.)

OBSERVATION BY THE CHAIR

MR. CHAIRMAN: The Committee, after deep and thoughtful consideration, finds Shri Raghav Chadha, hon'ble Member, guilty for both the charges:

Charge 1: That he intentionally and deliberately presented misleading facts to the media, misinterpreted proceedings of the Council resulting in affront to the authority of the Chairman, Rajya Sabha, and engaged in outrageous defiance of the resolutions of the House and directives of the hon'ble Chairman, Rajya Sabha; and

Charge 2: For including the names of Members in proposed Select Committee without their consent in blatant transgression of Rule 72 of Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in the Council of States, Rajya Sabha.

As regards the sentence, the Committee finds the suspension suffered by him since 11th August, 2023 from the House thus far as sufficient sentence that will meet the ends of justice.

The Committee stands committed to upholding the sanctity of parliamentary proceedings and safeguarding the integrity of the institution. The Committee expresses hope that Shri Raghav Chadha, Member, will reflect and introspect. The Committee expects Shri Raghav Chadha to uphold the expected standards of conduct and decorum befitting a Member of Parliament.

MOTION

Termination of Suspension of Member

SHRI G.V.L. NARASIMHA RAO: I move the following motion under Proviso to Rule 256(2) of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in the Council of States (Rajya Sabha):

That this House resolves that Shri Raghav Chadha, Member, be held guilty of breach of privileges and the suspension suffered by him so far be taken as sufficient punishment and the House may consider discontinuance of suspension of Shri Raghav Chadha, Member, from the service of the Council from this day.

The motion was adopted.

GOVERNMENT BILL

The Post Office Bill, 2023

THE MINISTER OF RAILWAYS; THE MINISTER OF COMMUNICATIONS; AND THE MINISTER OF ELECTRONICS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (SHRI ASHWINI VAISHNAW), moving the motion for consideration of the Bill, said: The Post Office Bill, 2023 has been brought to amend the 125-year-old Indian Post Office Act. People have great faith in post, post office

and postman. This new Bill reflects the revival of post offices and postal institutions in the last 9 years. In the last nine and a half years, post, post office and postmen have been transformed from mail delivery to service provider organizations. The post office has been converted into a Bank, Passport Service Center and Aadhaar Centre. More than 3 crore Sukanya Samriddhi accounts have been opened in post offices. 867 Post Office Export Centers have been opened which have been awarded the UPO Award by the United Nations. Latest technology is being used in post offices. This bill has been made in very simple language.

SHRI SHAKTISINH GOHIL: 150 years ago, the British tried to unify various methods of conveying messages and Indian Post got a new color and form. After independence, our wise leaders of that time, being concerned about the people, thought that there should be some Public Undertakings. Public sector undertakings will have to work not as profit-oriented but as service-oriented. If mail has to be delivered to someone in a small village, it should reach there. After independence, this postal service was made so good that today the Indian Postal Service is trusted even in the villages. Earlier, there used to be a UPC (Under Postal Certificate) in the Postal Service and the Courts also accepted the UPC. Now you have stopped the UPC. The Postal Department has been the backbone of the communication network of this country and has contributed significantly to the socio-economic development of the country. Everyone suffered losses during the Corona period and this department was also affected. You give them subsidy and make them stronger. The postal department has sports quota. I would like to know from the Minister why our young boys and girls are not being given jobs in the sports quota. The Bill provides that the Post Office shall provide such services as may be prescribed by the Central Government. You are not making it clear as to what you want them to do. Another provision in this Bill relates to the power to intercept shipments. An interception may be carried out on the occurrence of any public emergency. But what is a public emergency has not been clarified. It further states that an intercepted shipment can be detained or disposed of by the officer in charge. The officer also has powers to open, detain, or destroy the shipment. With such a provision, people will lose trust in the postman. We cannot compromise on the fundamental right to privacy. While giving job of postman in a village to someone in the postal department, give priority to the local youth there. He will work wherever he stays and will work honestly.

DR. LAXMIKANT BAJPAYEE: This Bill has been brought keeping in mind the principles of service and good governance and for the poor. The government has converted the post office into a bank. The Government is extending the benefits of schemes of poor welfare, women welfare and farmer welfare to the public through post offices. Present Government is opening thousands of Post offices which will naturally create employment. Post offices are also functioning as export centers which is an unprecedented step and will enable people even in remote villages to avail export facilities. By making post offices passport centres, people do not need to go far for availing this facility. Now digital payment is also possible from post offices. There is a plan to provide insurance to the workers through the post office. Previous Governments also tried to pass the Post Office Bill, but could not do so. Once it could not get the President's assent and thrice it remained with the Standing Committee and lapsed. Modernization and development of post offices has been given priority through this bill. The Bill has made a provision to make the Director General the head of India Post. Decisions of the Director General will not require the approval of Parliament. The Director General will also be vested with the power to make rules regarding charges for services and supply of postage stamps. One thing I would like to say is that in the current era of terrorism, the line between law and order and privacy has become very blurred. Therefore, the Government

should ensure that the powers of interception are used in a safe manner. I am confident that the Government will take care of this. The Central Government can set standards for identifying addresses and using postal codes for delivery of goods. Under the visionary concept of digital addressing, the physical address can be replaced with a digital code based on geographical coordinates for accurate identification of a premises, this will simplify the sorting process and make accurate and prompt delivery of mail and parcels possible. Parcels can also be couriered through drones. This Bill has been brought to develop and facilitate citizen-centric services. There is no punitive clause in this Bill. The language of the bill has also been kept simple. In this way, through this bill, the Government has tried to make the postal services people-oriented, for which it deserves praise.

SHRI SUKHENDU SHEKHAR ROY: I am very sorry that such a bill has been brought and I want to express that regret. I will refer to just two clauses. Through Clause 9 (1) of the bill, Central Government can empower any officer to cause any item in course of transmission by the Post Office to be intercepted, opened or detained in the interest of the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, emergency, or public safety or upon the occurrence of any contravention of any of the provisions of this Act or any other law for the time being in force. This Clause fails to specify the procedures to be followed for interception by the authorized postal officer. Even if it was mentioned that the authorised officer will intercept any letter or shipment on the basis of the information received from the Central agencies, which are dealing with the national security, then also we could have agreed to this provision, but it seems that on the basis of even suspicion an authorized officer can intercept any letter or a shipment. This is arbitrary. Similarly, the expression 'emergency' has not been defined in the Definition Clause. This provision has given unbridled powers to the authorities concerned. If a just and fair procedure to regulate the power of interception of communications is not established, it will not be possible to safeguard the rights of Freedom of Speech and Expression and right to privacy of people which the Supreme Court has acknowledged as a part of the Right to life and liberty. Clause 16 of the Bill is also ambiguous. It says that the Indian Post Office Act, 1898 is hereby repealed. At the same time, it is mentioned that notwithstanding the repeal of the Act, all rules, notifications and orders, made under that act will be deemed to have been made under this new Act and shall continue. So, on the one hand it is repealed, on the other hand, the other provisions, which are not inconsistent with this Act, shall continue. Also, the Bill has no provision about the consequences of any Postal Officer fraudulently acting or willfully causing loss to service. In the parent Act, there was provision for imprisonment up to 2 years, a fine or both. That has been removed. Further, the private courier services have been excluded from the purview of the Bill. This undermines the equality before the law. The Bill, if passed, shall create another avenue in transforming our democracy into a surveillance state. Therefore, I oppose this Bill.

SHRI P. WILSON: I strongly oppose The Post Office Bill, 2023 in its current form as it will lead to winding up of post offices and its services in India. This Bill is a step to privatise the postal services. It lacks a complete blue print on infrastructural upgrades, technological intervention for sorting and facilitating accurate delivery of mails and parcels and appears to be a hasty exercise just to replace old colonial laws. Under Clause 9, the Central Government can empower any postal officer to intercept, open or detain any postal article on the grounds of security of state, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, emergency or public safety. The provision grants unfettered powers to the Union Government and the authorised officer. In the absence of any procedure or guidelines to be followed by such officer, such powers are nothing but another step towards the surveillance State which is violation of the fundamental rights of freedom of

speech and expression and Right to life and Liberty. The privacy of all the citizens who use the services of Indian Posts is severely compromised since there is no provision in the Bill which injuncts the officer from leaking any contents of the intercepted postal articles. Clause 10 exempts the Post Office from any liability with regard to a service provided by the Post Office. This provision is severally vague. The provision makes no regard to the value of the articles to be dispatched through post. Though it prescribes liability for postal officers who are acting fraudulently or wilfully causing loss, delay or mis-delivery, the consequences of such action is not provided in the Bill. This dilutes the provisions of the earlier Act which prescribes imprisonment, fine or both in the above cases. Clause 10, thus, is highly arbitrary and discriminatory and will push the people to skip the Indian Postal services. The Bill grants the parallel and overlapping powers to both the Union and the Director General to frame rules and regulations for conducting any functions essential for running of a Post Office.

SHRI RAGHAV CHADHA: If we read this law closely, there are two very dangerous provisions in it, which are Section 9 and Section 10. This will give so much power to the Indian Postal Service that they can open any shipment, mail or letter, seize it, read it and intercept it. After that any action can be taken on it. No rules, procedures or norms for this are mentioned in the Bill. The purpose of this Bill is to keep surveillance on our citizens in every way. The grounds on which the power of interception of mail is to be given to the postal officer are also vague. Emergency, friendly country or violation of any law, are grounds for which there is no clarity. Procedures are not specified. The power to intercept, open and detain mail cannot be arbitrary. Then, if the officer who intercepts or seizes the mail is found to be wrong, there is no provision in the Bill for taking any action against him. The Bill is a violation of Article 19 and Article 21 of the Constitution. This is also a violation of the right to privacy. Recently, a case of violation of privacy of many members and dignitaries through their phones has come to light. In such a situation, I oppose this bill and urge the government to investigate the said matter also.

SHRI NIRANJAN BISHI: The Post Office Bill, 2023 seeks to modernise the postal services and match them with Digital India. It also seeks to utilise the wide network of post offices to provide banking and insurance services closer to the SC/ST, women and farmers which will boost rural development. It will also increase the possibility of creation of jobs especially in rural areas. According to the Bill, Central Government will appoint an officer and if that officer feels that any person is against the security of the nation or can disturb the peace, then that officer can stop the person, open his letter and check it and can confiscate it. There are more than two lakh Gramin Dak Sevaks (GDS) working in India. They perform the duty for post office services like Rural Postal Life Insurance, India Post Payments Bank, Sukanya Samriddhi Accounts, distribution of pensions etc. But they are not provided with any service benefits like regular employees of postal Department. The Gramin Dak Sevaks working in rural areas are doing more than eight hours duty. Therefore, I request that these Gramin Dak Sevaks should be provided with departmental status and their service should be regularised. The recommendations of the Kamlesh Chandra Committee should be implemented in favour of Gramin Dak Sevaks also. I support this Bill on behalf of my party BJD.

SHRI AYODHYA RAMI REDDY ALLA: There are a few positives of this Amendment Bill. It increases the authority of the Central Government to intervene in situations such as security, maintaining public order etc. It allows for the interception, examination, and temporary detention of any item in transit through the postal system under the aforementioned circumstances. Such a provision can be useful in terms of countering illicit smuggling and unauthorised transportation of drugs and contraband

products via postal services. An enhanced pricing flexibility is also provided in this Bill which is critical. The Bill introduces a significant shift in its approach to the interception of objects within India's postal system. Recent data shows an increase in security threats and illegal activities related to postal system, not only in India, but also globally. The Bill broadens the scope of interception. However, there are certain problems pertaining to the Bill. The powers relating to intercepting postal articles lack procedural safeguards, raising concerns about potential violation of individuals' freedom of speech, expression, and privacy. The ground of 'emergency' as a basis for interception may surpass reasonable restrictions outlined in the Constitution. The term 'Emergency' lacks a precise definition, providing a broad scope for interception. This goes against the constitutional principles established by the Supreme Court and requires more clarity. My next point is about exemption from liability for lapses in services. This also needs to be looked into. My next point is about removal of offences and penalties. As per the Act of 1898, various offences committed by the officers of a post office were punishable. However, now such actions would have effectively no consequences. The key issues which affect the functionality of the Indian Postal System also need to be taken into consideration. The revenue deficit issue also needs to be taken into account. So, we have given suggestions on some issues, but we strongly believe that the passage of this Bill is an important step in the restructuring of India's postal services. We support the Bill.

SHRI A. A. RAHIM: I express my deep concerns and critique over Post Office Bill, 2023. It is breaching the Fundamental Rights provided by the Constitution. It is against the federal principles. Through this Bill, the Government is giving up the liabilities invested upon them. I am bringing your attention to the Objects and Reasons of this Bill, which state that this Bill facilitates the evolution of postal services. In the light of this line, I would like to ask what has the Government done for the prosperity of postal services? Since 2014, not even a single post has been created in the postal services. As of now, 90,000 posts are lying vacant. I have a deep concern over the privatization of the Postal Department. This Bill paves the way for privatization. The Clause 10 of this Bill has a significant omission concerning the consequences for officers who misappropriate or damage postal items, which used to be a punishable offence, but it is not addressed in the Bill. This will negatively impact the Department's efficiency and the integrity of the officers involved. The Bill is against the federal principles of the Constitution. The Bill removes the authority of the State Governments. It is intentionally trying to breach the privacy which according to the Constitution of India is a fundamental right. The Government is trying to change the grounds for interception. I urge this august House to omit the centralization and privatization tendencies of this Bill.

MS. KAVITA PATIDAR: Many such provisions are being made in the Post Office Bill, 2023, due to which the trust of millions of people towards the post office will further increase. The old Act mainly focused on mail services, whereas the new Act includes many types of citizen-centric services apart from postal services. In the Bill, priority has also been given to the development and modernization of the post offices. The powers of the Director General of Postal Service are being increased through this Bill. They will have the freedom to make necessary rules related to services. They will be able to decide the rates of postage charges as per the market. Security is very important in this Bill. It does not threaten anyone's privacy, rather a provision has been made to ensure the security of the country. If the postal officer finds any parcel suspicious then he will directly inform the Customs Department who will take action as per law. 5746 more post offices are being opened in this financial year, which will enable easy delivery of citizen-centric services to the common people in every corner of the country. Post office is playing an important role in the field of women empowerment. The Post Office Bill, 2023 is a very

simple legislation and is an attempt to ensure minimum government and maximum governance. This will create a legal framework for the Post Office to provide more citizen-centric services.

SHRI V. VIJAYASAI REDDY: This Bill is a step towards achieving the three pillars of a good postal service -- reliability, reach and relevance. First, rethink pricing to increase profitability. Over the last decade, the losses incurred by the postal service have increased by at least nine times. The postal rates must be reconsidered to ensure that the subsidies meant for the poor do not go to the rich. Then, the pricing structure has to be rethought. We must think about differential pricing. There must be differential pricing based on the location. Only those post offices that are located in rural areas and in economically weaker regions must be given subsidy. The next point is digitization of services. The Government must try to replace as many traditional services offered through digital solutions as possible. All these measures will improve profitability and also the quality of services to the rural people. The third suggestion which I would like to make is about providing payment banks and financial services in rural areas. This proves our commitment to sustainable financial inclusion and citizen empowerment. Post Offices can be integrated with e-National Agriculture Market initiatives. This is a very important suggestion. Further, dak sevaks can also be used to form a link with e-NAM markets as they have direct interface with farmers. With these suggestions, we support and commend the Bill.

SHRI KANAKAMEDALA RAVINDRA KUMAR: I extend the support and welcome the Bill. It intends to replace the Indian Post Office Act, 1898. Over a period of time, Post Offices across the country are providing a variety of services. The earlier Act mainly deals with mail services provided by the Post Offices. In the modern world, the mail services are replaced by e-mail services. Under these circumstances, with the necessity to use appropriately the existing human resources with the Postal Department, the Government has brought this comprehensive Bill. I have concerns. Clause 3(1) gives sweeping power to the Central Government. In view of the federal structure, this type of trend has to be checked out. Clause 9(1) empowers the officer of the Central Government to intercept, open or detain any item or deliver item to customs authority. Such power will hamper the administration and will lead to misuse of power and also the privacy of the public. So, this clause needs a relook. The Bill aims at revamping the entire postal system. All the necessary arrangements that are proposed have to be kept in the Bill itself instead of making rules in this regard by the Executive. I earnestly appeal the Government to consider the above suggestions, take appropriate decision and make necessary amendments.

SHRI GHANSYAM TIWARI: The Bill brought today was much needed. Hon'ble members of the opposition have criticized clauses 9 and 10 of this Bill. They think that the right to intercept is an invasion of privacy, while it is also a matter of the security of this country. You have seen many times that parcel bombs caused explosions at many places. With this bill, an institution which was almost moribund has been given a new form by giving life to it. 16 provisions have been made in it. After the coming of this Government, one lakh new people have been given employment and 5,000 to 7,000 new post offices have been opened. Passports are being made here, savings accounts are being opened. Today exports are being done from villages through post offices. This Bill has been brought keeping in mind the changing nature of India and the future needs of India, hence I also thank the Honorable Minister for this Bill and I support this Bill.

SHRI ABDUL WAHAB: I stand here to oppose the Bill. After a long time, a much-needed Bill came but there is a provision in the Bill, which allows employees to

open postal parcels in the interest of national security. I am opposing this Bill as there is no privacy in the letters and parcels sent by the clients, there is no consequence of unauthorised opening of postal articles, there is no liability of postal officers in case of loss and that the charges for postal services may become unaffordable for the common people. Due to these reasons, I oppose the Bill. Thank you.

DR. FAUZIA KHAN: The intent of this Bill ought to have been the strengthening of the network of the postal services framework in India to make it more robust, modernised and speedier. But the legislative intent of the Bill does not seem to be anywhere near these objectives. It aligns more with the plan to turn us into the most surveilled nation. The proposed Bill should not solely focus on transforming post offices into financially viable entities, but it should also emphasize the need for operational efficiency. But we still have to talk a lot about infrastructure, how to modernise this infrastructure. Nothing like this has been mentioned in the Bill. The Bill specifies no mechanism on how the prices are going to be regulated by the Department. Our focus ought to be on improving services for the public and not making money. Security concerns are all right, but we cannot undermine the need for privacy. Thank you.

SHRI LAHAR SINGH SIROYA: This postal institution is connected to our hearts and minds, and it is the lifeline of every village. Due to progressive modernization and increasing technology, we thought that it might become extinct, this postal institution was given a new look by the respected Prime Minister. Many new activities were added to it, which have also been described by our other colleagues. Be it passport, digital payment, savings bank or insurance, many such things have been linked to the post office. I want to assure the House that no provision of this Bill will violate anyone's rights. This Government is a very honest Government. This Government is never going to misuse its powers. You believe in this. I expect the entire House and expect you to pass this bill with an absolute majority.

DR. M. THAMBIDURAI: I want to make some important suggestions to the hon'ble Minister. Most of the post offices still have old buildings. They are not at all fit enough. We need a good atmosphere, and the offices must be in a proper condition. In the rural areas, we have to give employment opportunities for rural people through the postal department. If you modernize and make a quick delivery system, it would be more profitable. I would request the hon'ble Minister to see that in the name of interception of postal things privacy should not be violated.

SHRI SANDOSH KUMAR P: All initiatives to modernize the post office system, which is the largest in the world, are welcome. The interest of security of the nation is a concept which can be mis-used. To modernize the post office system, the postal system, we have to think of the un-used postal land also. This Department is having acres of land in various parts of the country. There must be provisions and plans to make use of this un-used postal land. As far as the postal workers are concerned, more than 90,000 posts are still vacant. The Government has to take steps to fill up these vacancies as early as possible. Moreover, the wages of these grass-root level workers must be enhanced.

DR. ANIL SUKHDEORAO BONDE: Post is an integral part of our life. Although now there is WhatsApp, there is email, there are banks, all the things are there, but for the poor people, for the villagers, for the farmers, for the students and for the women, Post is very important. The work of the Post office is not only to deliver letters and parcels, 100 other facilities have been added to it. The Government brought "Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana" under the "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao" campaign. When any person gets financial security, his self-esteem automatically increases. The RD representative goes

door-to-door every month and deposits money through RD and after that the money is deposited in the Provident Fund or PPF. Indian Post Payment Bank started earning profits by opening 8 crore accounts in 4 years. No big official is taking advantage of this, rather the person living at the lowest level is getting benefit through the Post office. This Post office Bill is citizen centric. When a well-built post office is built, it means that the infrastructure is also very good. Our Post offices have such a huge network and I hope that tomorrow a delivery system like Amazon will be started through the Post offices. A facility can also be created to deliver any goods to people's homes through the Post offices. In today's time, whatever parcels are sent, they should be X-rayed, they should also be scrutinized and those which are suspicious should also be opened. This is an important initiative for the security of the country and the safety of the community.

SHRIMATI PRIYANKA CHATURVEDI: A reform has come after 125 years, we welcome it. I believe that under the guise of reforms, we are inserting such clauses which are no less than surveillance. In Clause No. 10, if there is any problem or fault in the services, then there is no liability. The Director General and his officers are being given a free hand that in the name of interception, they can damage goods, open letters, violate privacy, but no action will be taken. Be it surveillance, interception, suppressing the Opposition under the guise of national security, silencing people, this is against democracy and against our constitutional rights.

DR. ANIL AGRAWAL: Today it is necessary that our Post offices work better and reach far and wide. Today new Post offices are being opened and they are being operated in such a way that the people of the country trust them. Today poor people are opening accounts in Post offices and there is huge amount of money in them. Today, banking services have reached every village through Indian Post Payment Bank. Indian Post Payment Bank is reaching your home. A large number of very good accounts are opened in it, and it has very good services. One result of the same is that Indian Post Payment Bank has started becoming profitable in such a short period of time. The Government wants to open the account of every person who does not have a bank nearby. I support this Bill.

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATIONS (SHRI DEVUSINH CHAUHAN): It has always been the endeavor of the Government to ensure ease of living for the people of the country and ease of doing business for the businessmen. Every citizen should contribute to the progress of this country. If there is any face of the Government of India, if there is any network, which is visible everywhere, it is the Postal Department. The Government has created a trustworthy network with the spirit of upliftment of the last man. The Government has made huge reforms with the changing times. Changing this British Government law of 1898 is a part of this reform. Because of this network, which earlier used to only deliver mails and letters, today we have made banking for all, insurance for all and with complete transparency through that network. We have 1,64,000 Post offices. Four crore direct benefit transfer accounts have been opened in these 1,64,000 Post offices. Section 9 is only for national security and public safety. This Section 9 is not new, this Section was there in the old Act even during your time, but we have simplified it in the interest of the public and in the interest of the country. A Post office every five kilometers will serve as a bank and also provide insurance. When Government started parcel reforms, there were around 36 activities. Everyone knows what will be the strength of the Postal network in the coming times. If in future any virus comes into the national security or there are some illegal drugs or opium, if something like that is sent, then the Government has the right to see it, because it is for national security.

SHRI MITHLESH KUMAR: The Post office has great importance in our country. I request that a post office must be opened at the Panchayat level in the ward. This is a very commendable work that crores of people get money from the post office through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT). The work of making passports is given to the post office which is also a commendable task. The Post offices will be established everywhere in the country which will be a revolutionary step.

SHRI SANJEEV ARORA: I suggest that post offices should be given a level-playing field vis-à-vis other companies like FedEx, Blue Dart, etc. Therefore, a similar legislation should be brought for them also. Many Members have spoken regarding interception. But, I feel that there are no safeguards from interception. I request that the powers for the same should be given only to high-ranking officials to avoid arbitrary action against individuals. Further, Consumer Protection Act does not apply to post offices. It should also be applied to post offices to safeguard consumers' interest. Lastly, my suggestion is that post office should be involved in B2B logistics also. There are lands available with all the post offices. They can be converted into warehouses because now online ordering is very popular. If the companies open the warehouses in the post offices it will increase the income of post offices and in turn they will become self-sufficient. These days post offices are being used for banking purposes. The post offices should be allowed to deal in mutual funds. The non-tax savvy can go to post office and invest in mutual funds which will go to stock markets and ultimately will help in growth of the markets as a whole.

SHRI RAMBHAI HARJIBHAI MOKARIYA: I am telling you about the matter of 10 years ago, at that time there were no reforms in the postal sector and there was no competition in the market. Earlier only one postal service was working, now there has been a lot of improvement in it. Many people also get livelihood from this. There has also been development in the post. As far as security is concerned, its a must. This is an era of competition. Due to the competition taking place between private couriers and post, service is also improving. Courier companies also used to deliver drafts and checks of many people to the Prime Minister's Care Fund free of cost and also delivered Rakhi to army personnel free of cost at the time of Raksha Bandhan. They also do a lot of social work. There is a lot of improvement in the post. The salaries and allowances of its employees have also improved significantly. There is a rule that postmen do not go to the first floor or second floor, I request to amend it.

The Hon'ble Minister, replying to the debate, said: I thank all the hon'ble Members who participated in this very lively debate. In a complex and diverse society and the difficult times, it is very important that interception is done, and this kind of a provision is kept in the law for purposes of national security. I would like to inform that interception is in the previous Act for ages and the procedure has also been very well-established. As and when we frame the rules, the procedure for interception will be introduced through the rules. It will be very fair and transparent. The second point raised by many hon. Members was about the liability of the Post Office employees. The liability of the employees exists whenever there is negligence or a willful act by which the services are not given. The current Bill provides for the liability in those cases. The third major point raised by many hon. Members was about the employment, PSU and privatisation. There is absolutely no question of privatisation of the post offices. I am once again saying with full responsibility on the floor of the House that there is no provision in this bill to privatize post offices and the Government has no such intention. The provision brought in this bill is basically to expand the services of the postal network. Today post offices have practically become banks and they are functioning like a banking service. The Post Office

Savings Bank is a very good way for an ordinary family to keep their savings safe. Passport Seva Kendra is a service which will expand further. With the introduction of this bill, it will get a legal framework. Similarly, there are 13,500 centers for Aadhaar enrolment. About 3.5 crore people are getting the facility of direct benefit transfer through the payment bank of the post office. Sports quota is fully implemented in the postal department and to make it effective and transparent, everything has been made online. Some hon. members also said that the British had established this postal system. It is a fact and there is historical evidence that this system was established long ago in India from Pataliputra to Persia and was running very well. Some hon. members also said that recruitment has not been done in postal services. Honorable Modi ji has given employment to 1 lakh 28 thousand people in the postal network. Modi ji has opened 5,000 new post offices and has given approval to open more than 5,700 new post offices. An hon. member talked about pricing. I would like to say that postal services also have a huge social obligation, that is why postal services have been kept so affordable. In this, services are provided at very low prices. The Government has a clear policy that it will be kept affordable in this manner. Although it will be modernized, the pricing will always be kept affordable. Another member talked about heritage buildings. There are many good heritage buildings of post offices which are being well renovated. Recently, a heritage post office building in Jharsuguda, Odisha has been beautifully renovated with the help of Railways, maintaining its entire heritage character. There were suggestions regarding warehousing and new types of services regarding the unused land of the Postal Department. Today's bill specifically provides for the expansion of postal services. Apart from post and express mail, many other types of services should also come. I would urge the House to pass this Bill unanimously.

The motion for consideration of the Bill was adopted.

Clauses etc., were adopted.

The Bill was passed.

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P. C. MODY,
Secretary-General.

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****Supplement covering rest of the proceedings is being issued separately.