



By Email

To,
Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu
Hon'ble Vice President of India and The Chairman of the Rajya Sabha,
vpindia@nic.in

IFF/2020/144

June 23, 2020

Honourable Chairman of the Rajya Sabha,

Re: Sincere request for the restoration of Standing Committee meetings via remote online conferences.

1. The IFF is an Indian digital liberties organisation that seeks to ensure that technology respects fundamental rights. Our goal is to ensure that Indian citizens can use the Internet with liberties guaranteed by the Constitution. Our expertise in free speech, digital surveillance and privacy, net neutrality help us to champion freedom in the digital age. We spur grassroots membership through public campaigns and take them towards institutional engagement with regulators, legislative bodies and courts.
2. Firstly, we at IFF, sincerely wish that this letter finds you well and in the best of health. We are writing this letter to urge you to reinstate some level of legislative engagement, especially via regular meetings of the various Standing Committees. The COVID-19 apart from altering almost every aspect of human life, has increasingly given rise to new issues relating to but not limited to those of privacy, human & labour rights and data security. Unfortunately, in the absence of any deliberative parliamentary process currently in action, these issues are getting piled up by the day.
3. However, we would like you to consider that these are unprecedented circumstances and therefore, require novel solutions. **Rule 81** of the *Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in the Council of States* states that **"No sitting of a Select Committee shall be held outside the precincts of the Parliament House: Provided that if in any case it is considered necessary to hold such a sitting outside the precincts of the Parliament House, the matter shall be referred to the Chairman whose decision shall be final"**. Rule 81 when read in conjunction with **Rule 275**, which says that **"In other respects the rules applicable to Select Committees on Bills in the Council**



shall apply mutatis mutandis to the Standing Committees specified in Part I of the Third Schedule and the general rules applicable to other Parliamentary Committees in the House shall apply to Standing Committees specified in Part II of the said Schedule' definitely paves way for a novel solution like the usage of online conferencing tools to conduct committee meetings, if you approve the move. It is also worthwhile to note that as per two different Op-Eds by M. R. Madhavan and Chakshu Roy, the President, and the Head of Civic and Legislative Engagement at PRS Legislative Research, respectively—parliaments in countries like Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Brazil and New Zealand among others have duly incorporated online conferencing tools to conduct their legislative business. [[click here](#)], [[click here](#)].

4. Therefore, as the world's largest democracy and an IT powerhouse, we have both the imperative and the capacity to seamlessly bring this change. Given pressing issues related to digital, labour, and human rights, privacy, healthcare and pandemic relief relating to both food distribution and rehabilitation, it would be ideal to kick-off the deliberative process by reinstating meetings of the Committees on IT, Home Affairs, Health & Family Welfare, and Labour & Employment. This can serve as a great start as we transition to get other committees and the remaining legislative business on-board. We have also addressed a letter to the Hon'ble Speaker of The Lok Sabha urging him to do the same.

In conclusion, as firm believers in institutional processes, we are always available for any opportunities to provide any inputs which lead to informed recommendations and outputs.

Kind regards,

Apar Gupta, Advocate
Executive Director, Internet Freedom Foundation