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RS passes Bill to slash salaries of MPs

Central Vista project comes in for criticism

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The Bill to reduce the salaries of parliamentarians by 30% for one year to meet the exigencies arising out of the COVID-19 pandemic was cleared by Rajya Sabha on Friday even as the government came under a sharp attack from the Opposition for not cutting down on "luxuries" like the Central Vista redevelopment project and construction of a new Parliament building.

Lok Sabha had passed the Salary, Allowances and Pension of Members of Parliament (Amendment) Bill, 2020 bill earlier this week. It will replace the Salary, Allowances and Pension of Members of Parliament (Amendment) Ordinance, 2020, that was cleared by the Council of Ministers on April 6 and promulgated the next day.

Congress MP from Maharashtra Rajeev Satav said he fully supports the Bill and was willing to work for ₹1 if



An illuminated Parliament House during the Monsoon session on Friday.

that would aid COVID-19 response. But he pointed out that while the government wants to save ₹8,000 cr by suspending MP Local Area Development (MPLAD) Fund, it is willing to spend more than ₹20,000 on the Central Vista redevelopment project.

Many older buildings

J.R. Satav also said he government's claim that the present Parliament building is old is wrong. Across the world, parliaments of many nations are functioning out of buildings older than the Indian Parliament like the Dutch Parliament built in the

13th century, the Italian Parliament in the 16th century, the French Parliament in the 17th century, the U.S. Senate in the 1800s and the British Parliament in 1840.

"Our Parliament is less than hundred years old," he said. The government could have pushed the project by another four to five years, till the COVID-19 fight is done with, Mr. Satav added.

DMK MP P. Wilson said that in 2012 the then Parliamentary Affairs Minister had said the expenses incurred for conducting Parliament per session is ₹2.5 lakh per minute.

"The savings due to the introduction of the bill is roughly around ₹4 crore rupees in one year. However, the money spent by us in considering and passing this Bill is around ₹6 crore since it is going to occupy four hours in both Houses to pass this Bill. Thus, this Bill doesn't cut down expenses but has created loss to the exchequer to the tune of ₹4 crore," he said. At the same time, he said, his party was not opposed to the pay cut.

He added that perhaps it

is time to tighten the purse strings by shedding other expenses by the government.

"It is extraordinary that the Centre has turned to the MPLAD scheme to generate funds, when vanity projects like the ₹20,000 crore Delhi Vista project, which is useful to none, are still on the table. The government owes about ₹1,147 crore to Air India for the travel of VVIPs. It has also spent ₹5,200 crores in advertisements since 2014-15," Mr. Wilson said.

RJD MP Manoj K. Jha also echoed the sentiments by saying that a new Parliament building and a redeveloped Central Vista is a "luxury" that the country can't afford at this time.

Replying to the debate, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi said the Opposition's criticism about the Central Vista project is contrary to its demand that the government should initiate public spending to revive the economy.

J.R. Joshi also addressed Mr. Wilson's criticism. "The saving from the bill is not ₹6 crore, but ₹53.83 crore," he said.