

# Stealing futures

For years now, this newspaper has consistently raised concerns over the growing influence of coaching centres in India's education system. What was once seen as supplementary support has now turned into a parallel ecosystem that is increasingly unregulated, deeply commercialised and dangerously misleading. Today coaching centres across the country are no longer just institutions of learning. They have become a well-oiled machinery driven by aggressive marketing and profit. Through glossy advertisements, exaggerated success claims and targeted digital campaigns, they are selling dreams to lakhs of young students. Dreams that are often detached from reality. The scale of this problem has now reached the corridors of Parliament. Earlier this week, Union Minister Pralhad Joshi acknowledged the issue of misleading advertisements by coaching centres in the Lok Sabha. He pointed out that notices have been issued and penalties imposed on several institutions. This is a welcome step, but it also underlines the seriousness of the situation. The real concern lies in how these coaching centres operate. They carefully curate success stories, highlight a handful of toppers and project them as proof of guaranteed results. What is rarely shown is the other side. The thousands who fail, who struggle, who are left disillusioned after investing years of their lives chasing a single exam. Young minds, often straight out of school, are the most vulnerable. Influenced by social media promotions, paid advertisements and peer pressure, they are pushed into a narrow definition of success. Engineering, medicine or government jobs become the only acceptable goals. Individual interests, abilities and talents are pushed aside. This is not just unfair, it is harmful. When these dreams shatter, as they do for lakhs of young boys and girls, the cost is not just emotional. Students lose precious years that could have been spent acquiring meaningful skills, pursuing higher education in fields of interest or simply discovering their own path. Instead, they are left with frustration, self-doubt and a sense of failure that was never theirs to begin with. What makes matters worse is the growing role of digital platforms in amplifying this problem. Coaching centres are now investing heavily in targeted advertising on search engines and social media. Algorithms ensure that students repeatedly see these ads, reinforcing the illusion that success lies only through these institutions. It is a carefully crafted trap. This trend stands in direct contradiction to the vision of the National Education Policy 2020, which emphasises holistic development, critical thinking and flexibility in learning. The policy aims to move away from rote learning and exam-centric education. Coaching centres, however, are pulling students in the exact opposite direction. The government can regulate and penalise, but it cannot fight this battle alone. Society must wake up to this reality. Parents must question the narratives being sold. They should enroll their wards in the school which are against the coaching culture. Students must be encouraged to explore diverse paths. At a policy level, stronger action is needed. Misleading advertisements must invite strict penalties. Transparency in results must be mandated. A serious conversation must begin on whether a blanket ban on coaching centres is necessary to protect the integrity of our education system. Education is not a marketplace and students are not customers. When dreams are sold as products, it is only a matter of time before futures are compromised.

# REWIND: Towards Confrontation In Parliament



In the backdrop of the Opposition's no-confidence motion against the Lok Sabha Speaker expectedly defeated, this week we reissue an article, first published in February 1980, to flog the convention on choice of an incumbent for the high office of Speaker upon which depends the basic health of Parliament. The article offers an insight into the then leader of the House, Mrs Indira Gandhi's manoeuvres of choosing the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker, and even the Opposition showing lack of initiative at the appropriate time to insist on upholding of basic conventions.

INDER JIT

Our new Parliament's first session, though brief, has left many seasoned MPs and impartial observers uneasy and concerned about its future. Outwardly, the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha more or less completed on schedule the business set out before the two Houses. Mrs Indira Gandhi spoke in strong democratic idiom and accents and, on a couple of occasions, even helped the new Speaker, Mr Bal Ram Jakhar, to maintain order by restraining what are described in the Central Hall as her "young stormtroopers". She also made it a point to be present in the House on important occasions, notwithstanding her preoccupation with developments in Afghanistan which 'continue to cast their sinister shadow over the sub-continent. Inwardly however, Parliament has suffered in its capacity for smooth and purposeful functioning. Certain time-honoured traditions have not only not been upheld by the ruling party but ignored and subverted. The Opposition leaders, too, have not helped matters by their inability to overcome petty personal considerations and unitedly stand up for healthy conventions.

Nothing has caused the veterans greater dismay than Mrs Gandhi's first act vis-a-vis the new Parliament: the choice of an incumbent for the high office of Speaker upon which depends the basic health of Parliament and the curious manner in which the Prime Minister and her advisers went about the task. This has become even more pointed since the importance of the Speaker's office has been fully understood and recognised over the past three decades. Jawaharlal Nehru laid emphasis on the prestige and authority of the Speaker time and again. Speaking on March 8, 1958 on the occasion of the unveiling of the portrait of Speaker Vithalbhai Patel in the Lok Sabha, Nehru candidly observed: "The Speaker represents the House. He represents the dignity of the House, the freedom of the House and because the House represents the nation, in a particular way, the Speaker becomes the symbol of the nation's freedom and liberty. Therefore, it is right that that should be an honoured position, a free position, and should be occupied always by men of outstanding ability and impartiality."

Nehru did not stop at mere platitudes and pious sentiments. He drew a clear distinction between his responsibility as Prime Minister and Leader of the House an important distinction which, alas, has not always been observed. As the Leader of the House, he showed the greatest respect to the Speaker and did much to build up

healthy conventions and the Chair's prestige and authority. By his own conduct, Nehru also encouraged the Speaker to be independent and impartial. As I wrote once, I recall seeing a visibly agitated Nehru graciously submit to Speaker Mavalankar's ruling in the early 'fifties firmly disallowing him from making a second statement in one day in contravention of the rules. Curiously, however, nothing concrete came to be done to establish tried conventions designed to ensure the impartiality of the office of Speaker. The one sure way of achieving this was depoliticise the Speaker well and truly and to see that he was entitled to keep himself entirely aloof from party politics.

However, nothing was done despite the initial lead given by Vithalbhai Patel in the pre-independence days and the healthy convention vainly sought to be established by Mavalankar following independence. Vithalbhai, who succeeded Sir Frederick Whyte as India's first Indian Speaker in 1925, dissociated himself from the Swarajist Party of which he was an active member prior to his election and during his entire term of office he kept himself aloof from party interest. What is more, in the election of 1926, he did not stand on Congress ticket but contested as an independent and was returned unopposed. In 1951 and again in 1953, the Conference of Presiding Officers, under Mavalankar's leadership, expressed the view that the Speaker should dissociate himself from party politics and, towards this end, "a convention should be established that the seat from which the Speaker stands for re-election should not be contested." Nehru and the Congress Working Committee accepted the suggestion in principle. But the other parties refused to go along.

India may, no doubt, have failed to provide for the uncontested election of the Speaker to the Lok Sabha and adopt the British maxim: Once a Speaker, always a Speaker. But we have at least evolved a convention under which a Speaker is sought to be chosen unanimously through informal consultations initiated by the Leader of the House. Such consultations have been held all these years, including 1977. Such consultations have been held all these years, including 1977. But for the first time this year the ruling party ignored the Opposition altogether and did not even extend to it the courtesy of going through the motions of holding consultations. Matters were made worse by two factors. First, the new Lok Sabha had among its members Mr. B.R. Bhagat, a former Speaker even though he was elected this time on a Congress (U) ticket. Second, the new House also had among the members of the ruling Congress (I) four former, experienced

Speakers of State Assembly --- Mr. Hari Nath Mishra from Bihar, Mr. Gulsher Ahmed from Madhya Pradesh, Mr. S.P. Patil from Maharashtra and Mr. Braj Mohan Mohanty from Orissa. Mr. Mishra, incidentally, became a Minister in Bihar for the first time in 1952.

A consensus could have been attempted by the Government and the Opposition on the name of Mr. Bhagat in view of his experience and standing at the Centre. True, Mr. Bhagat is today a member of the Congress (U). However, contrary to an erroneous impression, nothing barred his election as the Speaker simply because he belonged to the Opposition and not to the ruling party. In 1962, Mr. Hukam Singh, an Akali member, was elected Speaker by virtue of his merit, standing and experience: he was Deputy Speaker earlier. Likewise, a consensus could have been attempted on one of the four Speakers from the State Assemblies at least a couple of whom had done well by the high office. Instead, Mrs. Gandhi quietly handpicked little-known Mr. Bal Ram for the high office and, showing both imagination and initiative, outmanoeuvred the Opposition by getting Mr. Bhagat himself to second the name of the Congress (I) candidate. Incidentally, Mr. Bhagat was pulled out of bed late the previous night by Mr. Bhisam Narain Singh, Minister of Parliamentary Affairs, to get his signature on the proposal. Mr. Bal Ram accompanied Mr. Singh as a matter of courtesy and propriety -- and to renew his acquaintance with Mr. Bhagat.

All this is not to detract in any way from Mr. Bal Ram's own stature, undoubted merit and proven ability as a man of drive and learning. In a short period, he has already won many friends by his culture and courtesy. His speech following election as Speaker struck the right note and held out to the Opposition a much-needed assurance. "I shall", he said, "do everything in my power to uphold the Constitution and be guided by its letter and spirit for conducting the business of the House." As the Speaker, he added, I shall now speak "only one language and that is the language of the House." Give time, he may surprise the doubting Thomases, as did Mr. Sanjiva Reddy earlier to emerge as one of India's most successful and independent Speaker. What has been stated in the preceding paragraphs is only intended to emphasize the need for functioning according to accepted democratic norms. Nothing prevented Mrs. Gandhi from seeking the prior support of the Opposition for the unanimous election of Mr. Bal Ram, especially in view of its ready willingness to accept the ruling party's candidate and opt for an uncontested return.

Not only that. Mrs Gandhi and her

party have done no better insofar as the choice of the Deputy Speaker is concerned. All accepted conventions have been set aside in spirit, if not in letter. The Deputy Speaker's office should have gone to a member of the Opposition in every sense of the term. Mr. Lakshmanan, who was elected to the office on Friday last by a voice vote, is no doubt formally a member of the DMK and sits in the Opposition. But Mrs Gandhi was less than fair to the office and to the time-honoured convention by ignoring the fact that the DMK is a close ally of the Congress(I) party an ally which played a crucial role in helping her win hands down in Tamil Nadu. Every consideration should have been extended to the opposition in the matter by Mrs Gandhi for choosing the Deputy Speaker, who often chairs the House proceedings for more than half the day. This may have provided Mrs Gandhi some personal satisfaction against the backdrop of the happenings of the past two years. But it struck a blow against accepted rules of the parliamentary game.

The Opposition, for its part, has shown total lack of imagination and initiative in the face of Mrs Gandhi's steam-roller majority and the threat it poses to free debate in the House. For one thing, it could have proposed Mr Bhagat for Speakership as a matter of tactic to put Mrs Gandhi in a spot before she sought his support. For another, it should not have rested content merely with putting up the name of Mr Dhanik Lal Mandal for Deputy Speakership. His name should have been pressed to a division, just to register the point. Originally, I am told, it had been decided to press the issue to a formal vote. But top leaders decided at the last minute on their own to make "a gesture" ignoring the fact that every single parliamentary battle counts in winning friends and influencing voters.

A ten-day session is admittedly rather brief to draw conclusions about the future. But the portions are there for all to see. Already the Government and the Opposition have clashed openly in the Rajya Sabha and a critical amendment voted to the motion of thanks for the President's address. In the Lok Sabha, meanwhile, both sides appear to have moved towards confrontation, as reflected in the rowdy interludes during the session's last two days. (at one stage, Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee was constrained to raise his voice to assert: "Let it be decided once and for all whether he can speak in this House or not?") The intercession period should clearly be devoted on all sides to review what has happened and to take steps to mend matters. Both the Government and the Opposition are equally important in a Parliamentary democracy for orderly progress and national well-being.--INFA

# Vanishing chirps, vanishing energy: The Silent Crisis of the Sparrow

LALIT GARGG

There was a time when mornings began with the gentle, cheerful chirping of sparrows in our courtyards and homes. This tiny bird was not merely a part of nature—it was woven into our daily lives, our culture, and our emotions. A companion of childhood, a symbol of liveliness in homes, and a reflection of nature's vitality—the sparrow once thrived alongside us. Today, however, it is quietly disappearing from our surroundings. This is not just the story of a bird in decline; it is a warning signal of the deteriorating balance between humans and nature. World Sparrow Day, observed every year on March 20, aims to raise awareness about the conservation of this small yet significant bird. The 2026 theme broadly emphasizes "coexistence between humans and nature," reminding us that without ecological balance, not only sparrows but the entire ecosystem could face irreversible damage.

The sparrow has always lived in close proximity to humans. It built nests in our roofs, ventilators, windows, and trees, becoming an in-

separable part of our daily rhythm. But the relentless pace of modernization has gradually displaced it. In today's concrete jungles, there is neither space for nesting nor availability of natural food sources. One of the primary reasons behind the declining population of sparrows is the transformation in our lifestyle. Traditional homes once had open spaces, mud courtyards, and rooftops where grains were dried—naturally providing food and shelter for birds. Today, life is confined within closed, polished structures, leaving no room for such coexistence. As a result, the sparrow has lost its natural habitat.

The excessive use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers has further aggravated the problem. Young sparrows depend heavily on insects for survival in their early days. However, modern agricultural practices have drastically reduced the population of these insects. Consequently, sparrow chicks often suffer from a lack of adequate nutrition, putting their survival at risk. Another growing concern is the impact of electromagnetic radiation from mobile towers. While scientific research is still ongoing, these radiations are believed to affect the navigation and reproductive abilities of sparrows. Regardless of the extent, it is evident that increasing

technological pollution poses a serious threat to the environment.

Climate change is yet another factor contributing to their decline. Irregular weather patterns, unseasonal rains, and rising temperatures disrupt their life cycle, affecting breeding patterns and overall stability. The delicate balance that once supported their existence is now under constant strain. The crisis of the sparrow is not only environmental—it is also a reflection of human insensitivity. As we drift further away from nature, our priorities have shifted, and our sense of responsibility towards other living beings has diminished. This growing disconnect is alarming because when humans detach from nature, their own survival is eventually at stake.

Protecting sparrows is not just about saving a bird; it is about preserving our environment, our cultural heritage, and the future of coming generations. The solution lies in small yet meaningful steps. We must create spaces in our homes and surroundings where sparrows can nest. Artificial nesting boxes, easily available in markets, can be installed on balconies, walls, or trees. Providing food and water regularly is another simple but powerful act. A small bowl of

grains or water can make a significant difference. Additionally, promoting native plants in gardens and open spaces can help increase insect populations, ensuring a natural food chain for sparrows.

Adopting organic farming and reducing chemical usage can also play a crucial role in restoring ecological balance. These changes not only benefit sparrows but contribute to the overall health of the environment. Equally important is nurturing sensitivity in children. They must be taught that birds are not just objects to observe, but companions in our shared ecosystem. Instilling this awareness at an early age can help build a more responsible and environmentally conscious society. Governments and social organizations also have a vital role to play. Strong policies for bird conservation, encouragement of research, and widespread awareness campaigns are essential. Schools, colleges, and community platforms should actively engage in discussions and initiatives related to biodiversity and conservation.

The sparrow teaches us the values of simplicity, harmony, and balance. It survives quietly, without demand or disturbance. But when even such a humble creature faces extinction, it

serves as a profound warning that we have somewhere failed in our duty towards nature. Today, there is an urgent need to rethink our approach. The Earth does not belong to humans alone; it is a shared heritage of all living beings. If we continue to exploit it for selfish gains, a time may come when nothing remains for us.

World Sparrow Day is not just a symbolic observance—it is an opportunity for introspection and commitment. It calls upon each one of us to assess our responsibility towards nature and to act consciously. If every home becomes a small sanctuary, every courtyard offers food and water, and every heart awakens to compassion, sparrows can return. Their chirping can once again fill our lives with joy and remind us of the beauty of coexistence. Ultimately, saving the sparrow is about saving ourselves. It may seem like a small step, but its message is profound: only by maintaining harmony with nature can human life remain secure and fulfilling. The time to act is now—to awaken, to understand, and to fulfill our responsibility—to so that future generations can also hear the sweet melodies of sparrows and cherish this invaluable gift of nature.