



G. V. MAVALANKAR



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The Speaker of the Lok Sabha is the presiding officer of the Lower House of the Parliament of India. If anyone asks whose Speakership made its greatest impact on our parliamentary institutions, the answer would be, Shri Ganesh Vasudev Mavalankar, fondly remembered as Dadasaheb Mavalankar on whom the title 'Father of the Lok Sabha' was conferred by none other than Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. As Speaker of the First Lok Sabha of a new-born nation, Mavalankar's role was not merely that of a moderator and facilitator of its proceedings but of a Statesman, a pioneer and a founding father invested with the responsibility to establish rules, procedures, conventions and customs that suited the culture and ethos of the land. He accomplished all this with patience, perseverance, wisdom and, above all, with a remarkable sense of history. He observed the decorum of the House and also enforced it on others. He was, undoubtedly, a model Speaker, firm yet flexible, stern yet kind and sympathetic and always fair to all sections of the House.

Ganesh Vasudev Mavalankar was born on 27 November 1888 at Baroda, presently part of the State of Gujarat. His family originally belonged to a place called Mavalange in the Ratnagiri District of the then State of Bombay. After his early education in different places in the erstwhile Bombay State, Mavalankar moved to Ahmedabad in 1902 for higher studies. He obtained his B.A. Degree in Science from the Gujarat College, Ahmedabad, in 1908. He was a Dakshina Fellow of the College for one year in 1909 before taking to his law studies. He passed his Law examination in First Class in 1912. Entering the legal profession in 1913, Mavalankar established himself as a leading lawyer within a short period of time. He was keenly interested in social work, alongwith his thriving legal practice. In fact he possessed remarkable mental powers from an early age.

Mavalankar was a colleague and close friend of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Mahatma Gandhi. Even from his early twenties, Mavalankar was associated with several

major social organisations in Gujarat, either as an office bearer or as an activist. He was the Honorary Secretary of the Gujarat Education Society in 1913 as also the Secretary of the Gujarat Sabha in 1916. He joined the Swaraj Party in the 1920s but later returned to Mahatma Gandhi. Later in 1946, he was elected to preside over the Central Legislative Assembly.

From a very early age itself, Mavalankar began to be actively associated with the Indian National Congress, which was spearheading the movement for national freedom under the leadership of Gandhiji. He played an active role in the freedom movement in Gujarat in the Thirties and the Forties. In the course of the movement, he was imprisoned several times and spent nearly six years in Jail. Whenever there was a natural calamity, famine or some other social or political crisis, Mavalankar came forward to help the people, suspending his lucrative legal practice. Recognising his leadership qualities and contributions, he was appointed Secretary of the Gujarat Provincial Congress Committee during 1921-22. He was also the General Secretary of the Reception Committee for the 36th Session of the Indian National Congress held in Ahmedabad in December 1921. He played a very active part in the 'Khaira No-Rent' campaign and later in the famine and flood relief works on several occasions.

A firm believer in the decentralisation of power and in the efficacy of Panchayati Raj Institutions, Mavalankar dedicated himself to the affairs of Ahmedabad Municipality for nearly two decades. From 1919 to 1937, he remained a member of the Ahmedabad Municipality. Twice during 1930-33 and 1935-36, he served as its President. Ahmedabad made tremendous progress during his stewardship. His interest in the affairs of the local self-government bodies continued throughout his life.

Mavalankar was known to be a patron of various social, cultural and sports organizations. Moreover, he had a wide variety of interests such as political thought and international affairs, education, philosophy of science, poetry, literature and the fine arts. He was the founder-Chairman of the National Rifle Association as also of the Institute for Afro-Asian Relations. He took great interest in educational and literary activities in Gujarat. For sometime, he worked as Professor of Law at the Gujarat Vidyapeeth.

He was also a founder-member and later the President of the Ahmedabad Education Society and the President of the Gujarat Vernacular Society. Other Societies he was associated with in various capacities included the Gujarat Law Society, and the Charotar Education Society. He was the Working Chairman of the Gujarat University Association and also Chairman of the Committee for Gujarat University and in these capacities he strove hard to mobilise the finances and other infrastructure for the Gujarat University.

Mavalankar was rightly acclaimed as a thinker and a scholar. He had many literary accomplishments to his credit. His book in Gujarati *Manavatana Jharna* containing some true stories about the prisoners he had met and guided while he was in jail from 1942 to 1944, in the course of the freedom movement, has been very popular. This was later rendered into a few other Indian languages as well. Another book in Gujarati, *Sansmarano* was devoted to giving his reminiscences of association with Gandhiji. The English book *My Life at the Bar* contains reminiscences of his nearly two and a half decades long active life at the Bar.

Mavalankar's legislative career began in 1937, when he was elected to the then Bombay Legislative Assembly representing the city of Ahmedabad. With his standing as an eminent lawyer and with his quarter century long experience in diverse capacities in the service of the people of Gujarat, Mavalankar was the immediate choice of the Assembly to be its Speaker. Thus, he had the distinction of starting his legislative career occupying the office of the Speaker itself. Years later, this was to be repeated at the national level also, when he was elected to preside over the Central Legislative Assembly in 1946. Mavalankar remained Speaker of the Bombay Legislative Assembly from 1937 to 1946.

His success as the Speaker of the Bombay Legislative Assembly made him a natural choice of the Congress Party for the Presidentship of the Sixth Central Legislative Assembly in January 1946. The nomination by the Opposition Congress Party in itself was not enough to ensure his election in an Assembly in which the majority of members was on the Government side which had put up its own candidate. However, after a keenly contested election, Mavalankar emerged victorious. This only proved his popularity among the members of the Assembly cutting across party lines.

Mavalankar remained Speaker of the Central Legislative Assembly till the midnight of August 14-15, 1947 when, under the Indian Independence Act, 1947, the Central Legislative Assembly and the Council of States ceased to exist and the Constituent Assembly of India assumed full powers for the governance of the country. In the wake of India's Independence, Mavalankar headed the Committee constituted on 20 August 1947 to study and report on the need to separate the Constitution-making role of the Constituent Assembly from its legislative role. Later, it was on this Committee's recommendation that the legislative and Constitution-making roles of the Assembly were separated and it was decided to have a Speaker to preside over the Assembly when it functioned as the legislative body for the country. Here again, the choice of the person to preside over the Session of the Constituent Assembly (Legislative) fell on Mavalankar, and accordingly he was elected to the office on 17 November 1947.

With the adoption of the Constitution of free India on 26 November 1949, and the consequent change in the nomenclature of the Constituent Assembly (Legislative) into that of the Provisional Parliament, there was a corresponding change in the status of Mavalankar also. Mavalankar thus became the Speaker of the Provisional Parliament on 26 November 1949.

Mavalankar continued to occupy the office of the Speaker throughout the Provisional Parliament, *i.e.* till the First Lok Sabha was constituted in 1952. This period, in fact, represented a very crucial phase in the history of the Indian Legislature as it was to oversee the process of transition from a colonial institution into a sovereign Parliament under the Constitution of Independent India. Also, it marked the beginning of a new era of fully responsible Government.

Compatible with its new status, several procedural innovations and modifications were required to be introduced into the functioning of Parliament. It was principally Speaker Mavalankar's job to be the harbinger as also the facilitator of these changes. Mavalankar did not belie the expectations of the Parliament and the country at large, from him. By the time the process of elections to the First Lok Sabha was completed in the country in 1951-52, Mavalankar was ready with rules, practices, procedures and conventions necessary for the smooth

functioning of a representative Parliament in the country. No one was, therefore, surprised when Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru proposed the name of Mavalankar to be chosen the Speaker of the First Lok Sabha of Independent India on 15 May 1952 and the House carried the proposal with 394 votes, against the opponent's 55.

In the next four years when Mavalankar presided over the Lok Sabha, the country was to witness his unique qualities as an institution-builder. Because he could link the past precedents with the fresh needs and effect changes while maintaining continuity, his period of Speakership was the most fruitful one for the evolution of parliamentary procedures in India. Not only did he introduce several new rules and procedures, he also modified the existing ones to suit the new conditions. On his initiative, the 'Question Hour' in its modern sense of the term became a regular and meaningful feature of parliamentary Sessions. Devices like Short Notice Questions and Half-an-Hour Discussions were introduced as means to elicit information from the Government and thereby make the Government truly accountable to the Parliament. The entire gamut of legislative procedures underwent drastic changes under his initiative in order to make it truly democratic in tune with the changing times. The discussion on 'President's Address' on a 'Motion of Thanks' was started by Speaker Mavalankar. Similarly, the rules governing the composition and procedure of Parliamentary Committees were amended under his guidance and direction, to make them adjust to the new political situation. Also, a number of new Committees were set up.

Committees like the Rules Committee, the Committee of Privileges, the Business Advisory Committee, Committee on Private Members' Bills and Resolutions, Committee on Subordinate Legislation, Committee on Government Assurances, Committee on Absence of Members from the Sittings of the House, Joint Committee on Salaries and Allowances of Members of Parliament, General Purposes Committee, etc. were introduced in the Indian Parliament on Speaker Mavalankar's initiative. He also took various measures to revamp the existing Committees and to make them relevant to the times.

Several of the rulings delivered by Speaker Mavalankar were of far reaching importance in the running of not only

of the House but even of other democratic institutions in the country. In fact, his rulings provided the basis for many entries in the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in Lok Sabha. Several important procedural points were settled and principles were laid down during his Speakership by prudently exercising his discretion to rule on issues that came up before him. And these issues actually covered almost the entire gamut of parliamentary activities and in a way, the national life itself.

In spite of having to attend to numerous items of parliamentary work within the country, Speaker Mavalankar did not overlook the importance of maintaining an active inter-parliamentary contact and cooperation between the Parliament of India and other individual Parliaments and international parliamentary Associations. With the objective of nurturing and cementing Indian Parliament's relationship with other Parliaments, Mavalankar encouraged and facilitated mutual exchange of Delegations between Parliaments. He himself led several such Delegations and received many in India. He also attended many of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) Conferences held in various parts of the world during his Speakership. He represented India at the opening ceremony of the new House of Commons in London on 26 October 1950. In 1953, he attended the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II and also a meeting of the Central Council of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association held in London at that time.

The practice of organising the Conference of Presiding Officers of Legislative Bodies in India received great encouragement and support from Mavalankar. From the time he took over the Presidentship of the Central Legislative Assembly in 1946 till his death in 1956, Speaker Mavalankar remained the President of this important Conference. These Conferences provided opportunities to all the Presiding Officers of the Legislatures in the country for the exchange of experiences and views and for evolving certain uniform practices and procedures as also for building up healthy and valuable conventions of parliamentary democracy throughout the country.

Yet another area that received Mavalankar's special attention as the Speaker of the First Lok Sabha was the Secretariat of the Lok Sabha. Mavalankar was very clear in

his thought that it was most crucial for the assertion of the independence and supremacy of Parliament in our system of government, to maintain an independent Secretariat of Parliament directly under the control of the Presiding Officers. He firmly believed that the "Speaker as representative and head of the Legislature, must have the help and advice of people who do not feel themselves suppressed because of the powers of the executive Government and who will give advice and put through the work irrespective of frowns and favours". According to him, officers in the service of Parliament Secretariat were to be guided only by the principles of freedom, faith, objectivity and promptitude.

Mavalankar also was very anxious to provide to members of Parliament a suitable working atmosphere and, therefore, maximum possible facilities for work were sought to be provided in order that members could become effective parliamentarians. He believed that objective and prompt information was an essential input for a parliamentarian. It was this realisation that motivated him in the setting up of a full-fledged Research and Reference Service in Parliament as part of the Lok Sabha Secretariat itself. He also took utmost interest in improving the Library facilities for members.

Mavalankar's Speakership was cut short abruptly by his untimely death in early 1956. Even while serving as Speaker, Mavalankar continued to be associated with a number of other organisations and trusts devoted to social service, rural uplift and development of the underprivileged classes in various capacities. They included the Harijan Ashram of Mahatma Gandhi at Sabarmati, the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Fund and the Gandhi Memorial Trust. In December 1950, Mavalankar had succeeded Sardar Patel as the Chairman of the Gandhi Memorial Trust. Work in connection with the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Fund and the Gandhi Memorial Trust took Mavalankar to all parts of India, as he was anxious to personally see the working of all Centres and meet the ordinary workers. Even considerations of his own health and personal comforts did not deter him from undertaking long and arduous journeys. During the course of one such journey in January 1956, Mavalankar suffered a cardiac arrest and eventually, on 27 February 1956, breathed his last in Ahmedabad.

On his death, a grateful nation and its Parliament paid rich tributes to its distinguished Speaker who, along with other founders of the Republic, laid solid foundations for parliamentary democracy in India. Through five decades of selfless service, Ganesh Vasudev Mavalankar left a deep imprint of his personality in every area he was associated with. Unquestionably the greatest impact has been on the office of the Speaker and on Parliament.

For a period of over ten years (1946-1956), Mavalankar guided the deliberations of India's Parliament with dignity, uprightness and impartiality. On the independent role and functions of the office of the Speaker, on the need to maintain an independent Legislature Secretariat accountable only to the Speaker, on the question of privileges of people's representatives, on the need to have Parliamentary Committees to scrutinise public expenditure, on the imperative to demonstrate decorum and dignity in the functioning of Parliament, and on all other basic and fundamental norms of parliamentary government, Speaker Mavalankar had very clear perceptions and did not spare any effort in making them an integral part of the system. When Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India and the Leader of the House, Mavalankar presided over, described him as the 'Father of the Lok Sabha', probably he was echoing the sentiments of the whole nation. And when the stalwarts of the Opposition, many of whom could match the stature and calibre of those in the ruling benches, described him as the 'sheet anchor of parliamentary democracy' and as a 'genuine custodian of the rights of the Opposition', it was evidently a tribute paid to the office of the Speaker itself and to the statesmanship of Dadasaheb Mavalankar.