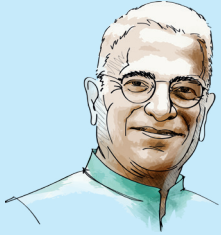


The Spirit of Parliament Must Be Constructive, Not Confrontational: A Conversation with Harivansh Narayan Singh, Deputy Chairman, Rajya Sabha



Harivansh Narayan Singh has served the Rajya Sabha for twelve years — first as a Member of Parliament from Bihar, nominated by the Janata Dal (United) in 2014 and then as its 13th Deputy Chairman since August 9, 2018, a position he holds as his current parliamentary term approaches conclusion in April 2026. A seasoned journalist who transformed the Hindi daily Prabhat Khabar into a powerful instrument of social change, his public life has been shaped in equal measure by the newsroom and the legislature. A.S. Raghunath — a media practitioner who has worked closely with him and authored Harivansh's Experiment with Ad-Vocacy Journalism: From Ads to Action,

Words to Change — spoke with him on the occasion of this milestone. In a rare and reflective conversation, the Deputy Chairman discusses legislative discipline, the growing influence of fake news on parliamentary debate, the changing character of journalism and why national interest must always guide democratic institutions.

Editorial Note: This interview was conducted on the occasion of Harivansh Narayan Singh's twelve years of service to the Rajya Sabha. It is presented in a question-and-answer format, lightly edited for clarity and coherence while preserving the substance and intent of the interviewee's responses. The views expressed are those of the interviewee and do not represent the editorial position of the Indian Journal of Electoral Studies.

What shaped your outlook during your twelve years in Parliament?

During these twelve years, I served four years as a Member of Parliament and eight years as Deputy Chairman of the Rajya Sabha. Both roles offered different but valuable experiences.

As an MP, I was deeply influenced by members who came well prepared, spoke with facts and reasoning and maintained decorum. Their seriousness towards parliamentary debate helped me understand the finer nuances of legislative functioning. I made it a point to listen carefully to members across parties and viewpoints. Learning, in our tradition, can come from anywhere and that spirit guided me throughout my parliamentary journey.

When I first entered Parliament in 2014, I met President Pranab Mukherjee, who shared advice that shaped my approach. He recalled that M.C. Chagla had once told him that the foremost duty of an MP is to remain present in the House and observe proceedings from beginning to end. By doing so, one learns immensely. I consciously followed this principle. Even as Deputy Chairman, whenever I was not presiding, I tried to sit in the House and listen to debates, whether during Question Hour, Zero Hour or other discussions. Parliament reflects the grassroots realities of the country and one can feel the pulse of the nation from there.

I also learned a great deal from Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu when he served as Chairman of the Rajya Sabha. His discipline, knowledge of parliamentary procedure and long experience in public life were instructive.

One major transformation I witnessed concerns India's economic growth. Earlier it was often argued that democracies grow slowly while authoritarian systems grow faster. Yet India's experience has demonstrated that strong economic progress is possible within a democratic framework. From being counted among the 'Fragile Five' economies a decade ago, India has emerged among the fastest-growing major economies and is moving steadily toward becoming one of the world's largest.

For me, the essence of these twelve years lies in adopting a constructive and solution-oriented outlook in legislative functioning.

How is the growing influence of social media, including doubtful sources and fake news, affecting parliamentary debates?

During recent sessions of Parliament, a trend appears to be emerging where Members cite unsubstantiated reports to make allegations, provoking protests from others or intervention by the Chair. This not only disrupts the House but also vitiates the quality of parliamentary discourse. Parliament is an august platform where free expression is valued, yet the only safeguard must be respect for the sanctity of authentic documents.

In the digital age, unregulated social media allows any statement to gain global reach within seconds. Members of Parliament must therefore exercise great caution. Expunction by the Chair is only a limited remedy. Once a remark is expunged, Members should, in respect of the institution, refrain from raising it again.

Parliament, as the nation's supreme deliberative forum, must uphold language and standards distinct from those heard in roadside conversations or election rhetoric. Members are expected to speak with civility and base their interventions on verifiable facts. Before raising any issue in the House, they must ensure the authenticity of the information and place on record documents certifying that they are original or true copies and that their contents are accurate.

In an era where social media transcends national boundaries instantly, mere expunction cannot fully address the consequences of irresponsible statements. Parliamentary rules and precedents have long cautioned against the use of unverified rumours in debate and those principles must continue to guide conduct in the House.

The media, as a powerful opinion-shaper, constitutes the fourth pillar of a free and vibrant democracy. However, it is noteworthy that certain media scoops have surfaced during or just before Parliament sessions, often triggering prolonged disruptions and derailing legislative work. Issues such as the Rafale deal (2019), the Pegasus controversy (2021) and the Hindenburg report (2023) emerged around the commencement of parliamentary sessions. Many of these allegations were later found to be either baseless or driven by vested interests.

In this context, Members of Parliament themselves bear the primary responsibility to ensure that the forum of Parliament is not used for making unfounded allegations or raising unverified claims.

How do you view the state of journalism and free expression today?

Journalism, by its nature, must be grounded in facts and guided by impartiality. Its credibility and moral authority arise from presenting verified information and giving space to all sides before making allegations.

When we practiced journalism, the emphasis was on factual reporting and balanced analysis. It was considered essential to verify facts and seek the other side before drawing conclusions. The ideals articulated by Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi remain relevant even today. In the inaugural editorial of Pratap, he wrote that journalism must serve the welfare of humanity and the progress of the nation. It must convey the genuine grievances of people to the government but should avoid distorting facts or inflaming public sentiment.

During the freedom movement, journalism earned dignity and credibility because it placed national interest above personal biases. Today the media environment is shaped by commercial pressures, political alignments and competing narratives. These influences have inevitably changed the character of journalism.

Freedom of expression is essential in a democracy. At the same time, credibility depends on responsibility, balance and commitment to truth. If journalism wishes to retain its mor-

al authority, it must rediscover those foundational values that once gave it stature.

How can parliamentary disruptions be reduced and productivity improved?

To address disruptions in Parliament, it is useful to recall the spirit in which our parliamentary traditions were founded. The Constituent Assembly worked for nearly three years, debated thousands of amendments and yet completed the Constitution without disruption. That legacy of dialogue and consensus should guide our democratic institutions.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad reminded us that even the best Constitution will succeed only if those who operate it possess integrity, competence and character. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar also cautioned that in a democracy with many parties and ideologies, national interest must always prevail over partisan considerations. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru emphasised that Parliament sets the standard for the entire country; its conduct influences legislatures at every level.

India today stands at a stage where national development requires cooperation and constructive politics. Ultimately, reducing disruptions depends on restoring a culture of discipline, dialogue and consensus in Parliament.

Has the quality of debate in the Rajya Sabha declined?

The Rajya Sabha was created as a chamber of reflection and balance. The Constitution-makers envisioned it as a forum where distinguished individuals with expertise and experience could enrich national debate.

Political parties therefore need to reflect carefully on the individuals they nominate. If selections are guided by expediency rather than merit, the spirit of the institution weakens.

The orderly functioning of the House cannot depend only on the Chair. Party leadership also has a responsibility, since members generally follow party direction. Leaders must ensure adherence to parliamentary rules and the established standards of legislative conduct.

Ultimately, the quality of debate improves when national interest takes precedence over partisan considerations.

Do you miss the active role you had as an MP after becoming Deputy Chairman?

As an MP, I actively participated in debates and raised questions. The role of Deputy Chairman is different but equally enriching. It offers an opportunity to study parliamentary practices across the world, observe institutional reforms and examine how technology is transforming legislative functioning.

These experiences broaden one's perspective and help identify ways to strengthen our parliamentary institutions.

Are Gandhian principles still relevant in public life today?

Gandhian principles remain timeless because they arise from India's civilizational ethos. They have guided my own life in journalism and public service.

Growing up in a farmer's family, I learned that dignity comes from honest labour and living within one's means. In public life I have tried to follow these values through transparency and restraint.

As an MP, I publicly disclosed the names of students admitted to Kendriya Vidyalayas on my recommendation and regularly declared my assets. I also tried to avoid unnecessary expenditure of public resources. Today I live in a modest house built from my professional earnings and have even donated part of my ancestral land for a Panchayat building in my village.

These are small attempts to practise the Gandhian principle that purity of means must guide public life. Such values remain a source of strength for India and continue to hold relevance for the future.

About Interviewer



A S Raghunath

A S Raghunath is a media practitioner with over four decades of experience across media marketing, advertising and print journalism. He has been associated with several leading media houses and has also served as visiting faculty at MICA, Ahmedabad, JIMMC, Delhi and IP University, Delhi. He is currently engaged as a consultant with prominent publications and media organisations and also serves on the governing council of Amar Ujala's Aarohan Media School (TAMS).
Email: asraghunath@gmail.com