

A Study of the Life and Ideas of Dr. Rajendra Prasad

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Very few people in the modern Indian history have been able to unfailingly exhibit uncharacteristic traits of statesmanship, pragmatism and courage of conviction during the various phases of their long-spanning pursuits in public life as was done by Dr. Rajendra Prasad. Starting his public life in 1917 by joining Gandhi's anti-Indigo Planters agitation at Champaran in Bihar, he remained in the forefront of the subtle move on the part of certain people to steadfastly stand by 'all that is good and noble in Indian culture' by practicing that with a fair degree of pragmatism and conviction till his death in 1963. As a result, despite sometimes being accused of acting in a conservative and orthodox fashion, Rajendra Babu never succumbed to such apparently motivated allegations if he was convinced of the veracity and utility of what he professed and practiced. Indeed, the course of the public life of Dr. Rajendra Prasad moved in such a way that throughout his life he remained a devoted and scrupulous disciple of Mahatma Gandhi. Yet, his apparently disciplined and unassuming life was marked by a number of historically significant events when he was asked to discharge such leadership responsibilities that demonstrated the subtle and unmatched qualities of statesmanship, pragmatism and conviction of his pioneering leadership. For instance, in the pre independence times, his assuming the charge of the Congress President-ship in 1934 afforded a novel opportunity for Rajendra Babu to articulate his opinions on the numerous critical issues bothering the minds of the Congress leaders. In other words, his Presidential speech at the 48th session of the Indian National Congress in Bombay might be reckoned as a sort of treasure trove of ideas that unambiguously demonstrated his qualities of statesmanship at a time when the frontline Congress leadership had been made defunct by the colonial government. Similarly, his becoming the President of the Constituent Assembly in 1946 also marked a turning point in the life of Rajendra Babu as it provided him an opportunity to prove his superlative quality of pragmatism by bringing about an accommodation and ensuring conciliation amongst the competing claims in the Constituent Assembly. Undoubtedly, framing of the Constitution was arguably one of the most difficult and complicated tasks of the time given the highest degree of rivalry amongst the competing claims and constitutional options available to the framers of the Constitution. In fact, there was apparently no clause of the Constitution on which contradictory opinions were not expressed by members of the Constituent Assembly and plausibility of one alternative over the other was not forcefully argued by their proponents. In such seemingly stupendous circumstances, the pragmatism and tactfulness of Dr. Rajendra Prasad was at test. And, successful completion of the proceedings of Constituent Assembly and smooth passage of the Constitution by it bore the testimony of the highest degree of persuasion and leadership showed by Rajendra Babu in conducting the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly as its President. Finally, probably the greatest responsibility that was bestowed on the shoulders of Dr. Rajendra Prasad was to become the first President of the Republic of India. His twelve years stint as the President of India brought Rajendra Babu face to face with the various alterations and modifications being suggested and planned in the socio-economic and political fabric of the country from various quarters. Amidst such far-reaching suggestions for transforming the value systems of the country, Dr. Rajendra Prasad had his own independent thinking on numerous issues in question. Moreover, he did not hesitate to hold on to his position despite the risk of being called a conservative and orthodox. Indeed, his courage of conviction led him to stick to his position in so far as his personal opinions were concerned. But as a pragmatic statesman, he accepted the imperatives of smooth functioning of the Constitution by giving his assent to even those bills and enactments that did not appear

congruent with personal views of the President Dr. Prasad. Thus, during his Presidentship, though he never yielded ground on the issues over which he was totally convinced of the veracity of his opinion, as a pragmatic statesman, he never tried to stubbornly sabotage the smooth functioning of the Constitution by putting his foot down on any particular issue. Rather, he evolved a middle way of giving his official assent while holding on to his personal opinion on such matters. The paper, therefore, seeks to unravel certain understudied aspects of the pioneering leadership of Dr. Rajendra Prasad that testify the virtues of statesmanship, pragmatism and courage of conviction throughout his public life in various phases. The three distinct phases of the life of Rajendra Babu forming the core of this paper include his Presidentship of the 48th session of the Indian National Congress held at Bombay in 1934, his term as the President of the Constituent Assembly during the period of 1946-1950 and his tenure as the President of the Indian republic for two terms spanning 1950-1962.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad was one of those nationalist leaders in India who displayed exemplary traits of statesmanship despite never holding any official position in the colonial British India administration at any point of time in his life. However, an outstanding event that gave him an opportunity to show his statesmanship seems to be his becoming the President of the Indian National Congress at its 48th session at Bombay in 1934. The Presidential speech that Rajendra Babu delivered during this time reflected the comprehensiveness of his thinking, maturity of his thoughts, discerning capability to identify the burning issues of his time, critical perspective on the British designs for India and a thoughtful plan of action for future, among others. The timing of shouldering this onerous responsibility was quite challenging for Rajendra Babu as most, if not all, of the front ranking leaders of the Congress including Mahatma Gandhi were rendered out of action due to extreme atrocities of the colonial government. It was in those trying times that Dr. Rajendra Prasad had to provide a pioneering leadership to the Indian National Congress, and in a way, to the masses of the country in such a mature and fabulous manner as a statesman provides leadership to his country and people in difficult situations. And, to our minds, there would be no denying the fact that Rajendra Babu shouldered that responsibility outstandingly providing a new sense of self-confidence and belligerence amongst the nervous masses, thereby, doing the basic spade work to put the movement for nationalist struggle back on the track.

With the objective of infusing a new blood in the moribund nationalist mindset, the substantive part of the speech of Dr. Rajendra Prasad began with reminding the delegates of the glorious history of Congress for the past fifty years and an undying courage of the people in bearing with the British repression for the cause of the independence of their motherland. Insightfully bringing out the sinister designs of the colonial rulers in the garb of the Gandhi-Irwin pact, he congratulated the people for bearing the colonial repression time and again to keep the flame of nationalist struggle burning alight all the time. As he put it, in the context of failure of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, 'The Congress was taken unawares and Government expected that they would be able to crush the whole movement within a fortnight. In spite of want of preparation, in spite of sudden removal of all the prominent Congress workers throughout the country within a few days to prison, when they were not able to give instructions to their followers as to how to organize the campaign, it must be said to the credit of the nation that the lead, which had been given by the Working Committee, was faithfully and spontaneously followed. Thousands again courted imprisonment, lathi charge, firings, heavy fines, confiscation of property, and beatings on an extensive scale.'

The vigilant eyes of Dr Rajendra Prasad were able to unambiguously expose the hidden agenda and dual character of the policies enunciated by Lord Irwin during this time. Moreover, the disproportionate weight being given to the repressive element of this policy drew scathing attack from Rajendra Babu in unequivocal terms. Venting his ire against this policy, he eloquently noted, 'It has been claimed by the Government that this double policy, on the one hand aims at advancing constitutional reforms, and on the other seeks to suppress what the Government considers to be subversive and revolutionary movements...To Indian it seems that the

second policy has not only been much more in evidence and has caused untold suffering to numberless people, but is responsible for the issuing of Ordinances and the enactments of laws which have taken away even the ordinary rights of citizenship and laid down drastic penalties and suppressed not only what may be regarded as subversive movements but effectively prevented perfectly constitutional agitation also. The reforms side of the policy has succeeded only in feeding credulous people on hopes of something which may not come.'

The basic thrust of the Presidential address of Dr. Rajendra Prasad was to provide a brief yet stinging critique of the White Paper issued by the British Government to articulate its proposals on the future of Indian political scenario. In a bid to hit hard where it pained the most, Rajendra Babu picked up four aspects of the White Paper to prove that it utterly failed to reflect even the bare minimum feelings and aspirations of the Indians. In nutshell, these aspects were, '(1) how far the proposed new legislature will be representative to the nation; (2) how far the powers alleged to be transferred to popular control are real in the Centre and the Provinces; (3) what the powers proposed to be transferred in regard to the finances are, and what additional burden India will have to bear; (4) whether the new Constitution contains within itself any elements of growth and development.'

Further, on the issue of composition of federal legislature, Rajendra Babu was able to sense the vicious designs of the British Government. Precisely, under the garb of the representation of States in federal legislature, the colonial government wanted to tighten its grip on this supreme legislative body in India. As he forcefully argued, 'It is sought to replace the bloc of officials and non-officials nominated by the Government by nominees of Indian States joining the federation. The nominated officials and non-officials of British India cannot be said to be amenable to popular opinion but they have certainly a wider outlook and have more contact with public opinion than any nominee of the State could be. They also feel a sense of responsibility, even though it is to the British Government, and not to the people of India. Will the States have been in a way kept segregated? The only effect of the replacement of the nominated bloc of States' nominees will be a tightening of the British control coupled with traditions of more autocratic rule and greater disregard of popular wishes than we are accustomed to in British India and which these nominees will bring with themselves. At the same time, he also opposed the creation of a second chamber in the legislature of provinces, despite a number of arguments being advanced in its favors. He strongly declared that, 'whatever justification there may be for a Second Chamber in the Federal Legislature like that of the Provinces, there is no justification for the extra expenditure involved in setting up and maintaining these Second Chambers. Similarly, he offered a stunningly insightful and viable critique of other core provisions of the White paper as mentioned above, in such a way that it appeared as if he had a long and rich experience of being part of some governing echelon to gain such a vibrant notion of statesmanship.

Presumably, the inbuilt trait of statesmanship engraved in the personality of Dr. Rajendra Prasad got reflected in not only in his Endeavour to unearth the hidden agenda of the British government to sabotage the momentum of the Indian National Movement but also in the constructive plans and programmers that he envisaged as the President of the Indian National Congress. He made it amply clear that suspension of the Civil Disobedience Movement was a strategic move on the part of the Congress and Mahatma Gandhi. In its place, he commended the decision of the Congress Working Committee to go for the Council Entry Programme which would not only enable the Congress members to get some sort of first hand experience in governance of the country under the format of the parliamentary constitutional government but would also act as a check on the British government to get anti-people and anti-national programmes and laws approved by the legislature. However, despite the euphoria of Council Entry Programme, Rajendra Babu did not forget to remind the countrymen about the dreams of his leader Mahatma Gandhi even in times of being busy with the political activities. In other words, he called upon the people to remain loyal to the virtues of truth, non-violence, Khadi, reform and revolution through conversion, not compulsion that Gandhi endeared throughout. The statesmanship of Dr. Rajendra Prasad was, therefore, quite evident in his presidential speech for at least two reasons. First, as a seasoned politician and leader of the masses, he was able to assuage the morale of the apparently demoralized masses of the country by not only narrating the glorious past of the Congress but also by exposing the vicious agenda of

the British Government which it tried to pursue through the White Paper. Second, he did not leave the people groping in dark amidst pall of gloom subsequent to the withdrawal of the Civil Disobedience Movement and went a step ahead in providing a blueprint of policies and programmes rooted in the Gandhian philosophy to reinvigorate the dormant courage and enthusiasm of the people.

Pragmatism – As President of the Constituent Assembly

The pragmatism of Dr. Rajendra Prasad was probably most eloquently articulated during his stint as President of the Constituent Assembly from 1946-1950. Presumably, it was his pragmatic attitude towards mundane and not so mundane things of life that inspired overwhelming majority of members of Constituent Assembly to elect him its President despite subtle and clandestine opposition to his candidature by people like Jawaharlal Nehru. The process of constitution making in India appeared to be a stupendous task by any standard given the numerous competing claims and aspirations of various sections of society on the one hand, and the massive communal conundrum plaguing large part of the country in the course of partition of India. In such complex circumstances, the leadership of the Indian National Congress, particularly Mahatma Gandhi was in search of a pragmatic nationalist who could have handled the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly without fear or favour and have taken the difficult task of constitution making in the country to its logical conclusion. Moreover, a great degree of erudition and superb training in the legal profession would have been a bonus point for a person who would have been offered the President ship of the Constituent Assembly.

Apparently, therefore, the election of Dr. Rajendra Prasad as President of the Constituent Assembly was a well thought out decision on part of the Congress leadership despite certain hidden forces being at work to stop his elevation to that august office. In other words, what presumably would have gone in favour of Dr. Rajendra Prasad to become President of the Constituent Assembly were the well considered blessings of Mahatma Gandhi on one hand, and his overwhelming acceptability amongst members of the Constituent Assembly, barring a few implicit exceptions, on the other. His academic achievements and suave personality appeared to have been supplementary factors in his candidature for that position. It was not surprising, therefore, that one of the most respected members of the Constituent Assembly Shri Gopalaswami Ayyangar expressed almost similar feelings while articulating his opinion on election of Rajendra Babu as President of the Constituent Assembly. As he said, ‘Dr. Rajendra Prasad is taking over a very onerous responsibility. His life has been a life of dedication-dedication to the service of the country. It has been consecrated by unique sacrifice. It is unnecessary for me to speak of his great erudition, deep scholarship, wide knowledge of men and affairs-qualities which fit him eminently for the task in which he will have need for requisitioning all this equipment in the solution of the many baffling and intricate problems that are sure to confront him.’ Thus, the election of Dr. Rajendra Prasad as President of the Constituent Assembly was marked with high hopes and aspirations amongst the members of the Constituent Assembly keeping in view his unparalleled fitness for the task at hand.

The complexity and gravity of the task of constitution making testing the pragmatism of Dr. Rajendra Prasad appeared to be monumental. The competing claims of various members of the Constituent Assembly appeared to be enormous and sometimes Irreconcilable. Given the great standing and vast experiences of members of the Constituent Assembly, it was quite natural that they held strong views on numerous issues of the constitution making process. What was most vexing, hence, for the President of the Assembly was how to bring about a balance and congruence between two seemingly contrasting views on a particular subject. Furthermore, his own judgmental comments and observations on any issue in dispute would have easily led a member to charge the President with having some sort of bias or prejudices for or against a specific point. Thus, in discharging his duties as President of the Constituent Assembly Dr. Rajendra Prasad appeared to have been placed in the most piquant situation of earning the ire of members of the Assembly at the drop of the hat. It was in one such situation that Dr. Rajendra Prasad could not tolerate the insinuations at the hand of the members of the

Assembly and offered to quit the job. However, Mahatma Gandhi's intervention on the issue brought about some sort of end to acrimony on the issue and persuaded Rajendra Babu to continue in the exalted position. While asking him to continue, Gandhi's views on the character of Dr. Rajendra Prasad appeared most prophetic, 'If anyone else had wanted to do it, I would not have stood in his way. But it is not right that you should tender resignation simply because the question of your self-respect is involved. In public work, one should be prepared to bear up against insults, and should not give up on that account.' Subsequent withdrawal of resignation by Rajendra Babu not only showed his deep sense of respect and appreciation for the views of father of the nation but also proved his pragmatism at the difficult times of choosing between one's own self-respect and the larger cause of the nation and the masses. In other words, though Dr. Rajendra Prasad, being a man of highest order of self-respect and impeccable self-dignity could not tolerate any kind of aspersion on his personality on any account, the trait of pragmatism in his personality did not allow him to take his sense of self-respect and self-dignity to such an absurd level that could have been harmful to the interests of the nation and its people.

As President of the Constituent Assembly, pragmatism of Dr. Rajendra Prasad was not only demonstrated through his election to the august position and his tactful handling of proceedings of the Assembly but also in his wise and insightful conciliatory notes on the numerous provisions of the draft constitution at the times when members of the Assembly were unable to reach a minimum agreement on an issue. Interestingly, such occasions apparently were not just one or two but many. Arguably the credit, thus, might be given to the pragmatism of Rajendra Babu that he shouldered an onerous responsibility in minimizing the differences amongst members of the Assembly on such contentious issues. He even tried to bring about an agreement amongst the scholars on the issue of demarcating the true nature of the Constitution of India vis-à-vis its federal characteristics. Hence, while one group of people wanted to call it a federal Constitution, others wanted to brand it as a unitary one given its unique features favoring the Union Government. On this, the thoughtful though witty remark of Dr. Rajendra Prasad appeared quite insightful. As he argued, 'Whether you call it a federal Constitution or a unitary Constitution, or by any other name...it makes no difference so long as the Constitution serves the purpose.' In sum, therefore, it may be argued that the phase of Presidentship of the Constituent Assembly appears to be a distinct span in the life of Dr. Rajendra Prasad during which he undoubtedly showed exemplary trait of pragmatism in not only handling the precarious situations during the long span of working of the Constituent Assembly but also steered it through thick and thin to make it successfully draft one of world's lengthiest and unique Constitutions.

Conviction: As President of the Indian Republic

In contradistinction to his roles as the President of Indian National Congress in 1934 and President of the Constituent Assembly during 1946-50, the role of Dr. Rajendra Prasad as President of the Indian Republic during its formative years of 1950-62 may be argued to be most critical as well as controversial. Significantly, in his earlier avatars Rajendra Babu was able to adjust his personal convictions and views with requirements of the august offices he held as these apparently did not put any serious fetter on his personal beliefs. As a result, there did not appear any situation during these times when he had to take a formidable position on the issue even at the risk of being losing the goodwill of the people in order to protect his self-respect and self-beliefs. Things, however, underwent dramatic transformations after his assumption of the office of President of India. Purportedly, in the name of letter and spirit of the constitutional provisions, decency and dignity of the office of President, and above all, in the name of the titular nature of the Indian Head of State, a subtle move appeared on foot to throttle the personal views and beliefs of Dr. Rajendra Prasad not only on the constitutional provisions but also even on those issues that did not bind him to act according to the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers. Such a predicament in holding the office of President of India did not go well with the independent thinking and courage of conviction of Rajendra Babu. Consequently, while upholding the imperatives of the constitutional provisions in both letter and spirit, Dr. Rajendra Prasad did not appear to hesitate to air his views

on certain issues and topics if he felt very strongly about them notwithstanding its repercussions on his personality or his equations with the other stakeholders in the Indian political system. This trait of the pioneering leadership of Dr. Rajendra Prasad demonstrated his personality as a man having his own courage of conviction to stand by it in all circumstances.

On the constitutional front, the most famous case in which the independent yet restrained thinking of Dr. Rajendra Prasad was quite eloquently expressed to show him as a man of conviction appeared to be the Hindu Code Bill. While the Bill was enacted by the transitional Parliament to bring about fundamental changes in the Hindu personal law, Rajendra Babu raised two basic objections to such a measure when presented for his assent. One, he believed that the transitional Parliament that was originally the Constituent Assembly might not be empowered to bring about such a fundamental change in the personal law of the majority of people as its composition was for some different purpose and on different issue. Two, 'since it was supposed that interference with the personal law that governs members of a community following a particular religion meant no interference with the freedom of conscience, there is no reason why the same civil law relating to marriage, marital relations, inheritance, etc., should not govern members of all communities.' The raising of these objections by Dr. Rajendra Prasad was apparently taken affront by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as Prime Minister who referred the issue to the constitutional luminaries such M.C. Setalvad and A.K. Ayyangar. No doubt, the opinion of these people was in support of the stand taken by Nehru. But Dr. Rajendra Prasad refused to modify his views on the issue and reaffirmed that he still stood by what he had said earlier. However, when there appeared a possibility of constitutional deadlock, he dutifully gave his assent to the Bill in order to respect the essence of the Constitution and avoid any aspersion on the utility of the Constitution for the incipient democracy in India. Yet, personally, he never supported the Hindu Code Bill as he thought it to be unduly interfering with the personal matters of majority of the people in the country.

Rajendra Babu's spat with Nehru on the issue of Hindu Code Bill prompted many people to call him a revivalist and conservative. However, he argued that having faith in one's traditions, social and religious customs and age old conventions did not mean being revivalist and conservative. Rather, such a stand could have been taken only by a person who would take pride in his glorious and meaningful past practices and would seek to have continuing faith in them. He, therefore, undeterred by the charge of conservatism and obscurantism, showed his courage of conviction in following the classical Hindu traditions like touching the feet of elderly and learned people and washing their feet at times. For instance, in one of his visits to Varanasi, he undertook a classical Hindu function of washing the feet of learned and revered Vedic and Sanskrit scholars who had come to Varanasi to attend a session of the Vishwa Sanskrit Parishad. When some people questioned his act on the ground that such an act looked like washing the feet of Brahmins and therefore, would not look proper for the President of India as that would strengthen the revivalist and obscurantist elements of the Indian society, Rajendra Babu gave a terse reply to them. 'He did not wash their feet, he said, because they were Brahmins, for he had washed a non-Brahmin's (Sampurnanand's) feet as well. It was learning and mastery of the Vedic lore that he had honored. Washing the feet was a mere symbol. If honoring knowledge and dedicated scholarship meant revivalism in the eyes of some, he could not help their wrong grasp of things.' The courage of conviction of Rajendra Babu, thus, was at his pinnacle in justifying his simple act of honoring the learned and revered people as has been the practice in the country for centuries.

In addition to the constitutional and personal matters, Dr. Rajendra Prasad showed his courage of conviction in raising the issues of political decay and corruption in high places in the country in a blatant and forceful manner, notwithstanding the fact that such actions would not have been to the liking of the people in the higher echelons of power. Unmindful of the acceptance or non-acceptance of his views by the government, 'he never failed to warn the government through advice and counsel, against the policies which he thought were not likely to prove beneficial to the country and the people. In every case he offered alternative suggestions, giving

reasons why he differed from the government's stand.' In brief, the personal views of Dr. Rajendra Prasad differing with the official stand of the Government of India ranged from the Hindu Code Bill to that of educational schemes, centre-state relations, appointment of governors, linguistic reorganization of states, common script for Hindi and other Indian languages, amongst others. While his views on such issues fell on deaf years in the government circles, they, nonetheless, showed the courage of conviction of Rajendra Babu to put forward his views given his strong opinion about them.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

In final analysis, Dr. Rajendra Prasad was a man of his own convictions. Right from his childhood, he showed exemplary conviction of doing what he thought fit. For instance, given the fact that he was brought up by his elder brother as his father had passed away in his early childhood, he needed to have shared the family burden of his elder brother. But his urge for serving the cause of the country became so strong that he shed his family responsibilities with due apologies to his brother to join the national movement at an early age. What however apparently supplemented the courage of conviction of Rajendra Babu were his deep erudition, pragmatic approach to life and his worldly wisdom in perceiving and articulating things in such a fashion that it looked logical and systematic. As a result, he was able to shoulder almost each and every responsibility that was bestowed on him with highest degree of efficiency and precision. His life, therefore, appears to be a life in articulating the numerous traits of a leader whose tireless efforts in the cause of serving the people became an example for others to emulate. Clearly, it may be said with a fair degree of truth that he represented a unique personality having a blend of both tradition and modernity, conviction and flexibility, rationality and emotions, highest degree of ego and sitting in the feet of Mahatma, among others. Nonetheless, his long stint in public life shouldering numerous responsibilities over the years remained an impeccable example of a man known for his statesmanship, pragmatism and conviction. Even today, he happens to be a role model for many a people in the country who love India by believing in her past, present and future. The trampling march of modernization and westernization, finding much acceptance at the hands of rulers of independent India, could not shake him from holding his own beliefs and convictions rooted in indigenous philosophical traditions and cultural ethos of India.

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