

THE MAKING OF A STATESMAN: RAJENDRA PRASAD AS THE PRESIDENT OF THE CONGRESS AND CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to examine the line of action undertaken by Rajendra Prasad as the president of Indian National Congress and of the constituent assembly which made him a statesman. This exercise would be done in the light of relevant primary and secondary sources.

Keywords: *Gandhian politics, Champaran Satyagraha, Congress leadership*

INTRODUCTION

Rajendra Prasad was a man of diverse abilities. He was a brilliant lawyer, a prolific writer and a passionate patriot with the ability to connect with the masses. His consuming interest in politics developed from his growing anti-colonial feelings. He entered into the nationalist politics in a concrete manner during Mahatma Gandhi's Champaran Satyagraha. Since then, he threw a powerful influence in favour of association of the masses in Bihar with the Gandhian politics. For more than a decade his political activities were mainly confined to Bihar. During the Non-Cooperation movement, he endeavoured to give effect to the Gandhian mode of politics throughout the province.

It was, however, during the Civil Disobedience movement, he played a major role in transforming the Congress in Bihar "into a mass based efficient political organization which made very significant inroads into the countryside." Furthermore, during the relief work in earthquake-ravaged area of Bihar, his dedication and selfless services immensely impressed the Congress leadership at all India level. Now, he acquired a respectable place in the inner counsels of the Congress leadership. He was brought to the national political arena and in 1934, he was elected to the Congress presidency. Twelve years hence in 1946, he was again given another challenging assignment as the president of the constituent assembly. Here to, he proved himself worthy of it.

Rajendra Prasad assumed the presidentship of the Indian National Congress at its 48th session held at Worli in Bombay on 26-28 October 1934. It was the first regular session after an interval of three and a half years. This position provided a variety of opportunities to Rajendra Prasad to articulate his opinions and exercise his decisions on various critical issues confronting the Congress leadership. He had to wrestle with a number of historically significant issues. In tackling all these he showed political acumen and pragmatism. Likewise, when the Constituent Assembly

was created to frame the India's constitution, he was elected on 11th December 1946 as its permanent president, he displayed ample political wisdom and qualities of statesmanship. The framing of the constitution for vast country of 400 million people with all their diversities and differences was a colossal task. It was also one of the most complicated tasks because of the varying degree of rivalry among the competing claims and constitutional options available to the framers of the constitution.

In spite of all these, under Rajendra Prasad's able guidance, it was accomplished within three years. Apparently, there was no clause of the constitution on which contradictory opinions were not expressed by the members of the Constituent Assembly and the plausibility of one alternative over the other was not forcibly argued by the people. Under such stupendous situation the ability, pragmatism and faithfulness of Rajendra Prasad was at test. It was largely on account of Rajendra Prasad's able guidance that it became possible for the Constituent Assembly to complete the Constitution within three years.

AS THE PRESIDENT OF THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

Before becoming president of the Congress, Rajendra Prasad has served in the Congress organization in Bihar in various capacities. He was elected Assistant Secretary of the Bihar Provincial Congress committee in 1917 and continued to that position until December 1920. In August 1920, he presided over the special session of the Bihar Provincial Conference held at Bhagalpur which adopted the non-cooperation programme by an overwhelming majority. He was secretary of the organising committee of the much-publicised Congress session held at Gaya in December 1922, wherein the council entry resolution moved by the President of this session, C.R. Das was defeated. In 1928, he was elected Secretary of the Bihar Provincial Congress Committee and in the next year he became its President and settled its tone and tenor for more than a decade. Besides, he had also worked as the Chairman of the Reception Committee of the Hindu Mahasabha held at Gaya in December 1922 at the Congress pandal. In 1923, he was appointed as the working general secretary of All India Hindu Mahasabha. Thus, it is quite clear that Rajendra Prasad had acquired ample organisational experience and when he assumed the charge of the Congress Presidency all these proved as assets for him.

To him, the Bombay session of the Congress which he presided over was an outstanding event that gave him an appropriate opportunity to showcase his statesmanship. His presidential address of this session reflected the broadness of his understanding, comprehensiveness of his thinking, maturity of his ideals, discerning capability to identify burning issues of his time, critical perspective on the British designs for India and a thought plan of action for future among others. In a sense, the timings of shouldering onerous responsibility were quite challenging for Rajendra Prasad as most of the front-ranking leaders of the Congress including Mahatma Gandhi were rendered out of the action due to the atrocities of the colonial government. It was in such trying times that Rajendra Prasad had to provide a befitting leadership to the Indian National Congress and also to the masses of the country in a mature and fabulous manner as a statesman provides leadership to his country and people in difficult situations. Rajendra Prasad proved himself worthy

of it as he shouldered that responsibility outstandingly and provided a new sense of self confidence and belligerence amongst the beleaguered masses. He did the basic spade work to bring back the nationalist movement on the track as had been pioneered by Mahatma Gandhi.

In order to infuse a new spirit and a much-needed momentum in the moribund nationalist mindset, the substantive part of his presidential address began with the reminding the delegates of the glorious history of the Congress for the past fifty years. He also dwelt upon the undying courage of the Indian people in bearing with the British repression for the cause of India's freedom. Furthermore, he brought out the sinister designs of the colonial government in the grab of the Gandhi-Irwin pact signed on 5th March 1931 and congratulated the people for bearing the colonial repression times and again to keep the flames of nationalist struggle burning alight. In the context of failure of the Gandhi-Irwin pact he expressed: '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 Prasad 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 it 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 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 Prasad 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 the composition of federal legislature, Rajendra Prasad was

able to sense the vicious designs of the British Government. Precisely, under the garb of the representation of States in the 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 favour. 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 inbuilt trait of statesmanship engraved in the personality of 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 programmes 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 Programmed, Rajendra Prasad 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 Rajendra Prasad, therefore, was 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 pursued 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.

AS PRESIDENT OF THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY

The pragmatism of Rajendra Prasad was probably most eloquently articulated during his stint as the 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 the members of the Constituent Assembly to elect him its President despite subtle and clandestine opposition to his candidature by the 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 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 Rajendra Prasad as the President of the Constituent Assembly was a well thought out decision on the 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 Rajendra Prasad to become the President of the Constituent Assembly were the well-considered blessings of the 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, one of the most respected members of the Constituent Assembly Shri Gopaldaswami Ayyangar expressed almost similar feelings while articulating his opinion on election of Rajendra Prasad as the President of the Constituent Assembly. As he said, '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 Rajendra Prasad as the President of the Constituent Assembly was marked with high hopes and aspirations amongst the members of the Constituent Assembly keeping in view his superlative fitness for the task at hand.

The complexity and gravity of the task of constitution making testing the pragmatism of Rajendra Prasad appeared to be monumental. The competing claims of the various members of the Constituent Assembly appeared to be enormous and sometimes irreconcilable. Given the great standing and vast experiences of the 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 the 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 the President of the Constituent Assembly Rajendra Prasad appeared to have been placed in the most piquant situation of earning the ire of the members of the Assembly at the drop of the hat. It was in one such situation that 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 Prasad to continue in the exalted position. While asking him to continue, Gandhi's views on the character of 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 Prasad not only showed his deep sense of respect and appreciation for the views of the 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 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 Rajendra Prasad was not only demonstrated through his election to the august position and his tactful handling of the 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 the 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 Prasad that he shouldered an onerous responsibility in minimizing the differences amongst the 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 favouring the Union Government. On this, the thoughtful though witty remark of 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 Rajendra Prasad during which he arguably showed exemplary trait of pragmatism in not handling the precarious situations during the long span of the 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.

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, Rajendra Prasad was a leader of deep 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 Prasad 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. Though the domain of this paper is confined to point out only a few matchless traits of his pioneering leadership, 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.

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