



DR. RAJENDRA PRASAD



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One of the chief architects of modern India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad was an eminent freedom fighter, a renowned jurist, an eloquent parliamentarian, an able administrator, a statesman par excellence and above all, a humanist to the core. An ardent follower of Mahatma Gandhi, he represented all that is best in Indian culture. As the President of the Constituent Assembly and subsequently as the President of India for two consecutive terms, Dr. Rajendra Prasad played a very important role in shaping the destiny of the nation and left an indelible imprint of his personality on our national life and polity.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad, affectionately addressed as 'Rajen Babu', was born at Village Ziradei in Saran district (now in Siwan) of Bihar on 3 December 1884. His parents, Mahadev Sahay and Kamaleshwari Devi, led a simple life even though the family had sufficient landed property. The environment at home in particular, and in his village in general, which symbolized peace and serenity, had a profound impact on the mind of young Rajen resulting in the inculcation in him of the finest ideals of fellow-feeling, selfless service, sacrifice, humility and simplicity.

Rajendra Prasad began his early education at the age of five under the guidance of a village *Maulvi* who also taught him Persian. Later, he went to a High School in Chhapra district from where he passed the entrance examination of the University of Calcutta with flying colours and joined the prestigious Presidency College, Calcutta*. Soon, he became very popular in the College and was elected by a huge margin to the post of Secretary of the College Union. After his post-graduation, he also completed his studies in law and started legal practice in Calcutta in 1911. Very soon, he built up a large clientele, not merely because of his legal acumen, but also because of his noble character and innate integrity, which earned him the praise and respect of the judges and his colleagues. Once, when he was arguing a case before the eminent jurist and scholar Justice Ashutosh Mukherjee, who was also the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Calcutta, the latter

*Now known as Kolkata.

was so much impressed by Rajendra Prasad's style of presentation of the case and forcefulness of arguments that he offered him a faculty position in the Law Department of the University, which Rajendra Prasad accepted with humility. He completed his Master of Law in 1915 by topping the list. In 1916, after the creation of the Patna High Court, Rajendra Prasad started practising at Patna.

Rajendra Prasad came under the spell of Mahatma Gandhi in 1917 when the latter organized the Champaran Satyagraha to liberate the peasants from exploitation by the British Indigo planters. Gandhiji invited Rajendra Prasad and some other advocates to assist him in the cause of the affected peasants. The Champaran Satyagraha not only brought him closer to Mahatma Gandhi, but also changed the entire course of his life. Under the active guidance of Mahatma Gandhi, he gave a new lead to the various movements in Bihar, with a view to taking the country nearer to the goal of freedom and economic regeneration. Inspired by Gandhian ideology, his clarion call to the countrymen and his distinct and unprecedented mode of protest against the colonial rulers, Rajendra Prasad took the plunge into the political struggle with the unflinching aim of freeing the country from the clutches of colonialism.

The Rowlatt Act of 1918 and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 pushed Rajendra Prasad closer to Gandhiji; he concurred with Gandhiji that the only effective weapon to deal with the British Government's inhuman actions and repressive laws was 'non-cooperation'. He was the first leader from Bihar to sign and undertake a pledge requiring every Satyagrahi to remain non-violent during the protest against the Rowlatt Act which came to be dubbed as the 'Black Act'. It was around this time that Rajendra Prasad gave up the lucrative law practice to fully devote himself to the cause of liberation of the Motherland.

In 1923, Rajendra Prasad actively participated in the Flag Satyagraha at Nagpur. During this period, he came into close contact with Sardar Patel whose friendship and association he cherished as one of the most pleasant memories of his life. The British Government arrested him for taking part in the 1930 Salt Satyagraha. The second long spell of imprisonment that Rajendra Prasad suffered was immediately after the passing of the Quit India Resolution in 1942 and he remained in jail for nearly three years till 1945.

Joining the Indian National Congress as an ordinary worker, Rajendra Prasad served the organization in various capacities for more than four decades. For him, the Indian National Congress was an instrument for serving the people and fighting for the cause of India's freedom. Even when he had a flourishing law practice, he devoted his time to the Congress. After the Indian National Congress declared *Swaraj* as its ultimate goal at its Nagpur Session in 1920, Rajendra Prasad toured the length and breadth of Bihar, explaining to the people the plans and programmes of the movement. He was elected President of the Indian National Congress in 1935 and again in 1939 following the resignation of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. He was elected President of the Congress for the third time in 1947, following the resignation of Acharya J.B. Kripalani.

Rajendra Prasad demonstrated his effectiveness and skills as a negotiator whenever he was called upon to do so. Along with Sardar Patel, he served on the Partition Council set up under the Chairmanship of Lord Mountbatten. It was primarily because of his clear perception, farsightedness and dexterity that he was able to obtain an equitable, just and fair settlement of the assets and liabilities, and settle various issues relating to Central Services, currency and coinage, economic relations, armed forces and so on, in favour of India.

In 1946, Rajendra Prasad joined the Interim Government of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as the Minister of Food and Agriculture. A firm believer in the maximization of agricultural production and amelioration of the lot of the peasants, he gave the slogan of "Grow More Food". The Ministry of Food and Agriculture, under his able and active guidance, launched an effective campaign to that end. In view of his family background and active involvement in the cause of the peasants, he believed that any effort to integrate the village life should be based on the Gandhian values.

When the Constituent Assembly was formed in 1946 to frame a Constitution for free India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, who had been elected as a member of the Assembly from the Bihar Province, was given the onerous responsibility of being its President. As President of the Constituent Assembly, he guided and regulated its proceedings with utmost firmness, infinite patience, incisive intellect and abundant grace. He always permitted members to have a free, frank and full discussion on issues before them and won the appreciation of every section of the House for his leadership qualities, objectivity and impartiality. When the

Constitution was finally adopted on 26 November 1949, Rajendra Prasad, in his characteristic humility, heartily congratulated all the members of the Constituent Assembly for accomplishing the stupendous task of framing the Constitution.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad was unanimously elected as the provisional President of India on 24 January 1950, the penultimate day of the last session of the Constituent Assembly. He took the oath of office on 26 January 1950. It was indeed a rare honour that the person who presided over the Constitution-making body was also given the equally challenging task of defending, protecting and preserving the Constitution. In 1952, he was elected as the first President of the Republic of India and was re-elected as the President of India for the second term in 1957.

Rajendra Prasad, alongwith India's first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, was able to establish many precedents and conventions culminating in a healthy political relationship between the Head of State and the Head of Government. With the passage of time, these precedents have become the cornerstone of our vibrant parliamentary democracy and have helped it in striking firm roots.

Even though Rajendra Prasad occupied the highest office in India, he led a very simple life. His integrity, purity of character, humility and devotion, love of humanity and depth of vision marked him out as a towering personality in our national firmament. Rajendra Prasad not only gave the most precious years of his life to the freedom struggle but also worked for the betterment of the under-privileged throughout his life. He was a great humanist whose heart always went to the poor and the distressed. It was his total identification with the needy and the deprived and the spirit of dedication for their cause, which endeared him to millions of his countrymen. In fact, realising his selflessness and dedicated social work, way back in January 1934, even the British Government had released Rajendra Prasad from jail to enable him to lead the Relief Committee to help the victims of the earthquake that had devastated Bihar at that time. Rajendra Prasad threw his heart and soul into the relief work and the whole nation appreciated the zeal, sincerity and humaneness with which he organized the relief services. A year later, when another earthquake hit Quetta*, he

*Now in Pakistan.

was again chosen as the President of the Quetta Earthquake Relief Committee. Whatever work he took upon himself, he did it with total devotion, selflessness and sensitivity. In this sense, he was indeed a *Karmayogi*.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad was a litterateur in his own right. Besides Hindi, he was well-versed in Sanskrit, Urdu, Persian and English. He wrote a number of books in English and Hindi, apart from editing a few newspapers. In the early 1920s, he took up the editing of a Hindi weekly *Desh* and an English biweekly, *Searchlight*. He also authored several books including *India Divided*, *Rajendra Prasad—Autobiography* and *At the Feet of Mahatma Gandhi*.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad relinquished the office of the President of India in 1962, an office which he had adorned for 12 long years and shifted to an Ashram in Patna. He spent the remaining part of his life in its peaceful and quiet surroundings and passed away on 28 February 1963. The entire nation mourned the sad demise of this colossus who had strode across India's national scene for decades. Condoling the death of Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the then President of India, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, described him as "an outstanding patriot and a selfless worker in the cause of our freedom whose sacrificial services will always be remembered". The then Vice-President of India and Chairman of Rajya Sabha, Dr. Zakir Husain, described Dr. Rajendra Prasad as "a perfect gentleman, the embodiment of the best in Indian life, a symbol of the good... whose extreme simplicity, great humility and complete lack of ostentation marked him out as a man of the people, the people he struggled to secure freedom for and guided in shaping a worthy life in the newly won freedom...". The Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said: "Rajendra Babu's death removes one of the greatest of our leaders, one who was so closely connected with Gandhiji. The great part he played in our independence struggle is a shining chapter in our history". Paying tributes to Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the then Speaker of Lok Sabha, Sardar Hukam Singh, described him as "a great freedom fighter and an ardent patriot who laid the foundations and established traditions worthy of the constitutional Head of a State".

In recognition of the yeoman's service rendered by this illustrious son of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad was conferred the *Bharat Ratna*, the nation's highest civilian award, in 1963.