



Reconstructing a Humane ideology of Social and Political Coexistence-Ontology of an Indian President and his Prose

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Abstract

President as a writer juxtaposes the roles of policy maker and path finder. A nation in its nascence needs a humane head which has been exemplified in the life, thought and work of India's first President, Rajendra Prasad. In this paper an ontological study of his text, *Constructive Programme – Some Suggestions*, is undertaken by entwining the genuine soul force of the persona. The ideas of social and political coexistence and avenues towards their realization, sustainability of economic systems in the onslaught of globalization and the protection of the essential humanity to safeguard the human rights find expression in the analysis of the writing of the President. The thoughts published some 80 years ago still carry strong strands of relevance to the contemporary thought on social, political and economic issues troubling the nation and world alike. The progressive humane ideology enunciated in the ontological discourse heralds a major initiative in the social reconstruction of the nation.

Key Words: Humane ideology, coexistence, tolerance, equality, untouchability, ontology, Indian President, Prose text, social and economic reconstruction

Introduction

Rajendra Prasad was the first President of India. By virtue of his elder statesmanship and abiding innate concern for the people he was the natural choice for the post of the President of India in the troubled times of 40's and 50's to steer the nation on to its cherished goalposts. He worked as the President of the Constituent Assembly of India (from 1947 to 1949) which drafted and approved the Constitution of India. He presided over its proceedings with utmost sincerity, infinite patience and rare courage and allowed time and space for different points of view which ultimately resulted in the drafting of world's one of the strongest constitutions. One of his biographers observes: "As President his contribution to the reconciliation of internal contradictions – a legacy of the British policy of divide and rule – was substantial. His judicious temper guaranteed equality to all, irrespective of caste, creed or politics; deep erudition provided the right perspective for guiding the deliberations of the Assembly, and for holding the balance between the desire to have a strong Central Government and the urge to protect the freedom of the individual; high sense of moral values and his gentle affable temperament endeared him to all sections of the Assembly." The Presidentship of the Assembly acted as a launch pad for him to

become the first President of India during the period from 1952 to 1962.

Rajendra Prasad was generally considered as a Saint President of India because of his courteous behaviour and moral certitude. He, throughout his life, stood for faith in god, humility of spirit, habit of disinterested action, healthy conventions and deep-rooted devotion to dharma (righteousness). Dalai Lama in his autobiographical book, *Freedom in Exile*, described him as a "true Bodhisattva" and averred that his humility brought tears to his eyes. While speaking on Rajendra Prasad's election as President of the Constituent Assembly of India, Dr. S Radhakrishnan portrays Rajendra Prasad as a "spirit of gentleness, the Gospel of India. He is the soul of goodness. He has great patience and courage. He is the suffering savant of India." Rajendra Prasad is marked by his traditional outlook and religious orientation to life that had been untouched by orthodoxy and for his genuine interest in seeking the middle path. He was an epitome of all the essence of Hindu way of life and was a real Karma Yogi. He was a Gandhian who was influenced by the spiritual principles behind the working of Non-cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and the Satyagraha. His policy work on cooperative farming, redistribution of agricultural holdings, tribal welfare and promotion of cottage industries, basic system of education, and state support to agriculture has been monumental and pioneering. His suggestion of a tribunal to enquire into corruption cases in high offices has been the talk of the town which was the demand in the movement of Anna Hazare for the institution of Lok Pal in 2012.

Works of Prose

Rajendra Prasad was a veritable repository of wisdom and a man of deep thinking. His speeches and writings profoundly reflect a predominant streak of a thinking mind ever bent on objective action and deal with the themes of freedom struggle, Indian independence, social existence and human rights, Gandhiji and his impact and India-Pakistan divide. His prominent works include *Constructive Programme: Some Suggestions* (1942), *The League Demand* (1946), *India Divided* (1946), *Autobiography* (1946), *Our Constitution* (1950), *Asoka for the Young* (1953) and *At the feet of Mahatma Gandhi* (1955). The text, *Constructive Programme*, stands out in terms of current relevance to the public cause and contribution towards public discourse. Jayaprakash Narayan says, "As the President of India Rajendra Babu was truly above all party considerations and the matters that exercised his mind while he was holding the august office have greater relevance to our own times. It is a good augury that some of these ideals are today gaining increasing acceptance at the Government level." The presidential thought is analysed with reference to his text, *Constructive Programme – Some Suggestions*.

Constructive Programme – Some Suggestions

Gandhiji formulated a thirteen point constructive programme in his magazine, Harijan of 18 August 1940. In 1942, Rajendra Prasad brought forward his incisive action plan, an ontological model, to carry out the constructive programme that will uplift the nation and society through the sustained development of village economy. Seventeen areas have been identified for attention and action. He goes minutely to each issue that is mentioned in Gandhiji's programme in order to provide some guidance. The issues analysed and offered are: Hindu-Muslim Unity, removal of

untouchability, prohibition, Khadi and other village industry development, sanitation, basic education, adult education, uplift of women, education in hygiene and health, development of State language, economic equality and organization of farmers, workers and students. The methodology he followed in his writing traces a sequence: objective analysis of the problem, practical preaching, persuasive pleading and suave suggestions. The tone is that of an elder person attempting to set right the problem with a holistic approach hinged on time tested wisdom.

Hindu-Muslim or Communal Unity

Rajendra Prasad goes to the core of the issue and pin points the root cause of the Hindu-Muslim problem as mutual “distrust and suspicion” existing between the two communities. The evil spirit of mutually exclusive distrust permeated the national life and destroyed the social fabric. Rajendra Prasad immediately gets down to the solution by saying that ‘use of force’ should be renounced to restore amity between the two communities. Rajendra Prasad presents instance by instance where a problem can arise and offers a feasible solution. The nano extent to which Prasad labours to bend to accommodate both stances is indicative of his keen perception of the fragile feelings of both communities. The impassioned understanding is startlingly relevant even after sixty years of Independence that nobody can deny. “If either a Muslim or a Hindu wishes to build a mosque or dedicate a temple to an image on his own land, either should recognize the right of the other. If the azan of the Muslim or the arati of the Hindu disturbs either party, the temporary inconvenience must be borne with due regard to each other’s feelings. To preach and propagate one’s religion is the right of everyone. But in exercising the right, the utmost care must be taken not to hurt the feelings of those belonging to other faiths by decrying their creeds or their founders or revered saints. Conversion of a person from one faith to another is a common source of rousing bitter feelings of revenge. This should not be.”

Interestingly Rajendra Prasad nails down the fact that, political power is equipping the most subtle and terrible causes for the growing mutual distrust and doubt. He advises each community to discard the dangerous ambition or destructive desire to rule over others. He cautions that India being a large house of several communities, will definitely lead to disturbance of peace and prosperity if any one of them attempts to erect its supremacy. Rajendra Prasad offers a vigilant vision to the policy makers of the country by saying that generosity and justice need not be concepts in conflict. “Generosity is, in fact, a potent force in removing mistrust and ill-will. Cowardice and fear should have no place in our dealings. It is for political parties to devise ways and means of political nature for bridging the present gulf, but individual workers can make an enormous contribution by setting an example of tolerance and patience in the face of the utmost provocation. One golden rule to be scrupulously observed is not to judge others.” This is remarkable observation by Rajendra Prasad often missed by leaders of all political parties. When the objective of social service is an exalted one, then these petty issues will not crop up. Otherwise, there is always a scope for exploitation and abuse of human sentiments, which is evident throughout the recent history of post independent India. Throughout the exposition, Rajendra Prasad stands a visionary whose bottom-line understanding of the realities of Indian polity offer light to the present day policy makers.

Rajendra Prasad furthers his finely ground argument in the form of warning to all the parties involved. “Statements hastily issued to the Press, inaccuracy in facts, imputation of motives, and retaliation create bad blood and makes reconciliation difficult. Truth must be brought to light, but statements and counter statements often aggravate rather than mitigate ill will.”

Untouchability

Untouchability, a social evil practiced in India for a long time against Harijans, started as a social boycott of select individuals on the basis of wrong doing and later it was applied to their families and children too and acquired a false religious and caste sanction and has been perpetuated as a means of isolating certain sections of the society. It is similar to the practice of racial apartheid. It has been abolished by the Indian Constitution and is punishable under law.

Rajendra Prasad castigates untouchability as an “ugly manifestation of *himsa* (*violence*)” which acquired false sanctity as a religious practice in Indian society. Not seeing a Harijan’s face, not allowing them into streets of forward castes, not allowing them to enter the temples, not allowing them to draw water from the village wells etc. are instances of its practice. He opines that the reform should start at the individual level. Every individual should see that he/she should eschew untouchability at work place or domestic area and persuade others to follow. He says, “It is only by assiduous and untiring labour in these three spheres, viz. removal of the sin of untouchability in one’s own life, propaganda for its removal among the so called higher castes, and service of the Harijans themselves, that the problem can be successfully tackled.” *Adivasis* (Tribes) along with Harijan should merge in the mainstream. The role played by the Christian Missionaries laudable in improving the living standards of the victims of untouchability.

Rajendra Prasad’s narration of Gandhiji’s fight against the social evil, his opposition to the proposal of separate electorates, his agreement with Dr. Ambedkar on reservation of seats for oppressed classes, his coining of the term ‘Harijan’ for oppressed classes, the Harijan’s entry into temples, the opposition and discontent of the caste Hindus as well as the oppressed classes towards the doubtful nature of the social reform and its inclusion in the midst of intense freedom struggle which was supposed to dilute and divert the spirit of Satyagraha and the difference of opinion – offer an insight on the evolution of thought and seeds of the policies that have taken shape in the post Independence India. In this context he seeks to prove the efficacy of Gandhiji’s *Constructive Programme* thus: “The discontented elements did not realize that the basic cause of domination over us by a foreign power was our weaknesses and the cracks in our social structure. That was why Gandhiji laid emphasis on the constructive programme to remove these weaknesses. Looking back, today, I can say that we have had a large measure of success in removing untouchability...much remains to be done but when we see that the evil custom is centuries old, the idea entrenched in the innermost recesses of our being and the practice by and made an almost integral part of religion, the success so far achieved need not be underestimated.”

Village Economy

Gandhian ideology placed the village at the base of Indian economy. Ironic as it is, the decline of handicrafts has led to the ruin of villages and deterioration of agriculture and cottage industries. Electric rice and flourmills have replaced the traditional grinding system (pounding of grains) of villages which has not only caused unemployment but also reduced the vitamin value of food. Likewise spinning mills have destroyed Khadi industry.

Rajendra Prasad calls for the revival of *Khadi* and other traditional cottage industries in tandem with large-scale industries and desires a well-defined protective area for cottage industries against the marketing policies of big industries. In the context of globalization and its deeper impact on the economy of Indian villages, Rajendra Prasad's comments are worth reiterating. He declares that the decline of handicrafts has led to the ruin of villages and decreasing importance of agriculture and cottage industries. Rajendra Prasad says, "Now rice, flour and *dal* (pulse) mills have largely displaced the *dhenki* and *chakki* (manual grinder and crushers) and have not only cause unemployment but have also reduced the vitamin value of food to the detriment of our bodily health. Similarly, the damage done to the Khadi industry in the name of the mechanized spinning mills has been apparent throughout India. Rajendra Prasad's specific suggestions and measures even though made known to the world even in 1942, are applicable everywhere to keep the Indian village economy alive in the second millennium. Some of these measures and suggestion still carry greater weight in many of the developmental programmes that are initiated since independence by several state and central governments. In view of the latent and twice-born importance given to the healthy food making processes, organic manure and foods, it is highly imperative that specific attention has to be given to the advice presented by Rajendra Prasad.

Rajendra Prasad's comments have the ring of a modern economist and global environmentalist with reference to the subject of fossil fuel consumption. "It is important from the point of view of village economy to see that as far as possible our houses are made with materials found in the village and by the employment of village labour. There is an economy in nature, which the modern age seems to overlook. Geologists say that it takes millions of years to produce a lager of coal, mineral oil, iron ore or any other metal or mine product. We use coal, metals and mineral oils lavishly without any thought of replacing what we consume. Nature invariably observes this economy but we interfere with nature, in a sense, and in the pride of our scientific knowledge, we think nothing of exhausting nature's store." Rajendra Prasad avers carefully that we have to be alert to our requirements and see what best can be extracted from the nature without upsetting the balance and which can be easily manufactured in villages. In 1940s, Rajendra Prasad called for the revival of traditional handicrafts and cottage industries in each village so that multiple sprouts of nature friendly small-scale industrialization can support the large-scale industrialization for certain requirements of the nation. R.L. Handa comments appreciatively of Rajendra Prasad's far sightedness and deep thinking as far as policy making of the nation is concerned. "It is an interesting coincidence that the solution that Rajendra Prasad suggested twenty –three years ago is the same that the Janata

government has thought of in recent months. Referring to the competition between small-scale and big industries and the marketing of their products, the President suggested that in order to eliminate the element of unhealthy competition, a well-defined sector should be reserved for cottage industries, exclusively..." Here in India, "we may be said to be at the cross roads, which made it obligatory on our part to consider the whole question of industrialization in the Indian context." Having despaired of any of the leaders in or outside the government standing up against the official trend, the President jotted down what reads almost like a prophecy: "But there seems to be none with the vision, understanding and strength of conviction to raise it and everything that is being done is taken as a matter of course. But some day – and that sooner the better – that will have to be raised and discussed."

Sanitation – Swatch Bharat

Rajendra Prasad rightly considers personal hygiene and community sanitation as one of the primary necessities of the society. The reading of his suggestions regarding the personal cleanliness establish Rajendra Prasad as a believer in discipline at individual level and a clinical observer of the Indian practices of personal behaviour. "The evil habits of throwing anything almost anywhere, of spitting and cleaning the nose in the house or veranda or compounds of houses or on the streets, of answering the calls of nature near the dwelling houses or in drains or on public thoroughfares or near tanks and rivers without so much as covering the excreta with clean earth, have got to be eliminated. All these are potent causes of disease and a perfect nuisance for our neighbours. An enormous amount of wealth is wasted too by these not being conserved properly as they should be for purposes of manure." He demands the citizens to be inspired with an intelligent understanding of the dangers and ugliness of insanitation and insanitary habits. He castigates the habits of soiling the waters of rivers and lakes through the bathing of cattle and using the same water from the same source for drinking and cooking. Still in many parts of India, this is a common sight.

New or basic education

Rajendra Prasad's viewpoint on Gandhiji's tenets of basic education reflects broadly the ideas of ideal education. The present day education system led the man nowhere except the deadening the senses. The observations made in 1940's still carry the contemporary relevance with heightened intensity and requests a complete shift from the literacy system that is blindly followed and practiced. Rajendra Prasad wants the natural creative instinct of the child to be nurtured and utilized to impart knowledge for using his capabilities. "If properly imparted by teachers who love children and who are experts in the craft concerned, it will be found that the mental, moral and physical development of the child will be far greater than it is in our present-day schools." The term 'present-day schools' pushes the reader into the transcendental confusion and puzzle regarding which 'present' Dr. Rajendra Prasad is talking about. . The present is no different from the present of Rajendra Prasad and paints the present education scenario in an uncertain darker area. Rajendra Prasad explains and clarifies that educationists the world over have realized and recognized the supreme value of the method of education through 'doing', transferring

knowledge through the path of handicrafts and he further stresses that in Indian system of knowledge, crafts have a special relevance.

Women

Gandhiji said that woman must be the true helpmate of man in the mission of service. Though Satyagraha brought women into the Independence movement as equal partners in the progress of the nation, the truth about their ability has not dawned on the general public in a forceful manner. In India women have been suppressed by custom and law for which men are responsible. They have been denied rights and opportunities in education, politics, social arena, domestic sphere and employment. The fact that the Women's Reservation Bill of 2000 in free India to reserve seats in legislative bodies has not got the approval of the Parliament is indicative of the reality of the situation. In this context, Rajendra Prasad's observations in 1942 are as follow: "The old tradition among Hindus is that woman is the *Shakti* – the origin and source of all power. However, it is tragic that in our present-day society she does not play the great part she is meant or entitled to play, because of certain social customs and prejudices that have unfortunately become, as it were, a tradition. It must be realized that no society can make real progress if one-half of its members are suppressed...We have, therefore, to banish from our hearts all ideas of the inferiority of women and give them their rightful place of absolute equality." The following measures have been suggested by him in his pamphlet.

- i. The *purdah* system should be abolished.
- ii. Women should be associated in all public work on lines of equality.
- iii. Polygamy should be discouraged with a view to its ultimate abolition.
- iv. The inequalities and disabilities in law and custom under which women suffer should be sought to be removed.
- v. Girls should be given equal opportunities with boys for education and should be made capable of earning a livelihood.

Language issues

India has twenty two officially recognized languages. But around thirty three different languages and two thousand dialects have been used in India. Hindi, in the Devanagari script is the official language of the Federal government of India. English is an associate official language, whereas Sanskrit is the classical language of India. Gandhiji termed the practice of treating English as be all and end all of everything as shameful and laments that the English spell has not been broken. Rajendra Prasad opines that mother tongue should be the ideal and natural choice for instruction and expression of thoughts. Yet he states that a country like India needs a common language for 'inter provincial intercourse' and 'national purposes'. National language is a necessity without which national bonding would be fragile whereas mother tongue cements one's own culture and preserves the core of the individual. There should not be any conflict but commonality between the regional languages and Hindi and Indians should acquire working knowledge of Hindi. A possible solution to this is that people in north can learn one southern language as southerners learn the national language. Even though he was an avowed Hindi loyalist, he detested the tyranny of one language and wanted Hindi to welcome English and foreign words.

Gandhiji was asked why he was so much against English education when men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Lokamanya Tilak and he himself, who were the products of that very education, had risen to great heights. Rajendra Prasad, in the *Autobiography*, quotes Gandhiji: "I am a mere nonentity. But as for Lokamanya, he would have been a much greater man had he not been forced to study through the medium of English, a foreign tongue. Where do Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Lokamanya stand in comparison with Sankaracharya, Guru Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh and Kabir? They had in their days none of the communication facilities that we enjoy today. Even then they were able to revolutionize the world of thought."

Economic equality

Gandhiji was of the view that economic equality means the abolishing of eternal conflict between capital and labour. Wealth and economic resources have been the main cause of wars. Rajendra Prasad forecasts that these wars and rivalries will continue as long as the current society exists and desires the removal of inequalities to pave the way for peace and happiness. On the question of violent revolution as a solution to reduce inequalities he opines that "the most stable and lasting equality will certainly be that which is not imposed from outside but which grows from within as a result of voluntary control of the acquisitive and exploiting tendency in man." The realization of the individual that it is a moral duty to spend a minimum on one's essential requirements and to use the surplus in the form of a trust for the general good is essential. Honour and status based on possession or birth should yield place to honour and status based on character and service. Such change depends on the training of the mind and pursuance of non-violent methods. The State also should refurbish laws and taxation rules to minimize inequalities. He hopes for a society where capitalists treat the workers well. When the rich pool their wealth for the benefit of the masses it will be heralding a great change in the society.

Farmers

India is predominantly an agricultural country. Peasantry occupies over fifty per cent of the population. In the first five year plan and the subsequent plans successive governments have tried to solve the issues of farmers (agricultural loans, seed and fertilizer policies, marketing support, mechanization and labour charges) but at a slow pace. The fact that the governments which ignored the plight of peasantry have faced electoral defeat demonstrates their collective might. Rajendra Prasad follows the line of Gandhi who acknowledged the role played by the indigo farmers in the success of Champaran Satyagraha where for the first time farmers were organized in India. They should not be exploited for political purposes by governments and parties and their grievances should be addressed promptly. He suggests constructive solutions like cooperative farming to improve their status.

Champaran agitation 1916 in support of the indigo farmers against the atrocities and unjust laws of the British planters, government and its agents, brought out the organizer and leader in Rajendra Prasad. Under the innovative leadership of Gandhiji, they employed the principles of Satyagraha fully and realized the spiritual force behind the political action. This was the first test of the concept of Satyagraha which had to be used in the long struggle of freedom. Rajendra Prasad, in his *Autobiography*, says, "The Champaran struggle is a fine rehearsal in the technique of

Satyagraha. The results achieved were quick and satisfactory because it was Satyagraha truly conducted. It is my faith that the objective of Swaraj will be realized similarly.” During the agitation Rajendra Prasad realized that public service is not merely holding conferences, making speeches and passing resolutions but uniting with the people and sharing and solving their problems. Rajendra Prasad slowly but arduously learnt the art of public speaking and was able to modulate his voice and fashion the nature of the speech based on the strength of the audience and the response. He toured all the provinces of Bihar and conducted meetings to heighten the political consciousness of the people. In the book *Autobiography* descriptions of his public meetings, tours, Congress sessions along with Gandhiji abound. Rajendra Prasad observed Gandhiji from very close quarters and imbibed all the essence of Gandhism. He narrates a revealing incident: “As a result of our stay with Gandhiji, a revolutionary change came in our day –to-day life. I was, for example, a strict observer of caste rules and restrictions. I would never eat any food touched by a non-Brahmin which was not ordinarily eaten by my caste people. Gandhiji told us if this sort of culinary separatism continued we would not be able to carry on public work. People having the same objective belonged to one caste, he said. There was no answer to that sentiment and I changed my ways, as did the others.” Rajendra Prasad owed his sober thought and measured speech to Gandhiji who could express the strongest opinion in the most moderate language.

Labour

Labour organizations should not be used for political agitations, disruption of work and organizing strikes but as sources of benefit for the labourers. While treating the strike as a last resort he suggests the study of Ahmadabad Labour Union founded by Gandhiji as a model for labour unions. This union based its working on non violence and persuasive methods and succeeded in ensuring the welfare of the workers with facilities like hospitals, own printing press, residential quarters for the workers and educational amenities. It is famed for its peaceful arbitration methods and successful negotiation benefiting the mill owner and the worker equally. It staved off outside political influence either from National Level Trade Union Congress or political parties in fighting their issues thus ensuring the sanctity of the union.

Conclusion

Gandhiji’s Constructive Programme tried to forge a link between the fashioning of the real Indians with the objectives of freedom struggle. The same is enunciated in the detailed explanation penned by Rajendra Prasad. He padded it up with real and practical suggestions, which have found way in many of the policies of the Government of India in its initial years of formation. Every thought, word and action mentioned in the programme equally apply to every section of the Indian society with the high hope of making a dynamic nation out of individuals – aware of their moorings, their present position and alert about their future potential. Change should start at the level of the individual and this will definitely bring about a new India for which the freedom struggle and consequent independent Indian governments stand for. Through the simple, non-polemical discourse Rajendra Prasad assures the people and readers alike that the ideas “will enthuse all and be worked with intelligence, energy, faith and vigour so that India may come into her own at the

earliest possible moment.” In essence, that is the brain, brawn, heart and mind of Rajendra Prasad’s writing. Though the vision is worked out for the immediate goals of gaining freedom and consolidating the principles of democracy and nationalism, major aspects of it still hold good for the policy makers and public alike. Rajendra Prasad employed plain speaking style devoid of literary flourishes to put forth his instructions. Persuasive tone is used keeping the didactic nature of the content in view. Sharp sentences attendant with elaborations convey the thought without straining the narrative or slackening the message. His humane ideology enunciated in his ontological discourse heralds a major initiative in the social reconstruction of the nation.

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