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Dr. Rajendra Prasad and Non-cooperation Movement in Bihar.

Abstract

Dr. Rajendra Prasad was a great freedom struggler who serves as the first president of the republic of India. Rajendra Prasad joined the Indian national congress during the Indian independence movement and became a major leader from the region of Bihar. He was among the great Indians in Bihar who stood with Gandhi in an unconditional way. From this paper our aim is to highlight the role of Dr. Rajendra Prasad in Champaran satyagrah and Non-Cooperation movement in Bihar. The details of his participation show how Rajendra Prasad effectively provided leadership in his simple and heart-winning way, to his followers and was largely responsible for a successful non-violent movement.

Keywords: Freedom struggler, Leadership, Champaran satyagrah, Non-cooperation, Non-violent, Bihar

Introduction

Dr. Rajendra Prasad formally joined the Indian national congress way back in the year 1911 and in 1916 during the Lucknow session of Indian national congress, he met Mahatma Gandhi. During one of the fact-finding missions at Champaran, Mahatma Gandhi asked him to come with his volunteers. He was so greatly moved by the dedication, courage and conviction of Mahatma Gandhi that as soon as the motion of Non-cooperation was passed by Indian national congress in 1920.

In Champaran, a district in state of Bihar, ten of thousands of landless serfs, indentured laborers and poor farmers were forced to grow indigo and other cash crops instead of the food crops which were necessary for their survival. These goods were bought from them at a very low price. Suppressed by the ruthless militias of the landlords who were mostly British. They were given meagre compensation, leaving them in extreme poverty. Now in the throes of a devastating famine the British levied and oppressive tax which they insisted on increasing in rate. Without food and without money, the situation was growing progressively unlivable and the peasants in Champaran revolted against conditions in indigo plant cultivation in 1914 at Pipra and in 1916 at Turkaulia. Rajkumar Shukla, an indigo cultivator, persuaded Mahatma Gandhi to go to Champaran and thus Champaran satyagrah began. Gandhi arrived in Champaran on 10 April 1917 with a team of eminent lawyers: Brajkishor Prasad, Rajendra Prasad, Anugrah Narayan Sinha and others including Acharya Kripalani.

Gandhi established an ashram in Champaran, organizing scores of his veteran supporters and fresh volunteers from the region. He organized a detailed study and survey of the villages, accounting the atrocities and terrible episodes of suffering, including the general state of degenerate living.

Champaran movement and Rajendra Prasad

Dr. Rajendra Prasad had already had his baptism in a big way in the Gandhian method during the Champaran movement of 1917. Actually it was the rehearsal of the exciting series of events that were to take place. He himself wrote – “when I look upon the period elapsed and the work that has since been done in the country, I feel as if we are enacting the Champaran drama on a very much vaster scale.”¹ On the success of Champaran satyagrah newspaper commented – “How we wish we had only half a dozen Gandhis in India to teach our people self-abnegation and selfless patriotism.”²

When the district authorities at Champaran asked him to do away with his followers who appeared to them to be a threat to peace he said that they were ‘able, earnest and honourable men’ and ‘to abandon them is to abandon my work.’ Rajendra Prasad was one of these men. Simplicity, erudition, judicious temper and high sense of moral values were his natural qualities and to them he added the capacity to make peace between conflicting interests, learnt from Gandhi whom he closely watched and



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admired 'as a negotiator and peacemaker.'³ prior to Champaran satyagrah Bihar had a little political clout and not many people had been attending the annual session of Indian national congress but thereafter this province swung powerfully into all india politics⁴ and Rajendra Prasad became its most sought after leader. At this time Gandhi was catapulted to the centre stage of indian politics when to protest on his call against Rowlett bill and subsequent activities in Punjab many part of the country including Bihar participated in the Satyagrahs.⁵ Bihar took part impressively in all the programmes of the movement but Rajendra Prasad at once stage lamented the lack of sincerity for Satysgraha and when asked by Gandhi to suggest names of Satyagrahis from Bihar he felt that except Rajendra Prasad very few would do what Gandhi wanted.⁶ However, Rajendra Prasad and other helpers of Gandhi at Champaran work 'to break out of the confines of elitist politics.'⁷ during the non-cooperation movement.

Principle of Non-cooperation movement

The idea of Non-cooperation relted on the premise that the British rule depended 'on the active collaboration of some Indians and the acquiescence of the rest'⁸ and if the Indians ceased to cooperate it was bound to collapse. To ensure this collapse was designed the movement that demanded from its adherents the surrender of titles and distinctions conferred by the government along with resignation from honorary officers and government jobs, the boycott of elections, severance of connections with the government and government aided educational institutions and boycott of courts. Besides starting no tax compaigns, establishment of national schools, setting up of panchayats, propogation of spinning wheels and boycott of foreign cloths also formed part of the movement.⁹ Here relevant to point out is that Rajendra Prasad despite his personal debilitating situation and certain ideological reservations proved to be one of the sincerest practitioners of these programmes. In August the 12th session of Bihar polotical confrence under his presidentship voted for accepting the non-cooperation scheme even before any decision in the matter had been taken at all India levels. In his presidential address in Hindi Rajendra Prasad made a bold appeal. A number of other leaders such as Brajkishore Prasad, Mazharul Haq, Mohammad shafi, Nurul Hasan etc. also advocated the cause forcefully in their addresse. Here we mentioned that Rajendra Prasad chose to speak in Hindi for the benefit of the large number of peasants from the rural areas who had gathered to attend that meeting. The confrence also resolved to urge the government to take care of the rising prices in order to relieve popular distress. This was apparently incompatible with the principle of non-cooperation.¹⁰ There is another importance of this conference that is on the suggestion of Brajkishore Prasad the demand of Swaraj was added to the demands for justice in the Punjab and for restoring the Khilafat of the Muslim world. Only Gujrat Provincial political Conference had resolved to accept non-cooperation programme earlier than Bihar.¹¹

Important events during Non-cooperation movement

Rajendra Prasad indeed grew in an atmosphere that was responsible for defining his role, along with some others, during the non-cooperation movement. Throughout much of the 19th century the imperial government had been a distant autocratic entity that played a limited part in the lives of the most of the Biharis.¹² The seperation of Bihar from Bengal also didn't mean much to the people at large many of whom had little idea of the jurisdiction that they belonged to.¹³ The Patna now with a university, highcourt, secretariat and some other institutions attracted young Biharis in place of Culcutta as new centre of education, jobs, and career advancement. Rajendra Prasad also a law graduate from Culcutta and was the son of a small landlord from Saran but had setup his practice at Patna and joined the professionals who supplied the legal, educational and other such services to the rural elite. There was also the peasanta and their leaders who had participated in the agitations led by peasants organizations and had grown sufficiently militant before they joined Congress.¹⁴ Other who joined this handwagon were the smaller players of Bihar politicswho realized that they did not stand against big landlords and other influential persons.¹⁵ It is to this section of the society that Rajendra Prasad refers to when he says that the Congress meeting at Bhagalpur town in 1920 was largely drawn from outside the professional classes and it were they who voted enbloc in favour of the no-cooperation resolution.¹⁶ A more serious matter that engaged his attention, was the boycott of the government and aided school and colleges. He already had the experience of the boycott of the government educational institutions in Calcutta during the anti-Bengal partition movement and on the basis he felt that this might not succed until and unless some alternative avenues of employment were made available to the students boycotting government institutions. He also wanted the students to be made aware of the curtailment of the employment prospects and accompanying privation and suffering before proceeding with this programme of boycott. Rajendra Prasad, therefore, wanted the boycott of the English schools first and depending on the response, opening of national institutions later.they prevailed and soon two hundred primary national schools were setup and fifty secondary schools were linked with the national college. At this stage Gandhi forcefully put forward his proposal for establishing a national university and helped in collecting funds for the same. Mazrul Haq made over his bungalow and adjoining campus at the outskirts of Patna known as Sadaquat Ashram, to the university known as Bihar Vidyapith. Rajendra Prasad regined from the membership of the senate and syndicate of the Patna university to lend meaning to the boycott. There was unprecedented enthusiasm among the students who boycott the government educational institutions.¹⁷ Gandhiji appreciated the work of Rajendra Prasad and others and asked the teachers to work sincerely so that the students did not feel cheated.¹⁸ The experiment successfully went on

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and by June 1921 Bihar had 41 high schools and 600 primary and middle national schools catering to the needs of 21500 pupils.¹⁹

One thing that stands out is that not only Rajendra Prasad but all members in his family responded splendidly to the multiple boycott calls. His brother renounced his title of Rai Saheb conferred on him for his work in the cooperative movement and resigned his honorary magistrateship. His sons Mrityunjay and Dhananjay were withdrawn from their respective educational institutions never to enter government institutions ever again. Rajendra Prasad wrote- "our family was thus able to implement the non-cooperation programme to the full."²⁰

Bihar Pradesh Congress Committee appointed a sub-committee on 5th October 1920 to oversee the implementation of the non-cooperation programmes with Mazharul haq, Rajendra Prasad, Brajkishore Prasad and Mohammad shafi as members. Rajendra Prasad toured the entire length and breadth of Bihar and for the first time he saw the whole province and made innumerable contacts. He spoke in Bhojpuri in the Bhojpuri areas and in Hindi in other areas. Once he addressed a meeting in Bengali in Purulia. So thus he was indeed a multilingual person who learnt Persian, Urdu, Hindi, English and Sanskrit at different stages of his career.²¹ He also toured outside Bihar particularly when he was required to accompany Gandhi.²² Gandhiji's visit to Bihar in Dec, 1920 stirred the mind of the people.²³ The government was in a tight spot. It was having telling effect on its excise revenue particularly owing to the campaign against the evil of drink.²⁴ It indeed suggested to the government of India to extend the said act to Muzaffarpur in view of the looting of the weekly village markets on a large scale there. Such incident took place in Darbhanga, Champaran and other district also. The central government did not agree to the proposal and wanted the situation to be dealt under the provisions of ordinary laws. Section 144 was also imposed, banning processions and meetings. Many went to prison and furnished security. Rajendra Prasad was himself served a notice under section 144 when he went to Arrah to address a meeting there as that might disturb the students appearing at the ongoing matriculation examination on the 17th Feb 1921. Newspaper flashed the matter and a question²⁵ was asked in the council about the advisability of such action particularly when Rajendra Prasad was held in high esteem by the people of Bihar. The trend towards violence worried the Congress leaders.²⁶ Rajendra Prasad made statement to deny the hands of the congressmen in the incidents of village markets lootings and other acts of violence. He conceded that some unscrupulous supporters of congress might have done so.²⁷

Congress committee and Non-cooperation

Meanwhile the Working Committee and the All India Congress Committee met at Vijayawada in the end of Mar. 1921 and decided to defer the movement for sometime but wanted the congressmen to fulfill its demand of one crore rupees for the Tilak Swaraj Fund,²⁸ enrolment of one crore

primary members of the congress party and making twenty lakhs of charkhas.²⁹ Rajendra Prasad moderated proportionately Bihar's contribution and appealed to the congressmen to collect two lakhs of rupees and enroll two lakhs members and start operation of forty thousand charkhas in the province during the Satyagraha week commencing on 6th April 1921. He asked the reliable volunteers to visit every house and appeal to every man and woman to become a member of the congress and contribute to the Tilak Swaraj Fund. As a result of these exhortations a sum of 71/2 lakhs rupees was collected, a little less than one lakh members enrolled and a large number of charkhas introduced.³⁰ Till June 1921 a total of 48 depots had been set up in 11 districts of Bihar to distribute cotton and charkhas.³¹ Rajendra Prasad's involvement in all this was singular. In order to make the programmes relating to non-cooperation reach the masses effectively he also took up editing a Hindi weekly Desh. He also worked as a member of the editorial board of the 'Searchlight' an English bi-weekly published from Patna. These papers served well the nationalist cause during the non-cooperation movement. Thus the time of Rajendra Prasad was now divided between the national college, the newspapers Desh and the Searchlight and mobilising the masses for the movement.³²

The All India Congress Committee met in Bombay in July 1921 to evaluate the situation and through it was found overall satisfactory and conducive for playing the trump card of Satyagrah yet Gandhi counseled some more patience and keep on popularising charkhas and the boycott of foreign cloth upto Sep.³⁰ The government announcement of the visit of the Prince of Wales to India in the coming winter. The congress decided to add the boycott of the visit to the many boycott already at work. This happily contributed to mutual trust between the Hindus and the Muslims as well³³ but overall communal unity in the country received a severe jolt because of the Moplah rebellion that began against the government and took the ugly turn of attack, killing and forcibly converting the Hindus. This nevertheless, led to the government unleashing another round of repression in the wake of a major disturbance erupting out of protest against some Parsis and Anglo-Indian. In this event near about 58 people were killed and injuries to over 300. The congress responded by organising Sevak Dals whose members were required to swear adherence to non-violence in thought and to accept its discipline in order to avert a repetition of the Bombay incident, but the government banned the Sevak Dals and arrested its leaders. Large scale arrests were made in Bihar too. The police swooped on the office of the provincial Congress Committee in Chapra and put an entire meeting, which Rajendra Prasad was participating under strict surveillance. In the meantime the congress working committee had met in Bombay and appealed that the government employees, military as well as civilian, should withdraw from their respective services. Rajendra Prasad along with some others

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had already signed manifesto only a day earlier requesting the people to do the same. according to the manifesto any movement without violence was nothing more than 'a propaganda movement of the purest type' and therefore any attempt to crush it was 'an attempt to crush public opinion.'³⁴

Conclusion

At last, finally the point to be looked into here is that the congress sought social harmony and wanted to forge landlord-peasant unity against the colonial rule and it was in this backdrop that Rajendra Prasad did not favour a confrontation with the zamindars at this juncture.³⁵ Indeed Gandhiji also very much wanted to keep the peasant movement separate from the non-cooperation movement albeit the former had received impetus from the latter.³⁶ In any case there was considerable support for the non-cooperation movement in Bihar and the small landlords and rich peasants were in the vanguard and they subsequently rallied support from among their clients and retainers within the village society.³⁷ Otherwise also the movement kept on progressing in Bihar. Big and small meetings were held, liquor shops picketed and propaganda against non-payment of Chauthidari Tax made. The movement continued in Bihar even after it was called off in the wake of the Chauri-Chaura violence but now it remained confined to pursuing the constructive programme. Rajendra Prasad led the movement from the front and he became the one of the truest followers of Gandhi. He spoke in the characteristic manner of Gandhi that nothing short of Swaraj was acceptable to Indians who would not brook a recurrence of the Punjab and Khilafat wrongs. He defined Swaraj as the government of the people. He explained Satyagraha as the weapon of righteous people. According to Rajendra Prasad A Satyagrahi, had to be unwavering, non-violent and ready to suffer for any noble cause. It was basically a movement for self purification. He considered non cooperation movement even more important than Satyagrah because in its constructive aspect it could lead to miraculous regeneration. Illustrative of it was the fact that if fifty lakhs of Charkhas were pressed in service Bihar could save about sixty crores of rupees.³⁸ So in fact Gandhi praised the good work done in Bihar in connection with non-cooperation and he felt that its leaders, he specially mentioned Rajendra Prasad in this connection, comprehended the true spirit of the movement.³⁹

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