

## Addressing a Generation in Transition

*A Reading of Babu Brajkishore Prasad's Presidential Address*

*Bihar Students' Conference, Chapra, 1911*

**Sunny Kumar**

*Research Scholar, Department of History, B.R.A.B.U. Muzaffarpur, (Bihar) India*

### Abstract

The presidential address of Babu Brajkishore Prasad at the 1911 session of the sixth Bihar Students' Conference—which took place annually during Dasahara<sup>1</sup> period-- needs to be seen in its transitional, historical context. First of all, the speech takes place in 1911, when one of the most important missions of Babu Brajkishore Prasad's public life and that of his other eminent contemporaries from Bihar, was about to become a reality. The mission, of course, was the carving out of Bihar from Bengal and making it a separate province. The issue of Bihar was settled with the Delhi Durbar proclamation in December 1911, cancelling the Partition of Bengal as announced in 1905. The separation of Bihar from Bengal was a great historical feat as it freed the Hindi-speaking areas of Bengal from one layer of colonial and cultural subjugation and allowed for them a socio-political identity and space in the newly emerging national consciousness under the one geographical, economic, social and cultural entity called Bihar, then written as Behar.

**Key Words :** Generation, Transition, Province, Consensuses, Subjection

However, the movement for the creation of Bihar was not an easy task for its leaders. In fact, those espousing the cause of Bihar were seen to be moving in the opposite direction of the clarion call for national unity that was gradually enveloping the Indians, in general, and educated Indians, in particular. No wonder, Sachidanand Sinha, in his article on Mahesh Narayan, another pioneering leader of the Bihar Movement, rather painfully recorded how the leaders of the Bihar movement were considered almost 'anti-national' by the intelligentsia of Bengal as well as of other parts of the country for espousing their cause. It may be instructive to quote him to make out the moral dilemma that was posed before them and how they successfully held their ground:

Readers of Bryce's *American Commonwealth* are no doubt aware that there exists in the United States a strong state patriotism, which subsists side by side with federal patriotism. This was precisely our ideal, but it was unfortunately not at all appreciated in Bengal—then the predominant partner in the Lower Provinces—as its practical effect was the setting up of now well-known cry for 'Bihar for Biharees'. In some other provinces, too, this ideal was regarded by some as 'anti-national', but such a view was not at all well-founded. As a matter of fact, the intense excitement, some years later on Bengal having sundered by the Curzonian partition (under which scheme two-thirds of the Bengalese shared, as its result, a common administration with the Assamese, and the remaining one-third with the Biharees and

the Oriyas) conclusively established that our ideal of linguistic provinces in India based on a common language, and also on historic traditions and territorial patriotism, was absolutely right.<sup>2</sup>

One can very well understand the pain and dilemma which Sinha underlines above because the perception that Bihar movement did not have support at the national level has percolated down to contemporary history writings too and much of it can be attributed to the lack of research about the Movement at the micro level. One can refer to the following observation to illustrate this:

The birth of politics in Bihar, in the proper sense of the term, is connected with a cause, which, *although it was not popular*, was sponsored by the intellectuals. This was the issue of separation of Bihar from Bengal.<sup>3</sup> (italics added)

It is, thus, no coincidence that in the present address, Babu Brajkishore Prasad first of all takes up the issue of the rationale of having such a students' conference. This is certainly the direct result of the questioning which he and other leaders of Bihar had had to undergo as indicated above. At the same time, however, his address seems to be infused with a sense of optimism for the future of his province, mainly because of the imminent separation of Bihar from Bengal. The main starting para of the address, following the introductory one in which he comes out as a very humble personality before the students, needs to be quoted in full to appreciate these conflicting emotions that seemed to have guided his address:

Gentlemen, the necessity and advisability of holding a students' conference has been questioned in

some quarters. It is doubted by some whether a conference of students like yours is of any real utility. It is easy to doubt and criticize work. I would like to tell those gentlemen, who seem to know very little of the aims and object, as also of the workings, of your Conference, that of all the public associations or conferences in our province, or in any other province of this country, if there is one which, more than others, serves a really useful purpose, it is your Conference. It has given a new life to the students of Behar. It has infused a new spirit in them. The overflowing enthusiasm, the robust optimism, the mutual sympathy and fellow-feeling, the organized co-operation, and above all, the spirit de-corps which I see in you today all the works of the Conference. You, gentlemen, who are the further hopes of the country, are receiving very good and valuable training through your Conference; and when you have left off your student-life and entered the world, you will find yourselves more fitted, more equipped, more ready and more willing to fight the battle of the country than the present generation which is engaged in it did actually find itself at the same stage. You will make better citizens of the British Empire and be better capable of doing good to your country and to yourself than we have been. By the time you finish your student career you will have learnt much which those who have gone before you had to learn for many a year after they had entered life. What can be a better justification than all for the existence of your Conference? Let

those who doubt open their eyes, and examine the thing more closely and they will be satisfied that yours is a very useful institution.

The exhortation of Babu Brajkishore Prasad to the students of the Conference to 'become better citizens of the British Empire' is in line with the general belief among the contemporary intelligentsia about the British rule being the harbinger of modern and progressive education and ideas, and it is not at all odd that he uses expressions like:

Thanks to the British Government which has kept us alive! All praise to the English people who have educated us! All honour to the British statesmen who have given us peace and made the realization of our future hopes possible!

In fact, if we compare these expressions to the ones used by Bishan Narayan Dhar during his Presidential Address of the Indian National Congress at Calcutta in 1911 itself, we would be able to better understand the mood and expectations of the intelligentsia from the British educational system at the time:

English education and a closer contact with the West have raised our intelligence and expanded our vision; the example of English enterprise has given us new ideals of citizenship and inspired us with new conception of national culture.<sup>4</sup>

#### **'De-political' Message of the Address**

Another factor that needs to be underlined is the rather complete absence of political message to the students in terms of any anti-colonial content. Babu Brajkishore Prasad in the address focuses entirely on the educational and intellectual training of

the youth of Bihar and the nation. And, in fact, the tone of the address shows him to be almost cautioning the students to not become avowedly political and remain focused as his following words show:

Gentlemen, but yours is purely a student's conference, and I hope you will always keep it in mind and handle those matters only which concern you as students.

Rather, towards the end of the address, he touches upon the issue of students and politics directly as the 'last matter' and quite obliquely conveys how getting 'sound education' in itself should be seen as the most important political 'dharma', so to say:

The last matter to which I wish to draw your attention is the question of students and politics. I have given my most careful consideration to this matter and am in a position to tell you that I quite agree with those who ask you not to mix yourself up in the active politics of the day. It is very harmful to students. But this does not mean that you should shut your eyes to what is going on around you. Rather I would like to see you get a sound education in the principles of politics so that you may be able to play your part and play it well when the time arrives.

However, in order to understand this rather de-political line of argument adopted by an eminent politician before a conference of young students trying to acquire a new political identity in the form of Bihar and Biharee, we need to go to the genesis of the Bihar Students' Conference which was established in 1906 with Dr. Rajendra Prasad as one of the prime movers. And what better and authentic would be than to

quote Dr. Rajendra Prasad himself who touches upon this issue in his *Autobiography*:

While the rules and regulations were being drafted, I remember that two points were hotly discussed: (1) whether the Conference should take part in politics and (2) whether the conference should be confined to Behari students only or thrown open to Bengali students also.

There was a difference of opinion on the first point and the elders opposed participation in politics. Wisely, as it seems now, the Conference decided that it would not take part in political agitation. At that time, Bihar was part of Bengal. Educationally it was backward, and had hardly any public life. Only a small section of the people was supporting the Congress. Bihar had no political organization of its own and the Congress had not yet set up its branches there. The Students' Conference, though dominated by youth, was the first platform where Biharis met to discuss questions of common interest. In these circumstances, if we had not proceeded cautiously, the Conference perhaps would not have been the success it was.<sup>5</sup>

The 'elders' mentioned by Rajendra Prasad could very well have been leaders like Brajkishore Prasad, Sachchidanand Sinha, Mahesh Narayan etc, whose insistence to have a de-political orientation for the Bihar Students' Conference was certainly a political decision in itself. What the Bihar students' Conference achieved was the sustained and not-so-pronounced political training in the initial years for the students of the newly emerging socio-political aspirations of Bihar. Babu

Brajkishore Prasad's exhortation to the students to 'get a sound education in the principles of politics so that you may be able to play your part and play it well when the time arrives', proved to be prophetic as during the Champaran movement, as pointed out by Rajendra Prasad in his *Autobiography*, the volunteers who worked with Gandhiji, Brajkishore Prasad, Rajkumar Shukla, Rajendra Prasad and other leaders were drawn from the ranks of the Students' Conference and they really played their part heroically when the time arrived for it. In fact, it may be worthwhile to mention that for the next nearly two decades, all major political and national movement leaders from Bihar were products of the Students' Conference only.

### **Pitching for Scientific As Well As Passionate Approach**

The 1911 Presidential Address of Babu Brajkishore Prasad stands out for the wide range of issues that he takes up to sort of initiate the attending students into major contemporary discourses. First, he emphasizes on and impresses upon the students about the need to develop a scientific approach to appreciate phenomena like, say, the spread of education in Bihar, by basing their understanding and analysis on facts and figures. What he tries to drive home at seems to be valid even today because of the still-prevalent tendencies among public figures to make sweeping observations without relating them to scientifically collated data and statistics:

I would like to impress upon you that the first and foremost question which your Conference should take up is the spread and growth of education in Bihar. Has there been a steady increase in education, or a

decrease in it in the province? I have heard some people say that the number of Bihari graduates turned out these days is fewer than what used to be the case ten years before. Is this a fact? Is it true? Your Conference should ascertain it; and the best means your Conference can adopt is to take statistics of two decennial periods, i.e., from 1891 to 1900 and from 1901 to 1910, and see where we are. If you find the result unfavourable or not so favourable as it ought to be, you should try to find out the causes at the root and remedy them.

This point also stems from the analytical training that the leaders like Babu Brajkishore Prasad would have liked the young generation of Bihar to imbibe in order to take forward the cause of the socio-economic and political development of their people in a more methodical manner. It needs to be mentioned that during the last two decades, the leaders from Bihar—and Babu Brajkishore Prasad was in the forefront of such leadership—had to come up with painfully collected data and statistics to demand better facilities and infrastructure for the people of Bihar from the Bengal administrative apparatus in the areas of education, health,

#### References:

- 1 Mentioned by Dr. Rajendra Prasad in his *Autobiography*
- 2 'Mahesh Narayan', *Some Eminent Behar Contemporaries*, Sachchidanand Sinha, Janaki Prakashan, Patna, 1946, p. 42-43
- 3 'Caste and Political Recruitment in Bihar' by Ramashray Roy collected in *Caste in Indian Politics*, (Ed.) Rajani Kothari, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 1995, p. 225
- 4 Quoted in *Education and Social Changes in Bihar 1900-1921: A Survey of Social History of Bihar from Lord Curzon to Non-Cooperation Movement*, Shreedhar Narayan Pandey, Motilal Banarasi Dass, Varanasi, 1975, p. 196
- 5 *Autobiography*, Rajendra Prasad, Penguin Books India, 2010, New Delhi, p.46-47

sanitation, poverty alleviation etc. Being a torchbearer of the cause of Bihar, Babu Brajkishore Prasad knew it too well the long and intricate road ahead for the progress of the people of Bihar, which had less than 5% of literacy in 1911, and how much of preparedness and training it demanded of the educated young men and women of Bihar.

#### Conclusion

The point of spread of education and the huge resources that it required is taken up in the address. Though the rich 'Maharajas and Rajas, Nawabs and Noblemen' are exhorted to help in the cause of education, but by suggesting the creation of sort of a co-operative of Bihari Students' Fund to help the poor students pursue education, Babu Brajkishore Prasad is able to underline the need for the better off students to identify with the lot of the underprivileged and as well as be actively empathetic to their needs. It is interesting to note that the eminent and successful lawyer as well as statesman that he was, Babu Brajkishore Prasad pitches for the twin approach of scientific as well as passionate engagement with the problems of the contemporary life as the ideal to be adopted by the up-and-coming educated generation of Bihar and the country.