An Illustrious Life

Early Life

Dr. Rajendra Prasad, son of Mahadev Sahay, was born in Zeradei village, in the Siwan district of Bihar, on 3 December 1884. He was the youngest in a large family, and was close to his mother and eldest brother. He was known as “Rajen” to his family and friends. His father, Mahadev Sahay, was a scholar of both the Persian and Sanskrit languages, while his mother, Kamleshwari Devi, was a religious woman. Zeradei’s population was diverse, with both Muslims and Hindus living in relative harmony.

Dr. Prasad is considered to be one of the architects of the Indian Republic, having drafted its first Constitution and serving as the first president of India. During the independence movement, he left his law work and joined the Congress Party, playing a prominent role in the Indian Independence Movement. He served as the president of the Constituent Assembly that drafted the first Constitution of the Republic, which lasted from 1948 to 1950. He also briefly served as a Cabinet minister in the first Government of the Indian Republic. He was a vegetarian.

The Backdrop

In a small house in Zeradei village in the State of Bihar Rajendra Prasad first saw the light of day, a year before the Indian National
Congress was founded. It was a time when social, technical and economic changes had stirred India into activity. The impact of the West had led to the introduction of new scientific techniques and the improvement of communications. By linking up remote areas the railways had brought people closer and had quickened the flow of trade and commerce. There was some industrial development, notably of jute in Bengal and of textiles in Bombay and Ahmedabad, and this brought prosperity to a fringe of the people—the industrial and the trading classes. On the other hand, the British Government did everything to liquidate indigenous industries. The manufacture of Indian textiles and other products was suppressed by “putting a ban on their exports and by levying crippling excise duties. The imports from Britain filled the vacuum. Millions and millions, of Indian weavers and artisans were thrown out of employment; They flocked to the land, putting heavy pressure on it. Severe distress prevailed in the rural areas. Lord William Bentinck, the Governor-General, reported in 1834 that ‘the misery hardly finds a parallel in the history of commerce. The bones; of the cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India’.

Rural economy was disrupted by the introduction of the landlord system, particularly in Bengal, Bihar and other northern provinces. Those to whom land revenue had been farmed out were recognised as landlords—the original occupants being downgraded as their tenants. The landlords held the land as long as they paid the fixed revenue to the Government, and they were given full freedom to extract what they could from the tenants. Owing to the abuses of this system, some curbs were put in course of time on the authority of the landlords; and this system was not extended to other territories, such as Bombay and Madras, where the occupants of land were recognised as the owners.

A far-reaching change, which affected the power of the people in the rural areas, was the break-up of the village panchayats. For centuries they had functioned as vital village republics and had kept the people together. During foreign invasions and political upheavals the villages had maintained their autonomy. Their panchayats had functioned as their spokesmen with the rulers in all matters, and even negotiated the amount of land revenue to be paid by the villages and the deductions to be made for the
expenditure on the community needs of the people. All matters affecting welfare of the villages were their concern—including the settlement of disputes among the people. In them was incarnate the power of the people. Foreign observers, including British officers, had paid glowing tributes to the panchayats, which had maintained stability in the rural areas. But this curb on the power of the Government was not to the liking of the British, and they pursued a policy of weakening the hold of the panchayats. They were completely ignored in the new set-up, and village administration was entrusted to official headmen appointed by the Government and working under the control of the district officers. The corporate life of the villages was thus weakened.

Another change in the rural areas was the encouragement given to the growing of jute, cotton, indigo and other cash crops for purposes of export. This change in the cropping pattern stimulated the introduction of a money economy and brought about revolutionary changes in the rural areas. These were further accelerated by the introduction of the system of recording all ownership rights in land in the official village records. The security of title to land thus granted facilitated the legal transferability of such rights, and thus benefited the land-grabbing moneylenders in the rural areas. The combined impact of these changes was very severe.

The setting-up of printing presses had led to the introduction of newspapers and journals. The first newspaper was started by an Englishman in Calcutta in 1780, and the first Indian-owned and edited newspaper was issued in 1818. English education had caught the imagination of the leaders, and several schools were opened, leading to the establishment of universities at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in 1857. This gradually led to a social upheaval. Educated young people—inspired by the teachings of Mill, Spencer and Huxley—grew restive; and a spirit of revolt against the rigid social conventions imposed by orthodoxy in the name of religion and sacred custom gathered force. The political thought of Britain inspired ideas of freedom and liberty. As Rabindranath Tagore put it: ‘The educated of those days had recourse to English language and literature. Their days and nights were eloquent with stately declamations of Burke, with Macaulay’s long rolling sentences; discussions centred upon Shakespeare’s
drama and Byron’s poetry and above all upon the large-hearted liberalism of the nineteenth-century English politics.

This awakening brought in its train a spirit of revolt against the rigid practices and the social framework of Hindu society, Bengal took a lead in this. Bhagwan Ghaitanya popularised freedom of worship unhampered by rituals and priests. Raja Rammohan Roy fought against the blind bigotry fostered by a sanctimonious priesthood. He founded the *Brahmo Samaj* in 1829 with a view to purifying Hindu religion. Ramakrishna Paramahamsa had a great influence on the youth of the times and Swami Vivekananda established the Ramakrishna Mission for humanitarian and social work. Led by Rabindranath Tagore and others, there was a cultural and social renaissance in Bengal which found echoes in other parts of India. In Bombay G. K. Gokhale, Lokamanya Tilak, Mahadev Ranade and others took up educational and social work. Swami Dayanand’s *Arya Samaj* found a congenial home in the Punjab and played a great part in the regeneration of Hinduism. The new classes of landlords, merchants, doctors and lawyers became the spearheads of social and political activities. They were destined to lead the national movement.

Bihar, which had been the home of Indian culture for centuries, had not been able to adjust itself to the changing conditions, and in the nineteenth century it was one of the most backward provinces. It had given birth to two founders of religion. Gautam Buddha had attained his enlightenment at Bodh Gaya. Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, had spent most of his time at Magadh. King Ahsoka had made Pataliputra (Patna) famous and Nalanda became a centre of learning. From the eleventh century Bihar came under Muslim conquerors. Sher Shah was the founder of modern Patna, which had become the centre of Islamic culture. From the eighteenth century Bihar had attracted the British, the Dutch and the French on account of its resources of saltpetre, opium, calico; Muslims and indigo. But its learning, culture and enterprise declined. The indigenous industries had been crushed, increasing the pressure of men on the land. Landlordism had been introduced on a large scale and the old village communities had collapsed. Grinding poverty stalked the land. The standard of living of the tenants was about the lowest in India. The bulk of
the family holdings consisted of about four acres of land each—depending on uncertain rainfall. Administratively Bihar had been linked with Bengal and was much neglected. As Dr. Rajendra Prasad puts it, Bihar was a backward province socially and politically. Bengal had robbed it of its separate identity.

The Ancestors

Rajendra Prasad’s ancestors had migrated from the eastern districts of Uttar Pradesh to Zeradei village in (the then) Saran district, which was backward in land fertility and yet one of the most densely populated areas in Bihar—where every square mile of cultivated area had to support 1304 persons. They brought with them nothing but education and a keen mind, and took up employment as teachers and later as estate managers. Rajendra Prasad’s great-uncle Chaudhar Lal laid the fortunes of the family. He was endowed with the traditional virtues of his Kayastha caste—devotion to learning, loyalty to the master and skill in administration and management of the estate. He soon rose to be the Dewan (Chief Administrator) of Hathua Raj—a big landed estate. At one stage, when his young master’s life was threatened by “rival claimants, Chaudhar Lal used to sleep in the same room as his master and used to taste all food before it was served to his master. The tenants long remembered him for his humane and sympathetic treatment. By careful management and thrift he soon acquired a small landed estate of his own, which yielded an annual income of five to six thousand rupees.

Rajendra Prasad’s father, Munshi Madvadev Sahay, grew up to be a country gentleman, a scholar of Persian and Sanskrit, fond of wrestling, who divided his time between horticulture and free Ayurvedic and Unani treatment of the patients who flocked to him. His mother was a devout lady and brought him up to cherish the best ideals of ancient culture and traditions. She related to him stories from the Ramayana and sang devotional songs to lull him to sleep. These left a deep impression on him. Love of the country and devotion to Dharma took early roots in his mind. She had great influence in moulding his character, and he never failed to seek her advice and guidance, and invariably acted on it. Her death in 1910 deprived Rajendra Prasad of his guardian angel. To
some extent her place had been taken by his elder sister, Bhagwati Devi, who was widowed at an early age. A tender affection had grown up between her and Rajendra Prasad. Possessed of a strong mind, she took charge of the household. Phuvaji, as she was called, had a commanding personality and was respected by all. Her recent death was a severe blow to Rajendra Prasad.

His brother, Mahendra Prasad, who was only eight years older, guided Rajendra Prasad’s studies and moulded his thoughts. He realised the unusual potentialities of young Rajendra and encouraged him in every way. Relieving him of the care of family affairs, he left him free to pursue his career of social service and political struggle. Until he came under the magnetic spell of Gandhiji, Rajendra Prasad always consulted his brother and took his advice, for he knew that it came from a loving heart.

His family did not give Rajendra Prasad any influence in higher circles. Although it was well-to-do during Chaudhar Lal’s life, it encountered hard times after his death. Owing to bad harvests and mismanagement of the estate the income was hardly sufficient for a decent living. Often it was a problem how to keep the two sons at college; on one occasion the family jewellery had to be pawned. But the family gave him more than money and influence. The home atmosphere was pervaded by a living faith in God and a spirit of devotion to Dharma. To these Rajendra Prasad has clung with tenacity throughout his life.

Zeradei and Jamapur, the adjacent village, really formed one unit. It was a medium-sized village which met most of the needs of the inhabitants. Being mainly agricultural, it had a sprinkling of artisans, weavers and traders to make it more or less self-sufficient. A religious toleration which enabled Hindus and Muslims to live together permeated the village life. The two had developed common traditions, habits and ways of living and freely participated in each other’s festivals. As a boy Rajendra Prasad looked forward to Holi and Diwali festivals when there would be music and dramatic performances with recitations from the Ramayana—which lingered in the memories of the simple people. Rajendra Prasad relates an example of the festive spirit of the people on these occasions. Group-singing used to be carried on throughout the night. ‘In the group-singing it is the drummer
Dr. Rajendra Prasad

who has a most strenuous job. Once a competing village group had only one drummer. He played for the whole night. He got blisters and they burst, but he continued. Blisters formed and burst, formed and burst again, but he saved the honour of the village. He received a hero’s praise’. Drinking wine was rare. Among the Kayasthas there was a belief that drinking was a sin that would be punished by leprosy. Life began at sunrise and ended at sunset with few luxuries to disturb the even content of their existence. Disputes among the people were settled by the village panchayat whose decisions were accepted by all.

There was no school in the village or nearby. So a Muslim divine was engaged to teach Rajendra and his two cousins Persian and Urdu. His remuneration was four rupees per month with free board and lodging. In his own words; ‘On the first day he began our education in the name of Allah, and an offering was made to him. Sweets were then distributed to all around.’ Simple arithmetic they learnt separately.

In a reminiscent mood he said: ‘What a change has taken place now. In my days there was not even a primary school in my village or near it. A moldvi used to run a maktab (class) for teaching Urdu and Persian. He was fed by the parents of the pupils in turn and was paid two pice every Friday evening and a rupee or two per pupil at the end of the month. Hindi and elementary arithmetic was taught by a weaver who used to ply his loom while teaching. He taught the alphabet by covering a bit of plastered raised ground with coal dust, and the pupils had to practise writing the alphabet and the figures on this with their fingers or chalk. There were only three high schools in the district for a population of one and a half million. Today there are a hundred high schools in the same district and one of them is in my village’. Having completed his elementary education, it was desirable for him to go to a school where he could learn English—the language of the rulers. For this he had to go to the high school at Ghapra twenty-three miles away. His studious nature and quick grasp earned him a double promotion in the very first year, and he soon topped the examinations. In 1902 he secured first rank in the matriculation examination of the Calcutta University, which catered in those days for all the provinces in the northeast from Assam and Bengal to Bihar and Burma.
While he was still a child of thirteen, Rajendra’s parents fixed up his marriage with Rajbansi Devi, a daughter of a family of mukhtars (village attorneys). He was interviewed by the bride’s father and uncle, was asked a few questions and was approved. His horoscope was scrutinised and found favourable. It indicated a powerful Rajyoga, and this would raise him to a position of great authority in Government. The early marriage was enjoined by ancient custom. Young Rajendra was hardly in a position to resist this move, particularly as he had been brought up in an atmosphere of filial obedience and conformity with traditions. On the appointed day he was carried to the bride’s village in a palanquin in which he went to sleep. It was quite a job to wake up the boy-bridegroom to undergo the tedious ceremonies. Looking back on it, he has likened it to the game of dolls’ marriage which he used to play with his sister. A year later the bride was brought to her husband’s house. The marriage hardly affected him. The bride became the responsibility of the family, and Rajendra was left free to pursue his studies. For years they saw little of each other. The first child was born after ten years.

In his household the custom of seclusion of women prevailed. This practice arose in India after the Muslim conquest, when there was little security for women, and gathered force during the Mughal times. It was enforced particularly among the upper classes and in areas where the Muslim influence was prominent, namely the northern provinces from the Punjab to Bengal. In Rajendra Prasad’s family it was rigidly enforced.

The young bride had to veil her face not only in the presence of males but even in that of her mother-m-law. It was considered bad form for anyone to visit his wife’s room during the daytime, so much so that in later years, when his wife had an attack of cholera, young Rajendra was not permitted to see her. Nevertheless, in spite of this restriction, the women in the household exercised great influence over the men. They built up a position of dignity and affection which enabled them to share the life of their husbands, sons and brothers without being continuously in the way.

The hold of the purdah system began to loosen when the Congress brought women into the national struggle, particularly for picketing foreign cloth and liquor shops. Dr. Rajendra Prasad
Dr. Rajendra Prasad relates an incident showing the helplessness of women in these areas. One day a newly-married girl was posted by the volunteers in front of a shop. They forgot to collect her in the evening. She could not go to her house as she did not know the address, nor was she able to recognise her house from outside. Custom forbade her to mention her husband’s name. She could only write it. She knew little beyond the four corners of her house. And yet she had enlisted as a volunteer in the national struggle! With the help of a gentleman who had come to pick up his wife from the same shop, she ultimately reached her home.

Preoccupation with his studies, his legal practice and political work kept Rajendra Prasad away from home, and he saw little of family life. He was a lonely man, immersed in his work. His elder brother had the care of his wife and children. Looking back on it, he says: ‘We met only during the holidays. Although it is forty-five years since we were married, I wonder if we have lived together for as many months. Even when I was practising as a lawyer in Calcutta, I had to live by myself. When I settled down in Patna my people lived with me for a short time. And when the non-cooperation movement began, I could hardly keep my wife with me in Patna or go and see her in my village. There was so much to do that my preoccupation left me little time for my personal matters’.

Student Life

When Rajendra Prasad was five years old, his parents had put him under a Mawlawi, an accomplished Muslim scholar, to learn the Persian language, followed by Hindi and arithmetic. After the completion of traditional elementary education, Rajendra Prasad was sent to the Chhapra District School. He, along with his elder brother Mahendra Prasad, then went on to study at T.K. Ghosh’s Academy in Patna.

Since childhood, Rajendra Prasad was a brilliant student. He placed first in the entrance examination to the University of Calcutta and was awarded Rs. 30 per month as a scholarship. In 1902, Rajendra Prasad joined the Presidency College. He was initially a student of science and his teachers included Jagadish Chandra Bose and Prafulla Chandra Roy. Later he decided to focus on the
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arts. Prasad lived with his brother in the Eden Hindu Hostel. A plaque still commemorates his stay in that room. Dr. Rajendra Prasad was instrumental in the formation of the Bihari Students’ Conference in 1908. It was the first organisation of its kind in the whole of India, which would later produce many of the important figures of Bihar.

In 1915, Rajendra Prasad graduated with a Masters in Law, passing his examination with honours. He then went on to complete his Doctorate in Law.

Marriage

Rajendra Prasad married with Rajbansi Devi. The early marriage was enjoined by ancient custom. It was quite a job to wake up the boy-bridegroom to undergo the tedious ceremonies. Looking back on it, he has likened it to the game of dolls’ marriage which he used to play with his sister. A year later the bride was brought to her husband’s house. The marriage hardly affected him. The bride became the responsibility of the family, and Rajendra was left free to pursue his studies. For years they saw little of each other. The first child was born after ten years.

Calcutta Days

Having secured first place in the matriculation examination, Rajendra Prasad decided to pursue his studies at the Presidency College at Calcutta. Coming from a small town, he was thrilled by the massive buildings, wide roads and rumbling tramcars. Young Rajendra, clad in a Bihari achakan, pyjamas and cap, was at first taken for a Muslim. Everything he saw was a new experience to him. But he constantly remembered the advice of his good friend and school teacher Rasik Lal Roy who, on the eve of his departure to Calcutta, feted him with mangoes and sweets and warned him against sloth and negligence: ‘Nothing should seduce you from your hard work in maintaining your position’ as the first student in the class. Calcutta is a very big city. It is full of places of entertainment and distraction, many of which are undesirable. You should keep away from them.’

He did so, but could not keep away from malaria which haunted him. He had suffered from it at Chhapra, but the attacks
now came with greater frequency and virulence. He chafed at this interruption in his studies and sought relief in drastic remedies—large doses of quinine. These kept the malarial attacks at bay, but the quinine left its trail behind. As he says: ‘Heaven knows how much quinine I consumed. Twenty-five years later, a homeopathic doctor told me that my asthma was the result of so much quinine.

This affliction pursued him for many years. Strain of work and sometimes changes in the climate brought violent attacks of asthma. It is amazing how he carried on with his ailing body, in fact defied it, at the call of public duty. Fortunately he has now brought it under control, and his health is normal—able to stand the strain of a strenuous day’s work.

The Presidency College at that time had several distinguished professors. He learnt much from P. K. Roy’s teaching of philosophy. For Mr. Percival he had great admiration, ‘Mr. Percival was a great scholar. His simplicity, devotion to duty, unassuming manners and strictness could not but make a great impression on us all’. Binayendra Nath Sen also made a keen impression on him. He learnt chemistry under Dr. P. G. Roy and physics under Dr. J. C. Bose, who conceived such regard for him that he later entrusted large sums of money to him for prohibition work in the mining areas. Rajendra Prasad was greatly attracted to science but could not master mathematics. So he gave up his intention to take his degree in Science and pursued the Arts course. Presiding over the centenary celebrations of this college in 1955 he said: ‘Whatever service it has been my good fortune to give to our people and the country has been the result of what I learnt and assimilated from all those with whom I came into contact’.

At the university he had a brilliant career, coming first in every examination for the Bachelor’s Degree and winning several scholarships. They were necessary for supplementing the slender remittances from home. The family fortunes had declined on account of bad seasons and mismanagement of the estate, and often money had to be borrowed to keep him and his brother at college.

Books did not occupy all his time, and he mixed freely with everybody and became a social figure. His simple straightforward nature and his unassuming manners won him the deep regard of the students who, to the amazement of the staff, elected him the Secretary of the College Union, in preference to a senior student.
Behind his gentle nature there was a hard core of determination. In defiance of the caste ban he joined a dinner party in honour of Dr. Ganesha Parshad on return from overseas. It was customary to undergo purificatory processes on return from a foreign country. Dr. Parshad had declined to do so and, therefore, eating with him was banned by the caste people. Rajendra Prasad was threatened with removal from the caste for eating with Dr. Parshad unless he agreed to undergo the purificatory and penitential ceremonies. But young Rajendra firmly declined to do so. He was supported by the progressive elements in his caste, and the agitation gradually fizzled out.

‘Calcutta opened my eyes to the world,’ he said. It drew him into the vortex of public activities. A new consciousness had been aroused in Bengal by a galaxy of giants, such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore. Social and economic life was in a ferment. The social reforms sponsored by Rammohan Roy, Keshub Chander Sen and others broke the power of Hindu orthodoxy, which had for long oppressed men and women and kept them ignorant and backward. Swami Vivekananda preached the gospel of strength and action. If there is a sin in the world it is weakness, avoid all weakness, weakness is sin, weakness is death,’ he said; and here is the test of truth—anything that makes you weak physically, intellectually and spiritually, reject as poison; there is no life in it; it cannot be true. Truth is strengthening, truth is purity, truth is knowledge.’ Rabindranath Tagore revived the ancient tradition of Indian culture and gave expression to it in constructive educational work. On the political front a storm had arisen over the partition of Bengal in 1905—carried through in the teeth of opposition from the people. The moderate politicians, like Surendranath Bannerji and Bipin Chandra Pal, organised a countrywide resistance to it by the force of their oratory and the spirit, of fearlessness. The cult of violence also attracted many votaries. It found expression in the Tugmtar edited by B. Dutt and in the Bande Matram of Aurobindo Ghose. Between 1906 and 1910 Shri Aurobindo was prosecuted on three occasions and in 1908 spent a year in jail. In 1910 he slipped away to Pondicherry and spent the rest of his life as a Yogi with a great reputation and following.
In search of a weapon to fight the British the country took to swadeshi, that is boycotting all articles of foreign manufacture. In Bengal the movement spread like wildfire. Mahendra Prasad during his college vacation had spoken about it to Rajendra who was then still at school. His reaction was immediate and he took to it whole-heartedly. He determined not to use foreign articles. Later, when some college students at Calcutta twitted him for using a foreign fountain pen, he showed them all his clothes and belongings and they were surprised by his exclusive devotion to swadeshi.

Rajendra Prasad pondered deeply over these events, both social and political. His gentle nature could find no response to the extremist views preaching the cult of violence in the struggle for freedom. What particularly repelled him was the resort to armed robberies in order to get funds for carrying on the struggle. He was slowly drawn to the constructive field of work. Satish Chander Mukherjee, a contemporary of Swami Vivekananda, had renounced his practice at the Bar and devoted himself to work among the students. Assisted by N. N. Ghose, Sister Nivedita and others, he started the Dawn Society which aimed at widening the horizon of the students and building up their character. Rajendra Prasad was an ardent member of the Society, which held regular classes and lectures. It had a great influence on his outlook and instilled into him a habit of social service. He started organising the Bihari students, who were scattered all about Calcutta, and bringing them together in the Bihari Club. In 1906 he founded the Bihari Students Conference which had its first session in Patna. Through it the students learned to organise themselves and exchange their views on public affairs. It also provided a forum for training in the art of public speaking.

Having taken his degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1906, Rajendra Prasad began thinking of a career. Government service did not appeal to him. But the glamour of the Indian Civil Service attracted him. At that time entry into the Service could be gained only by appearing in a competitive examination in London. He says: ‘I began to be obsessed by a new idea; to go to England somehow and pass the I.C.S. examination’. His brother supported the idea; several friends offered to help with funds. As his trip to England
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was not likely to be approved by his family, he made secret preparations to leave, hoping that after his departure from India his family would get reconciled to the idea. But somehow the information reached the family, and he got a telegram to come home as his father was seriously ill. When he got there ‘everyone started crying and father scolded my brother for conspiring to send me abroad’. He then appealed to Rajendra not to hasten his end by going abroad. Rajendra Prasad could never do anything against the wishes of the family. It was no use trying to persuade them to let him go. They could never bear the idea of separation from him. His father was ailing. How could he build his happiness on the grief of others? Causing pain to those he loved so dearly was alien to his gentle nature, and he dropped the plan.

After taking his M.A. in 1908, Rajendra Prasad took up the post of a professor in Muzzafarpur College. But the profession did not appeal to him and the college did not offer bright prospects. His brother advised him to pursue legal studies. He decided to do so, although the study of law had no particular attraction for him, and he was drawn to it purely by family considerations. The income from the family estate was dwindling, and the legal profession offered the best prospect of rehabilitating the family finances.

When he was steadily building up a legal career in 1910, he was called upon to make a momentous decision which would have changed the tenor of his life. Gopal Krishna Gokhale was searching for talent for the membership of his Servants of India Society. He met Rajendra Prasad at Calcutta and appealed to him to join the Society. ‘The country needs men like you. Come and join the Servants of India Society, he said. This suggestion disturbed him greatly and for ten days he turned it over in his mind—losing his appetite and sleep. He felt personally that he could adapt himself to the bare living conditions of the Servants of India. But the family had pinned great faith on him. The household affairs were in confusion, the family income had dwindled. Should he desert the family? he asked himself. Ultimately he wrote to his brother, although he was sharing the room with him, asking for his approval of his joining the Society. He explained that he had no ambition except to be of service to the country. Wealth had no attraction and poverty no terrors for him. But he hesitated because
he would be of no use to the family thereafter. His brother, realising the thirst in his soul, burst into tears. Both wept together and decided to consult their mother, who was deeply moved and said nothing. But the practical-minded sister, Bhagwati Devi, spoke out: ‘By talking of going abroad you made father miserable. Now by talking of becoming a recluse at this age you want to make your brother unhappy’. She then burst into tears and all in the house started crying. Unable to inflict suffering on those nearest to him, Rajendra Prasad gave up the idea.

He returned to Calcutta to continue his legal studies and was apprenticed to Khan Bahadur Shamsul Huda, a lawyer of fame and political standing as leader of the Muslims. Struck by his diligence and conscientiousness, the Khan Bahadur took a keen interest in his training. Rajendra Prasad had to work very hard, as, in addition to his studies and court work, he had to give private tuition in order to maintain himself. This kept him busy from early morning till late at night, but Rajendra Prasad has never flinched from hard work. He went through his training so assiduously that the Khan Bahadur used to pay him many compliments.

In 1911 he started legal practice under handicaps which would have deterred many young men. He had no connections among rich clients, senior lawyers or influential persons and relied more on poor clients. His integrity, hard work and sound knowledge of law drew more and more clients to him, and he rapidly rose in the profession and earned the good opinion of the judges and senior counsel. Sir Ashutosh Mukherji, Judge of the High Court, was so impressed with his masterly presentation of law that, as Vice-Chancellor of the University, he offered him the post of Professor of Law. It was a great compliment to Rajendra Prasad, who had only two years’ experience of law, and he readily accepted the post. Dr. Rash Behari Ghosh, a leading but temperamental lawyer, was so struck with him that he told him: ‘You will go very far’. The judges placed great reliance on his arguments because they felt that they were based on a deep study of law and conscientious presentation of the case. His transparent honesty would not permit him any of the dubious ways of lawyers. He would never mislead his clients with the prospects of success. He says: ‘I never accepted a case which could not be argued properly.'
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I preferred to tell such a client that there was nothing to be gained by filing a suit.

In 1915 he got the degree of Master of Laws in the first division, and a Doctorate of Laws now awaited him after two years. In 1912 Bihar had been separated from Bengal, but a separate High Court was not established at Patna till 1916, when Rajendra Prasad shifted his practice to Patna. The fifteen years that he spent in Calcutta were a formative period in his life. Calcutta had turned him from a callow schoolboy to a finished young man, an expert in law and a rising advocate, fired with the spirit of public service.

In Bihar he ranked among the leading advocates and had a flourishing and lucrative practice. But most of his income he spent on others. He started taking greater interest in political activity and was drawn to the Indian National Congress.

Career

As a Teacher

Rajendra Prasad served in various educational institutions as a teacher. After completing his MA in economics, Dr. Prasad joined as a professor at the Bhumihar Brahman College in Muzaffarpur, on July 1908 and later went on to become the principal. However later on he left the college for his legal studies. In Kolkata too he worked as Professor of Economics.

As a Lawyer

Rajendra Prasad practised law and pursued studies at Bhagalpur in Bihar and eventually emerged as a popular and eminent figure of the region. In 1916, Rajendra Prasad joined the High Court of Bihar and Orissa. Such was his intellect and his integrity, that often when his adversary failed to cite a precedent, the judges would ask Rajendra Prasad to provide a precedent.

Independence Movement

Dr. Prasad was drawn into the Indian independence movement soon after starting his career as a lawyer. During one of the fact-finding missions at Champaran, Mahatma Gandhi asked him to come with his volunteers. Rajendra Prasad was so greatly moved by the dedication, courage, and conviction of Mahatma
Gandhi that he quit his duties in the university to aid the movement. He also responded to the call by Gandhi to boycott Western educational establishments by asking his son, Mrityunjaya Prasad, to drop out of his studies and enrol himself in Bihar Vidyapeeth, an institution he along with his colleagues founded on the traditional Indian model.

During the course of the independent movement, he formed a friendship with Dr. Rahul Sankrityayan, the great Indian writer, freedom fighter, and polymath. In many of his articles he mentioned about his meeting with Dr. Rahul Sankrityayan and narrated about their close friendship and Rahulji’s love towards his nation. He wrote articles for the revolutionary publications *Searchlight* and the *Desh* and collected funds for these papers. He toured widely, explaining, lecturing, and exhorting the principles of the independence movement.

He took an active role in helping the affected people during the 1914 floods that struck Bihar and Bengal. When the earthquake of Bihar occurred on 15 January 1934, Rajendra Prasad was in jail. During that period, he passed his responsibility to his close colleague and eminent Gandhian Dr. Anugrah Narayan Sinha. He was released two days later, and set himself for the task of raising funds to help the people. The Viceroy of India had raised his own fund, though Rajendra Prasad’s fund collected over 38 Lakhs (Rs. 3,800,000), three times what the Viceroy raised. During the 1935 Quetta earthquake, when he was forbidden to leave the country, he set up relief committees in Sindh and Punjab.

He was elected as the President of Indian National Congress during the Bombay session in October 1934. He again became the president when Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose resigned in 1939.

After India became an independent republic in 1950, he was elected as the first President of India. Prasad acted independently of politics, following the expected role of the president that the Constitution set down. Following the tussle over the enactment of the Hindu Code Bill, he took a more active role in the affairs of the nation. He set several important precedents for later presidents to follow. In 1962, after twelve years as the president, he announced his decision to retire.
An Illustrious Life

The Demise

In September 1962, Rajendra Prasad’s wife Rajavanshi Devi passed away. The incident helped in the deterioration of his health and after suffering from brief illness for around six months on February 28, 1963, Dr. Prasad expired. Rajendra Prasad spent the last few months of his life in retirement at the Sadaqat Ashram in Patna. Rajendra Prasad was awarded with “Bharat Ratna”, the nation’s highest civilian award.