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Rajendra Prasad

THE impassivity with which Rajendra Prasad as President put up with all the silly viceregal ceremonials which India has taken over bodily and maintained intact all these years was a perpetual wonder to those who had thought of him as a man of the people. It was like one of those idols which are anointed, soaked up in vermilion and ghee. [dressed] up, covered under a mound of flowers and garlands and yet the idol never loses its dignity and remains serene and unperturbed. For one who is not a piece of stone or brass, it is indeed an achievement. The secret of it lies in maintaining mental equilibrium, no matter how topsyturvy are the things around. Another way of looking at it is the Indian genius of reconciling differences, or the amusing capacity of allowing contradictory things to coexist peacefully side by side.

When Rajendra Prasad became President, he brought with him respect and trust of his people and during the two terms of his Presidency, that trust and respect suffered no diminution. This is saying a lot, considering that Rajendra Prasad in many ways still stood for the traditional view of life which his Government, through the Hindu Code Bill and in other ways, was determined to change in many important respects. This again is an achievement, the secret of which has to be sought in the continuity and infinite resilience of Indian society.

What is the secret of the trust and affection which Rajendra Prasad commanded from the people? He has always been to the right in the Congress, though it would be wrong to hold it against him that he resigned from the Working Committee in the stormy days which followed the Karachi session when Pandit Nehru, as the President, wanted to bring in socialism into the Congress. Many others had resigned also and Panditji himself did not press the point. If that is cited as an example of Panditji's respect for other people's opinions and his democratic instinct, many changes in Rajendra Prasad and on occasions, his definite stand for traditional as against the progressive point of view can be similarly explained. He was ready to move with the people, but preferred to wait until he was sure people would accept the change.

This is not an unimportant point since the question of the relationship between the President and the Cabinet in the Indian Constitution has on occasions given rise to some controversy, though largely academic. In retrospect, this may be found a little surprising, considering that the elective element in the President's office was thought in the beginning to endow him with more power than that with which the constitutional head is vested in a parliamentary form of Government. What, robbed the elective office of this possibility was of course, the safeguard that the election was indirect and by a very limited body of voters, which made the control of the party complete and ruled out any possibility of the slightest conflict. This may not hold when the party is less homogeneous than the Congress is today.

Rajendra Prasad goes back to the humble Ashram on the Ganges in Patna from which he came to take up his high office as the first President of the Republic of India. Vanaprastha which, as a traditional Hindu, he would normally be expected to follow, he put off, or was persuaded to put off for a second term of office. Now loaded with years and honours, he retires to his well-earned rest.

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