



Salute to Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan

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‘It would be my proud privilege if September 5th is observed as “Teachers Day”. Such was the humble reply of a gentleman sitting over the highest chair of Constitutional power and position, when some of his friends and students requested him to allow them for celebrating 5th September as his birthday every year. On another occasion, when a student of Oxford University asked this gentleman holding the post of Professor by that time, ‘What is the difference between a station master and a school master?’, he coolly replied, ‘a station master minds the train and a school master trains the mind’. Further we pay our salute to this gentleman at the apex of political power for accepting Rs.2,500 out of Rs.10,000 salary and donating the rest of the amount to the Prime Minister’s National Relief Fund every month.

The gentleman we are taking about is none other than our beloved and revered president of

the past Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. Let’s now make a glance over his early life and family, his education, his career as a teacher, his political career, his views on contemporary religion, philosophy and education.

A prominent academician and philosopher, a promising politician and statesman, a prolific writer and scholar—all rolled in one—being wonderfully blended to find a time-tested and lively expression in Radhakrishnan.



Born to Sarvepalli Veeraswami, a sub-ordinate revenue official under British raj and Sarvepalli Sitamma, a housewife in a modest but poor Telugu-speaking Niyogi Brahmin family of thiruttani, Madras Presidency, British India (Now Tamil Nadu, India) on 5th September 1888, Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was destined to become the

first vice president of India (1952-62) and second president of India (1962-67). He had his primary, secondary and higher secondary education at



Thiruttani's K.V. High School, Tiruvallur's Gowdie School, Tirupati's Hermannsburg Evangelical Lutheran Mission School, Walajapet's Government Higher Secondary School and Vellore's Voorhees College. He enrolled himself in the most prestigious Madras Christian College where he graduated with philosophy Hons. and did his post-graduation in Philosophy (1906-08). Throughout his students' career, he was awarded several scholarships which considerably helped him to continue his higher studies without break. His Bachelor's Degree thesis entitled, 'The Ethics of the Vedanta and its Metaphysical Presuppositions' vehemently battled against the accusation that the Vedanta scheme did not have any quarter for ethics. But being highly appreciated by two of his professors Rev. William Meston and Dr. Alfred George Hogg, the thesis was published when he was 20 years of age.

He was married to Sivakamuamma, his distant cousin at the age of 16, got blessed with five daughters and one son and spent a happy married life for about 51 years. His son Dr. S. Gopal emerged as a promising Indian historian credited with the authorship of biographies of Dr. Radhakrishnan and Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru.

After the completion of higher education, Radhakrishnan started his teaching career as a Lecturer of Philosophy at Madras Presidency College, Madras in April 1909 and successfully got through the screening test of L.T. training to qualify for the permanent post of Assistant Professor and Professor in the same college. In 1916, he was appointed to the Department of Philosophy of Government Arts College, Rajamundry (A.P.) as Professor. In 1918, he was appointed as Professor of Philosophy at the University of Mysore where he was privileged to teach the students at Maharaja's College, Mysore

and to write several useful articles for the prestigious journals such as 'The International Journals of Ethics', 'The Quest' and 'The Journals of Philosophy' for three years. In 1921, he was selected for appointment to the post of Professor of Philosophy at the University of Calcutta where he held the highly distinguished King George V Chair of Mental and Moral Science. It is pertinent to mention here that while on move to take up his new assignment at the University of Calcutta, some of his loving students of Mysore University took their much adored and admired Professor to the station in a carriage decorated with beautiful flowers. In June 1926, he represented the University of Calcutta at the British Empire Universities Congress and in September 1926, he made his intellectual presence felt at the International Congress of Philosophy at Harvard University. That year he accepted Upton Lecture at Manchester College where he made a significant mark of his intellectual excellence.

In 1929, on an invitation, he assumed the office of the Principal, Manchester College, Oxford after J. Estlin Carpenter and brilliantly delivered Hibbert Lecture on 'The ideals of Life' which was later on published in an outstanding book form "An Idealist view of Life". In 1930, he was appointed as Haskell Lecturer in Comparative Religion at the University of Chicago. In 1931, he held the most dignified office of the Vice-Chancellor, Andhra University (A.P.) and continued in that position for five years. He was then fortunate enough to become the first Indian to hold a Professorial chair at the Oxford University, London where he served as a well-known Spalding Professor of Eastern Religion and Ethics in 1936. In 1938, he was elected as a fellow of All Souls college and that of British Academy. In 1939, he was invited to succeed



Pt. Madan Mohan Malavya as the Vice-Chancellor of Banaras Hindu University where he continued for 9 years. He also chaired the University Education Commission in 1948, and initiated several significant measures for the promotion of education all over the country as per the country's need. His teaching career in several distinguished positions spanned over a length of time stretching from 1909 to 1952. He held the respectable position of being the Chancellor of the University of Delhi from 1953 to 1962 and focused on the remarkable development of Higher Studies and Research.

In his life and extensive writing career, Radhakrishnan proved himself to be a very prominent, powerful and influential writer of extraordinary scholarship. He is said to have been credited with a wide range of Literary works in form of books and articles of utmost philosophic rigour and spiritual fervour. Some of his highly distinguished books are Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore (1918), Indian Philosophy 2 Vols (1923), An idealist view of life (1929), Eastern Religion and Western Thought (1939), Religion and Society (1947), The Bhagavad Gita (1948), The Dhammapada (1950), The Philosophy of Upanishads (1953), Recovery of Faith (1956), The Brahmasutra (1959), Religion, Science & Culture (1968), The Reign of Religion in Contemporary Philosophy, Religion in a Changing World, East and West in Religion, East and West : Some Reflections, The Hindu view of life, The Philosophy of spiritual life, living with a purpose, The pursuit of Truth, The Heart of Hindustan : A Collection of Seven Essays & many more. Tagore's Philosophy, he claimed was 'the genuine expression of the Indian spirit'.

In most of his published books, write-ups and lectures, Radhakrishnan has earnestly

endeavoured to describe, defend and propagate his faith which he referred to in various terms- 'Hinduism', 'Vedanta', 'religion of the spirit' against all possible what he termed as 'Uninformed Western Criticism'. With a string religious conviction, he tried to establish that Hinduism, as reflected in Vedanta, was philosophically sound and ethically valuable. His philosophy was deeply rooted in Advaita Vedanta and he powerfully reinterpreted it in terms of its direct intuitive experience and inner realization to shape the understanding of Hinduism both in India and the West. In him, we find Vedanta getting an access to the west where it satiated the spiritual hunger of the Europeans and Americans with proper nourishment in the early decade of 20th century. All his rich ideas and powerful writings enormously contributed to the formation of India as 'a nation-state' as well as to the hegemonic status of Vedanta as the 'essential world view of Hinduism'. Further, his extensive knowledge of the eastern and western philosophical traditions brought him the glory of being a 'bridge-maker' between India and the west. To him, the truth and diversity of human nature as grounded in the absolute should have proper recognition in theology and creeds that rested upon intellectual formulations and religious experience.

Radhakrishnan defines education as an 'instrument for social, economic and cultural change'. Apart from providing extensive knowledge, information, skill and training, it instills into human mind a sense of discipline, moral values, creativity and critical thinking power to sort out many issues in life. It makes a man physically, mentally and spiritually complete and teaches him the art of living through refinement of heart and mind. It generates an opportunity for formation of character, development of



personality, training of leadership, development of secular and scientific attitude, cultivation of social, moral, spiritual and democratic values; preservation, enrichment and transmission of culture and finally development of nationalism and international understanding.

Radhakrishnan was honoured with several outstanding awards such as “Knighthood” in 1931, Bharat Ratna, India’s highest Civilian Award in 1954, German ‘Order pour le Merite’ in 1954, The Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in 1961, Institution of Teacher’s Day on 5th Sept. every year in honour of Radhakrishnan’s Birthday, Honorary membership of the British Royal Order of Merit in 1963, Sahitya Academy Fellowship in 1968, The Templeton Prize in 1975, Institution of the Scholarship renamed as Radhakrishnan Chevening Scholarship and Radhakrishnan Memorial Award by Oxford University in 1989.

It deserves a special mention here that Radhakrishnan was the first person to be honoured with the highest honour of Sahitya Academy Fellowship for his rich contribution to literature. From the honour of being ‘Knight hood’ till India’s attainment of freedom, he was addressed as “Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan” but in the post-independence period he became widely known as “Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan”. He was awarded Templeton Prize, a few months before his demise for advocating ‘non-aggression’ and conveying ‘a universal reality of God that embraced love and wisdom for all people’. With a commitment to the cause of education, he donated the entire amount of the Templeton Prize to the Oxford University. From 1933 onwards, he was nominated 16 times for the Nobel Prize for Literature and 11 times for Nobel Peace Prize. He was one of the founder members of Helpage

India, a premier non-profit organization committedly working for the well-being of the elderly underprivileged in India.

After a promising academic career, Radhakrishnan joined politics in the later part of his life. By virtue of his pervasive knowledge and intellectual brilliance, he could have an abiding influence in Indian politics as well as in foreign affairs in post-independence period. He made his presence strongly felt in the Andhra Mahasabha of 1928 where he advocated the idea of renaming the ceded Districts Division of Madras Presidency Royalaseema. In 1931, being appointed to the League of Nations Committee for Intellectual Co-operation, he held an identity among the intellectuals as a Hindu expert on Indian Ideas. In 1946, he was elected to the Indian Constituent Assembly for two years and then in 1948-49, he headed the Indian delegation to the newly formed UNESCO. He initially served as an active sitting member of the Executive Board of UNESCO and subsequently became its elected Chairman and then India’s ambassador to UNESCO. In 1949, he was appointed India’s ambassador to Moscow by the then Prime Minister Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru and continued that dignified office till 1952. On his return to India, he was elected as first Vice-President of India (1952-62), first Chairman of Rajya Sabha and then was elected as the second President of India (1962-67) after Dr. Rajendra Prasad. In 1959, he was accompanied by Pt. Nehru on a foreign tour and his gradual influence in political circle raised to new heights.

During his tenure as Vice President and President of India, the political scenario was overshadowed with numerous global crises like the Korean war, Indo-China political conflict, Indo-Pak hostilities and the cold war split between East and West. In such a grave situation of political



instability, Radhakrishnan wonderfully managed to bring his philosophical and political beliefs into motion. He resented over the divisive ability and dominant character of what he witnessed as 'the self-proclaimed' international organization like the League of Nations. Realizing the growing need for world peace and universal fellowship, he advocated for the promotion of an innovative Internationalism based on integral experiences of metaphysical foundations and political ideology. Through such a vision, he emphasized, 'mutual understanding and tolerance can be effectively encouraged between cultures and nations.'

The demise of Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan on 17th April 1975 was an irreparable loss for our country. From a humble origin to the apogee of political power and position, the journey was undoubtedly incredible and amazing. But history is replete with instances of many people attaining stride of success as a colossus. This is exactly what has happened to Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan in his life. The span of his life covering a period of about 87 years was quite eventful in many ways. His significant and influential role in the domain of academics, politics and philosophy has earned him 'a place of all time remembrance' by his dear countrymen.

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