



The Great Indian Philosopher : Dr. Radhakrishnan

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One of India's most influential scholars of comparative religion and philosophy, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan is considered through his efforts to have built a bridge between the East and the West by showing that the philosophical systems of each tradition are comprehensible within the terms of the other. To him, philosophy was a way of understanding life and his study of Indian philosophy served as a cultural therapy. By interpreting Indian thought in

Western terms and showing that it was imbued with reason and logic he was able to give Indians a new sense of esteem, who were overcome by inferiority complex by imperial forces. But he also made clear to them that their long and rich tradition had been arrested and required further evolution and he exhorted Indians to cast off much that was corrupt and abhorrent.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who was one of his closest friends throughout, said about Dr. Radhakrishnan: 'he has served his country in many capacities. But above all, he is a great teacher from whom all of us have learnt much and will continue to learn. It is India's peculiarity in itself showing the kind of men we honour and respect.'

Dr. Radhakrishnan was born into a middle class Telugu Brahmin family at Tirutani in Tamil Nadu state. A town in Madras Presidency, British India, 64 km to the northwest of Madras (now Chennai). His early years were spent in Tirutani and Tirupati. His father was a subordinate revenue official in the service of a local Zamindar (landlord). He didn't want his son to learn English, instead wanted him to become a priest. His primary

education was at Primary Board High School at Tirutani. In 1896 he moved to the Hermansburg Evangelical Lutheran Mission School at Tirupati.

Dr. Radhakrishnan was awarded scholarships throughout his academic life. He joined the Voorhee's College in Vellore but switched over to the Madras Christian College at the age of 17. He graduated with a Master's Degree in Philosophy from the Madras Christian College in 1906, being one of its most distinguished alumni. Radhakrishnan wrote his thesis for the M.A degree on 'Ethics of the Vedanta and its Metaphysical Presuppositions'. He was afraid that his M.A thesis, would offend his Philosophy Professor, Dr. A.G Hogg. Instead, Dr. Hogg commended Radhakrishnan on doing an excellent job. Radhakrishnan's M.A thesis was published when he was only 20.

Radhakrishnan studied philosophy by chance rather than by choice. Being financially constrained student at that time, when a cousin, after graduating from the same college, passed on his textbooks in philosophy to Radhakrishnan, it automatically decided his academic course. Later on he

developed deep interest in his subject and wrote many acclaimed works on philosophy, both Eastern and Western. Dr. Radhakrishnan stated that western philosophers, despite all claims to objectivity, were influenced by theological influences of their own culture. He wrote books of Indian philosophy according to Western academic standards, and made all efforts for the west to give serious consideration to Indian philosophy. In his book 'Idealist View of Life', he made a powerful case for importance of intuitive thinking as opposed to purely intellectual forms of thought. He is well known for his commentaries on the Prasthanas namely, the Bhagavadgita, the Upanishads and the Brahma Sutra.

Radhakrishnan was married to Sivakamu, a distant cousin, in 1904 at the age of 16. As per tradition the marriage was arranged by the family. The couple had five daughters and a son, Sarvepalli Gopal. He went on to a notable career as a historian. Sivakamu died in 1956. They were married for over 51 years.

In 1918 Radhakrishnan was selected as Professor of Philosophy by the University of Mysore. By that time he had

written many articles for journals of repute like The Quest, Journal of Philosophy and the International Journal of Ethics. He also completed his first book, "the Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore." He believed Tagore's philosophy to be the 'genuine manifestation of the Indian spirit.' Dr. Radhakrishnan's second book, "the Reign of Religion in Contemporary Philosophy" was published in 1920.

In 1921 he was appointed as a Professor in Philosophy to occupy the King George V Chair of Mental and Moral Science at the University of Calcutta. Radhakrishnan represented the University of Calcutta at the Congress of the Universities of the British Empire in June 1926 and the International Congress of Philosophy at Harvard University in September 1926.

In 1929 Dr. Radhakrishnan was invited to take the post vacated by Principal J. Estlin Carpenter in Manchester College, Oxford. This gave him the opportunity to lecture to the students of the University of Oxford on Comparative Religion. For his services to education he was knighted by the British Government in 1931, but he never used the SR title in his

personal life, preferring instead his academic title of 'Doctor'.

He was Vice-Chancellor of Andhra University from 1931 to 1936. In 1936 Radhakrishnan was named Splinging Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at the University of Oxford, and was selected a fellow of All Souls College. In 1939 Pt. Madan Mohan Malavya invited him to succeed him as the Vice-Chancellor of Banaras Hindu University (BHU). He continued as its Vice-Chancellor till January, 1948.

When India became independent in 1947, Dr. Radhakrishnan represented India at UNESCO and was later Ambassador of India to the Soviet Union, from 1949 to 1952. He was also elected to the Constituent Assembly of India.

Along with Ghanshyam Das Birla and some other Social workers in the pre-independence era, Dr. Radhakrishnan formed the Krishnarpan Charity Trust. Dr. Radhakrishnan moved beyond being a more academic and sought to engage his philosophical and religious studies in the political and social developments of the contemporary context. He believed that in India, the

philosopher's duty was to keep in touch with the past while stretching out to the future. This commitment to society, the crusading urgent tone in his scholarly writings, the modern note in his interpretations of even classical texts and his intellectual resistance to the deforming pressures of colonialism gave Dr. Radhakrishnan a distinct public image. He was a coin minted differently from the usual run of politicians and academicians.

Far from being a stern and severe intellectual remote from the world, Dr. Radhakrishnan was a very humane person. Exceedingly popular among his students right from his early days as a Professor at Presidency College, Madras he was an evocative teacher. He was offered the professorship in Calcutta University when he was less than 30 years old.

His mastery on his subject and his clarity of thought and expression made him a much sought after teacher. But what made him even more popular was his warm heartedness and his ability to draw out people. This aspect of his personality continued to win him countless admirers throughout his long and illustrious public life.

In the last decade of British rule, his was the most sophisticated and exalted analysis of Gandhi's work and thought and in free India he provided the ideological armour for Nehru's foreign policy. His commitment to high principles and unflinching dignity and moral authority to all the offices which he held. In India Dr. Radhakrishnan was highly respected figure, abroad he became one of the best-liked public figures of his time. He earned very early international recognition as a philosopher. In 1952, the Library of Living Philosophers, an institute of world-wide repute, brought out a massive volume on the philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, devoted wholly to a critical appreciation of his philosophical doctrines.

After independence, this philosophical luminary, who personified the essence of India yet had a universal vision, became an ideal ambassador to the Soviet Union, for the nascent nation poised to establish itself in the international arena.

In 1952, Dr. Radhakrishnan was chosen to be the Vice President of the Republic of India and in 1962, he was made the Head of the State for five years. It was the

glory of Indian democracy that educationist aloof from politics but having an International acclaim as a profound scholar was placed in the position of the President. And it was an advantage for a young country like India to have him to interpret its domestic and foreign policies abroad to expound its outlook and aspirations emphatically and in the right way which was much needed in a world of uncertainty and disbelief among nations.

His appointment as President was hailed by Bertrand Russell who said, "It is an honour to philosophy that Dr. Radhakrishnan should be President of India and I, as a philosopher, take special pleasure in this. Plato aspired for philosophers to become kings and it is a tribute to India that she should make a Philosopher President."

History reserved for Radhakrishnan's term of office as President much suspense and surprise. Within months of his ascendancy in 1962 there was the Chinese invasion. The nation's morale was dealt a blow but Radhakrishnan's voice, firm and resolute came on the air to reassure a shaken nation: "Owing to the difficult terrain and numerical

superiority of the Chinese, we suffered military reverses. These have opened our eyes to the realities of the situation. We are now aware of our inadequacies and are alive to the needs of the present and the demands of the future. The country has developed a new purpose, a new will."

In 1965, Pakistan violated our Western frontiers. Dr. Radhakrishnan in his broadcast to the nation on September 25, 1965 said, "Pakistan assumed that India was too weak or too afraid or too proud to fight. India though naturally disinclined to take to arms felt the necessity to defend herself when attacked. Pakistan also assumed that communal disturbances would occur in the country and in the resulting chaos she could have her way. Her miscalculations must have come to her as a rude shock."

Dr. Radhakrishnan had great faith in Indian democracy. In his farewell broadcast to the

Nation on May 12, 1967, he said that despite occasional forebodings to the contrary, the Indian Constitution had worked successfully so far. But democracy, he warned, was also more than a system of the Government. "It was a way of life and a regime of civilised conduct of human affairs. We should be the architects of peaceful changes and the advocates of radical reform," he said.

Dr. Radhakrishnan was selected as the first Vice-President of India in 1952. He was elected as the second President of India (1962-1967). When he became President, some of his students and friends requested him to allow them to celebrate his birthday, 5th September. He replied, "Instead of celebrating my birthday, it would be my proud privilege if 5th September is observed as Teachers Day." His birthday has since been celebrated as the Teachers Day in India. It was a

tribute to Dr. Radhakrishnan's close association with the cause of teachers. Whatever position he held, as President or even as Ambassador, Dr. Radhakrishnan essentially remained a teacher all his life. The teaching profession was his first love and those who studied under him still remember with gratitude his great qualities as a teacher.

References

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