

## **Interface of Discourses: The Writings of Indian Presidents**

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### **Abstract**

Indian Writing in English is multi-dimensional. Prose is enriched by writers of diverse milieu. Freedom fighters, intellectuals, philosophers, journalists, lawyers, scientists, officers, diplomats, statesmen, politicians and persons of high offices have contributed to this genre.

The writings of Indian Presidents deserve a close study and serve the purpose of course correction for the nation. This paper tries to make an overview of the writing, traces the patterns and erect a structure. The position of Indian President in Indian Constitution has been envisaged as conscience keeper of the nation and path finder. Indian Presidential writing naturally reflects the high values and thoughts of these statesmen, Rajendra Prasad, S. Radhakrishnan, Zakir Hussain, V.V. Giri, N.Sanjiva Reddy,

Zail Singh, R. Venkataraman, S.D. Sharma, K. R. Narayan, Abdul Kalam and Pranab Mukherjee who occupied the office from 1947 onwards. Two streams of thought: progress of the nation and humanity; the evolution of thought beacons are evident in the writing. Paradigm shift and rethinking is imperative to reorient the statesman as a writer. Indian Presidents as writers are a class apart.

### **Keywords**

Indian Prose Writing in English, Multi-dimensional and diverse milieu in prose, Indian Presidents' writing, Pattern and structure of Indian Presidents' prose, Rethinking Presidents as writers.

## **Interface of Discourses: The Writings of Indian Presidents by Dr Tatavarty Radhakrishna Murty**

Indian Writing in English is multi-dimensional and has yielded an impressive output. The prose genre, in particular, has been immensely contributed by the writers of diverse milieu. Freedom fighters, intellectuals, philosophers, journalists, lawyers, scientists, officers, diplomats, statesmen, politicians, and to the persons of high offices have contributed to this genre exceptionally. However, except for the writings of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, S. Radhakrishnan, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and a few others, little attention is given to the prose genre in the canon of Indian Writing in English. A lot many national leaders have written on contemporary

national issues and their experiences, which offer interesting topics for study.

Indian polity basically looks at its Presidents as ceremonial figureheads, yet they own high 'authority and dignity'. The President of India is expected to be visionary and acts as the conscience keeper of the nation. Their writings deserve to be considered as a treasure trove of ideas and experiences. In this context, the idea of a paradigm shift in the criticism of prose genre of the statesmen and persons in high offices has taken shape of a sub-genre and rethinking and reorientation of critical focus for this genre has been imperative and relevant. Hence, an attempt has been made to analyse some of the writings of various Indian Presidents in order to 'see' India from their perspectives and reconstruct the vision of national ethos and interest, which can be an exercise in course correction.

## **The Presidents and their writings**

Presidents of India are eminent persons who have different backgrounds: freedom struggles, political conflicts, philosophy, social status, and education. Their education and direct and indirect roles in freedom struggle and experiences reflected in their writings are a source of inspiration to the nation. The nation's progress and its vicissitudes are reflected in the work of each President.

Most interestingly, this sub-genre — the writing from the first citizens of India — has the flavour of erudition and insight. The writings are immensely diverse with the flavour of many secrets highlighting internal political conflicts between leaders and other interesting facts. They consist of partial and full life autobiographies, memoirs, general works, specialized works, collection of articles, short essays and texts of the addresses delivered on various occasions. These can be broadly divided into two major categories — the writings prior to the presidential position and the works published during and after their tenure. The works which are written before they assumed the office are diverse and deal with a large number of disciplines including philosophy, labour laws, jurisprudence, technology, developmental economics, public administration, religion and diplomacy and education. While the works written after completion of their presidential tenures are reminiscent of those years in office. Some wrote their autobiographies much before they became Presidents. Their reflections on the requisites and correctives for the nation are recorded here.

### **Dr Rajendra Prasad - The Patriot**

**Dr** Rajendra Prasad was the first President of India (13.05.1952 – 13.05.1962). A patriot, he was an example of the philosophy, ‘simple living and high thinking’. He suggested the appointment of a tribunal to enquire into corruption cases in high offices (a similar demand was mobilized by the social activist Anna Hazare in recent time

to form the Lok Pal bill, which eventually became an act in 2012). Dr Rajendra Prasad authored books such as *Constructive Programme: Some Suggestions* (1942), *The League Demand* (1946), *India Divided* (1946), *Autobiography* (1946), *Our Constitution* (1950), *Asoka for the Young* (1953) and *At the Feet of Mahatma Gandhi* (1955) which cover issues ranging from freedom struggle, Gandhiji's political movement, to the partition of India. Dr Rajendra Prasad's *Constructive Programme: Some Suggestions* (1942) is a blue print of Gandhiji's *Constructive Programme* that advocated for the betterment of the Indian society. It focused to make the people self-reliant and self-sufficient and propagated equality in matters of access to education, sanitation, literacy to empower women and every single citizen of the country. It underlines the need to eliminate the biasness on the basis of caste, creed, language and gender. On the question of violent revolution as a solution to reduce inequalities he opines that "the most stable and lasting equality will certainly be that which is not imposed from outside but which grows from within as a result of voluntary control of the acquisitive and exploiting tendency in man." *Autobiography* (1957), which was written while Dr Rajendra Prasad was in prison, describes his impressions, discusses his tribulations, and examines the British colonial rule and the saga of resistance to it under the leadership of Gandhiji.

## **Dr. S. Radhakrishnan - The Philosopher**

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, a world-renowned philosopher-educationist, was the second President of India from 13.05.1962 to 13.05.1967. He perceived Gandhiji's civil disobedience movement not as a physical protest but as a spiritual force. He is noted for his lucid explanation of difficult thoughts of philosophy in English and visions of material and spiritual prosperity for humanity. Radhakrishnan with his "range of interests, sweep of mind, and catholicity of tastes, temper and quality of eloquence" authored books on philosophy, religion, and education. His writings voice the concerns of the civilization and his devotion to humanity.

Radhakrishnan authored many books including *The Ethics of the Vedanta and Its Metaphysical Presuppositions* (1908), *Essentials of Psychology* (1912), *Religion and Life* (1915), *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (1918), *The Reign of Religion in Contemporary Philosophy* (1920), *Indian Philosophy in two volumes* (1923 & 1927), *The Philosophy of the Upanishads* (1924), *The Hindu View of Life* (1927), *The Religion We Need* (1928), *The Vedanta According to Sankara and Ramanuja* (1928), *Kalki or The Future of Civilization* (1929), *An Idealist View of Life* (1929), *East and West in Religion* (1933), *Freedom and Culture* (1936), *The Heart of Hindusthan* (1936), *Gautama the Buddha* (1938), *Eastern Religion and Western Thought* (1939), *Education, Politics and War* (1944), *Is this Peace?* (1945), *Religion and Society* (1947), *The Bhagavad-Gita with an Introductory Essay* (1948), *The*

*Dhammapada* (1950), *The Principal Upanishads* (1953), *Recovery of Faith* (1955), *East and West: Some Reflections* (1956), *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* (1957), *The Brahma Sutra: The Philosophy of Spiritual Life* (1959), *Fellowship of the Spirit* (1961), *On Nehru* (1965), *Religion in Changing Word* (1967), *Religion and Culture* (1968), *Our Heritage* (1973) and *The Creative Life*(1975).

Radhakrishnan's writings are not limited to national perspective, they cater to the entire humanity. They try to offer succor to the harassed humanity and suggest a way out of its chaos. His *Kalki or The Future of Civilization* (1929) is an incisive commentary on the present civilization in the aspects of religion, family life, economic relations, politics and international relations. It diagnoses the symptoms of the malady and dispenses ideas for rejuvenating it. Radhakrishnan's *An Idealist View of Life* (1929) is a magnum opus that deliberates on the necessity for constructing the vision of life on the foundations of pragmatic religion, its sensible experiences and varying perceptions of ultimate reality. The Focus is on spiritual and moral fibres of society to counter the effects of materialism. Radhakrishnan's writings reflect a rare blend of eastern and western thoughts—an understanding of humanity and progressive outlook. *An Idealist View Life* is hailed by critics, philosophers and public as one of the best texts of the century for its elucidation of ideas on philosophy and religion, its argument and lyrical prose style. His command of the classical texts and ability to synthesize the past and present is amazing. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes,

“Reading *An Idealist View of Life* aloud, one feels that here at any rate is philosophy which is not forbidding, which does not overwhelm the reader with a mass of incomprehensible verbiage. One feels, besides, that the lectures are spoken to one in his study, with familiarity, with disarming cordiality. Abstract philosophical conceptions are rendered in language that satisfies the mind but intoxicates the senses.” An accomplished master of prose that Radhakrishnan was, it is not easy for commoners to put his ideas across in as clear a manner. His discourse aims at making a good human being and his ideas whether they are of 1920’s or 1960’s act as antidotes to the widespread maladies of the civilization.

## **Dr. Zakir Husain – The Educationist**

Dr. Zakir Husain, an educationist, served the country as the third President from 13.05.1967 to 03.05.1969. Zakir Husain outlined his ideas of education and economic affairs in many lectures published under titles such as *Capitalism: Essays in Understanding* (1948), *Educational Reconstruction in India* (1958), *The Ethics and the State* (1960), *The Dynamic University* (1965) and *Education and national development* (translation from Urdu to English by B. Sheik Ali, 1993). Zakir Husain wrote short stories for children in Urdu under the title, *Abbu Khan ki Bakri Chaudah Aur Kahanian* (1963) which was translated into English as *The Goat of Abbu Khan and Fourteen Other Stories*. His *The Dynamic University* (1965) is a discourse on education, its meaning, problems and challenges

encountered in its imparting, comparison of past and present systems of education, skill-centered education and the philosophy of education that has holistic evolution of individual at its heart.

### **V. V. Giri – The Labour Leader**

V. V. Giri, the fourth President from 24.08.1969 to 24.08.1974, was a prominent labour leader who gave priority to labour and brought respectability to trade unions. V. V. Giri authored books like *Industrial Relations* (1955), *Labour Problems in Indian Industry* (1958), *Problems of Public Administration* (1967), *National Regeneration – Problems and Prospects* (1969), *Civilization at the Cross Roads of Destiny* (1969) and *Jobs for our Millions* (1970) which deal with topics of macroeconomics like national planning, employment issues, industrial growth and trade union problems. *My Life and Times* (1976) is his autobiography. This autobiography enunciates the value of morals and discipline by showcasing personal examples. On the other side, it traces the formulation of labour welfare policies and growth of trade union movement in pre-Independence and post-Independence eras. The Irish freedom struggle proved to be a source of inspiration to Giri.

### **N. Sanjiva Reddy – The Leader**

N. Sanjiva Reddy, freedom fighter and administrator, served as the sixth President from 25.07.1977 to 25.07.1982. *Without Fear or Favour: Reminiscences and*

*Reflections of a President* (1989) is a presidential memoir of eventful years after the Emergency which chronicles the inception and collapse of the first non-Congress government and voices concern on the issues of politics like rise of corruption and harmony between the opposition parties and the ruling party and economics like price rise and wage parity for skilled and unskilled workers. The writing in the book is devoid of literary flourishes, witty lines and polished expressions which will not diminish the impact of the insight it presents nor dilute the value of the concerns of a leader who felt anguished at the erosion of standards in sharp deviation from Gandhian principles of pre Independence.

## **Giani Zail Singh – The Popular Leader**

Giani Zail Singh, a popular leader and architect of modern Punjab, served as the seventh President from 25.07.1982 to 25.07.1987. Giani Zail Singh belongs to a new class of politicians of whom the earliest example was K. Kamraj, who knew only 'telegraphic English'. The only writing that this man from the peasant stock attempted was *Memoirs of Giani Zail Singh* (1997). This autobiography is a graphic personal view of the rage and fight against autocratic rule in princely states, the subsequent victory, the fire of patriotism ignited by Bhagat Singh's martyrdom, Nehru's influence on modern India, building of modern Punjab, initiation of land reforms and impact of Vinoba Bhave, the emergency and the discipline it imposed and finally his tumultuous Presidency – the Akali agitation for a separate

nation, the Operation Blue Star, the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the strained relations between Prime Minister and the President. The account of constitutional relations between the Head of State and the Head of Government, the controversies and crises—the cause and effect—offer an interesting counter discourse. This autobiography is a faithful record of not only of a very difficult period in modern India's history, and its communal outbursts but also of the personal hurt.

## **R. Venkataraman – The Statesman**

R. Venkataraman was an expert in constitutional and industrial law. He was the eighth President from 25.07.1987 to 25.07.1992. Venkataraman wrote a travelogue, *Kamaraj's Tour in Socialist Countries* (1967) which won the Soviet Land Prize in 1967 and an autobiography, *My Presidential Years* in 1994. His lectures and articles were published under such titles as *The Role of Planning in Industrial Development* (1969), *The Role of a Private Member of Parliament* (1986), *Nehru: A True Democrat* (1986), *So May be Great – Selected Speeches and Writings by R. Venkataraman* (1990) *Selected Speeches 1984-87* (1991), *President R. Venkataraman – Selected Speeches*, (1993), *R. Venkataraman on Contemporary Issues* (1996) and *Stream of Humanism – R. Venkataraman* (2000). Venkataraman's *My Presidential Years* (1994) as the title suggests, limits itself to the description of the matters, events and personalities with which he, as the President of India, was connected.

## **Dr. Shanker Dayal Sharma – The Scholar**

Dr. Shanker Dayal Sharma was a scholar of Sanskrit and jurisprudence. He was the ninth President from 25.07.1992 to 25.07.1997. He was an educationist who advocated all that was best in the Indian culture. His erudition brought charm to his political offices. Sharma's scholarship is manifest in his speeches and writings. His speeches were published under titles such as *Congress Approach to International Affairs* (1970), *Studies in Indo-Soviet Cooperation* (1981), *Nehru's Impact on India as PM* (1989), *Rule of Law and Role of Police, Secularism in the Indian Ethos*(1989), *Eminent Indians* (1990), *Horizons of Indian Education* (1992), *The Democratic Process* (1993), *For a better Future* (1993), *Ideas, Thoughts and Images* (1994), *Aspects of Indian Thought* (1993), *Towards a New India* (1994), *New Directions of Development and Our Heritage of Humanism*. The book, *Horizons of Indian Education* (1992) presents the insights and visions of a thinker of great distinction connected with higher education in India as an element in safeguarding the gains of freedom and accomplishing the gigantic task of national reconstruction. He advocates the virtues of traditional systems of education in India against modern education and its problems and threats, the issue of national integration through regional languages, the value of Sanskrit to computer technology as well as spiritual aspects of the world, modern education methods like Open University and the need to have a vision for youth in post-Independent India. He tries to dispel notions

of youth who are drawn to certain ways of the western world through his ideas.

## **K.R. Narayanan – The Diplomat**

K.R. Narayanan, diplomat and expert on political economy, was the tenth President from 25.07.1997 to 25.07.2002. A Gandhian and Nehruvian, he felt that unless the aspirations of the oppressed classes are met, there could not be any real unity of the nation. K. R. Narayanan is the author of such *works* as *Non-alignment in Contemporary International Relations (1981)*, *India and America – Essays in Understanding (1984)*, *Images and Insights (1987)*, and *Nehru and His Vision (1999)*. The book, *Images and Insights*, a collection of lectures and articles, addresses the questions of Indian unity, nationalism and secularism and argues for the reform from the grassroots level and persuades the public towards a casteless society and value oriented education. Narayanan presents the past, present and future socio-economic condition of the nation through his insights about unity and nationalism.

## **A.P.J. Abdul Kalam – The Scientist**

A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the eleventh President from 25.07.2002 to 25.07.2007, is a scientist who played a key role in strengthening India's self-reliance in space technology and war technologies. He recommends the blend of science and spiritual values for the growth of India. He has become an icon for the young generation with his motivational books and speeches. Kalam authored *India*

2020 – *A Vision for the New Millennium* (1998), *Wings of Fire* (1999), *Ignited Minds* (2002), *Envisioning an Empowered Nation* (2004), *Mission India – A Vision for Indian Youth* (2005), *Guiding Souls* (2005), *Indomitable Spirit* (2008), and *Spirit of India* (2010). His writings have become a source of inspiration to youth and advocate the power of dream and vision for their success. In his autobiography, he narrates: “To succeed in life and achieve results, you must understand and master three mighty forces – desire, belief and expectation. ...before anything I wanted ...I had to desire it intensely and be positively certain it would happen.” *Ignited Minds* (2002) is a vision document that analyses the pitfalls of the present Indian society, uncovers the brighter side of the past and convinces on the urgency to raise the indices of material prosperity in tandem with spiritual refinement of the human resources. On the surface, he speaks about ways of gaining material prosperity of the nation visible in the economic indices of development but stresses on giving the individual mind a spiritual bent. According to Kalam, the process of harnessing both spiritual and material forces though difficult should be initiated.

## **Pranab Mukherjee – The Thinker**

Pranab Mukherjee, the present President of India from 25 July 2012 – 25 July 2017, was a distinguished Parliamentarian and administrator. He authored books such as *Beyond Survival: Emerging Dimensions of India Economy* (1984), *Off the Track* (1987), *Saga of Struggle and*

*Sacrifice* (1992) and *Challenges before the Nation* (1992). Recently he published his autobiography. *The Dramatic Decade: The Indira Gandhi Years, Thoughts and Reflections, The Turbulent Years: 1980 – 1996* are some of his works to be studied.

The progress of the nation is presented through a reconstruction of the ideas, visions and experiences of Indian Presidents presented in their discourses and their reflective accounts. The nation in its varying stages of freedom struggle, formation, consolidation, turbulence and reformation is kaleidoscoped through the memoirs of the Presidents; it offers vision to the nation and humanity; the analysis and the diagnosis of its failings and correctives—compiled from their general discourses. The thought, word and action of the Presidents are visions in their own right encompassing the vital aspects of national development and progress. Education, morality, simplicity, integrity, family values, material prosperity supported by spiritual outlook and true religious practices; decency, reconciliation and national approach in political life; democracy and spirit of cooperation among nations and political parties; the convergence of science and spiritual outlook are integral to this vision. In spite of India's rich background of culture, morals, spiritual and material knowledge, its spirited freedom struggle and the ideal life of its freedom fighters; maladies and problems exist; disappearance of traditions in its medieval stage are observed. In this context, a vision for the nation is required on the lines of the freedom movement. The

thought and actions of the Presidents offer this vision. The body of Presidential prose writing is a unique confluence of position, personality and text. The written and spoken words of the Presidents of India are fountainheads of inspiration which present a vision of the nation that has been evolving over the years which is worthy of a revisit.

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