

**DR. SRI KRISHNA SINHA MEMORIAL LECTURE 2012 DELIVERED ON 9TH
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I

I consider it a great honour to be invited to speak in memory of Dr. Sri Krishna Sinha, the first Chief Minister of Bihar who was not only an iconic figure but also an inspiration for the youth of my generation. I was very happy when Mahachandra ji came over and requested me to address this august gathering on the occasion of the 125th birth anniversary of *Sri Babu*.

Thank you also for inviting me to speak from the podium of Bihar Vidhan Parishad Hall. This is the campus which played a pioneering role in building of modern democratic institutions of Bihar. This place has also been witness to several landmark speeches of and policy pronouncements by *Sri Babu*.

In our recorded history, two events particularly stand out: the establishment of the famed Mauryan empire in the fourth century BC by Chandragupta Maurya inspired by his mentor Chanakya; and the emergence of India as a sovereign democratic nation-state in 1947.

The Mauryan empire which unified India, secured a pan-Indian (of sub-continental size) administrative system and followed policies of strong defence and welfare of the people was mostly Bihar's contribution to nation-building. Second, in the independence of India from British rule on 15th August, 1947 under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi that led to the establishment of the new Indian democratic Republic, Bihar made impressive contributions both to the freedom movement and nation-building thereafter. Among the stalwarts of the new Republic, Rajendra Prasad played a significant role alongside Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, and B.R. Ambedkar. Rajen Babu, as he was affectionately called, provided moral and constitutional leadership to the Indian nation-state as the first President of India and *Sri Babu*, the statesman-administrator gave Bihar sound policies and a responsive administration as its first Chief Minister.

Sri Babu belonged to that rare group of statesman-administrators who possessed creative imagination and strong will to achieve welfare of the people through a responsive administrative system. Normally, a statesman has ideas and vision, and understanding of the country's

historical, social and religious forces but may not have a sound strategy and action plan. *Sri Babu* was, however, a unique leader who ably combined statesmanship with genius of governance.

II

As is widely known, Dr. Sri Krishna Sinha (popularly known as *Sri Babu*) was born on 21st October, 1887 in Maur village in Munger. He obtained his early education in his village school and thereafter at Zila School in Munger. It was at Munger that the urge to liberate the motherland from colonial rule entered his blood-stream; and on the bank of the Ganga on which Munger is located, he took a vow to work for freedom until it was secured. *Sri Babu* later moved to Patna University and completed his education. He started practising law in 1915, but gave it up in 1921 to take active part in Mahatma Gandhi's non-cooperation movement.

Sri Babu was a forceful speaker. As the echoes of his voice resonated across Bihar, people began calling him *Bihar Kesari*, an epithet that has come to have natural association with him.

Sri Babu first went to jail in 1922. He underwent different terms of imprisonment for a total of about eight years. Impressed by the courage of *Sri Babu*, Mahatma Gandhi named him 'the first Satyagrahi of Bihar'. The Indian National Congress too made him the leader of the State Congress of Bihar.

Sri Babu formed Bihar's first Cabinet at Patna on 20th July, 1937. He resigned in 1939, as did all Congress Premiers of the Provinces over the question of involving India in the Second World War without the consent of the Indian people. He again formed the Cabinet in 1946. He remained Chief Minister continuously till his death on 31st January, 1961.

Sri Babu was a staunch opponent of casteism and always rose in defence of the oppressed, the backward and the minority community. He will be long remembered for his quest for freedom. It may be recalled that at the Lahore Congress session in 1929, a resolution was passed for full independence (Poorna Swaraj). The Congress President of the Session, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and *Sri Babu* were among the prominent leaders who danced on the dais itself, which had the image of Bharat Mata painted as its background. One could only

imagine the depth of longing for freedom that was in the heart of *Sri Babu*.

Sri Babu resolutely supported the creation of All-India Services. It was Sardar Patel who in October, 1946 got a resolution adopted at the conference of the Congress Chief Ministers which authorised setting up of the Indian Administrative Service and the Indian Police Service to succeed ICS and IP. *Sri Babu* strongly supported this move along with Jawaharlal Nehru.

Sri Babu was always interested in self-study and his ideas and speeches were noted for their wisdom. He was a voracious reader and very fond of books. Instead of spending time on idle gossip, he preferred to read books. He had a personal collection of nearly 20,000 books which are now housed in a campus in Munger.

I don't have to refer to the popular myth associated with Paul Hansen Appleby (1891-1963) who visited India in 1952, 1954 and 1956 and submitted two reports on public administration in India to say that Bihar was a well-administered State during *Sri Babu's* time. For I had experienced this as a student, as a lecturer and as a citizen of Bihar. I understood it even better while serving in Assam as a civilian.

It may be mentioned that I joined the IAS three years after *Sri Babu's* death, and I had fresh memories of the type of governance that he had established in Bihar.

Sri Babu left an inspiring legacy for civil servants. He believed that a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic polity like ours needed impartial civil servants who prided themselves as being servants of the Constitution and not of any individual, group or party. Accordingly, he encouraged civil servants and police officers to do their duty with dedication and transparency.

The spirit of public service that was such a characteristic feature among leaders of the early Republic has started declining. Unfortunately, this continues despite some outstanding public-spirited and honest leaders and civil servants both at the Centre and in the States. The civil society and the Government need to pay urgent attention in order to arrest this decline.

The environment in the 1960's was, however, different. As a young member of the IAS, I was told and I believed that it was one's district-charge and one's performance that would make or mar one's prospects in the civil service. Even more was the belief that as a civil

servant, one was expected to know his district or department thoroughly; to maintain the highest levels of integrity; and to nurture and sustain one's intellect in a manner that one acquired the ability to elevate the level of dialogue at any meeting or discussion. We were also told and we believed that in a conflict of interest between the peasant and the landlord, between the deprived and the rich, other things being equal in law, one should be on the side of the peasant and the deprived as opposed to the landlord and the rich.

The enduring legacy of *Sri Babu* would demand that the services should act to regain the trust of the poor and the downtrodden, of the women and the minorities, of tribals and the backward classes. The success of building an inclusive society is both challenging and a satisfying journey for civil servants, social workers and political leaders.

III

I grew up in a family of freedom fighters. My father Shri Harbansh Narayan Singh, was a revolutionary freedom fighter who went underground. He was finally arrested on 26th January, 1943 while hoisting the national flag in the court compound of Begusarai. My grandfather, Shri Hriday Narayan Singh, also participated in the freedom struggle. He, however, was an educationist and became famous by becoming the founder-Principal of the National School which was set up in our village – Bihat- in the 1920s under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Rajendra Prasad. My village had several leaders who belonged to the Indian National Congress, the Communist Party of India, and the Socialist Party. In fact, Bihat was well-known as a place for revolutionary freedom fighters during the

Quit India Movement, and several of India's top leaders had, at one point or the other, come to the village.

The other stream in my village was that of culture and literature. Bihat was famous for *Ramlila* troupes. A person who earned national acclaim was from the adjacent village of Simaria, Shri Ramdhari Singh Dinkar. He was a student of the National School and whenever he visited Simaria, he would invariably come to Bihat to receive my grandfather's blessings.

Having grown up in this environment, I always entertained the idea of becoming a poet or a political leader. However, my migration to Patna for higher studies and later as a lecturer at Patna University inspired me to opt for the Indian Administrative Service. As a result, I became a member of the IAS and served in Assam, New Delhi and later at Washington DC. Public service and poetry, however, continue to fascinate me.

As children, besides the *slokas* of *Ramcharitramanas* and *Bhagvad Gita*, we used to listen to stories about the freedom movement, agriculture, monsoon and also about musicians, poets, teachers, *vaidyas* and *sadhus* from our elders. Later, we started

reading newspapers and listened to news and songs every evening for one hour on All India Radio.

By sheer coincidence, I was admitted along with my uncle and cousin to Mahatma Gandhi High School in my village at the age of eight. Four years later, I moved to Begusarai and got enrolled in Ganesh Dutt College. This was a big change in my life. I was under the care of my mother who used to stay in the village. I now started living away from her for the first time and with my father who was a lawyer at Begusarai.

We were housed in a large compound belonging to *Bade Babu* of Naokothi whose wife was a niece of *Sri Babu*. We had a number of rooms and servants as well. *Bade Babu* and his family stayed in the main building which was a fine piece of colonial architecture that had a large compound with a nice courtyard in the front and a comfortable *varandah* at the back.

One day, *Bade Babu* informed my father that *Sri Babu* was coming to stay with them for three days. There was a kind of commotion in the campus. It was decided that Indu, *Bade Babu's* daughter who was slightly younger than me, and I were to give

company to *Sri Babu* as and when required. It was made clear that I would not be required to curtail my attendance in the college for this purpose.

I do not exactly remember the date but it was sometime in March-April, 1955 that I was with this great leader one evening. After brief enquiries, we parted company. *Sri Babu's* niece told me that I would not be required at night. The next day was a holiday in the college so I had plenty of time to spend with *Sri Babu*.

Sri Babu had an impressive physical presence. That morning, however, he had had a massage and his chest was covered by a towel. He was seated on a chair. As and when the towel slipped, I could see a lot of scars on his chest. I was intrigued. Later, I learnt from my father that *Sri Babu* had sustained severe burns on his hands and on his chest during the Gandhiji- led Namak Satyagraha Andolan. While trying to protect the huge vessel (*Kadaha*) atop the fire place at Garhpura, which the police were trying to overturn, *Sri Babu* had decided to shield it with his own body. Ramdhari Singh Dinkar composed a memorable poem to describe this event.

I went again that morning after *Sri Babu* had bathed and had had breakfast. I vividly recall *Sri Babu* sitting on a large cot with a table next to it which had several books on it. There were many pillows on the cot. When he learnt that I was a student of political science and economics, his face lit up. I faced a lot of questions. He mentioned about books and authors with whom I was not familiar. I also had no clue at that time as to what the job of a Chief Minister was. I wondered if the Chief Minister of the State was the Teacher - Superior or a great administrator of the realm?

In those very brief meetings, *Sri Babu*, like my father, encouraged me to speak in English. I was lucky to have two good English teachers. The first was Banarsilal Gupta in Mahatma Gandhi High School at Bihat, and second was Prof. M.N. Bose at Ganesh Dutt College in Begusarai. I still remember the advice of Prof. Bose that one is entitled to commit a mistake but a good student never repeats the mistake that he has once committed. This not only applies to class-rooms but also to all things in life.

The following day was the day of his departure. He lavished much affection on both Indu and me, wished us good health and exhorted us to become responsible citizens of this great country.

It was a few years later that there was a flutter of activity in the College as the news had spread that *Sri Babu* was coming the following day at 9 am. I had, by then, moved to BA (Hons) Political Science class. We were made to sit on *durees* on the lawns of the College. *Sri Babu* and the Principal came and sat on the designated chairs. For the next 45 minutes, *Sri Babu* talked about the freedom struggle, political philosophy of democracy and non-violence. He outlined the manner in which Bihar and the country were going to be rebuilt. That morning I understood him better as I had, by this time, acquired more information on Indian polity as well as economy.

One of the most memorable meetings I had with *Sri Babu* was in 1960 when I passed my MA examination in Political Science from Patna University, and had almost simultaneously become a lecturer there. I had made some news for being the youngest and having obtained record marks. I went to seek his blessings. He was initially irritated as I had not seen him for quite some time. Then he smiled

and called me near. He embraced me and said that he felt very proud of my achievement. He wanted me to fetch two copies of a book from the almirah in front of his table in the office room. I brought the two copies of the book. He kept one copy that he had read and used, and the other unused copy was given to me. He also ordered that I had to meet him every month and instructed R.C. Sinha, IAS who worked as his Secretary accordingly. When I went back to Shri Sinha's room, he enquired about the book in my hand. He was surprised that *Sri Babu* has given a book to me from his personal collection as he did not recall any similar incident during his long tenure.

It was my good fortune to meet him once again after two weeks in the company of Prof. P.S. Muhar, Head of Department of Political Science, Patna University. We had gone to invite *Sri Babu* to inaugurate the All India Conference of Political Scientists in 1960 at Patna. *Sri Babu* was reluctant as he did not have sufficient time to prepare his speech. He also enquired about ideas that he should cover in his speech. He then asked Prof. Muhar to lend him some books, suggesting 5-6 titles. He was happy to see me and patted me fondly.

Sri Babu inaugurated the All India Political Science Congress in December, 1960. This was his last public address. I remember the words of the Secretary General of the Congress, Prof. S.N. Das of Orissa who said that this was the best speech that he had heard in his entire academic life. The speech of *Sri Babu* had indeed, he declared, “bridged the gap between the philosopher and the king”.

It may be recalled that *Sri Babu* felt that in independent India, the Governor had to play only a constitutional role and must not interfere in the day-to-day governance of the State as that was within the domain of the Council of Ministers. He had some differences of opinion with the then Governor of Bihar in this matter. In a communication of 25th December, 1947 *Sri Babu* wrote to the Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru : *‘As an humble colleague of yours I will only advise that in evolving any constitutional practice we should not be guided by the fact that a Governor is a talented man of the same party affiliation as we. Only that constitutional practice should be evolved which will work well inspite of the party affiliations of the Governors and the Governments’*. Much later, Jawaharlal Nehru in consultation with *Sri Babu*, appointed Shri R.R. Diwakar,

Minister of Information and Broadcasting of the Union as the new Governor of Bihar.

I also got a glimpse of the cordiality between the Chief Minister and the Governor. In 1959, I was invited by my colleagues in Patna University to join the annual event of Anjuman Islamia meet at its campus which was in front of Patna market. A *shamiana* was erected and sitting arrangements were tastefully made. Dr. Zakir Hussain, Governor of Bihar was the Chief Guest and he reached at the appointed time in the evening. *Sri Babu* was the Guest of Honour and had not turned up until then. It was learnt that *Sri Babu* was not keeping well and a scheduled Cabinet meeting was taking place at his residence. There was uncertainty as to whether the Chief Minister would come at all. When *Sri Babu* learnt that the Governor had already arrived, he rushed to the spot but was late by about 40 minutes.

Sri Babu apologised to the Governor and, in his address, kept on apologising to Zakir Saheb and delivered a moving speech. Dr. Zakir Hussain, who spoke in beautiful Urdu on the subject and impressed us all, also mentioned that he did not mind that *Sri Babu* arrived late as

he wanted to hear him. At the time of departure, Zakir Saheb wanted *Sri Babu* to leave early as he was not well. *Sri Babu* again apologized and said “*by coming after you and late to this event, I have already erred. Please do not make me commit another mistake by leaving before you*”. Such was the mutual respect and admiration that they had for each other.

We knew that *Sri Babu* was critically ill and yet one hoped that he would recover. In the early afternoon of 31st January, 1961, the news spread in the college that *Sri Babu* had passed away. Students and teachers melted away from their class rooms. Prof. V.P. Verma and I were lucky to get a rickshaw at Ashok Rajpath outside the college campus to go to *Sri Babu*'s residence. There was a memorable sight on the road. All vehicles were moving in only one direction at Ashok Rajpath, towards *Sri Babu*'s residence. I had never seen such a thing happening. He was cremated on the bank of the Ganga at Banse Ghat. I was in the crowd with moist eyes.

Sri Babu bequeathed no house, no bank account and no jewellery; his books had already been moved to Munger. He left

behind the legacy of a well-disciplined life dedicated to the cause of freedom and public welfare for posterity to admire and emulate.

IV

Lord Buddha warned that Bihar must guard itself against flood, fire and feud. The colonial administration added three more to the list: abject poverty, widespread illiteracy and dismal healthcare facilities. It also expanded the nature of feud to include communal hatred and caste animosities.

The new State of Bihar led by *Sri Babu* faced these challenges with determination and fairness. The task of every State is to maintain peace and allow the rule of law to prevail; to take quick decisions that could help in improving the living conditions of the people; and to always remain accountable to them. *Sri Babu* acted as a colossus and garnered high points on every score. He was above caste prejudices. He worked tirelessly for harmony between Hindus and Muslims. He led from the front in the eradication of age-old scourges like untouchability and prejudices of high and low caste and other forms of discrimination. *Sri Babu* was a compassionate person and he could naturally feel the pain of the oppressed and the poor. *Sri Babu*

pioneered land reform in Bihar and gave Bihar an administration that was worthy of respect.

. *Sri Babu* had a vision of progressive and prosperous Bihar. He wanted that there should be harmony in development of north Bihar and Chotanagpur region of the State in a manner that manpower of north Bihar and mineral resources of Chotanagpur (now Jharkhand State) could be well integrated. Towards this, he worked tirelessly for setting up of industries and educational institutions at Ranchi, Jamshedpur, Hazaribagh, Bokaro, Sindri and Dhanbad all now in Jharkhand. He also wanted that mutually beneficial economic programmes should be undertaken between Bihar and Orissa in order that Bihar could have access to the port facilities of Orissa. Today, Bihar, Jharkhand and Orissa are three different States. Statesmanship requires that leaders of politics and market should think in a manner that would ensure progress of the entire region.

Sri Babu always felt accountable to the people. In fact, he prescribed a *talisman* in electoral politics for himself. He went from constituency to constituency, canvassing support for Congress candidates, but never visited his own constituency during or on the

date of polls. He used to say, “ *if people have not judged me by my action, will they judge me by my speech during election?*”

In retrospect, it is difficult to believe that *Sri Babu* achieved so much in his lifetime. He was indeed a historic person. *Sri Babu* emerged from almost nowhere to accomplish goals that were not defined. He set up new standards of public service and went ahead to provide them. Such people are seldom born but when they are, they change the course of history.

In the first Ramcharitra Singh Memorial Lecture that I delivered at Gandhi Sanghralaya, Patna on June 12, 2007, I had posed : “*Can Bihar make its claim on the national scene in the 21st Century?*” I went on to state : “*it is for the people of Bihar, their democratic institutions, their social, economic and cultural formations to work unitedly on development programme and to secure for Bihar a place of pride in the Indian Union in the 21st Century. Mere wish is going to take us nowhere as it did not prevent us from rapid decline in the last quarter of the twentieth century nor it will help us achieve anything substantial in the 21st Century. Let us live up to Lord Buddha’s last words, “strive with earnestness”.* Today, Bihar’s democratic

governance system and political leadership give us hope that Bihar can.

A great gift bestowed by our freedom leaders was to generate positive ideology of hope among the people. Today, this could be seen again in villages and towns of Bihar. It gives me confidence that in coming years Bihar will again be a centre of good governance and of creative ideas which are prerequisites of a good society and polity. And that alone would be a fitting tribute to the memory of *Bihar Kesri* Dr. Sri Krishna Sinha.
