

JP-the Man

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I remember that at the Lucknow session of the Indian National Congress in April 1936, after Jawaharlal Nehru had delivered the Presidential Address which was hundred per cent Marxist in its essentials and world view, Babu Rajendra Prasad, in the course of the debate that followed, stood up and made a somewhat critical reference to Jawaharlal.

Speaking in Hindustani, he described himself and his colleagues, with sarcasm, as simple peasants who did not travel abroad and derive their ideas from foreign books. Obviously, the shaft was directed at Nehru and us socialists.

At the end of this unusually aggressive speech, the larger part of the audience shouted 'Mahatma Gandhi ki jai' to be followed by counter-shouts of 'Jawaharlal Nehru ki jai' in which, I imagine, I also participated!

As JP and I came out of the charged atmosphere of the pandal, I noticed that he was very agitated by Rajendra Babu's speech. He had been a great admirer of Rajendra Prasad and was in some distant way related to the older man. As it happened, we soon ran into Mathura Babu, one of Rajendra Prasad's devoted followers, who on his part appeared to be in a jubilant mood and asked JP in somewhat mocking manner: 'Kahiye Jayaprakashji, sunee?' ('Did you hear that, Jayaprakashji?')

At this JP flared up and said in Hindustani: "Rajendra Babu is

not fit even to clean Jawaharlal's shoes."

As we walked on, however, JP looked more and more upset and said: "What have I gone and done now? It is terrible. I never meant it. But Mathura Babu will go and repeat what I said to Rajendra Babu for whom I have such regard."

When we got to a restaurant for lunch, JP would not eat and kept on asking what he should do. I suggested that immediately after lunch he should go and see Rajendra Babu, tell him what had happened and apologise. When JP met Rajendra Babu, the latter took it all very sweetly and asked him to forget about. That, however, was not the end of the story.

Next morning, when Gandhiji was holding his prayer meeting at four o'clock or thereabouts, Rajendra Babu turned up somewhat unexpectedly for prayers. When Gandhiji asked him what he, with his asthma, was doing there at that time of the morning, Rajendra Babu told Gandhiji that he could not sleep at night and had come to ask for guidance.

If Jayaprakash could get so upset with him as to make an offensive remark of that nature, did it not show that he had on his part been guilty of considerable violence against Jawaharlal in his speech? It was this that had made him spend a sleepless night.

Gandhiji, who had a great sense of humour, of course, made light of the whole affair and told him there was nothing wrong

with his speech and sent him back to bed.

Where else in the world, one wonders, would two politicians allow their meals and sleep to be disturbed in this manner by pangs of conscience? Churchill and Nye Bevan? Unlikely!

II

IN 1952, JP was the President of the Post and Telegraph Employees' Federation and Rafi Ahmed Kidwai was the Minister in charge of the Communications portfolio. A strike called by the Federation was called off as a result of negotiations between JP and Kidwai.

A certain understanding was reached between them about payment of wages during the period of strike, but this was not reduced to paper, and a little later Kidwai backed out.

JP felt that he had let down his own men and that he had to do penance for his carelessness in not getting the agreement in writing. He decided on a 21-day fast at the Dinshah Mehta Clinic in Poona. Any other politician would have called this a hunger strike or a protest fast against the Minister, but not so JP. A statement he issued on June 22, 1952, a day prior to embarking on his fast, ran as follows:

1. This fast is not against anybody, nor for anything outside of myself.

2. It may be recalled that the decision to fast had originated over a year ago from certain unsuccessful negotiations I had carried on with Shri Rafi Ahmed Kidwai, the then Communications Minister, regarding payment of strike period wages to postmen and lower grade staff.

3. But today the fast has nothing to do (except for this historical connection) with those negotiations, nor with the Central Government, nor with Shri Kidwai.

4. The fast is (a) in the nature of a self-correction and (b) in fulfilment of a vow.

5. During my negotiations with Shri Kidwai, I found I was guilty of carelessness and negligence. This was not in connection with a personal affair, but in the course of public work, and it affected a large number of men.

6. The vow to fast was taken at that time to atone for the mistake. Today that particular mistake serves only an illustrative purpose, and I venture to hope that the fast will fit me better to discharge my duties in the future.

7. The fact that I have not been able to carry out my vow till now has pained me. I cannot delay it longer and I hope I shall have the blessings even of those friends who have not approved of the fast.

8. The fast will commence on the morning of June 23 and will last for three weeks, subject only to the limitation that I have no wish to die in its course.

9. During the fast I shall take only water with Soda-bicarb and common salt.

10. The fast being an entirely personal affair, I do not want any publicity, agitation or any sympathetic public manifestation in connection with it.

11. The postmen, particularly, should not feel that they have any responsibility in the matter and should not indulge in any agitation on my account.

[Courtesy "Is JP the Answer?" by Minoo Masani Pub. Macmillans, pp. 133, Rs. 12.50]



Shri Morarji Desai being sworn in as Prime Minister of India by Acting President, Shri B. D. Jatti on March 24, 1977.