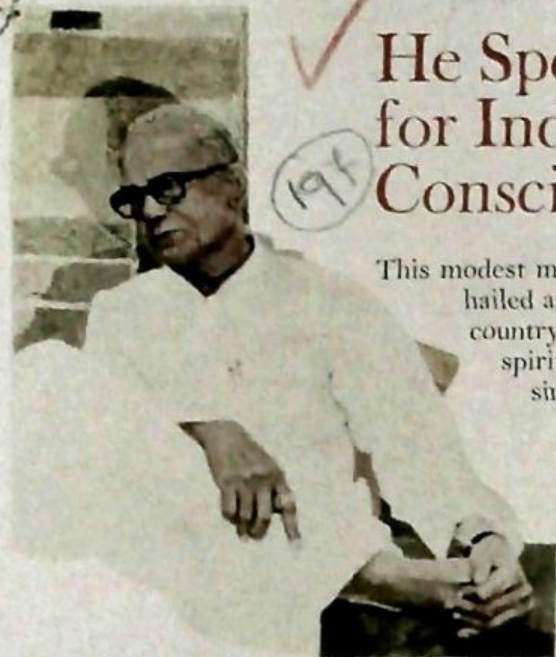


He Speaks for India's Conscience

This modest man has been
hailed as one of his
country's 'greatest
spiritual leaders
since Gandhi'



By M. R. MASANI

DUSK was falling as the notorious dacoit bandit chief stalked into the central Indian village of Jaura, armed with the automatic rifle with which he had dispatched nearly 100 victims. Raising the weapon in salute, he laid it at the feet of a tall, frail but serene man dressed simply in the handspun cotton of the Indian peasant.

With similar ceremony in the next three months of summer 1972,

the man in peasant dress persuaded 443 dacoits to hand in their rifles, machine-guns and mortars, and then surrender themselves to the police.

For decades, these elusive terrorists had preyed on some 17,000 square miles of central India with daily robberies, kidnappings, murders. Combined police and army squads 2,000-strong had hunted their hideouts in the twisting ravines of the Chambal Valley, the

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Reader's Digest, Aug. 1974, (Chand.)

air force had even bombed them. Yet the largest dacoit surrender in India's history was secured by a man armed with only a belief: "Any heart can be changed if the right approach is made."

In his unique role as India's unofficial ombudsman and conscience-keeper, 71-year-old Jayaprakash Narayan—known to millions simply as JP—had persuaded the authorities that rehabilitation was the real solution to the dacoit problem.

He told the hunted outlaws: "The only way you will ever earn peace of mind is by changing your lives and purifying yourselves." He assured them that if they surrendered, their families would be protected and none of them would be hanged for their crimes. "If the authorities don't honour their word," he vowed, "I will be the first to lay down my life."

Go-Between. JP won over both sceptical officials and hardened murderers with the transparent honesty and love of humanity that had struck me so forcefully when we first met 42 years ago as activists in India's independence movement.

Although JP had been prominent in this struggle, in the hour of

victory in 1948 he quit the limelight and the opportunity of political office, and in the 1950s became a leader in the grassroots social service movement dedicated to *Sarvodaya*—the welfare of all. Subsisting on a frugal vegetarian diet, he has spent the last 20 years roaming India, exposing corruption, initiating self-help projects, breaking down religious and caste barriers, espousing countless causes that others knew would win them no votes. André Malraux, France's former Minister of Culture, hailed him as "one of India's greatest spiritual leaders since Gandhi."

Convinced of the futility and self-defeating nature of violent revolution, JP has played an outstanding role in countering the lies and false hopes spread by India's extreme left-wing parties. Accompanying him on a *Sarvodaya* tour in Bihar in March 1954, I saw a typical example of his methods. Before our arrival at one village, communists had circulated scurrilous handbills denouncing JP as an enemy of the people who was seeking to divert attention from the real class struggle.

JP read the handbill aloud to his audience, and calmly answered the questions it addressed to him. "In Russia," he pointed out, "overdue changes came with violence, brutality and murder. They have done no one any good. In fact, man is enslaved wherever violent revolution has taken place. The bigger

M. R. MAHANI, 68, author and former leader of India's Swatantra Party, was educated in Bombay and London. Subsequently he served as Mayor of Bombay, Ambassador to Brazil, Chairman of the UN Sub-Commission for Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, and Member of Parliament in Delhi.

revolution is to bring about change peacefully and through love."

His main aim on this trip had been the voluntary redistribution of land. "Let those with a lot of land give away the surplus; let the middle peasants give away a sixth part of their land, and let even the poor give just a tiny bit as a token of their participation."

Inspiration. Through *Sarvodaya*, JP has set a practical lead in many crises. When famine threatened thousands in drought-stricken Bihar in 1967, he worked round the clock. Although seeming to spend much of his time listening to individual tragedies and comforting the bereaved, unobtrusively he organized volunteers from a dozen foreign countries to distribute food, clothes and medicine, sink wells and dig irrigation canals.

More important, JP brought home to millions of Indians for the first time the necessity of such voluntary work to supplement and speed up officialdom's elephantine machinery. Many later initiated their own local community projects and carried out vital relief work during the recent national drought.

JP has often displayed great physical courage. In the wake of the horrifying 1969 Ahmedabad riots that left hundreds of Hindu and Moslem dead, he braved the city's mobs baying for vengeance.

"Political extremists have been fishing for power in troubled waters," he bluntly told them. "But

if we don't show more tolerance and respect for each other's religions, this foul disease will spread and tear our country apart." More cautious men preached brotherly love from the safety of newsprint.

JP's inexhaustible patience and willingness to listen have also proved crucial in breaking deadlock. In February 1965, as a member of a parliamentary group, I visited him in the hills of Nagaland—in the extreme north-east of India—where Naga guerrillas had been fighting the Indian Army for an independent state.

At campfire meetings far into the night, JP not only catalogued alleged atrocities by Indian troops, but coolly discussed the dissidents' political aspirations. Gently, he would point out the economic difficulties of an independent Nagaland and how easily it might be picked off by China.

As a member of the three-man Nagaland Peace Mission, he played a vital role in securing the 1964 ceasefire that ended a ten-year war. Each September, Nagaland leaders and former rebels mark the ceasefire's anniversary by sending him telegrams of thanks.

Active Voice. JP has been one of the few people since Gandhi to tell India things it least wants to hear. For years he was alone in condemning the government for its denial of free political activity in Kashmir and for the 11-year imprisonment without trial of the Kashmiri

political leader Sheikh Abdullah. "Like other universal values," he declared, "democracy is indivisible. We cannot be democratic abroad and anti-democratic at home."

When the Indian Government was silent on the brutal Soviet crushing of the 1956 Hungarian uprising, JP launched a blistering attack. "Indians," he pointed out, "all know the old imperialism and are therefore most sensitive to its smallest manifestations, no matter how camouflaged. But we are still very innocent of the new kind of imperialism—communist imperialism." These words hit home with such force that Prime Minister Nehru was nudged into a belated condemnation.

After Chinese forces swept into Tibet in 1959, JP asked me to join an international conference he had convened in Delhi. The reluctance of some officials to rent out a hall large enough for the delegates simply added to JP's resolve that India, despite a left-leaning government, should provide a forum for exposing Chinese atrocities.

JP has probably touched India's rawest nerve with his efforts to achieve closer ties with Pakistan. In 1962 he founded the India-Pakistan Conciliation Group, and as leader of the 1964 unofficial goodwill mission he was one of the first Indians to set foot on Pakistani soil in the cause of reconciliation since the 1947 partition. No one worked harder to bring the two countries

together—until March 1971 when Pakistani forces unleashed their reign of terror in East Pakistan.

In the face of that horror JP dispatched *Sarvodaya* teams to help the millions of East Pakistani refugees streaming into India, then set off on a gruelling 16-nation tour to alert the world to what was happening. Yet as soon as liberated East Pakistan had become independent Bangladesh, JP's voice was the first to urge the countries of the sub-continent to make one more concerted bid for peaceful co-existence.

Impartial Idealist. Championship of such causes has led to JP being vilified as a traitor, capitalist lackey, agent of the CIA. Understandably, communist politicians have been among his shrillest critics. Yet when candidates of the Communist Party (Marxist) were voted out of West Bengal's legislature two years ago, they did not hesitate to seek JP's support for an inquiry into alleged ballot-rigging.

Gently, JP mentioned the invective that a communist leader had hurled at him over many years. Swallowing his embarrassment, the politician confessed, "But JP, you're one of the few public figures prepared to fight for justice."

An idealistic willingness to do just that has been apparent throughout JP's life. The son of a minor official, he was born in 1902 in the remote Bihar village of Sitabdiara, and he was 17 before he saw a tramcar. This rural upbringing gave him

both a lasting love of village life and a haunting reminder of its poverty and indignities.

Determined to gain a full education, he won a scholarship to Patna's Science College. Yet just days before his final exams he abandoned the course, in scrupulous response to Gandhi's call to boycott British institutions.

Sailing for the United States in 1922, he took natural science, economics and sociology courses at universities in California, Iowa, Wisconsin and Ohio, paying for them by working on farms, in factories and restaurants. He returned to India in 1929 and quickly plunged into the independence struggle.

By now a Marxist, he was one of the few bold enough to disagree with Gandhi on many fundamental issues. Gandhi, too shrewd to attempt an outright conversion, prophesied, "One day this man will talk my language."

Man of Reason. JP was never strident or vindictive. As former Labour MP Lord Brockway points out, "Narayan brought to the independence movement all that was best in India; he was generous, constructive and without the least trace of bitterness."

I came to know these qualities well when we were jailed for a year in January 1933 for our political activities. There is probably no better test of a man's character than prison. JP was unfailingly free with

his time and books, to help young prisoners eager to make use of enforced leisure by filling up gaps in their knowledge. By the time I had completed my year's sentence, I knew that JP was one of God's good men.

In fact, it was largely my personal liking for JP and confidence in him that impelled me to join him along with a handful of others in founding the Congress Socialist Party. As the 1930s wore on, JP looked more and more to the left. Yet even when we finally parted political company in 1939, we remained friends. JP showed typical generosity when he later admitted that experience had "completely vindicated" my stand.

Hero Figure. During the Second World War, JP's exploits fired the imagination of India's radical youth. Arrested at the start of the war, he escaped from Hazaribagh prison by scaling its 22-foot walls on a rope of *dhotis* (loincloths). He then became one of the leaders of the "Quit India" movement that harried the British by cutting telegraph wires and sabotaging railway communications. Typically, JP would rip up track only where it was sure to be seen in time to avert a train crash.

It was only after independence—and Gandhi's death—that JP renounced Marxism and turned towards Gandhian ideals of non-violence and brotherly love. But he has remained haunted by the disparity between what we in the

independence movement had fought for and what was actually being achieved.

"What is the point of new laws and grandiose five-year plans," he once said to me, "if untouchables can still be driven off their land, the poor deprived of even their most basic rights?"

India's problems were so enormous, JP eventually concluded, that there was a crying need for some leaders to return to the villages to spearhead the struggle against ignorance, poverty and prejudice at grassroots level.

These mammoth tasks have inevitably taken their toll of his frail health. A victim of sciatica and diabetes, he devoted such effort to the Bangladesh cause in 1971 that he later had a mild heart attack. The death in April last year of his wife Prabhavati, a loyal Gandhian worker in her own right, was

another harsh blow. For more than 50 years she had been a powerful source of encouragement and support, and performed the vital chore of protecting JP from his own limitless concern for other's problems.

In October 1972, JP had announced his virtual retirement from public life to his modest Patna home in his native state of Bihar. Then, last April, he re-emerged into the limelight as leader of a new, non-party movement called Citizens for Democracy, pledged to fight the evils of corruption, inflation and the exploitation of the poor.

Says Bisheswar Prasad Koirala, former Prime Minister of Nepal, "Jayaprakash Narayan has often raised the vital voice of dissent on the sub-continent. Since India's independence, he has been one of the most vigorous democratic forces in the world's most populous democracy."

Commercial Break

THE FLIGHT of urban man, living in a skyscraper, hemmed in by brick and concrete and ever-increasing traffic, was illustrated recently by an incident in south London. A policeman, seeing a man 40 feet up on some scaffolding, asked him why he had climbed there. The man answered, "There's nothing on television."

—Granville Wilson

AUTHOR Donald Barthelme tells of a time when he asked his television-conditioned small daughter what her mother was doing. The child replied, "She's watching a book."

—John Leonard in *New York Times Book Review*

READING maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man, according to Lord Bacon. What TV viewing maketh a man is anybody's guess.

—Don Fraser