

233
J.P. - Through Thirty Years

by

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I recall vividly my first meeting with Jayaprakash. It was some time late in 1932. The Indian National Congress had then been declared an unlawful organisation and those of us in the city of Bombay who adhered to it and its activities were functioning 'underground'. I was then a practising Barrister in the Bombay High Court and one day a quiet, thoughtful young man turned up at the Bar Library, asked for me and introduced himself as Jayaprakash Narayan. He was then Acting General Secretary of the All India Congress Committee, also 'underground'. We stood on the verandah facing the sea and discussed various matters which had brought this visitor to see me.

The next time I met Jayaprakash was in the 'B' Yard of Nasik State Central Prison some time in January 1933, where he had already preceded me. We each had a year's rigorous imprisonment to our credit, and so we left Nasik around the end of that year.

Nobody could be a more charming and considerate fellow prisoner. Jayaprakash, finding himself a stranger among a host of Bombay people, won all hearts. In our goodly crowd were Bhulabhai Desai, Mangaldas Pakvasa, B.G. Kher, Morarjee Dessai, Achut Patwardhan, Ashok Mehta and many others.

Jayaprakash and I spent the greater part of that year drafting a programme for the Congress Socialist Party we both thought India needed as an integral part of the Indian National Congress. There was one issue that marred our comradely discussions, and that was the issue of Democracy vs. the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Jayaprakash had been indoctrinated in Marxism by the American Communist Party under the leadership of Jay Lovestone, now a pillar of anti-communism in the AFL-CIO. I was a product of the British Liberal Party and the I.L.P. When the end of 1933 arrived, the dispute was still unresolved. We decided to form the Party anyhow, leaving this little item open for discussion within the Party itself - an error for which I fear the socialist movement in India had later to pay a somewhat heavy price.

The Congress Socialist Party was duly formed at a Convention in Patna in May 1934. Jayaprakash became the General Secretary and I one of the Joint Secretaries. This intimate partnership lasted till 1939 when, at last, the issue we had evaded five years earlier could no longer be obscured. Rather than split the Party, Ram Manohar Lohia, Achut Patwardhan, and Ashok Mehta and I joined in drafting a statement resigning our various offices in the Congress Socialist Party and explaining our difficulty in accompanying Jayaprakash any further along the path of the "Left Bloc" in collaboration with the Communist

Party and Subhas Chandra Bose and in opposition to Mahatma Gandhi and the rest of the Indian National Congress.

This was a great wrench for all of us because we were all still very good friends. Jayaprakash's generosity and tolerance, despite his being a Marxist, came into evidence at this point. I remember taking our joint statement of resignation to him before releasing it to the press and inviting his comments and suggestions in the way of alterations. He had none to offer, saying it was a fair statement. I then invited him to publish such rejoinder as he felt was necessary, to which he said he proposed to give no answer. Two years later, in 1941, he went one step further and in his booklet The Congress Socialist Party and Socialist Unity, he actually admitted that he had been mistaken in that controversy and had thereby injured the cause. Very few people in Indian politics have been known to make such a public confession.

Jayaprakash is a person with whom personal friendship is not affected by political difference and our friendship, which I value greatly, has, therefore, remained unimpaired through the years, despite the fact that there arise occasions where we find ourselves in disagreement, as when in 1947 Jayaprakash refused to believe that the British were really handing over power and insisted as head of the Socialist Party that Independence had not actually arrived and in consequence refused to become a member of the Constituent Assembly, and again when several years later in 1952 Jayaprakash advocated an electoral understanding between democratic *L parties* ~~Opposition Party~~ and the Communist Party of India.

It is a pity I have not preserved ^{all} his letters over the last three decades, but one little bunch has survived. These are the letters he wrote from prison in the Punjab where he was held incommunicado, during the "Quit India" campaign, from the beginning of 1944 till the beginning of 1945 when, as he put it in a postcard, "after 16¹/₂ months I have at last found deliverance" - the deliverance ^{being} ~~was~~ transfer to the Agra Central Prison. These letters, heavily censored, make most interesting reading, since all personal references to his condition were clipped by the censor's scissors, the surviving bits of paper containing reviews of books, with which the then Prime Minister of the Punjab, Mr. Khizr Hyat Khan, allowed me to send him in view of the fact that his wife and brother were also in prison. Jayaprakash's trials and tribulations in prison, particularly the Third Degree to which he was subjected in the Punjab, had been a great strain to his friends outside and so it was not surprising that my maiden speech in the Indian Legislative Assembly after my election in 1945 as Congress member from Bombay City, should be a protest against his continued

incarceration and a demand for his release. The British administrators of that time knew 'how to dine with the Opposition' and the result was an immediate invitation to dinner from Sir John Thorpe followed by an invitation to visit Jayaprakash in Agra prison, where I was allowed to spend the best part of a day with Ram Manohar Lohia and Jayaprakash.

In the fifteen years since, Jayaprakash and I have worked together in many non-partisan organisations like the Indian Committee for Cultural Freedom and the Afro-Asian Council for Tibet and Against Colonialism. We have broken many a lance together, when occasion has called for it, whether it was in connection with the brutal suppression of Hungary by Soviet tanks in 1956 or the invasion of Tibet by Communist China in 1950.

In the last few years, a great part of the Indian intelligentsia have expressed irritation with Jayaprakash for "deserting" politics and thus, in their view, failing the country. Many of them have written him off. The gulf between the Indian intelligentsia and the people of India is wide, and this appears to me to be one of many examples of this alienation. Has Jayaprakash retired from Indian or world politics? Watching him, I find that a great part of his activity - and this is considerable - is political in the finest and best sense of the word, which, as a look at the dictionary will confirm, is concerned with 'organised society' and 'public affairs'.

I would be inclined to concede that Jayaprakash is not a clever politician. India is full of clever politicians and one more or less would not make any difference, but the quality and the character that he brings into public affairs is very rare, and so we have reason to be grateful for Jayaprakash. Weighed in the international scale, our public men shine in so far as intellect and the power of expression are concerned but how many of them measure up to the standard that the world expects of the country of Gandhi? In service to Man and devotion to the Truth as he sees it, there are not many in India who can compare with J.P.

Being a man of deep conviction, Jayaprakash is slow to move. Thus his transition from Marx to Gandhi, which was well under way by the time World War II ended and Jayaprakash emerged from prison did not find its culmination till 1952 when, at the end of his 21 days' fast in Poona, Jayaprakash wrote that significant article in Freedom First entitled "Incentives for Goodness", where he at last renounced the false goddess of dialectical materialism at whose shrine he had worshipped for three decades of his life. This reluctance to shift also resulted in the great

tragedy that, having fought Gandhiji till near the end, he accepted him fully only after his death. Gandhiji on his part, while regretting Jayaprakash's inability to define clearly his attitude on certain basic issues, had long seen him the makings of a future leader of the country. In

So far, Jayaprakash's past. Has he a future? Most "intellectuals" think not. They evidently take a dim view of India's future! I am convinced that, if our country has a future to look forward to, as I believe it has, there is a great future for Jayaprakash. I do not necessarily have in mind what the "intellectuals" usually think about, whether he will become Prime Minister. He well may, he may not, but - unless it is felt that leading a Party and holding an office is the be all and end all of existence - does that really matter? What matters is that it can safely be predicted that he will be engaged in constructive and worthwhile activity, that whatever he does will be for the common good and the advancement and freedom of man as he sees them and that, if occasion calls for it, he can be counted on to lay down his life for these causes.