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"I want to be left absolutely alone so that I can take rest, do some thinking, writing and reading", said Jayaprakash Narayan in a statement on October 28, 1972, in the course of which he announced that he had retired from public life for a full year which would end on his next birthday on October 11, 1973. Jaysaprakash went as far as to say that he should be left alone and would not be in a position to reply to any letters.

But this was not to be. On 8th April, 1974, Jayaprakash was to be found at the head of an impressive and dignified 'silent march' in Patna and a few days later he presided over a Convention in Delhi which brought into existence a new organisation called "Citizens for Democracy". As I write, Jaysaprakash is today one of the most discussed people in the country.

There are those who are glad that, at long last, Jayaprakash has emerged to play the role for which they had always believed he had been cast by destiny. On the other hand, there are those who are angry and are to be found gnashing their teeth. That their ranks should include communists and courtiers keen to please was perhaps only to be expected, but it is indeed a pity that the Prime Minister should also have been found amongst the ranks of Jayaprakash's denigrators. Jaysaprakash, who is hard and slow to move to anger, found it necessary to react by saying : "My humble submission to Indira ji is not to teach me and other Sarvodaya workers where our duty lies and not to use her proven skill in trying to create a wedge between me and Vinobaji and thus split the Sarvodaya movement".

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Be that as it may, the more important question is why and how the pendulum should have swung all the way from complete retirement to complete commitment. How come this change all within a period of eighteen months?

Democracy's Best Hope

Perhaps the answer is that there is today in India nobody else with the record and the credibility that make people rally round Jayaprakash as they have done. Not for nothing is he widely regarded as democracy's best and last hope.

Into this image have merged various strands which make the man. There is a story that Winston Churchill after World War II, while referring to the two parts of his life that made up his past, told an amused French audience in his inadequate French, "Quand je regarde mon derriere, je vois qu'il est divise en deux parties". Unlike Churchill, one can say that Jayaprakash's past is made up not of two but of four facets. These can be labelled his love of freedom, love of the country, a passion for social justice, and a deep religious or spiritual side. These four strands run through his public life which now extends over four decades and a half - sometimes intertwining, at other times unravelling and at yet other times crossing one another.

Jayaprakash's passion for social justice led him into the ranks of the communists while he was a student in the U.S.A. in the twenties. Jay Lovestone was then the leader of the American Communist Party. Later he was cured and became an advisor of the

A.F.L. - C.I.O. and when I met him in New York I had reason to rag him about his contribution ^{towards} ~~in~~ making Jaysprakash a communist.

On his return to India, however, Jaysprakash found a peculiar situation in which the Communist Party in India was opposed to Mahatma Gandhi's campaign for Civil Disobedience against British Imperial rule. Jaysprakash's patriotism revolted against this. Deviating from the party line, he became by 1932, one of the Secretaries of the All India Congress Committee.

My first meeting with him was in that capacity. The Indian National Congress had been declared unlawful. I was then practicing as a Barrister in the Bombay High Court but was also operating "underground" on behalf of the then illegal Bombay Provincial Congress Committee. One day, a quiet, thoughtful young man came to the Bar Library and introduced himself as Jaysprakash, the Acting General Secretary of the A.I.C.C. I remember we stood on the verandah looking at the wide ocean which was then visible but is now obscured by a great many buildings. We discussed various matters of common concern which had brought him to see me.

Fellow Prisoners

The next time I met Jaysprakash was in January 1933 in the 'B' Yard of Nasik Road Central Prison where he had already preceeded me. Since we both had a sentence of a year's rigorous imprisonment, we spent the whole of 1933 together. One could not have had a more charming and considerate fellow prisoner. Though a stranger to the prisoners from Bombay, Maharashtra and Gujarat, he soon won all hearts.

Though we were both socialists of a kind, our backgrounds were very different, with Jayaprakash a staunch Marxist and I a Social Democrat of the British Labour pattern. We argued long and furiously about the relative merits of Democracy vs. the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. We decided to push this "theoretical" difference of opinion under the carpet and came out of prison at the end of 1933 to establish the Congress Socialist Party. This was an act of opportunism, though like most opportunism undertaken with good intentions, for which we all had to pay a price for many years to come.

Working with Jayaprakash is, with one exception, a joy. That exception is the problem of securing a reply to one's letters and telegrams ! But the issue that had been swept under the carpet kept bobbing up and at last in 1939 we parted company over the issue of the United Front with the Communists. It speaks volumes for Jayaprakash's unfailing generosity that, when I took my letter of resignation to him before publication and asked him to remove from it anything he might feel unfair to himself, Jayaprakash not only said that it was all right but that he would not reply to my criticism even after it was published. Though he felt strongly enough to part company with me rather than with the communists, he was generous enough to leave my criticism uncontradicted. It is difficult to quarrel with Jayaprakash and I always wonder when some others find it possible to get into a controversy with him.

"Quit India"

Jayaprakash's exploits as a revolutionary during the "Quit India" campaign made him a hero of Indian youth.

He had been held incommunicado for such a long time that, when I got elected to the Indian Legislative Assembly from Bombay City in 1945, the first speech I made in the Assembly was to demand Jayaprakash's release. I described Jayaprakash as a great patriot and as a gentle person who would not hurt a fly. While complimenting me on my maiden speech, JP sent me a raspberry from Agre Prison by asking the question: 'Do you think it right to concede that only those who are too gentle to kill flies should be at liberty?'

When India achieved independence Jayaprakash, always slow to move, found it somewhat difficult to adapt himself intellectually to the realities of Indian freedom. He was enough of a Marxist to be suspicious about a transfer of power that had not been preceeded by a holocaust of bloodshed. One of the casualties of this attitude was that Jayaprakash, along with other socialists, declined to join the Constituent Assembly of India, where people like me missed him greatly.

JP and Gandhi

Jayaprakash's relationship with Gandhiji and the changes that it underwent make a fascinating study. In the thirties, Jayaprakash was much more critical of and angry with Gandhiji than I was. On the other hand, while I shook hands with the old man, Jayaprakash would bend and touch Gandhiji's feet. I remember I used to tease him about this, but it reflected a combination of two of the four strands to which I have referred

earlier and which made Jaysprakash something of a Hindu Marxist.

Gandhiji on his part was most generous to his critics and both of us had an opportunity to be grateful for Gandhiji's generosity -- I when my passport was taken away by the British Government in 1935 and Jaysprakash when he tried unsuccessfully to smuggle out a letter to his wife Prabhavati Devi during an interview in Deoli Detention camp in the early forties.

Jaysprakash, having ceased to be a practicing Hindu, clung all the more tenaciously to the substitute religion of Marxism. When I tried at a summer school we had organised at Sonapat in Bihar in March 1938 ^{make him} ~~him~~ to read Eugene Lyon's "Assignment in Utopia" telling the story of his disillusionment as a communist in the Soviet Union, Jaysprakash refused to read it on the ground that he did not wish to be derailed from his new faith. If he gave up this creed which had replaced his Hindu orthodoxy, he was not sure where he would end up.

Though greatly shaken by the Communist treachery during World War II embodied in the "People's War" line of the C.P.I., J.P. was still reluctant to discard Marxism or to commit himself to non-violence as a creed.

Gandhiji, who looked to him as a future leader of the Indian people, told me once about his sadness at Jaysprakash's indecision in regard to fundamentals. Even so, Gandhiji wished Jaysprakash to be the Congress President in 1947 on the eve of the transfer of power. I felt then that Gandhiji was thinking of Jaysprakash as a countervailing force and a check on Pandit Nehru and

Sardar Patel who were to head the new government and were in the process of tending to turn their backs on Gandhiji and what he stood for. Gandhiji tried the idea out on Nehru who turned a cold shoulder to it and suggested Acharya Narendra Deva instead. But Narendra Deva's name was vetoed in turn by Sardar Patel, and finally Dr. Rajendra Prasad was nominated Congress President.

Gandhiji died without witnessing Jayaprakash's conversion to Servodaysa, though the ferment was already proceeding within. It was not till his fast in 1953 in Poona that Jayaprakash publicly renounced Marxism.

Poona Fast

When I interviewed Jayaprakash for the Illustrated Weekly of India in June 1972, and asked him whether I was right in holding the view that it was during the 1953 fast that he finally jettisoned Marxism, Jayaprakash's reply was : "I had three weeks to think it over and, as you correctly say, I came to reject the philosophical basis of Marxism - dialectical materialism - because it did not offer me an answer to the question : 'why should a man be good?' or 'why should anyone be good?'." It is clear that the spiritual element in Jayaprakash had won out in the end.

Servodaysa is in a way Jayaprakash's third religion. In March 1938, he could not see to what he could turn to if he discarded Marxism. In 1953, he found the answer. It was in a way a step back to Hinduism also, though only a partial one.

In a letter to the Indian Express of September 20, 1972, Jayaprakash surprised his friends by joining in a controversy over

introduction, the decoits of the businessmen, Jayaprakash replied: Hinduism between Dr. Keren Singh and Mr. Frank Moraes. "What marks a Hindu", he wrote, "are not caste and untouchability alone, but customs, ceremonies, rituals, our worship of stones, trees, animals, and the veritable jungle of karma-kand. It is that terribly tangled net which binds and constricts Hindu society and blocks its moral and material development.....We Hindus have been prone to take shelter behind the loftiest structures of thought built by some of our distinguished forefathers and behind that screen we continue to practise a form of religion and rituals that are millions of miles away from the spiritual insights of the Upanishadic rishis. It is this self-deception, that self-petting of our backs that stands between Hindu society of today and enlightenment and progress. Let us be frank with ourselves and confess that ours is a decadent society which perhaps needs a new Buddha to cleanse it and release it from the cobwebs in which it is caught".

Trusteeship

Jayaprakash has devoted the last two decades of his life in the villages spreading the Gandhian doctrine of Trusteeship which takes the form of bhoodan, sampattvidan and shramdhan. Since 1965 he has been the spearhead of the campaign to make Business aware of its social obligations. In 1965 he called an International Conference in Delhi which issued a Declaration on the Social Responsibilities of Business which still holds the fort. The response, except for pioneering by one or two industrialists in Bombay, has been disappointing. When I asked JP, during my interview about the Chambalghati decoits, who he found the more

intractable, the decoits or the businessmen, Jayaprakash replied: "I think it is the businessmen who are the more intractable. That is why we have this creeping disease of Statism in India today". His disillusionment with politicians was however just as complete because, when I referred to him a suggestion made by a pressman that Medho Singh should stand for Parliament and asked whether in that event he would not be in good company, Jayaprakash demurred and said: "He would probably not be in good company, Minoo, because he would be a reformed decoit !"

Jayaprakash came to judge a man or a group by whether they were sincere in their acceptance of the doctrine of Trusteeship. When the Swatantra Party was formed in 1959, with an acceptance of Trusteeship among its basic principles, he welcomed the birth of the party. He was later to express disappointment at the lack of sincerity on the part of many members of the party, and who can blame him ?

J.P. and the Naxalites

In 1970 Jayaprakash went to Muzaffarpur in Bihar to use his influence to wean the area away from the Naxalites and to offer a peaceful alternative to their programme for the landless. He tried to argue with the Naxalites: "The central issue of all revolutions is that of power and though they are all made in the name of people's power, power comes invariably to be usurped by a handful of the most ruthless among the erstwhile revolutionaries. Nor can it be otherwise when power comes out of the barrel of the gun and

the gun is not in the hands of the common people but in those of the organised instruments of violence that a successful revolution always throws up -- the 'revolutionary' army and its auxiliaries".

His other objection to Naxalism stemmed from his patriotism. He objected to their anti-nationalism and went on to observe that "certain forms of nationalism may be objectionable such as ^{the} aggressive, expansionist and neo-colonialist. But Indian nationalism certainly does not belong to that category. Chinese Han nationalism, on the other hand, particularly as expressed in the claim that any territory that at any time was a part or under the influence of Imperial Peking is for ever China, is certainly a variety of not only objectionable but dangerous nationalism. All brands of communists suffer in some measure - the least perhaps the Marxists - from extra-territorial patriotism but the slogan 'Chairman Mao is our Chairman too' beats them all in anti-nationalism and in toadying to foreign masters".

A similar concern for fundamentals came to the surface when Mr. Biju Patnaik approached Jayaprakash in February 1973 to lead an All India Front which would provide an alternative to the Congress Party. Jayaprakash promptly pricked the bubble. While expressing his view that no sensible person who had a feeling for human liberties and democracy could be happy about the political situation in India, he turned down Mr. Patnaik's invitation and suggested that no such opposition front would succeed unless the consolidation of the opposite forces was 'principled and not

opportunistic' and that it must not be consumed by mere negative aims such as 'Indira Hateso' but place before the people a positive policy and programme".

Consistent Anti-Imperialist

Unlike most 'anti-imperialists' in India, Jayaprakash's anti-imperialism begins at home. While a great patriot, he evidently seems to share Edith Cavell's thought that 'patriotism is not enough'. Jayaprakash has been India's unofficial Ombudsman and its conscience whenever our Government has erred. When Pandit Nehru could not make out who was aggressing against whom in Budapest in 1956, Jayaprakash stood up for the freedom of the Hungarians against the Soviet tanks. In 1959 he championed the cause of Tibet against the Chinese Communist invasion. In 1964, he was instrumental in bringing about a ceasefire between the Indian Army on one hand and the Naga National Army on the other. He has never weakened in his advocacy of the right of the people of Kashmir to justice and freedom and, as founder of the Indo-Pak Conciliation Committee, he has worked for friendship between the two neighbouring countries in the sub-continent for many years.

It is only during the last six months that Jayaprakash has got embroiled once again in political controversy. It was in December 1973 that Jayaprakash published some correspondence he had been carrying on with ^{Mrs} Indira Gandhi earlier that year. It
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ended with Jayaprakash confessing to "a sense of utter disappointment and distress" at the lack of response from the Prime Minister. Jayaprakash followed this up by publishing an Open Letter to the Members of Parliament which was published in Everyman's, his new journal, on December 29, 1973.

Time For A Change

By the beginning of 1974, Jayaprakash had come around to the view that it was time for a change and on February 3 he was able to look ahead and see that "there is another 1942 movement in sight to change the course of history". Gujarat and then Bihar were soon to prove that he was not a bad diagnostician.

Jayaprakash Narayan is seventy now and has given generously of himself in the service of the Indian people, with considerable damage to his health. The passing away of his wife, Prabhavati Devi, a wonderful little woman in her own right, in April 1973, has left him bereft of the affection and care which she bestowed on him. Will the body keep pace with the mind and the conscience in what he has set out to do? Will he be spared to serve India at a time when the country needs him most? One puts these questions to oneself with a tremulous heart but with intense hope.