

INDIAN REVOLUTIONARY

IT may be that we have among us at the moment the person who will dominate the next decade of Indian history.

Jayaprakash Narayan, an unusually striking-looking and gentle man of fifty-seven, has already lived several lives—Marxist revolutionary, Gandhian disciple, terrorist organiser against the British, active opponent of Communism, leader of the Indian Socialists. He was strongly tipped as Nehru's successor until, after months of meditation and fasting, he recently withdrew from party politics to serve the saintly Vinoba Bhave in the Bhoodan movement of voluntary land reform.

Some observers have decided indeed, that Narayan is too erratic to have a very serious political future. This might be true in any country but India. But those who take account of the peculiarities of India point out, on the contrary, that it is precisely his record of an almost ruthless soul-searching and disregard of the political opportunities of the moment that may propel him into the place of Gandhi and Nehru.



JANE BOWN

Jayaprakash Narayan

FOR several years, Narayan has been reflecting on the problems of his country. He has now been invited to Britain by private people who are interested in forming a friends of Bhoodan association and is using the opportunity to discuss his constitutional ideas with, among others, Friends House, Chatham House, the Foreign Office and Mr. Gaitskill. He has been staying in London with Arthur Koestler and this week-end he is the central figure in a seminar at St. Antony's College, Oxford.

Narayan's proposals for an entirely new approach to the problems of India spring from the belief that the present system of a technically imposed, Western-style party democracy is unreal and bound to fail, as similar attempts of blueprint democracy have failed everywhere else in Asia.

India, he argues, is essentially a rural country, yet an urban elite of some 500,000 people are trying to impose their pattern on the lives of nearly 400 million villagers. In the old days, he says, the traditional structure of the country was based on vigorous, proud and nearly self-sufficient "little village republics," the Panchayats. Their organic democracy was so stable and efficient that no invasion ever seriously upset it—until the British arrived.

Then, according to his view of history, an irresistible bureaucracy rushed it out of existence and left India with a peasantry which is lost and dazed and which must be roused again if India is to become a great nation offering a genuinely democratic alternative to Communism or other forms of despotism.

It is highly significant that the author of these views is not, like Nehru, a product of India's Westernised middle class. His ancestors had been farmers for several generations. He was born in Bihar Province and his early life was so simple that he was nineteen before he saw a tramcar.

HE won a university scholarship in India—and promptly renounced it when Gandhi called on Indian youth not to co-operate with the British. Instead he went, in 1922, to America and, in the classic manner, paid his way through college by working in the vacations as a labourer. He also became an enthusiastic Marxist.

Going back to India he became an active Congress supporter, and in time, like all activists, went to prison. Confined with a group of young intellectuals, he founded with them the Congress Socialist Party, and, when he came out, made an experimental alliance with the Communists. They tricked him contemptuously, and documents proving it came to light. That was a costly mistake by the Communists. They acquired a judicious and formidable opponent.

At the beginning of World War Two Narayan was sent back to gaol. There he became a national hero by leading a hunger strike of several hundred political prisoners, lasting thirty-one days, and later by escaping with five others. They scaled the prison walls on a ladder made from their dhotis. Thus began the most romantic period of his life. In hiding, he organised the Congress terrorists who, ignoring Gandhi's precepts of non-violence, derailed trains, blew up bridges, cut telegraph wires, and stopped at almost nothing in the conduct of guerrilla rebellion. The Government offered a reward of 10,000 rupees for his capture. He was captured twice, escaped twice, and was finally recaptured in the Punjab. He remained a close prisoner until 1946.

BUT nothing in his personality betrays this past. He has exceptional outward calm. He wields authority as a natural gift. The greater part of the year he lives in his working ashram in his native Bihar. He abstains from meat and alcoholic drinks, but there is nothing ascetic about him.

In the years after India's independence he became the riddle of Indian politics. For a long time Nehru, exasperated by the right wing of Congress, would gladly have had him in the Cabinet. But Narayan declined. At the same time his Socialist Party slowly disintegrated; among his gifts was not one of imposing unity on the cantankerous intellectuals who made up most of the party. In two general elections the party suffered humiliating defeat.

In 1957 he resigned the leadership of the Socialists, announced that he was giving himself body and soul to Vinoba Bhave's movement, and condemned the imitation of our centralised Western State as the fount of most of India's troubles. In despair at political action, he recommended his fellow-Socialists to dissolve their party and form themselves into a group of "selfless individuals" who would be the teachers and friendly guides of the people.

To-day his thought has gone a good deal further. It has become more systematic. The draft memorandum which he has brought with him to England describes how the State is to be a confederation of self-governing communities. It would form not a bureaucratic but an organic hierarchy, from the village community through regional, district and State councils, all elected, except at the village grass-roots, by in-

direct vote based on the personal merits of the candidates.

HIS key-word is "communitarian," by which he means the decentralisation of political power and decentralisation of the national economy—the latter by the creation of crafts and industries, providing a measure of economic self-sufficiency for the villagers. The political and economic tyranny of the nation-wide political parties is to be broken. At all levels, government is to be by committees; there is to be no cult of personality. The ultimate committee will be the National Council, but this will confine itself to foreign relations, defence and similar matters.

This is an extreme form of the rethinking of democracy which goes far beyond anything dreamed of in this country. Its weakness is that it fights shy of the problem of power. Politics is usually thought of as being about power. Narayan prefers to think that it is about the will of the people, based on his knowledge of the civic maturity of traditional Indian village communities when encouraged to look after their own affairs.

BECAUSE he dislikes the power State, he has kept up a running adverse commentary upon the excesses of the new imperialism practised by the Communist countries. From his self-imposed seclusion in village welfare-work, he has come out from time to time with manifestos on international affairs. His condemnation of Russia over Hungary, his condemnation of China over Tibet, stirred the heart and mind of India, and forced a little the hand of Nehru.

Narayan's new plan, coming from a man who already commands so much veneration and authority, is certain to cause a nation-wide stir. It is universally agreed that in spite of Western blueprints and five-year plans India will get nowhere unless the present apathy of its rural population is shaken off and the villagers are made to feel that the future depends on them. The man who expresses clearly what is vaguely felt in the mind of a generation may, in spite of his renunciation of party politics, suddenly find himself in high authority.

Even the most Westernised Indians regret in private conversation that those in authority have strayed away from the saintly yet shrewd idealism of Gandhi. They also feel that only by a peaceful revolution somewhere on the lines advocated by this descendant of generations of farmers in Bihar will the nation recover the sanity and moral élan to meet the threat from Communist China.

There are many difficulties in the way of Narayan's plan; but however novel or revolutionary it may sound to Western ears, it is in harmony with the basic flow of both traditional and most recent Indian thought.