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Need To Strengthen Roots Of Democracy

J. P. DEFINES IDEAL OF GRAM RAJ

From Our Staff Reporter

NEW DELHI, Dec. 28.

MR. JAYA PRAKASH NARAYAN today strongly advocated the recreation of self-governing institutions at various levels beginning down from the village. This was essential not only for the preservation of real democracy but for the maximum participation of the people in the affairs of the nation.

In his 75-minute address to the Indian Council of World Affairs this evening, Mr. Narayan gave broad outlines of his new thesis on the political, economic and social reconstruction of the country to strengthen the roots of democracy. Mr. D. R. Mankekar presided over the meeting.

The main theme of the Sarvodaya leader's speech on "Is democracy suited to Asian soil?" was that parliamentary democracy in most of the countries in Asia had failed. In India also it had not been able to serve the needs of the people. They must, therefore, find a new form of democracy to give it greater content and meaning.

DECENTRALIZATION OF POWER

The self-governing institutions and village communities which had stood the test of times in India before British rule, should be elected indirectly and given control not only of the local affairs but of the general economic, industrial and social life. Unless the work of economic and industrial development was entrusted to these institutions the decentralization of power would have no meaning.

The Sarvodaya leader called for the proper implementation of the ideal of gram raj into practice. In this regard, Mr. Narayan referred to the experiment of democratic decentralization launched in Rajasthan and Andhra and described it as "bold". He, however, warned that if the scheme was not worked out properly they would be faced with disastrous consequences.

As it was people were losing faith in the efficacy of the parliamentary democracy; if the new experiment of democracy from the bottom failed there would be chaos or Communist or military dictatorship. His idea of democratic industrialisation was that not less than 60 per cent of the task of economic and industrial development should be given to the village and district councils, 25 per cent should be done by the State and only 15 per cent by the Centre.

VILLAGE COUNCILS

The Sarvodaya leader spoke of the high traditions of the working of the self-governing village communities. The village councils should be elected either by general consensus among the villagers, or by drawing lots or by selecting one or more persons acceptable to the villagers and authorising them to nominate the council. He was not in favour of panchayat elections, since they often led to disrupt the village life and sometimes lead to violence. Elections had turned out to be a divisive method while what was needed in Asia was a unifying force.

Mr. Narayan said he did not want immediate scrapping of parliamentary system. But he was against what he described as "umbrella democracy" with an all-powerful centre. The top-to-bottom democracy did not suit the country. He pleaded for a democracy beginning from below and going upto the centre. The only way to save democracy in this region was to rest it on the slabs of self-governing village communities.

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At the outset, Mr. Narayan replied to the question posed in the subject of his talk and said democracy was good for everyone. The only question was what shape it should be given to suit the climate of a particular region. It was axiomatic to him that democracy was the only way of life. He deplored that serious attention was not given to the problem of giving a new form of democracy. He declared that no kind of democracy could exist without the basic freedoms of conscience, association and rule of law.

STRUGGLE FOR POWER

He related how in some Asian countries from Cairo to Djakarta reluctant dictators had to assume powers to rid the country from the shackles of the political parties, which had been engaged in an unashamed struggle for power. Most of the dictators in these countries had protested that they did not want power but they were now faced with a real problem of how to hand over power to the people. He referred to the new democratic systems experimented in Egypt and Pakistan, which were on the lines of the Gram Raj ideal.

Mr. Narayan referred to the technological advancement and said that they needed a human revolution to free man from the clutches of technology. "Let us master technology instead of being a slave to technology," he added. That could be done by basing our democracy in the village and retaining the rural civilization.

The Sarvodaya leader asked political leaders to give serious thought to this problem of finding a new form of democracy. He added that "let us take advantage of the umbrella of the system so far developed and the leadership of Prime Minister Nehru to build democracy from the bottom. If that was not done in good time the future of democracy in India would be in peril."