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Jayaprakash: The Road Back to Gandhi

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Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

"Jayaprakash," said Prime Minister Nehru to an American journalist a few years ago, "is the future Prime Minister of India." Even with Nehru's blessing it would not have been easy, for Jayaprakash Narayan became head of the Praja Socialist Party, which stood a poor second to Nehru's Indian National Congress. Nevertheless, he was youthful, vigorous, articulate, honest, prestigious and popular. He had an excellent "independence record" (the Indian equivalent of the "war record"), and he attracted large numbers of politically minded youth who found the Congress too stolid and the Communist Party too extravagant.

Today, Jayaprakash is most unlikely to become a Prime Minister of India. He has left "party and power politics" and joined the Bhoodan (Land-Gift) movement led by Vinoba Bhave. Indeed he has made jivandan, the gift of one's life, to the ideal of Sarvodaya, or voluntary egalitarianism. In so doing, Jayaprakash has disappointed a lot of Praja Socialists, and many Indians who hoped that he would lead his party to become the Opposition in a two-party system of government. He also disappointed some who wonder, with some anxiety, who will lead India after Nehru leaves the scene.

Jayaprakash is still celebrated---he is known as "J.P.," with all the fame that the abbreviation implies. But having left his friends and followers behind, he is grudgingly described these days as "unstable," "escapist," or at least "zig-zaggy."

J.P. himself allows the "zig-zag" criticism: "My apparently tortuous path." In his time he has been a youthful enthusiast of Gandhi's first Non-Cooperation Movement, a long-time student in the United States, a founder of the chief socialist party in India, a high-ranking leader of the Congress and Nehru's heir-presumptive, a forceful critic of the Congress and of communism. Now he is a mild-speaking, ashram-dwelling devotee of Sarvodaya.

In his political thinking he has passed from Marxism to democratic socialism to what he calls Gandhism. Having tasted them all, he has rejected most Marxian tenets, communism, democratic socialism, party politics and materialism in general. Now he has come to Sarvodaya, with its insistence on the individual change of heart, "conversion to brotherhood and cooperation," as the basis of social reorganization, and its emphasis on decentralized government, voluntary sharing of land, and small-scale industry. J.P. still calls himself a socialist, and he calls Sarvodaya "the logical conclusion of socialism in India."

Perhaps Sarvodaya is just another tack on Jayaprakash Narayan's

zig-zag course to personal political satisfaction. But I consider him also as a symbol and a symptom. For J.P. seems to have covered, and even to personify, just about all that has been going on intellectually in modern liberal Indian politics.

The questions before politically thinking Indians have been plain enough: How to attain national freedom? And then what to do with it? Although Gandhi's non-violent method of securing national independence was challenged by some, it was successful, and that was that. For the Mahatma's vague, incomplete, but clearly radical ideas for social re-organization, there has been much less enthusiasm. The search for alternate solutions has led Indians to grasp everywhere, with the result that there has been a preoccupation with theory, a penchant for plans and manifestoes, and a neglect of values, a fuzziness about the goal. Jayaprakash, having looked on all sides, now finds himself at home with Gandhi. And with Vinoba, the elder, less turbulent disciple, he may make Sarvodaya a useful extension of Gandhi's "experiments with truth," a conscience speaking to India's present leaders, and a significant contribution to political thought and action.

Jayaprakash Narayan was born 55 years ago in a village in Bihar, North India. As a student at Patna College, he went off two weeks before pre-final examinations to join Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement. At the age of 20, he began an eight-year stay in the United States, where he worked his way into and around four universities (California, Iowa, Wisconsin and Ohio) and became, as he has said, a revolutionary, class-struggle "Soviet Communist."

Returning to India, he was liked by Gandhi and favored with a minor Congress office by Nehru (who was then much more of an orthodox socialist than he is now). In 1932, J.P. was arrested along with many other Congressmen during the Civil Disobedience Movement, and upon release founded in 1934, with some of his ex-jailmates, the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) within the Congress, to correct the "bourgeois domination" by forces within the parent organization.

In 1936, against the advice of his colleagues, J.P. led the CSP into a United Front with the Communist Party of India (CPI), whom he regarded as "other socialists." His more wary colleagues saved the CSP from capture by the CPI in 1938, but only after the Communists had made a great foothold in the South (including Kerala) and the All-India Trade Union Congress (which is now Communist). Two years later J.P. agreed that the Front had been a mistake. These days no one in India criticizes the Indian Communists and communism in general more frequently nor more effectively than he does.

Meanwhile J.P. rejected Gandhi's non-violent path to national independence, and during the "Quit India" Movement of 1942 he became an advocate and organizer of violent revolution. Imprisoned, he made a dramatic escape and for a year before he was recaptured, he toured India stealthily, attempting to incite armed revolt.

Released from prison after the war, J.P. reorganized the socialist group as the Socialist Party, this time to provide a "vehicle of democratic socialism."

During the first several years after Independence, J.P. spent his time as General Secretary of the Socialist Party and its successor the Praja Socialist Party. Efforts to make the party an effective opponent of Congress were hampered by dissension, bickering and schism. In 1953 Nehru and J.P. sat down and talked about possible Congress-Socialist merger, but this fell through. J.P.'s later suggestion for non-partisan, "cooperative politics" gained no response.

During this time, Vinoba's Bhoodan movement gained momentum. In April 1954, after a 23-day fast, J.P. declared at the Sarvodaya conference at Bodh Gaya that he would give his life to Bhoodan and the Sarvodaya ideal. He resigned as leader of his party, though he continued to advise the party and to comment publicly on political events (on Krishna Menon's UN speech on Hungary, he said: "As an Indian I hang down my head in shame..."). This past Summer he quit the party entirely, and he devotes his time now to Sarvodaya propaganda.

In a recent public letter to his Praja Socialist colleagues, J.P. explained his "parting of the ways," and thus provided a self-analysis on his personal political journey:

"As a boy, like most boys of those days, I was an ardent nationalist and leaned towards the revolutionary cult of which Bengal was the noble leader at that time," he wrote. "... (But) before my revolutionary leanings could mature, Gandhiji's first non-cooperation movement swept over the land as a strangely uplifting hurricane... That brief experience of soaring up with the winds of a great idea left imprints on the inner being that time and much familiarity with the ugliness of reality have not removed."

The goal was freedom, but the "Marxian science of revolution seemed to offer a surer and quicker road to it than Gandhiji's technique..." While in America he began to see this goal of national freedom in the broader context of "freedom for all---even the lowliest---and this freedom must include freedom from exploitation, from hunger, from poverty." He was not sure then that Gandhi stood for these things.

Returning to India, he found that nationalism was "reaching white heat," but "I did not find the Indian Communist anywhere on the battle lines... They were denouncing the national movement as bourgeois and Mahatama Gandhi as a lackey of the Indian bourgeoisie." So J.P. kept away from the CPI and joined the national movement. As socialists within the Congress, J.P. and his friends tried to inject revolution and socialism into that "conservative" organization. While not challenging Gandhi's non-violence directly, J.P. condemned "cowardice, clothed in Shastric subtleties;" and the CSP program included such items as "transfer of all power to the producing masses," "redistribution of land to peasants," and "liquidation of debts owed by peasants and workers."

When the CPI, following the Popular Front cue of the Comintern, did an about-face and supported the Congress national movement, J.P.'s "Marxist zeal" got the better of him and he entered into the CSP-CPI alliance. Out of this "disaster" came disillusion about Communist tactics, and out of the news of the Moscow purge trials came "doubts about the basic postulates of Marxism-Leninism."

"In Soviet Russia we saw not only denial of 'formal' freedom, but

also denial of social justice, of equality; the growth of a new class of bureaucratic rulers, of new forms of exploitation. All this was not only the absence of socialism but also its negation...

"All that happened in Russia," he continued, "was not the result of the wicked deeds of a paranoic, as Khrushchev would have us believe now, but the end-product of the socio-economic system that was set up there. Over-centralization of political and economic authority and total statism were clearly at the bottom of the evil...As I began to perceive some of these things my mind naturally turned toward ideas of decentralization and the gradual attenuation of the State and the fashioning of alternative forms of collective behavior and social control."

This brought J.P. to the "half-way house of democratic socialism," but he did not remain there. "Democratic socialists, communists and welfarists," he was to conclude, "are all statist. They all hope to bring about their own variety of the millenium by first mastering and then adding to the powers and functions of the State." The common flaw is that they all regard the State "as the only instrument of social good," and the common result is a regimented society.

This, he rejects, and along with it, from another angle, materialism. The society existing today in the West and sought by others in the East, is to J.P. utterly impersonal, without joy or human warmth, pulled along by the sole objectives of productivity and efficiency. "Such a society is heaven for bureaucrats, managers, technocrats, statist." Socialists, he regretted, have taken "in the name of science, production, efficiency, standard of living and other hallowed shibboleths, this whole Frankenstein of a society lock, stock and barrel and hope, by adding public ownership to it, to make it socialist...In such a society the very breath of socialism would be hard to draw."

Indeed, he wrote, it became clear to him that "materialism as a philosophical outlook could not provide any basis for ethical conduct and any incentive for goodness..." The emphasis in both socialism and communism on material prosperity is "appropriate for poor and backward countries like India. But they also apotheosize material happiness" and encourage a predatory outlook on life.

Where will the curb be, the restraint? "The mistake of Marxism," J.P. wrote---the answer comes obliquely---"was to assume that consciousness could be understood in the same manner as matter...The study of matter is an objective exploration, whereas that of consciousness is subjective realization." By reducing consciousness to a behavior of matter, the Marxists have equated consciousness with amoral matter. But the duty of man is to see through the "inextricable commingling" of the two and to realise the "unity of his existence, or to put it differently, to realise his self." J.P. thus provides his politics, his socialism, with a moral basis. The curb on the individual takes the form of limitations on wants, self-control and self-discipline, which are traditional Indian religious ideals. In the larger social framework, the socialist "way of life" is now redefined more softly than before as "a way of sharing together the good things that common endeavor may make available."

This is to be accomplished by restricting the need and area of discipline from above, and the expansion, with the educative assistance of "a band of selfless workers," of self-discipline, i.e., voluntary local community discipline and cooperation.

"The capacity to self-regulate the life of the community must be created and not bestowed from above," Jayaprakash now wrote. "The process must start at the bottom..." Genuine socialism---"self-government, self-management, mutual cooperation and sharing, equality, freedom, brotherhood---all could be practiced and developed far better if men lived in small communities..."

This is very much what Gandhi was saying, the non-violent technique for changing and reconstructing society. J.P. acknowledges it as such. "My regret is that I did not reach this point in my life's journey while Gandhiji was still in our midst..."

Later this month, I intend to visit J.P. at his ashram in Bihar and to learn something more about the method and dynamics of Sarvodaya. I shall write you more about him then.

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