Sunday ET: A look at some unique letters that Jayaprakash Narayan wrote to Indira Gandhi when he was being kept in solitary confinement in prison

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On a muggy overcast day in July 1975, a most important prisoner was awaited via special aircraft in Chandigarh.

Jayaprakash Narayan, better known as JP, was to arrive at the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), where he would undergo treatment in the custody of the district collector of Chandigarh, MG Devasahayam.

“I didn’t know much about JP, I thought he was a troublemaker,” smiled Devasahayam as he reminisced about a turning point in his own life. “He was my prisoner. Only the superintendent of police, senior doctors and I could meet him freely. Everyone else had to get my clearance as he was a VVIP prisoner,” he said.

JP, the David to the then prime minister Indira Gandhi’s Goliath, was 73, ill and diabetic. One of Gandhi’s first political rivals to be arrested after the proclamation of Emergency at midnight on June 25, 1975, JP was moved to Chandigarh within a few days for safekeeping and to ensure he caused no trouble. JP was a Gandhian, admittedly one of the main causes for precipitating the Emergency with his massive JP movement in Bihar, demanding that the state government and the legislature resign as it had “gone corrupt”.

One ward of the PGIMER was declared as a jail with the inner periphery manned by jail officials and the outer patrolled by the police. Over a series of meetings with his prisoner, Devasahayam would learn to respect and admire him, later even helping save his life.

“Within three weeks of his arrival in Chandigarh, JP got visibly worked up at the happenings in Delhi and elsewhere,” said Devasahayam. “I have been privy to some rare letters written by JP to Mrs Gandhi — most of those were destroyed or lost after the Emergency but I have a few since a copy was marked to me as well at the time,” he said.

JP’s first letter to Indira Gandhi dated July 21, 1975, barely a month into Emergency, is scathing in tone and criticism. “Dear Prime Minister,” it begins. “I am appalled at press reports of your speeches and interviews…” (see excerpts of the letter on page 5). No response ever came from the office of the PM to this 15-page letter of anguish.

“In August 1975, I was sitting down for lunch with some guests when I received a letter from JP,” said Devasahayam. “It was another letter written Gandhi, this time threatening death…,” said. The second letter by JP was even more anguished. “I have watched with dismay and growing agony the way you have been pushing down the country ever deeper into the abyss of darkness,” wrote JP.

The situation was tense. Here was an idealist, a man who would rather die than go back on his word, threatening to stop eating. The repercussions would be severe. “JP, I felt, was the only one who could get Indira Gandhi to revoke Emergency,” said Devasahayam. “If he died, then India would be doomed to dictatorship. I realised I had to somehow convince him against doing this.”

A heated argument ensued. “I asked JP whether he had given up on the country, spoke to him at length about how the opportunity would come sometime to bring India back to normalcy… That made him think and he finally agreed that the letter would not be sent to the prime minister. I tore up that letter in front of him. Only my copy survived,” he said.
Little is known in public memory of the conciliation process initiated by JP as early as September 1975 to try and convince the prime minister to revoke the Emergency. Giani Zail Singh, the then chief minister of Punjab and Sheikh Abdullah, then chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir, were respected Congress leaders who were known to be close to Indira Gandhi but also disagreed with the Emergency.

“I got in touch with a common friend who took the message of conciliation to both Singh and Abdullah,” said Devasahayam.

“Subsequently Sheikh Abdullah made a statement that was reported in the press. When I brought this to JP’s attention, he immediately wrote to Abdullah, requesting him to come to Chandigarh to hammer out conciliation talks,” he said.

Quoting from the press report in The Tribune daily, JP showers praise on Abdullah for his encouraging statements on revoking Emergency.

But his criticism of the prime minister continues.

“However, in spite of all that has happened and is happening, I am prepared, in the interest of our country, to seek the path of conciliation,” wrote JP to Abdullah.
This letter reached the Prime Minister’s Office in Delhi but went no further. The first attempt at conciliation died a natural death. Several attempts at conciliation and dialogue followed in the coming months. Indira Gandhi’s principal secretary PN Dhar initiated dialogue through the then director of Varanasi’s Gandhian Institute, Sougata Dasgupta. No breakthrough took place.

In early November, a special package arrived from the Prime Minister’s Office for the eyes of JP only. "My Chief Commissioner NP Mathur called me at night and gave me a cover addressed to JP by the Prime Minister herself," said Devasahayam. "JP smiled on reading it and asked me to have a look. It was a letter from senior British politician and activist Fenner Brockway addressed to JP. It was pretty much an apology on behalf of Mrs Gandhi, virtually asking JP to agree to reconciliation," said Devasahayam.

JP was elated that there finally was a breakthrough and was preparing to respond to the letter.

His health, however, began to deteriorate suddenly and alarmingly. “Almost a week later, I asked JP whether he had written a response to Brockway’s letter,” explain Devasahayam. “He said he was unable to read or collect his thoughts. He was very unwell.” As Devasahayam looked for Brockway’s letter, it was not to be found. “That is when I realised something was very fishy and that it was no longer safe to keep JP in Chandigarh,” said Devasahayam. “I started the process of getting him out of there.”

**Taking JP Out**

A plan was hatched with JP’s brother Rajeshwar Prasad as well as PN Dhar’s messenger Sougata Dasgupta. The theme of the plan was to be: “What if JP died?” On November 11, 1975, Rajeshwar Prasad wrote to the prime minister stating that JP’s health was in very poor condition.

“I have very serious apprehensions that if his condition continues like this, he might not survive for more than two months,” wrote Prasad.

“…Apart from the great personal tragedy that his loss would mean to our family, it is for you to decide whether it would be in the best interest of the Government if JP dies in jail.”
On the same day Dasgupta informed the PM's principal secretary PN Dhar about JP's deteriorating health condition, bringing up the worrying question of what would happen if he were to die as a prisoner.

"The next morning a team of doctors from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences arrived to check on JP," grinned Devasahayam.

"The same evening, the district magistrate of Delhi and the chief secretary of Delhi arrived by special aircraft with the orders — one of unconditional parole and another of release," he said.

JP accepted the unconditional parole offered to him and was sent to Delhi the next day from where he headed to Jaslok Hospital in Mumbai for treatment for a kidney ailment.

JP would survive another four years on dialysis and would also be a key player in revocation of Emergency in 1977.

"I agree with BJP leader LK Advani on one thing — that the situation in the country is ripe for another Emergency," said Devasahayam.

“Atal Bihari Vajpayee had compared JP to Bhishma Pitamah and Jesus but nothing has been done to honour the man who brought us our second freedom. Blame must go equally to Congress and the Opposition for continuing with autocratic methods post Emergency,” he said.

“I am glad I had the opportunity to interact closely with such a man,” signed off Devasahayam. “He used to say that I was the son he never had. There is none like JP any more.”

**JP: A Brief History**

**BORN:** October 11, 1902

**BIRTHPLACE:** Sitab Diara, Ballia district, Uttar Pradesh

**PARENTS:** Harsu Dayal and Phul Rani Devi

**OCTOBER 1920:** Married Prabhavati

**STUDIED IN:** Patna College and Bihar Vidyapeeth

**1922-1929:** Left for San Francisco, for higher education at Berkeley, California and later University of Wisconsin

**1929:** Returned to India; Nehru invited JP to head labour research department of Indian National Congress at Allahabad

**1930:** Following the Dandi March, when senior Congress leaders were arrested, JP continued party’s work underground but was subsequently arrested. He was in and out of jail for participating in various protests until 1946

**1954:** Announced support for Vinoba Bhave’s Sarvodaya movement

**1973:** Prabhavati died

**1974:** Led peaceful silent march against Bihar government in Patna, was lathi-charged

**JUNE 26, 1975:** Arrested soon after proclamation of Emergency

**JULY 01, 1975:** Brought to PGIMER, Chandigarh for treatment

**NOVEMBER 12, 1975:** Released from PGIMER, shifted to Jaslok Hospital in Bombay where he was treated for kidney failure

**OCTOBER 8, 1979:** Died aged 76