

# JP and India's Second Freedom

## 31st JP Memorial Lecture - 23rd March 2011

- M.G. Devasahayam

This is a tribute by MG Devasahayam who has brilliantly chronicled the Movement which is a saga of the ongoing fight for freedom in Bharat. The nation is still enslaved, with a slavery of a non-colonial sort, succumbing today to the regime of Sonia Gandhi, whose credentials for leading the nation are certainly questionable. Devasahayam, author of Jp Movement, Emergency And India's Second Freedom : 9789380828619 Vitasta Publishing Pvt. Ltd. 2012 The book is about the deep dark period of autocracy (1975-77) in India. Those were months of draconian laws, extinguished freedom, Gestapo-type arrests, severe Press censorship, forced sterilization and abject surrender marked by terror of the minions and slavery of the elites that made India a fascist type police state.

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I feel honoured to be invited by People's Union for Civil Liberties to deliver the 31st JP Memorial Lecture.

India's Freedom, achieved on the midnight of 14/15th August 1947, ended on the midnight of 25/26th June 1975, when the then President of India signed a crisp four-line proclamation virtually on command from the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi:

"In exercise of the powers conferred by clause (1) of Article 352 of the Constitution, I, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, President of India, by this Proclamation declare that a grave emergency exists whereby the security of India is threatened by internal disturbances."

This extinction of freedom in the country brought about an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation between Indira Gandhi, the self-appointed dictator and Jayaprakash Narayan, popularly known as JP, the congenial democrat. While the former was the epitome of power and pelf, the later abjured all desire for power, but wielded immense moral authority. By the time the confrontation ended in March 1977, JP had won with India regaining its Freedom.

Acknowledging this, veteran journalist Kuldip Nayar said in his 24th JP Memorial Lecture: "He wasn't built to be a hero: slight of figure, racked by illness, battle-worn. Yet, he proved to be the outstanding hero who won us the second freedom in 1977, 30 years after the first one."

Hardly anyone today seems to know about this 'second freedom' won with such suffering and sacrifice. So much so, anyone launching an agitation calls it 'second freedom struggle'. The latest to use this phrase is Anna Hazare while seeking enactment of the JAN LOKPAL Bill. If this is the perception of a veteran crusader like Hazare, one can only imagine the public awareness about JP, his Movement, resultant Emergency and regaining of Freedom in 1977. Is it that decades after this're-making' of history people do not really have a sense of freedom and liberty?

Perhaps so. It looks as if Indira Gandhi, who used the violent 'Jhatka' method to kill democracy in the mid-seventies, learnt her lesson and resorted to the less painful 'Halal' method after returning to power in 1980. The objective is to effectively drain the body of the victim's blood, resulting in slow, but steady decay and death. Successive regimes have followed this resulting in a benumbed state of democracy and freedom in the country today.

Even so, Freedom has been India's path ever since Independence, a path chosen by the founding-fathers of our Republic under extremely trying circumstances. Despite all trials and tribulations and its many imperfections, India today is being lauded as the largest democracy on earth practicing freedom, however imperfect it may be.

For JP, considered among the greatest revolutionaries of the last century, Freedom has always been a passion. This is what he said in 1975:

“Freedom became one of the beacon lights of my life and it has remained so ever since.....Above all it meant freedom of the human personality, freedom of the mind, and freedom of the spirit. This freedom has become a passion of my life and I shall not see it compromised for bread, for security, for prosperity, for the glory of the state or for anything else”.

In the dying moments of the 2nd millennium, standing on the ramparts of the Lincoln Memorial at Washington DC, US President Bill Clinton declared: “The story of 20th century is the triumph of freedom. We must never forget the meaning of the 20th century or the gifts of those who worked and marched, who fought and died for the triumph of Freedom”.

JP had ‘worked and marched, fought and died for the triumph of freedom’ in a country wherein live one-sixth of the human race. And he did it not once, but twice—as a fiery fighter for freedom from alien rule under Gandhiji’s leadership and later winning it back from a native ‘durbar’ under his own stewardship. Elsewhere in the world such a man would be celebrated with gratitude. But here in this ‘Republic of Scams’ and land of ‘cash-and-crime politics’ he is near-totally forgotten.

During the 20 months of active Emergency, people moved in hushed silence, stunned and traumatised by the draconian goings on. Across the nation, groveling academicians, advocates and accountants vied with each other to sing paeans of glory to the Emergency rulers, some signing pledges of loyalty and servitude in blood! The bulk of the civil service crawled when asked to bend. Higher judiciary was willing to decree that under Emergency regime citizens did not even have the ‘right to life’. Politicians of all hue and colour, barring honourable exceptions, lay supine and prostrate. There was gloom all around and it looked as if everything was over and the world’s largest democracy was slowly but surely drifting into dictatorship.

But through this all, one single soul, one lonely spirit continued to stir in anguish and agony, for the first few months in captivity at Chandigarh and later attached to a dialysis machine at Bombay’s Jaslok Hospital and a spartan house at Patna. Yet, this defiant, indomitable spirit in the person of Jayaprakash Narayan dared the might of Indira’s dictatorship and defeated it thereby restoring freedom and democracy to India. This he did despite being in the frailest of health and living on borrowed time. All nations, most of all India, need an icon to which they can cleave when times are bad, which can unite them across barriers of caste, creed, clan and language. Mid-seventies were bad days and through the draconian and repressive regime of National Emergency and the ‘era of discipline’ positioned against ‘anarchy and chaos’, Mrs. Gandhi was building herself up as that icon.

If she had succeeded, she would have got a clear mandate in any ensuing election, since majority would have voted for her instead of opting for a vacuum. When firmly in saddle, with Emergency endorsed by the people, the ‘iconship’ would have passed on to Sanjay Gandhi who was waiting in the wings. With age in his favour and his known dislike for the democratic process, India would have drifted from ‘direct democracy’ to ‘directed democracy’, a euphemism for dictatorship. An alternative icon was needed to prevent this tragedy from happening and JP with his towering personality and his aura as the hero of ‘Quit India’ movement eminently filled the bill.

JP’s emergence as an alternate icon to take the nation back to Freedom and democracy was not an easy task. The Sarvodaya leader was out of circulation and public view for several years before he surfaced in 1974 to lead an uprising, which mostly involved the Youth. Mainly students spearheaded this uprising, popularly known as “JP Movement”. Outlining its raison d’etre JP wrote: “The movement was started with certain specific demands. The chief among them were: removal of corruption, curb on inflation, solution of the problem of unemployment and basic changes in the system of education”.

Emphasising on the movement's main thrust JP said, "We have always raised our voice against corruption. Prevention of corruption was the main aim of our movement". These were indeed genuine and unassailable demands and should have received positive response from any Government run on democratic principles. Instead, a power drunk ruling coterie chose to respond brutally with harsh repressive measures resulting in the strengthening and spreading of the JP movement.

The Allahabad High Court judgement of June 12, 1975 unseating Mrs. Gandhi from Parliament for 'corrupt practices' gave a big fillip to the Movement, which was poised to sweep the country. But before it could gain momentum Mrs. Gandhi struck and in one swift move declared Emergency and incarcerated all leaders who commanded public following.

On top of the list was 'enemy-number-one-of-the-state' Jayaprakash Narayan. By this time JP had come to symbolise the conscience of the nation and uncompromising opposition to corruption and despotism which had become the hallmarks of Congress party and governments. By locking up an ailing JP in confinement, the ruling coterie thought they could break his body and spirit and thereby eliminate the only hurdle they had in enjoying uninterrupted and unfettered power.

What 'man proposes God disposes'. In this case it was a woman proposing to be the icon of 750 million people and the unquestioned leader of the vast sub-continent of India for years to come and then pass it on to her progeny. Using the Emergency as a whip to 'discipline the nation' and building her up as "Indira is India", she would have eminently succeeded with individuals and institutions collapsing one by one and falling by the wayside. And, barring sporadic murmurs of dissent, she had no opposition whatsoever and all roads were clear as far as eyes could see. But God has his own way of disposing.

During the initial days of the Emergency, within the confines of the yet to be commissioned intensive care ward of the Chandigarh's Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGI), JP was a haggard, and 'defeated' individual who felt that all hopes were gone and freedom in India stood extinguished. He had also mentally reconciled himself to die in confinement 'as a prisoner of Indira Gandhi'. But the Almighty and the Ultimate Arbiter had other ideas. He wanted this man, who once symbolised all that was fiery in India's Freedom struggle and all that was noble in pursuing a cause, to resurge, rise again and re-emerge as the nation's hope and the alternate icon to lead the people back to freedom and democracy. As the then District Collector & Magistrate of Chandigarh and custodian of JP-in-Jail, I had the privilege of witnessing this history-in-the-making first hand.

When I received 'prisoner JP' at the tarmac of Chandigarh Air Force base on the night of July 1, 1975, Emergency was only a few days old. JP had been taken into custody under the dreaded Maintenance of Internal Security Act by the District Magistrate, Delhi on 25/26 June night, moved around nearby areas of Haryana and Delhi's All-India Institute of Medical Sciences, and was being brought to Chandigarh for safe custody and medical care. To me at that time JP was an enigma as well as a mystery. My memory of him as the 'Hazaribagh hero' of the forties was hazy and the perception of his recent campaign for 'total revolution' was rather confusing.

During the 22 weeks JP was in my custody, I did come to know him very intimately. And having understood the nobility of his struggle and the intensity of his commitment, I partook in all matters concerning him and the State, shared his intimate thoughts and feelings, discussed political events and happenings, played 'Devil's Advocate', participated in brainstorming and strategy sessions, took charge of his mental and psychological well-being, initiated the reconciliation process between him and the Prime Minister and succeeded in reviving his faith in himself and his people which he was on the verge of losing.

“My world lies in shambles all around me. I am afraid I shall not see it put together again in my lifetime. May be my nephews and nieces will see that. May be”. These opening words of ‘JP’s Prison Diary-1975s’ first entry dated 21 July—a full three weeks after his arrival in Chandigarh—amply describe a sense of defeatism and extremely fragile state of JP’s mind and spirit during the initial days.

While this was JP’s state of mind within PGI confines, outside some strange things were happening. Under instructions from the ‘Delhi Durbar’, Chandigarh Administration was preparing a contingency plan in the event of JP’s death in detention and a ‘death drill’ was being rehearsed. Blissfully unaware of the rehearsal of his own funeral, JP was taking stock of things and doing some hard soul searching, introspection and evaluation of events leading to the imposition of Emergency and its aftermath. This intense ‘solo-brainstorming’ led JP to believe that the ‘intellectuals’ who had egged him on saying ‘JP you are the only hope of the nation’ and whom he counted upon as bulwarks of democracy had buckled and had deserted him.

This deep mental hurt was the main cause for some disturbing developments later including his conclusion that at least for the foreseeable future, democracy in the country was dead. And even when ‘it was put together after a long time’ he will not be there to see it. So, over a period of several days he drafted a ‘letter of farewell’ to Mrs. Indira Gandhi pouring out his heart in anguish, pleading with her to mend ways and “reconciling to die a prisoner under her regime”. This letter—indeed an epistle—sent on July 21, 1975 to the Prime Minister caused quite a ripple along the corridors of power.

JP has been expecting some response to this impassionate letter from Mrs. Gandhi whom he often referred to as ‘the child who played in my lap.’ He felt slighted and humiliated when there was none. Already smarting under a deep feeling of hurt and betrayal, reports of intellectuals, academics and groups of people ‘hailing’ the Emergency and the ‘decisive’ leadership of Mrs. Gandhi, had tremendous psychological impact on JP edging him to give up all hopes and ready to fold-up.

One touching incident is worth narrating. On Sunday, August 10, 1975 I had permitted JP’s brother-in-law S. N. Prasad an interview for one hour. Around noon Jail Superintendent delivered to me a letter from JP addressed to the Prime Minister conveying his decision ‘to go on fast until death’ unless the Emergency was revoked and all prisoners released within two weeks.

JP had authorised Prasad to announce this to the outside world. Considering the grave implications this could bring forth I took upon myself the task of dissuading JP from this disastrous move, but did not make any headway even after two hours of highly surcharged nail-splitting verbal duel. JP refused to relent and said that his decision was irrevocable because in his opinion Mrs. Gandhi will only bring more destructive measures now that ‘Intellectuals’ had totally buckled and there was no resistance whatsoever.

Sensing that his main grievance was the meek surrendering of the intellectuals, I argued that all intellectuals had not buckled and there were many willing to follow JP. I mentioned octogenarian Bhimsen Sachar and his distinguished ‘freedom fighter’ colleagues daring the Prime Minister and commencing a public campaign against Emergency from that very day. I said people are in a daze and only now the enormity of the situation is sinking in. As of now state power is holding absolute sway but before long they are bound to slip and people would regroup. At that time people across the nation would need a JP to lead the largest democracy in the world back to freedom and liberty. JP pondered, paused and agreed to reconsider his decision and defer the fast for the present. He took the original letter and tore it off. I however retrieved it. Moving fast, Prasad was accosted in the moving bus and embargoed from announcing the fast.

Extremely concerned and perturbed by the devastation and destruction caused by unprecedented floods in his home state of Bihar, JP requested the Prime Minister for a month’s release on parole so that he could mobilise people’s help and organise popular relief in cooperation with the state and

Central Governments. Despite the floods getting worse and JP's repeated pleadings for parole, the response from 'Delhi Durbar' was total indifference. All that happened was the visit of a senior government emissary for briefing JP on the Bihar flood situation

Though nothing much came of it, I found this as an opening to initiate the process of political dialogue and reconciliation, which I have been thinking about. So I got working on this, quietly putting this thought in the mind of JP, and increasingly getting positive response. My efforts culminated in a warm gesture by way of a letter from JP to PM on September 17 expressing hope of an early end to the Emergency. In response to this, at the behest of Mrs. Gandhi, Sheikh Abdullah issued a positive statement setting the ball rolling on reconciliation.

JP responded to Sheikh Abdullah through a letter which inter alia said: "However, in spite of all that has happened and is happening, I am prepared to seek the path of conciliation. I shall, therefore, be much obliged if you kindly see me as soon as possible so that I could discuss this matter with you. I being the villain of the piece, the arch-conspirator, culprit number one, a return to true normalcy, not the false one established by repression and terror, can only be brought about with my co-operation. I am herewith offering you my full co-operation".

This letter was delivered at Delhi on September 24th forenoon and the response from PM's Office was swift. A special emissary of the PMO (Sugatha Das Gupta, Director, Gandhi Institute of Studies, Varanasi, of which JP was the Chairman) arrived on 25th morning to initiate efforts for a political dialogue between PM and JP. There were some more visits by Das Gupta and the preliminary work on reconciliation was going apace.

As hope for the success of reconciliation efforts and restoration of democracy was rising, certain mysterious and intriguing things happened culminating in the whole process being sabotaged by Sanjay Gandhi and his cronies. JP's letter to Sheikh Abdullah was never delivered but was returned through Das Gupta during one of his visits. Certain other disturbing events followed.

Mysteriously in early November 1975, JP's health started deteriorating fast and from doctor's hedgy replies about his health I suspected that something was amiss. As later events proved, JP's kidney was getting irrevocably damaged! Under the circumstances, I was convinced that it would be unsafe to keep JP in Chandigarh any longer and he should get to a place where his ailment could be diagnosed correctly and treated properly. This conviction led me to initiate silent and swift steps to launch a multi pronged assault- through PMO emissary Das Gupta, JP's brother Rajeshwar Prasad, Chandigarh Chief Commissioner/Union Home Secretary and my personal channel to the PMO with the same message content—"If JP dies in Jail"—to create a crisis mind-set in Delhi so that JP could be released immediately.

This worked admirably resulting in a flurry of activities leading to JP's release on 'unconditional parole' on November 12, by an order served on him by the Chief Secretary and District Magistrate of Delhi who flew into Chandigarh by a special BSF aircraft. This was followed by high intensity drama in the next few days when the panicked 'Delhi Durbar' made desperate efforts to retain JP in Chandigarh. However, I prevailed upon the PGI to discharge JP and commandeered seats in the Indian Airlines flight to take JP to Delhi en route to Bombay Jaslok Hospital!

As he departed from Chandigarh on 16th November, I saw him off at the airport wishing him well and requesting him to look after his health. JP's reply still rings in my ears: "Devasahayam, you are like a son I never had. My health is not important. The health of the nation and democracy is. I will defeat 'that woman' and have them restored". And then the aircraft departed. Fourteen months later, emboldened by the reports of 'success' of Emergency regime and the perception that opposition to her rule was crumbling and JP, the only mass all-India leader was sick and demoralised, Indira Gandhi called for the Sixth General Election to Parliament in January 1977. And in his inimitable style JP went

into action despite being tied down to dialysis machine twice a week. Without wasting any time he put into effect the political blueprint he had worked out while in detention and refined later.

Due largely to his untiring efforts, immediately after coming out of jails, the opposition leaders announced the coming-together of Congress (O), Jansangh, Bharatiya Lok Dal and Socialists under the Janata Party umbrella. Congress was dealt a body-blow by the sudden defection of Jagjivan Ram, HN Bahuguna and Nandini Sathpathy who formed the Congress for Democracy and along with DMK and Akali Dal, forged a common front with the Janata Party in order to give a straight fight to Congress and its allies in the election held in March 1977.

Emergency and its excesses was the major issue of the election campaign. JP created a public upsurge by touring the country intensively and addressing mammoth gatherings. At several places, where he could not go, large crowds intently listened to JP's speech through pre-recorded tapes. His message was simple and straight—'If you want autocracy and corruption vote Congress; If you want democracy and honesty vote Janata'.

With the popular upsurge thus created, Janata alliance captured 345 parliamentary seats with the Congress and its allies far behind with 189. Congress was virtually wiped out in North India with the party winning only 2 out of 234 constituencies in seven states. Both Indira Gandhi and Sanjay were defeated.

Historian Bipan Chandra wrote this about India losing its freedom in the seventies and getting it back: "Whatever the character of the JP Movement or of the Emergency regime, there is no doubt that the decision of Mrs. Gandhi to hold genuine free elections, and her defeat and the opposition's victory that followed were a remarkable achievement of Indian democracy."

Indeed true, and it was made possible by a man called JP and he kept his word of 'restoring India's freedom' in full measure. In the process he had suffered and sacrificed enormously, thereby proving Leo Tolstoy's famous dictum: "It is by those who have suffered that the world has been advanced."

Janata government collapsed in mid-1979 due to intrigues and betrayal. Shortly after this, I visited JP in his Kadam Kuan residence at Patna. He was on dialysis, but made me sit beside him. That he had taken Janata's collapse to heart was evident when he said with tears welling in his eyes, 'Devasahayam, I have failed yet again'. The hard-boiled revolutionary, who was a foot-soldier for the Mahatma in his fight for Independence and who almost single-handedly won India's second freedom was a sad man when he died weeks later in October!

The billion-people question is—Did JP and his Movement fail? What kind of freedom is being practiced in the country post-Emergency? As everyone agrees, Emergency was a cataclysmic experience by itself. Describing this dark period civil rights activist Rajni Kothari wrote: "It was a state off-limits, a government that hijacked the whole edifice of the state, a ruling party and leader who in effect treated the state as their personal estate.... It was one big swoop overtaking the whole country, spreading a psychosis of fear and terror with the new upstarts storming away through whatever came their way, pulling it all down and calling boo to it all. And it happened in this country after 28 years of democratic functioning."

Are things any different today? Just before independence, Winston Churchill said this more in contempt than with concern: "Power will go to the hands of rascals, rogues and free-booters. All Indian leaders will be of low calibre and men of straw. They will have sweet tongues and silly hearts. They will fight amongst themselves for power and India will be lost in political squabbles." With successive elections throwing up as 'leaders' criminal and corrupt wheeler-dealers, who are no more than vassals to native and alien dynasties, Churchill has been proved right. And governance has gone into the hands of these servile sycophants lacking any trait of leadership.

"If you have leadership without governance you risk tyranny, fraud and personal fiefdoms. If you have governance without leadership you risk atrophy, bureaucracy and indifference", said Mark Goyder. India today is a heady concoction of both the brew—'governance without leadership' and 'leadership without governance'. Therefore, what we see is tyranny in dealing with the poor; widespread fraud and corruption in every sphere; mushrooming political and personal fiefdoms; atrophying civil, police, judicial and military services and gross indifference to public opinion.

'Power to the People' was the political philosophy of the Fathers of both 'Freedom movements' and on the socio-economic side they wanted an equitable, small-is-beautiful, need-based, human-scale, balanced development while conserving nature and livelihoods. India's low-caliber 'leaders' have turned it upside down. 'Power to the Profligates' is the current political 'mantra' and 'destructive development' is the socio-economic policy. In the event, decimating the forests to propitiate the corrupt carpetbaggers is 'development', while speaking up for nature and the tattered tribes is 'sedition'!

JP Movement, Emergency and restoration of Democracy are all crucial chapters of India's post-Independence history. But these have been blacked-out from school-texts, books, forums, media and other avenues. BJP, a party that owes its existence to JP, did precious little to set this right. All political parties-left, right and centre-have benchmarked Emergency excesses and are practicing them with vengeance. In the event, all institutions of democratic governance either stand compromised or virtually decimated. The wheel has come full-circle!

Why have these happened in the world's largest democracy? Let me say it in the manner of Joseph Story extolling the Constitution of USA:

"The structure of India's democracy has been erected by architects of consummate skill and fidelity; its foundations are solid; its compartments are beautiful as well as useful; its arrangements are full of wisdom and order; and its defences are impregnable from without; it has been reared for immortality, if the work of man may justly aspire for such title. It may nevertheless perish in an hour by the folly, or corruption, or negligence of its only keepers, THE PEOPLE.

Republics are created-these are the words, which I commend to you for your consideration—by the virtue, public spirit and intelligence of the citizens. They fall when the wise are banished from the public councils because they dare to be honest, and profligates are rewarded because they flatter the people in order to betray them."

This has been the reality of India. With 'profligates' ruling the roost, leadership in the country is non est and governance has descended into a bottomless pit, displaying unconcealed greed and contempt for all basic norms of democracy. Do we then say that India is the world's greatest democracy or is it the largest 'Kleptocracy'-a government of the thieves, by the thieves and for the thieves! Indeed, through his suffering and sacrifice JP left us a legacy of Freedom, which people have taken for granted. In the event they do not take notice of this precious legacy being 'compromised for bread, for security, for prosperity, for the glory of the state.' Whendraconian laws, police repression and militarization replace justice, equity and fair-play, media hails it as 'war-on-terror' and people remain mute spectators! Dr. Binayak Sen's case is the standing testimony of this rot.

It is fortuitous that the cry against such rot has resurged and is spreading far and wide. For the first time, over 2/3rd of the people consider corruption and collapse of governance as the most serious national issues. What is more significant, anguish is giving place to anger and that needs to be harnessed in a democratic manner. The battle need to be joined:

Much to cast-down, much to build, much to restore;  
Let the work not delay, time and the arm not waste;  
Let the clay be dug from the pit, let the saw cut the stone;  
Let the fire not be quenched in the forge;  
For it is time to demolish the corrupt;  
Who are entrenched so very deep?

Do we see hope of this happening? I am afraid not, unless all the disjointed rumblings and protests come together and form into a thundering shout. In this we must heed the pragmatic words of Edmund Burke: "When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle."

Such association is possible if the spirit of JP Movement is revived and words are converted into weapons. Let us take heart from Alexander Solzhenitsyn's exhortation: "It is infinitely difficult to begin when mere words must move a block of inert matter. But there is no other way if none of the material strength is on your side. And a shout in the mountains has been known to start an avalanche..."

In the mid-seventies, a shout by JP from the Ramlila Grounds (sinhasan-khali-karo ki janata aatii-hai) had started an avalanche. Let it reverberate again. At this time of national anger, PUCL, founded by that great patriot should take the lead and be in the vanguard for reviving his iconic name and reigniting the JP Movement with youth in the forefront.

Thank you very much for your patience. May God Bless