

JAYAPRAKASH NARAYAN

A Biographical Sketch by Prof. Bimal Prasad

Jayaprakash Narayan (1902-79), popularly known as J.P., occupies a unique position among the galaxy of political leaders produced by India in modern times. He played a major role not merely in the struggle for independence, but also in the foundation and growth of the socialist movement, acquiring a stature in public life next only to that of Jawaharlal Nehru, who had become the nation's helmsman as Prime Minister in 1947. Even though the Socialist Party which J.P. led had not become very large or strong, in view of J.P.'s growing popularity among the masses as well as the elite many, both in India and abroad, began to look upon him as the person most likely to succeed Nehru as Prime Minister. J.P., however, cherished no such ambition. In 1953, he did not accept Nehru's invitation to join his cabinet, thus abandoning an opportunity which would have put him in a position of vantage from the point of view of succession.

On the other hand, he identified himself more and more with the non-party Bhoodan (land-gift) movement led by Vinoba Bhave. Seeing in it the seeds of a non-violent social revolution, he publicly dedicated his whole life to it in 1954. Finally in 1957, he announced not merely his resignation from the Praja Socialist Party (the new name of the Socialist Party since its merger with the Kisan Majdoor Praja Party in 1953), but also his complete withdrawal from all party and power politics—admittedly an act of renunciation in view of his position in the public life of the country at that time. Although thus opting out of party and power politics, J.P. remained as active in public life as ever before in support of the causes he believed in—publishing tracts, addressing meetings and seminars all over the country and organising workers at various levels engaged in public activities under his supervision and guidance. For the next fifteen years or so most of his time and energy was spent on the Bhoodan and Gramdan (gift of village) movements, the latter emerging as an offshoot of the former.

However he also occupied himself with several other causes like the restoration of freedom in Tibet, and harmony and peace in Nagaland and Kashmir. Sometimes his stand on certain issues like Kashmir, made him somewhat unpopular among the Indian elite, but that did not bother him and he persevered on his chosen path as long as that appeared right to him. Towards the end of his life (1974-7), sensing a serious threat to democracy in India because of rampant corruption in government and growing authoritarianism on the part of those in power, he mobilised the people in Bihar as also outside for what became famous as the J.P. movement and even founded a new political party (Janata Party) and ardently campaigned for it in the national election held in 1977. While the Janata Party succeeded in overthrowing Indira Gandhi and forming its own government, thereby ensuring the end of authoritarianism, J.P. was far from satisfied.

He had set a much higher goal—Total Revolution—for his movement and that seemed nowhere around. Most of the persons who had come to power through the Janata Party, with J.P.'s blessings and support, had no longer any use for him or his ideas. Dogged by severe ill-health, he could do little to remedy the situation except to give occasional expression to his disillusionment with the performance of the Janata regime and his hope that the Indian people would not abandon the vision of a social revolution based on freedom, social justice and peace. Although there was little sign of it in 1979, when he passed away, he drew solace from the thought that some of his ideas might be found useful by those who were interested in working for the realisation of that vision. This series of volumes has been planned with a view to giving the reader an idea of the varied activities which occupied J.P. during his public life, extending over more than half a century, as well as of the evolution of his political and social thought. In many ways he was a mirror of his times and his selected works, it is hoped, will not merely give the reader an idea of his own activities and thinking, but also of the times in which he lived and worked—a useful supplement in this respect to similar works of Gandhi and Nehru.

II

J.P.'s debut into public life took place in 1921, as a fighter for Indian freedom under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Born in a lower rural middle class family in Bihar¹ on 11 October 1902, he had shown promise early in his student career and won a merit scholarship on the basis of his performance at the Matriculation examination in 1919. Entering Patna College, then the premier educational institution of higher learning in that province, he was in the second year science class when the wave of the non-cooperation movement reached its portals. Tall (5 feet, 9 inches), fair and handsome as well as bright and studious and noted for his simplicity and elegance, he was among the most promising students of the college. The university intermediate examination was only a few weeks away and the fee for it had already been deposited. But Gandhi's call of non-cooperation with all educational institutions maintained or aided by the Government, conveyed to the students at Patna through the eloquence of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, proved irresistible and J.P. walked out of his college with a select band of students. He never turned back. "That brief experience of soaring up with the winds of a great idea," he recalled much later, "left imprints on the inner being that time and much familiarity with the ugliness of reality have not removed". It was then that freedom became one of the beacon lights of his life and always remained so as long as he was alive. With the passing of the years, it transcended the mere freedom of India and embraced the "freedom of man everywhere and from every sort of trammel—above all, it meant freedom of the human personality, freedom of the mind, freedom of the spirit."²

¹ The village, Sitabdiara, where J.P. was born, lies at the confluence of two rivers—Ganga and Ghaghra. Its location has been changing with changes in the course of the rivers. When J.P. was born, it lay in the Saran district of Bihar. Now, for many years, it has been in the Ballia district of U.P.

² Jayaprakash Narayan, 'From Socialism to Sarvodaya', in Bimal Prasad, ed., *A Revolutionary's Quest: Selected Writings of Jayaprakash Narayan* (New Delhi, 1980), p. 183.

While J.P. received the beacon light of freedom from Gandhi it was from Man that he derived the ideals of equality and brotherhood. After leaving Patna College he enrolled himself as a student in the Bihar Vidyapith, founded by the Congress leaders for the benefit of non-cooperating students and not recognised by the Government, but that institution did not have any provision for teaching science beyond the second year's stage. On the other hand, unlike many other students in similar circumstances, J.P. could not persuade himself to return to Patna College or to any other educational institution maintained or aided by the Government. But the desire for higher education remained strong. At that time J.P. came to know that it was possible for a student in the United States to pay for his education through part-time work. So in 1922 he proceeded to the United States, without adequate resources and leaving behind his beautiful wife, Prabhavati (then sixteen) to whom he had been married two years earlier, as per the custom in those days. He lived in that country for seven years, studying by turns at the universities of California (Berkeley), Iowa, Wisconsin and Ohio (from where he graduated, with a scholarship and took the Master's degree in Sociology) and working during vacations and other holidays in fields, factories and hotels to meet his expenses. While studying at the Wisconsin University (Madison) he came into close contact with some communist students, and avidly read the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and their followers, including M.N. Roy, and became converted to Marxism. Freedom still remained his goal, but the Marxian science of revolution seemed to offer a surer and quicker way to it than the technique followed by Gandhi. Besides, Marxism provided him with another goal, namely equality. He now became convinced that political freedom was not enough and that it must be accompanied by freedom from exploitation and poverty. At that time he was not aware of the fact that Gandhi too was concerned with the problem of poverty and had his own concept of a social revolution.

J.P. was keen to work for his Ph.D. degree in Sociology, but the news of the serious illness of his mother forced him to return home towards the end of 1929. India was again in ferment, reminiscent of the days of 1919-22. J.P., with all his Marxism, was first and foremost a votary of Indian nationalism and found himself inevitably drawn into the struggle then unfolding. The bond with Gandhi had also now become much stronger than before. While in 1920-1, he was only a great leader for J.P. at whose call the latter had left Patna College, now he was also a revered elder in the family. That bond had been established by Prabhavati. While J.P. was in the United States she had lived for more than a year with Gandhi and Kasturba at the Sabarmati Ashram and been lovingly treated by them as their own daughter. One of the first things that J.P. did after his return home was to pay a visit to Gandhi at Wardha and was overwhelmed by the love and affection showered on him. J.P. also met Nehru there and the two were instantly drawn towards each other. Gandhi, Nehru, J.P. and Prabha travelled together to Lahore where Nehru presided over the annual Congress session in the last week of December 1929. With Nehru's encouragement J.P. gave up the idea of joining Banaras Hindu University with a view to starting the teaching of Sociology and began to work as secretary of the recently created Labour Research Department in the office of the All India Congress Committee.

This further cemented the bond between J.P. and Nehru and the former always respected the latter as an elder brother. A parallel relationship of friendship and affection developed between their wives, Prabha and Kamala. The close personal bonds with Gandhi and Nehru, particularly with the former, played an important role in the evolution of J.P.'s political life and thought.

Because of the passing away of his mother and the ill health and financial difficulties of his father J.P. could not play an active role in the first civil disobedience campaign (1930-1), but he more than compensated for it by his role in the second (1932-3), which soon followed. After the arrest of the top leaders of the Congress he became the acting General Secretary of the Congress in 1932, and in that capacity, built up an underground organisation in order to continue the civil disobedience campaign in various parts of the country. When he was arrested in September 1932, the *Free Press Journal* of Bombay splashed the news with a headline "Congress Brain Arrested".

J.P. did not notice the communists anywhere in the nationalist struggle at that time (1930-3). Many of them were in prison, facing trial at Meerut, but even those who were out of prison had, under the instructions of the Comintern, stayed out of that struggle and even denounced it as being waged in the interest of the bourgeoisie. To an ardent nationalist like J.P. this came as a rude shock and led him to conclude that the socialist movement in India could not be carried on under the leadership of the Communist Party of India or under the guidance of the Comintern. He was convinced that, although preparations for ushering in socialism must begin instantly, the achievement of freedom must have top priority in the national agenda so long as the country remained under foreign rule. This pointed to the need of organising a socialist party, which would function within the broad framework of the nationalist movement and help keep it on the path of struggle and away from that of constitutionalism, towards which it seemed to be drifting in 1933-4. Besides, it would broaden the base as well as the social outlook of that movement by drawing a much larger number of workers and peasants to its ranks than was otherwise possible. Such thoughts on J.P.'s part, shared by some of his fellow-inmates in Nasik Central Prison, notably Achyut Patwardhan, M.R. Masani, Asoka Mehta, N.G. Goray, and M.L. Dantwala, as also by several other leaders then lying in other prisons, notably Narendra Deva, Yusuf Meherally, Purshottam Trikamdas and Rammanohar Lohia, led to the foundation of the Congress Socialist Party in 1934, with J.P. first as its Organising Secretary and then General Secretary. Yusuf Meherally aptly observes: "Jayaprakash came out of prison with an idea, a purpose and a vision. And out of that was born the Congress Socialist Party."³ During 1934-5, J.P. was mainly preoccupied with carrying the message of the C.S.P. to the youth, intelligentsia, workers and peasants all over the country, organising as many branches of the new party as possible, elucidating its ideology and programme and defending it against its critics.

³Jayaprakash Narayan, *Towards Struggle*, ed. Yusuf Meherally (Bombay 1946), Editor's Introduction, p. 7

III

The items included in this volume reflect J.P.'s preoccupations and activities as well as the evolution of his political and social outlook between 1929 and 1935, sketched above. While there is no need to refer to them here, item by item, and stand between them and the reader, it may be in order to mention a few words about the first item—J.P.'s thesis on Cultural Variation submitted to the Ohio State University (U.S.A.) in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master's degree in Sociology. Being a Master's thesis it is naturally quite a preliminary study and cannot be called profound in any way. However, it does indicate the early beginnings of T.P.'s talent as a social analysis!—sifting all kinds of views on a particular theme and coming to a well-reasoned conclusion—as well as his ability in marshalling arguments, on the basis of varied data, in support of the view being upheld by him. At the same time, it contains the earliest expression of his innate yearning for a new and a better world. This should be clear from the following paragraph of his Introduction:

The aim of science is often said to be the discovery of Truth (which is always written in this case with a capital T). This perhaps is a noble ideal. But to a more mundane nature the chief purpose of science appears to be to make human life fuller and richer, to rid it of its inner and outer limitations, to endow it with comfort, health, beauty, to render it more creative, more rational. Perhaps the discovery of truth is the first step towards all this. But it is a deceitful term—this truth. There may be 'true' ways of destroying life and happiness. And alas! Science has discovered enough of such 'truths' already!⁴

Certain pieces which were not published exclusively in the name of J.P., but carried other names also have been placed as appendices. Also included therein are a few items to which J.P. reacted at some length in the form of an article or a statement. This should give the reader an idea of the context of some of his writings and statements. The (partially incomplete) report on the first civil disobedience movement (1930-1) prepared in 1931 in the office of the A.I.C.C. and included as Appendix 1 falls in a different category. The Foreword written by the three general secretaries of the Congress—Syed Mahmud, Jairamdas Doulatram and Jawaharlal Nehru—records their thanks to J.P. and Raghbir Sahai (also working in the A.I.C.C.) for having 'collected the material for this report... and helped in drafting it'.⁵ That might have been formally the position, but there is some basis for assuming that J.P. had been largely responsible for drafting it. This is proved by what Ramvriksh Benipuri, an eminent Hindi writer as well as a close friend and colleague of J.P. in the socialist movement, recorded in his biography of J.P, first published in 1947 and written on the basis of information made available by the latter. Benipuri writes that while working at the office of the A.I.C.C. at Allahabad, J.P. had written a history of the civil disobedience movement and that unless ants managed to eat it up, some day someone might discover the manuscript among the A.I.C.C. Papers.⁶

⁴ See item no. 1 in the present volume.

⁵ See Appendix 1 in the present selection.

⁶ Ramvriksh Benipuri, *Jayaprakash* (in Hindi) (Patna, 1947), p. 77.

Indeed it is Benipuri's lead which made me search for this manuscript among the papers suggested by him and I consider it my good luck that I was able to lay my hands on it, even though it is far from complete. The remaining portion could not be traced. As J.P. was a stickler for truth and not used to making boastful statements, it is safe to assume that he had done most of the drafting. It will surely be of use to historians of our freedom movement. At the same time, it will afford some insight into J.P.'s way of looking at an important event of history as a sympathetic contemporary observer.

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