

JAYAPRAKASH NARAYAN: FROM MARXIST TO GANDHIAN

Jayaprakash Narayan (1902–1979), India's most popular postindependence political figure next to Nehru, left the ruling Congress Party in 1948, then in 1954 abandoned politics altogether in favor of Gandhian “constructive work” (*sarvodaya*) at the village level. His urge to spur sweeping political reforms resurfaced in the mid-1970s, and he played a major role both in precipitating Indira Gandhi's “Emergency” of 1975 to 1977, and in leading the coalition that defeated her party in 1977. In 1979 the coalition broke apart, and soon thereafter Jayaprakash (or “JP,” as he was affectionately known), died of kidney and heart failure. His contributions to political thought won him a worldwide audience; even today they continue to influence those who seek to infuse the economic, social, and political life of the future with greater equality, justice, and respect for the individual and the local community.

Jayaprakash (“the light of victory”) Nayaran was born in a village in eastern India now in the state of Bihar. His father, an official superintending the operation of irrigation canals, was required by his work to move from place to place. Probably for health reasons (his eldest son died of cholera and his eldest daughter succumbed to the plague), he left young Jayaprakash in his native village with the boy's step-grandmother while the rest of the family moved away. At six, Jayaprakash started his education in the village primary school. When he was nine, his father sent him to the Collegiate School at Patna, Bihar's major city. The shy and dutiful son worked diligently, and won a merit scholarship to Patna College at the age of sixteen. He had considered himself a political extremist from the age of fourteen; at nineteen, when Gandhi's non-cooperation movement arrived in Patna, Jayaprakash threw away his schoolbooks and prepared to join it. His father wanted him to continue studying, and had him enrolled in a newly founded nationalist school called the Bihar Vidyapith.

In the following year, 1922, Gandhi suspended the non-cooperation movement, and Jayaprakash was deeply disillusioned. In addition, he was finding his new school insufficiently equipped with the apparatus for experiments he needed to carry on his studies in the natural sciences. A friend wrote him from the University of Iowa, urging him to complete his higher education in the United States.

In 1924, at the University of Wisconsin, he discovered the writings of Marx, and was especially influenced by Marx's claim to have found the “inevitable” solution to the problem of poverty. Jayaprakash soon became a regular reader of M. N. Roy's *New Masses* magazine and the US Communist Party's *Daily Worker*. He switched from natural science to sociology, and from Wisconsin to Ohio State, where he took his BA in 1928 and MA in 1929. He wanted to go on for a PhD, but his mother was critically ill, and so he returned home.

At once he was drawn into the mainstream of nationalist politics: his wife took him to meet Gandhi; he met Nehru, the next Congress president, and the two became friends. Nehru invited him and his wife to live in Allahabad and help with the work of the Congress, and in 1932, when most other leaders of the Congress were in jail, he

served as its general secretary until he, too, was arrested, tried, and imprisoned. In 1934 he and other leftists founded a group within the Congress that they named the Congress Socialist Party; Jayaprakash became its chief organizer and traveled all over India to recruit and teach new members. From 1936 he encouraged the newly legalized communists to enroll as Congress socialists, but by 1940 he was fed up with their maneuvering for power and sudden changes in policy in obedience to dictates from the Soviet Union. At the same time he was impatient with the Congress under Gandhi's moderating influence—so much so that he courted and received two successive prison sentences from 1940 to 1942 for his fiery speeches urging factory workers to start a general strike, stop paying taxes, and set up their own police, courts, and government.

Jayaprakash became a national hero in 1942 when he and five other prisoners climbed over the seventeen-foot-high wall of their jail on the night of Diwali (the festival of lights) and escaped capture. Undetected, he visited the major cities of India to instruct guerrilla fighters and issue proclamations urging struggle against British rule. Within a year he was arrested at Lahore and subjected to prolonged torture in a vain attempt to make him talk about his activities. Although he was released only in 1946, a year after most of the Congress leaders, he remained determined to oust the British through a massive uprising of the people.

Thirteen years younger than Nehru, equally intellectual and even more idealistic, Jayaprakash could easily have become Nehru's right-hand man and ultimately his successor as India's prime minister. Yet he shared that part of Gandhi which could instinctively rebel against the official exercise of political power (he was never a candidate for public office). In 1948 he led his socialist followers out of the Congress, and from then on steadily lost interest in political activity. Instead, he gravitated toward Gandhian work at the village level, beginning with the Bhudan (land-gift) Movement begun by Gandhi's disciple Vinoba Bhave. In 1954 he founded his own ashram in a rural part of Bihar to try to apply Gandhi's methods of village economic improvement, and by the 1960s he was sending workers to train in Israel and Japan in order to adapt modern technology to villagers' needs.

Jayaprakash never ceased to reflect and speak on his ideals for India's future. At the core of his vision lay a blend of Marx's and Gandhi's dreams: unselfish and altruistic individuals living in self-supporting communities, undisturbed by either centralized government or exploitative capitalism. He repeatedly refused opportunities to serve in the government, but his restless nature moved him to try to solve or mediate problems in one area after another—Kashmir, Nagaland, and throughout his home state of Bihar. He played the role of gadfly to both state and central governments, and attracted huge crowds of youthful sympathizers when he called for an end to corruption, police terrorism, and the misuse of power. The size of these crowds, and his vague but catchy call for "total revolution" in 1975, provoked an extreme clampdown by Indira Gandhi and her government that left a scar on India's record as a liberal-democratic polity.

Jayaprakash's Gandhian ideals of swaraj, satyagraha, and *sarvodaya* remain for future generations to reexamine or reactivate in the spirit of social and political change.

*A PLEA FOR A COMMUNITARIAN
POLITY AND ECONOMY*

In his longest piece of theoretical writing, entitled "A Plea for the Reconstruction of Indian Polity," Jayaprakash set forth in 1959 his plan for the radical decentralization of his country's government and economy. It draws heavily on Gandhi's dream for independent India, connecting individual freedom and social responsibility in a democracy that is here called communitarian.

I propose in this paper to describe the main outline of the polity which to my mind is not only most suited for us, but is also most rational and scientific. . . .

My search here has been for the forms of social life, particularly of political life, that would assure the preservation of human values about which there is hardly any dispute in the world today; and my approach has been non-partisan and non-sectarian. . . .

First of all, let it be pointed out that the problem of democracy is basically, and above all, a moral problem. Constitutions, systems of government, parties, elections—all these are relevant to the business of democracy. But unless the moral and spiritual qualities of the people are appropriate, the best of constitutions and political systems will not make democracy work. The moral qualities and mental attitudes most needed for democracy are: (1) concern for truth; (2) aversion to violence; (3) love of liberty and courage to resist oppression and tyranny; (4) spirit of co-operation; (5) preparedness to adjust self-interest to the larger interest; (6) respect for other's opinions and tolerance; (7) readiness to take responsibility; (8) belief in the fundamental equality of man; (9) faith in the educability of human nature.

These qualities and attitudes are not inborn in man. But he can be educated in them and trained to acquire and practise them. . . .

When there is liberty it leads to abuse and necessitates State interference, and when there is State interference it leads to curtailment of liberty. How then to preserve liberty and prevent its abuse? There are no political means by which the dilemma can be resolved, there are only moral means. The obverse side of the medal of liberty is responsibility. If the individual is not prepared to take social responsibility, if he uses liberty for self-aggrandisement and neglects or hurts the interests of others, some form of state-ism becomes inevitable. It is here that the pertinence and wisdom of Gandhiji's concept of trusteeship becomes evident. The only democratic answer to state-ism and totalitarianism is trusteeship. But trusteeship cannot be practised without voluntary limitation of wants. An individual cannot function as a trustee unless he is prepared to share his possessions with his fellowmen; this he cannot do unless he has learned to curtail his wants. Thus voluntary limitation of wants, in other words, the rejection of materialism or the unlimited pursuit of material satisfactions, is essential for the achievement and preservation of democracy. . . .

It should be remembered that democracy does not consist merely in its formal institutions. It lives really and truly in the life of the people; it is a way of life. It is not only through the representative assemblies and elected governments that democracy works, but in an equally true sense through the voluntary associations and actions of the citizens which they carry on and establish to deal with their problems, promote their interests and manage their affairs. . . .

Democracy is not merely a question of political rights and people's part in government. Particularly since the First World War, democracy has come to mean more and more social and economic justice, equal opportunity, industrial democracy. . . . This is not to suggest that democracy is bound up with any such politico-economic ideologies as socialism or communism. It is true that these ideologies had promised full democracy in the sense used above. But . . . if communism and socialism have failed so far to lead human society to these goals, the endeavour to reach them must continue to form part of the quest for democracy. It has been indicated above that the answer is moral rather than political or economic. . . .

A word that figures boldly on the ancient sign-post is *dharma*. Indian polity held that the State was subject to the *dharma*, which it was its duty to uphold and protect.

Unless life in India is again organised on the basis of self-determining and mutually coordinating and integrating communities, that organic self-regulation of society which the concept of *dharma* represented will not be possible. To that extent democracy will remain distantly removed from the life of the people. . . . [If] the village becomes a community . . . only then will it be possible for the village to adopt as its *dharma* the welfare of all the villagers, so that none goes without food, clothing, a roof over his head, work to do; no child goes without the benefit of a knowledge of the three R's; none goes without the benefit of a minimum health service. . . .

If man decided that instead of being herded together in large cities it was better to live in small communities, instead of being automatons it was better to be conscious human beings, instead of being a grain in the sand-heap it was better to be a member of a community, it should not be difficult for scientists to evolve the appropriate [small-scale industrial] technology.

Thus the society we are visualising here will be neither "urban" nor "rural," it will be, if a name has to be given to it, communitarian. In other words, it will truly be society. Development of science has made it possible for the distinction between urban and rural to be abolished. The communities of the future will have a balance of agriculture and industry; they will be agro-industrial; they will make full use of science and technology so as to serve the ends of their life and no more. Owing to geographical and historical conditions agriculture may predominate in one and industry in another, but a balance between them will be the ideal of all. The present monstrosities, the big cities, will have to be decentralised as far as possible to relieve congestion and create healthy conditions

of life; and for the rest, they will have to be so re-organised as to be made federations of smaller sized communities. To the extent this is not possible, the big cities will have to be endured, care being taken to see that they do not become bigger, and no new big cities come up. . . .

The next step in the building up of an integrated society is for a number of neighbouring primary communities to come together and cooperate amongst themselves to build, let us say, a regional community. . . . Thus the regional community comes into existence by an organic process of growth. The circle of community is widened. . . . The regional community, however, is not a superior or higher body that can control, or interfere with, the internal administration of the primary communities. Each in its sphere is equally sovereign.

The regional community in its turn will do all that is within its competence. But again, there will be many things which will be beyond its competence, such as running a techno-agricultural college, a major irrigation project, production of electricity, manufacture of machines, etc. In order that these tasks be tackled a number of regional communities will have to come together to form a still larger community—the district community, let us say. The district community too will be an integrated community and its relationship with the regional communities be of a pattern similar to that of the latter with the primary communities.

In this manner the district communities in their turn would federate together to form the provincial community. The provincial communities would come together to form the National Community. A day might come when the national communities might federate together to form the World Community. . . .

However, a treatment of the polity would be incomplete without a brief description of the economy that would underlie it. Society is a complex whole, as man himself is; and, therefore, social and human reconstruction requires an all-sided approach. . . .

The community is an enlarged family, and like the family it represents the eternal flow of life. Just as the family is interested not only in its present members but even in those who are unborn, so the community thinks of future generations. Its economy, therefore, is not wasteful. It is particularly careful about the non-renewable resources of nature which are being wasted at such a criminal rate by the so-called advanced nations of the world. A balanced economy concerned with future generations of men, that is, with life rather than death, would try to do its best to return to nature what it takes from it. It will, therefore, try to restrict consumption as far as possible to renewable resources and use as little as possible of the resources it cannot put back. The economy of the community is in co-operative harmony with nature, while present-day economy both of the West and East is at perpetual and destructive war with nature. . . .

The economic life of the communitarian society would be so organised that human needs are satisfied as near at home as possible: first, in the primary community, then in the regional, district, provincial, national and international community—in that ascending order. This means that each expanding area of community would be as self-sufficient as possible. Incidentally, this would save much of the unnecessary energy and time devoted today to the business of commerce, advertisement, etc. . . .

A word about private enterprise. Private enterprise, in the sense of purushartha, the individual's spirit of enterprise, would have fullest scope in the community. But in the community the individual would be imbued with the spirit of community. Therefore, private enterprise in a communitarian society would also partake of that spirit and work for private as well as communal good. Further, private enterprise would also be subject to the principles of self-government and responsibility to, and integration with, the community. . . .

The picture drawn here of the polity for India, and of social organization in general, might perhaps appear to be idealistic. If so, I would not consider that to be a disqualification. An ideal cannot but be idealistic. The question is if the ideal is impractical, unscientific or otherwise ill-conceived. I have tried in the preceding pages to show that all relevant considerations lead irresistibly towards it.

The achievement of this ideal would, however, be a colossal task. Thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of voluntary workers would be needed over a number of years to accomplish it. The Government should lend its full support; but it is necessary to remember that the main burden of the task would have to be borne by voluntary political and social workers and institutions. The heart of the problem is to create the "spirit of community," without which the whole body politic would be without life and soul. This is a task of moral regeneration to be brought about by example, service, sacrifice and love. Those who occupy high places in society—in politics, business, the professions—bear the heavy responsibility of leading the people by personal example.

The task also is one of social engineering, needing the help of the State; of scientists, experts, educationists, businessmen, experimenters; of men and women; of young and old.

It is a task of dedication; of creation; of self-discovery. It is a task that defines India's destiny. It spells a challenge to India's sons and daughters. Will they accept the challenge?

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