



The quintessential revolutionary

The Dream of Revolution: A Biography of Jayaprakash Narayan

By Bimal Prasad and Sujata Prasad

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This is an important book on the life and politics of Jayaprakash Narayan (JP), on the Socialist Movement in India, the role of the 'Left' in the Indian National Movement, on the flavour of politics in general during the initial decades after Independence, the JP Movement and the Emergency, and on the misery of JP's last days. It is a readable story of how JP lived and interacted with those around him.

Political biographies in India, as a genre, generally have two distinct characteristics. They often tend to be hagiographies, and they eschew personal, intimate details. Happily this biography is quite free from these traits. It discusses JP's life and choices with a certain freedom and does not shy away from providing personal details.

The book is written jointly by Bimal Prasad and Sujata Prasad, but in a curious sort of way. The joint authorship is more like a relay race, in which one runner passes the baton to the other runner, rather than as a joint venture.

Bimal Prasad was an eminent historian who wrote on many facets of 20th-century political history of India. His last work was truly a magnum opus — a magisterial three-volume history of India's Partition. He was also a close associate of JP and, after editing ten volumes of JP's *Selected Works*, had started working on a new biography of his leader. However, he didn't live to complete the biography and passed away in 2015. The project then fell on the shoulders of his academic-cum-bureaucrat daughter Sujata Prasad, who took up the baton and finished the race. So, apart from being an accomplished and much-needed biography of JP, this book is also a daughter's tribute to her father.

Any new biography of JP raises expectations and readers will generally have a number of questions whose answers they would hope to find in the book. How important was JP to the Socialist Movement in India? What was the nature of his relationship with other important leaders of his times — Nehru, Patel, Rammanohar Lohia, Indira Gandhi? How does one characterise the JP Movement — a resounding success or a mere aberration in the long span of Indian politics? The book to its credit goes into these questions and provides elaborate and credible answers.

JP was a complex figure, whose life consisted of multiple experiments with different ideas and ideologies,

people and movements. He started his career as a Marxist and a Socialist who enriched the anti-imperialist struggle by trying to transform it in a broadly Left direction. This strategy

of transforming the movement *from within* was different from the Communist tactics of trying to provide an *alternative* to the mainstream anti-imperialist struggle launched

As the possibility of independence looked imminent at the end of the Second World War, JP again went through a round of disillusionment, this time with the mainstream Congress leadership. He felt that the period 1945-47 had created a revolutionary opportunity, but the Congress leadership was more keen on a negotiated settlement for independence. The path of negotiated settlement also contained the possibility of partition. It is interesting that of late so much is made of the Nehru-Patel differences. In JP's perception, both the leaders were on the same side of the divide. And JP was opposed to both. But, as this biography has pointed out, whereas JP disagreed with Nehru, he completely disapproved of Patel

under Gandhi's leadership. JP was initially disillusioned with Gandhian techniques, but gradually evolved a unique experiment of combining the tactics of Gandhi with those of Marx. Increasingly, he moved away from the "dictatorship of the proletariat" to a "democratic socialist" frame. He was one of the first to liberate the idea of socialism from its doctrinal moorings and bring it closer to the Indian context and realities. This had important consequences. If the anti-imperialist struggle retained crucial slices of a Leftist orientation, in spite of a strong Right-wing domination, it was in no small measure because of the active presence of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) and JP's role in it. This is an extremely important point and the book has done well to tilt the existing pendulum of explanation more towards JP.

JP's finest moment before 1947 was of course during the Quit India Movement of 1942. He was in Hazaribagh jail and the movement faced an existential crisis as the entire Congress leadership had been arrested by the British and the organisation had been banned. JP then took the crucial decision to keep the movement alive. In a dramatic episode, he escaped from jail and organised the movement underground. This round of struggle was far from non-violent and consisted of destroying government property, attacking police stations, cutting telegraph wires and other such features of guerrilla warfare. It was largely through the efforts of JP and his socialist colleagues that the Quit India Movement retained its vibrancy and went on till 1944.

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Jayaprakash Narayan with Morarji Desai. Photograph by Raghu Rai

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Independence thus brought about a clear break between the Congress and the Socialists. JP felt that the government under Nehru was only paying a lip service to socialism and was actually promoting capitalism, in the vain hope that this would somehow create conditions for social welfare. He wrote in a letter to Nehru:

You are trying to ride two horses which may be possible in circuses but not in a historical evolution ... You want to go towards Socialism, but you want the Capitalists to help in that. You are bound to fail in that. If you want Capitalism to play its role in industrializing the country, it will demand its price and if you pay the price you will give a go by to Socialism. (p 101)

The CSP removed 'Congress' from its name and called itself the Socialist Party. The break was truly unfortunate for all the actors. The period 1934-48 was easily the most creative period of Indian socialism. A break from the Congress platform deprived the Socialists of much vibrancy and fervour. The break was equally unfortunate for the Congress Party and the State, as the balance of forces clearly tilted towards the Right. It was also unfortunate for the Constituent Assembly and its deliberations. If JP had participated in them instead of boycotting the Constituent Assembly, his presence would certainly have made an impact.

The break affected the Socialist Movement as a whole in yet another way. An inability, or reluctance, or unwillingness to compromise and adjust had the impact of instilling a kind of "mutation proneness" into the very DNA of Indian Socialist Movement. After the CSP became the Socialist Party, it was further split into the Praja Socialist Party and the Sanyukta Socialist Party. After that the Socialist Movement became a free-for-all in Indian politics and lost all its original energy. Unhappy with these dilutions and distortions, JP retired from politics altogether, concentrating on the Sarvodaya Movement for village reconstruction. His dream of revolution remained as bright as ever, but he decided to pursue it not through politics but by social intervention.

Even though JP broke away from Nehru politically, they remained close to each other at a personal level. JP referred to Nehru as 'Bhai' and was in turn received with much affection by Nehru. JP had learnt to separate his personal and political lives. This was in sharp contrast to Lohia's response to Nehru. Both JP and Lohia had been close to Nehru in the 1930s, both personally and politically. JP retained his personal bonds with Nehru even after they had fallen apart politically. Lohia, on the other hand, refused to separate his personal and political lives and made a total break with Nehru. The book offers interesting insights on the JP-Nehru relationship but is somewhat silent on the JP-Lohia one.



JP in a bus with detainees, 4 November 1974. Photograph by Raghu Rai

JP's success was that he was the pivot around which the tidal wave of protest could develop which swept away the Congress at the 1977 elections and brought the Janata Party, JP's creation, to power. But the Janata interlude failed to provide the breakthrough the country so badly needed. Why was it so? The fact of the matter was that the crisis that had developed in the 1970s was both economic and political. But the breakthrough brought about by the Janata government was purely political. Not backed up by an economic breakthrough, it lacked any transformative potential. In the end, its achievements were only restorative. JP the quintessential revolutionary was justifiably disappointed

JP's long political career was marked by many twists and turns, diversions and setbacks. Certain values and priorities however remained constant. All through his active life, he remained a revolutionary, committed to socialism, Indian nationalism and democracy. These objectives were however not entirely free from their own contradictions. Whereas it was in principle possible to combine socialism with Indian nationalism, there was no democratic-consensual way of taking one's colleagues along the path of welfare and national unity, in other words, socialism and nationalism. These priorities could of course be imposed from the top. But that would compromise democracy as a value. All his life JP remained haunted by the contradictory nature of these ideals.

These contradictions showed up in a big way in the last major chapters of his political life as well as of the book,

titled aptly, 'Hope in Dark Times' and 'The Death of a Dream'. The decade of the 1970s was one of crisis, both economic and political. The system as a whole was confronted with a crisis of legitimacy. The political establishment led by Indira Gandhi faced an acute crisis and a potentially revolutionary situation began to develop. This brought the revolutionary JP once again to the centre of the political turmoil that had begun developing first in Gujarat and Bihar and then all over India. He rose to the occasion and was successful in uniting all opposition on a common platform. He also popularised the idea of the 'total revolution' that would go beyond a mere change in the political structure. But his concept of a total revolution remained a mere slogan, in the absence of a revolutionary programme, cadre or party. JP's success was that he was the pivot around which the tidal wave of protest could develop

which swept away the Congress at the elections of 1977 and brought the Janata Party, JP's creation, to power. This was no small achievement, after the country had gone through 18 months of authoritarian rule under the Emergency. But the Janata interlude failed to provide the breakthrough the country so badly needed and had come quite close to. Why was it so?

The fact of the matter was that the crisis that had developed in the 1970s was both economic and political. But the breakthrough brought about by the Janata government was purely political. Not backed up by an economic breakthrough, it lacked any transformative potential. In the end, the achievements of the Janata government were only restorative. Many distortions created during the Emergency were of course undone. But other than that the Janata government was not able to do much. JP the quintessential revolutionary would certainly have wanted more, and was justifiably disappointed. He expressed his anguish in a letter to Chandra Shekhar as early as 1978:

...the great hope and enthusiasm that had been generated amongst our people ... has, more or less, wholly cooled down by now and instead a feeling of hopelessness is growing among the people. It is sad that so far we have not been able to grasp this opportunity. Even at this late hour we should begin to ponder deeply on this matter and devise ways and means whereby this awakened aspiration of our people can be fully utilized in the reconstruction of India. (p 215)

This was truly the wail of a revolutionary.

The remaining days of JP were spent in despair and helplessness. His dream of a revolution had remained a "dream" without any possibility of its realisation. JP retreated into a world of poetry and literature. The range of his literary interests was quite amazingly diverse. As his foster daughter, Vibha, who was with him during his last days, said:

He found solace in poetry. We sat by his bed-side reciting portions from *Madhushala* [by Harivansh Rai Bachchan] and *Rashmirathi* [by Ramdhari Singh Dinkar]. Equally he found succour in the psalms of Nicaraguan liberation poet Ernesto Cardenal Martinez and poems from Octavio Pazz collection, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. Reading a few pages from the *Ramcharitmanas* was a daily evening ritual. He enjoyed listening to Sahir's lyrics from *Pyasa*. He also seemed to enjoy my rendition of "Raghupati Raghav", and other Gandhian songs, and Tulcidas's immortal song, "Tu Dayalu Deen Ho". (p 219)

An appropriate literary diet for a revolutionary dreamer, in the last days of his life!

Bimal Prasad and Sujata Prasad's biography of Jayaprakash Narayan does full justice to the personal and political life of JP: his dreams and ideas, courage and convictions, biases and prejudices, frustrations and disappointments, and the supreme value of such a remarkable person to India and its people. ■