

Jai Prakash Narayan

(Presidential Address on the occasion “100th Birth Anniversary celebration of Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narayan” at Mahila Charkha Samiti, Patna on 11.10.2001)

It gives me immense pleasure to be in your midst in the historic city of Patna to pay my tribute to Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narayan, one of India’s noblest sons. He belongs to the galaxy of stalwarts who valiantly fought for India’s freedom and dreamed of ushering a new society and a new world order.

This ancient city of Pataliputra has a history, dating back 2500 years and this luminous state of Bihar has been the home of several religious cultures. It was here that the great Buddha received enlightenment and Mahavira made his last abode. The famous Magadha Empire was the centre of religion and culture. Jai Prakashji inherited all the ancient wisdom of India and strove to adapt them to the modern conditions of the 20th Century. Today on the occasion of the 100th Birthday of Jai Prakashji, we commence the year long centenary celebrations of the illustrious visionary under excellent auspices.

I am happy that my esteemed friend Shri Mohan Dharia is with us today to deliver the commemorative address. Shri Dharia is one of the close associates of Jai Prakashji and a true interpreter of the complex nature of the principles, policies and programmes of Jai Prakashji.

At all times Shri Dharia was a constant follower of Jai Prakashji. In 1975 when Shri Mohan Dharia was a Minister in the Cabinet of Smt. Indira Gandhi, expressed his view openly that the government should have a dialogue with Jai Prakashji. This was at the time when confrontation between Jai Prakashji and Indira Gandhi was at its zenith. Indira Gandhi without following the practice of asking for resignation from Shri Mohan Dharia, sent a letter to the President, recommending the dropping of Shri Mohan Dharia from the Cabinet. She sent a letter to Shri Dharia also, stating that she had recommended to the President to drop Shri Mohan Dharia from the Cabinet. On receipt of the letter, Shri Dharia sent his letter of resignation to the President which the President accepted. Thus Shri Dharia was one of the rare politicians who were ready to sacrifice the office for the sake of his conviction. He is now devoting himself to ecological issues where he finds fulfilment in life.

In the 20th Century, India threw up a large number of patriots who led an exemplary life of service and sacrifice. Leaders of eminence blossomed over all parts from Kashmir to Kanyakumari and from Maharashtra to Assam. They were giants intellectually, morally and spiritually. They broke away from archaic and obscurantist traditions and set the nation on the path of progress, consistent with the rich cultural heritage of India.

If Gandhiji was the world’s greatest humanist, Nehru was one of the world’s great statesman, social reformers like Narayan Guru and Ambedkar helped the Gandhian programme of eradication of untouchability and other social evils. Jai Prakash Narayan dreamt of creating a new order in the nation. He was one of the gems of purest ray that adorned the illustrious necklace of Mother India. His life was one quest for a perfect society without poverty and hunger, malice or illwill and authoritarianism and antagonism. He sought to establish an idyllic society and life.

He started his life as a Marxist and found in Nehru a kindred spirit. He thought Gandhiji was a reformist and not a revolutionary. However, Jai Prakashji got disillusioned with the policy of the Communist Party of India and the commintern. To him individual freedom of thought and

action was sacrosanct. The regimentation that Stalinist Communism imposed went against his grain.

The leftists in the Congress Acharya Narendra Dev, Achyut Patwardan, Ashok Mehta, Ram Manohar Lohia and others formed the Congress Socialist Party. Nehru welcomed it. He thought it was better to have a progressive opposition in Parliament than a conservative one. And Jai Prakash was convinced that it was possible to bring about socialism through democracy and not necessarily by violent revolution. In 1953, a communist, was elected to the Lok Sabha from Bengal. At that time, Shri V K Krishna Menon, Chairman of the Indian Delegation to U N General Assembly, hosted a dinner for the Soviet Delegation in New York. The Soviet Delegate there said that India is the only country where even communism can come to power by the ballot box!

The attitude of Marxists in India during the World War II disillusioned Jai Prakashji. Jai Prakashji was convinced that the World War II was an imperialist war for domination and exploitation while the Marxist reversed the gear and called it the People's war. He threw himself heart and soul into the movement and literally accepted the call, "DO or DIE".

Superficial critics had often charged Jai Prakashji with inconsistency. They did not realise that Jai Prakashji was a soul in search in quest of ideal solutions for human misery, a Marxist turned into a Democrat.

Jai Prakashji's quest for ideal conditions for masses continued. Though he withdrew from active politics, he devoted himself to the Bhoodhan movement, started by Vinobha Ji. He thought that the movement would bring about in more equitable ownership of land. He also realised the need for rural employment, the place of small and cottage industries in Indian conditions. He spelt out his economic objectives clearly and unequivocally. It was a Gandhian frame laying emphasis on agricultural development, equitable land ownership, development of domestic and rural industries with the widest possible spread of small industries.

He did not equate socialism with nationalisation of the means of production and confiscation of property. He called his scheme "Socialism with an Indian face". The great critic of Mahatma Gandhi in his earlier years accepted later that "Socialism in this country would neglect Gandhism *at its peril*".

Jai Prakashji was disillusioned by the way the Congress governments functioned. He thought that they carried on the same routine administration that their predecessor British governments were doing. He was disappointed that no radical programmes changing the age old structure of society and poverty had been seriously attempted. Overwhelmed by corruption, nepotism, authoritarianism and callous indifference to the suffering masses, Jai Prakashji initiated the "Total Revolution" against the government. India went through a dark period of emergency and suppression of fundamental rights. In the general elections that followed in 1977, Jai Prakashji fashioned the unity of opposition forces and brought about a Non - Congress government at the Centre for the first time. To the utter sadness of Jai Prakashji, the Janata government did no better than its predecessors. The constituents of the Janata Party were far removed from the ideology of Jai Prakashji and accepted his writ only to the extent that it suited them. Jai Prakashji's heart was broken.

Jai Prakashji never sought office or power. In fact, when Nehru asked him to join his Cabinet, Jai Prakash Ji declined. His mass appeal was next only to that of Gandhiji. He could move the masses as only Gandhiji could. When the American writer *Mr. John Gunther* came to India in early fifties of the last century he asked Nehru after interviewing him, whom else in India he (*Gunther*) should meet. *Gunther* reports that Nehru told him to meet Jai Prakash

Narayan, adding that he was the future Prime Minister of India. After organising the Socialist Party, if Jai Prakashji and his colleagues in the socialist party who were all stalwarts had come into Parliament and functioned as a responsible opposition, the course of our parliamentary history might have been different.

Alternatively, if Jai Prakashji had accepted a place in Nehru's Cabinet and made his contributions, he could have been the nation's choice, after Nehru for the Prime Ministership of India.

But Jai Prakashji was a visionary who gazed into the distant future of the Indian society and envisioned a state of supreme joy and happiness for the masses. He lost faith in electoral politics and party system. He thought that electoral politics excited sectarian passions, speaking half truths, giving impossible promises and indulging in extravagant expenditure. He talked of a partyless democracy. His ideas were totally at variance with the currently accepted electoral practices. Even today commissions are trying to grapple with the curse of electoral malpractices, money power, criminalisation and corruption in politics. Laws cannot prevent these abuses; they can only punish the wrong doer. Democracy can succeed only when the electorate becomes aware of its responsibility to elect men of ability, integrity and selflessness, as their representatives. If the people elect the corrupt, the criminal, the selfish and the immoral representatives, they will get only a government of their choice. Thus like Gandhiji, Jai Prakashji laid great emphasis on the moral and spiritual base of democracy. If Nehru was the political heir to Gandhiji, Jai Prakashji was Gandhiji's spiritual heir.

It is not human nature to own one's mistakes. Gandhiji accepted one mistake of his as "Himalayan Blunder". Jai Prakashji was another such species of humanity. Once in a Congress Session, Dr. Rajendra Prasad severely criticised Nehru's speech, extolling socialism. Naturally the socialists in the Congress were upset. Jai Prakashji lost his temper and used abusive language against Dr. Rajendra Prasad. Soon he was overtaken by remorse and the discourtesy he had shown to Dr. Rajendra Prasad oppressed him. The gentleman that Jai Prakashji was, he went and apologised to Dr. Rajendra Prasad for the language he had used.

Earlier Jai Prakashji as a Marxist had viewed Sardar Patel as a reactionary and criticised him as a stooge of the capitalists. Later in an article Jai Prakashji wrote in 1977, he acknowledged "the immense service that Sardar had made in integrating the princely States and stated that "No leader but Sardar could have pulled off the feat". He further complimented Sardar for the sane advice he gave to Nehru on Tibet. Superficial observers may regard the instance as a sample of Jai Prakashji's proverbial inconsistency. But it requires courage of a high order to recant one's wrong notions.

To sum up, Jai Prakashji's entire life was devoted to the search for creating a just and egalitarian ideal society where there would be peace and prosperity. His mind worked on a higher plane for other mortals to comprehend. He experimented with the Marxist ideology, democratic socialism, Sarvodaya, reformation of dreaded decoits and also with a formal government, namely the Janata. He could not find an answer. People called him inconsistent, enigmatic, visionary etc. But in reality they did not understand him. He was a noble soul beyond the depth of ordinary mortals.