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AUTHOR Merriam, Allen H.
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ABSTRACT

India's policy of free speech suffered a severe if temporary setback in the 1970s. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a 19-month state of emergency, during which 150,000 people were arrested, newspapers were censored, and dissent was essentially eliminated. A central figure in the confrontation with the Indian government over political suppression before and during the emergency was Jayaprakash Narayan, an outspoken advocate of socialism and a movement to create a classless society. Convinced that Gandhi's government was incapable of achieving the change he felt necessary, in 1973 he urged a peaceful struggle against hunger, unemployment and ignorance. In 1975, when Gandhi was accused of using government employees to aid her election campaign, Narayan tried to topple her government through mass civil disobedience. He was imprisoned in the ensuing emergency, having precipitated the very suppression he feared. He continued his opposition in prison until he was released because of a serious kidney ailment. When Gandhi failed to win reelection, Narayan helped to form the new government shortly before he died. His denunciations of tyranny, embodied most succinctly in his "Prison Diary," form an enduring testament to the values of free expression and civil liberty. (HTH)

THE CONTRIBUTION OF JAYAPRAKASH NARAYAN IN PRESERVING FREE EXPRESSION IN INDIA

by

Allen H. Merriam
Department of Communication Studies
Virginia Tech
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061

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IN PRESERVING FREE EXPRESSION IN INDIA

Early in 1980 Freedom House published its annual report on the status of human rights throughout the world. According to that report India qualifies as the only "free" nation on the entire Asian mainland between Japan in the East and Israel in the West -- a distance of some 6,000 miles inhabited by over two billion people.[1] Viewed in global perspective the survival of free expression in India thus becomes an important concern.

As the world's largest democracy, India possesses a notable legacy of civil freedom. The concept of local self-rule (swaraj) is rooted in the institution of the traditional village council (panchayat). The Indian commitment to political freedom intensified during the colonial rule of Great Britain, whose own heritage of individual liberty inspired several generations of Indian freedom fighters. Winning independence in 1947, India developed a system of parliamentary democracy which has few equals anywhere in the Third World.

India's policy of free speech suffered a severe if temporary setback, however, in the 1970s. On June 26, 1975 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of Emergency which lasted for nineteen months. During this time as many as 150,000 people were arrested, newspapers were censored, and dissent was essentially eliminated. The Emergency represented a profound (and, according to Mrs. Gandhi's critics, an unjustified) threat to India's commitment to civic freedom.[2] According to a distinguished diplomat,

> On the day the emergency was declared, the legal position was that every citizen's right to life and liberty was suspended, not merely the right to liberty, but the right to life....Then another law was

> passed stating, "No citizen of India shall be entitled to claim liberty on the ground of common law, natural law, or rules of natural justice." There is no parallel in the history of jurisprudence to this barbarous law.[3]

A central figure in the controversy over political suppression in India in the 1970s was Jayaprakash Narayan (affectionately referred to in India as "J.P."). Long respected as an advocate of radical social reform based on the principles of Mohandas Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence, J.P. came into sharp confrontation with the Indian government before and during the Emergency. This essay attempts to interpret his influence on the fortunes of free expression in contemporary India.

Background

Jayaprakash Narayan was born in Bihar (northern India) in 1902. As a youth he experienced the revolutionary climate created by Gandhi's campaigns to end British colonialism. Travelling to the United States to study sociology and economics, J. P. read and became enamored of Marxist literature. Upon returning to India he taught sociology at the prestigious Benares Hindu University. Jailed for participation in the civil disobedience movement prior to Independence, J. P. won notoriety for his outspoken advocacy of socialism.

In 1952 J.P. renounced active party politics, dedicating himself to the Sarvodaya Movement led by Vinoba Bhave, which sought to create a classless social order based on equality of opportunity, non-violence, rural reconstruction, and land reform. J.P's style of leadership, like that of Mohandas Gandhi's, was spiritually rather than legally based, concerned more with the purification of the human spirit than with the corrupting influences of partisan politics.[4] J.P.'s considerable following among India's students and peasants

stemmed in large measure from his personification of the ancient Hindu value of tyag (the renunciation of ambition).

In the early 1970's J.P. became increasingly vocal in his criticism of the political and economic conditions in his native Bihar, long one of India's poorest states. In 1972 he wrote that "dissent...is...a necessary catalytic agent to which society owes its progress, its revolutions, its technological and scientific advances. Without dissent society must become stagnant and moribund."[5] Identifying India's major problems as corruption, hunger, unemployment, inflation, casteism, and ignorance, J.P. issued an "Appeal to the Youth" in December, 1973 urging a peaceful struggle against these evils. Two meetings with Indira Gandhi in 1973 convinced J.P. that her government was incapable of achieving the systemic change he felt was required. With insight which proved prophetic, J.P. warned of

> ...the extinction of free platform and press, of opposition parties, of all trade unions, except the official ones, of all such institutions and organisations as do not agree with the ruling party.[6]

The "J.P. Movement"

In 1974 J.P's campaign intensified. While ostensibly aimed at the dissolution of the Bihar Legislative Assembly for its alleged corruption, repression of dissenters and ineffectiveness in combating unemployment and inflation, the "J.P. Movement" now took on national dimensions as a rallying point for many groups opposed to the Congress Party monopoly. The Movement adopted Sampoorna Kranti ("Total Revolution") as its motto, and promoted the slogan

> "Sampoorna Kranti ab naaraa hai;
> bhaavi itihas hamaara hai."
> ("Total Revolution is our slogan;
> Future history belongs to us.")[7]

J.P.'s increasing popularity was evident in the huge crowds he attracted at rallies in Patna on June 5, 1974 and again on November 18, when as many as 400,000 people attended. Urging all students to boycott classes for a year, J.P. argued that "the education system does not teach them anything, it does not train them for any work."[8] He continued to call for land redistribution, agricultural development, a return to decentralized village rule (gram raj), and the elimination of casteism, elitism, corruption, high prices, and unemployment. J.P. asked his followers to block trains by squatting on the tracks and he accused All-India-Radio of broadcasting "lies" and "one-sided views."[9]

Urged to assume the leadership of a united opposition party, J.P. steadfastly refused, claiming that he sought no personal power but only a better democracy and the people's welfare: "the struggle is not for the capture of power...for the replacing the Congress government with the opposition, but for the purification of government and politics, including those of the opposition."[10]

By the spring of 1975 Indira Gandhi's government was in serious jeapardy. The prime minister had been convicted by the Allahabad High Court of illegally using government employees to aid her 1971 election campaign. Black marketeering, communal riots, and droughts increased civil unrest. Morarji Desai, a popular opposition leader, undertook a hunger strike to protest alleged corruption in the Gujarat Legislative Assembly. On March 6, 1975 J.P. led over 500,000 demonstrators in an "All India People's March" in New Delhi, presenting a charter of demands to the Indian Parliament. In an interview a month later J.P. labelled Mrs. Gandhi the "fountainhead of all authori-

tarianism of the ruling Congress" and a "threat to democracy."[11]

The climax to the drama came in June. On June 24th the Indian Supreme Court issued its decision on Mrs. Gandhi's appeal of the Allahabad decision, upholding her conviction. The next day J.P. addressed a large rally in Delhi calling for a nationwide satyagraha (civil disobedience campaign) to bring down her government. He called on the army, police, and civil servants "not to obey any orders they considered illegal."[12] Before dawn the following day J.P. and hundreds of other opposition leaders were arrested as Indira Gandhi invoked the Emergency under Article 352 of the Indian Constitution.

This review of events preceeding the Emergency suggests that J.P.'s role in Indian politics in 1975 was ambivalent: while he represented a major advocate of free speech and dissent, his mobilization of the masses behind a call for "Total Revolution" helped precipitate the very suppression he feared. The Emergency resulted from the government's perception of impending civil anarchy, the Congress Party's insecurity produced by convictions in the courts, and Indira Gandhi's personal propensity for autocratic behavior when feeling trapped. A biographer described the Emergency decision as Mrs. Gandhi's "defensive reaction against threats to her self-esteem" and quite consistent with her tendency to shift quickly from aloofness to aggressiveness when personally challenged.[13]

Mrs. Gandhi defended her action by declaring:

> The state of emergency was proclaimed because the threat of disruption was clear and imminent...I do not believe that a democratic society has the obligation to acquiesce in its own dissolution. I do not believe that a democratic society need be defenseless against those who would paralyze it. I do not believe that a democratic society cannot take strong measures to deal with its foes, from within or without.[14]

While acknowledging that some excesses were committed by the police and over-zealous local officials, Mrs. Gandhi continues to maintain that the majority of Indians supported her decision to insure the continued functioning of the nation's vital public services.[15] But critics remain unpersuaded, claiming that "she treated dissent as defiance and criticism as conspiracy" so that the Emergency degenerated into a reign of witch-hunts, brutality, and suppression.[16]

J.P.'s Words from Prison

Regardless of one's assessment of the Emergency, the imprisonment of Jayaprakash Narayan prompted the aging idealist to produce a torrent of rhetorical flourishes in defense of liberty. J.P.'s statements on human freedom and free speech form part of his Prison Diary, a document seemed destined to insure its author a permanent place in the annals of Indian democracy. The Diary opens dramatically: "My world lies in a shambles all round me."[17] Lamenting the suppression of freedom and "the abyss of personal dictatorship," J.P. wrote: "this tightening grip of death on our democracy...makes my heart weep."[18]

J.P. aimed his sharpest attacks against Indira Gandhi, whom he characterized as both "by inclination and conviction a dictator."[19] He charged her with trying to "strangle democracy to death and clamp down her dictatorial regime" and likened her to Adolph Hitler who also had used constitutional methods in assuming dictatorial powers.[20] From his prison cell J.P. exclaimed: "...the arrests, the Emergency proclamation, the suppression of the freedom of the press and of the citizens' fundamental rights of expression and association (among others) plus the legal and constitutional

amendments add up to one single objective: to keep Mrs. Gandhi safe and warm."[21]

On July 21, 1975 J.P. wrote a personal letter to Mrs Gandhi in which he sought to justify his own methods of protest while eloquently appealing to her pride in India's heritage:

> In a democracy the citizen has an inalienable right to civil disobedience when he finds that other channels of redress or reform have dried up. It goes without saying that the Satyagrahi willingly invites and accepts his lawful punishment. ...It staggers one's imagination to think that so valuable a freedom of the press, the very life-breath of democracy, can be snuffed out because of the personal pique of a Prime Minister...You inherited a great tradition, noble values, and a working democracy. Do not leave behind a miserable wreck of all that.[22]

The prime minister did not respond to that letter, nor is it clear that she even ever received it. In September J.P. wrote to the Home Secretary in New Delhi complaining that nineteen of twenty letters he had sent from jail had been held up by the authorities, amounting to censorship and "mental torture."[23]

In October J.P. stated in his Diary that "nobody except the enemies of democracy can be taken in by Mrs. Gandhi's hysterical propaganda" and he decried the "shameful" way she had "played havoc with the laws of the land to suit her personal interests."[24] With admirable directness J.P. articulated a principle of political authority which has universal applicability, and which Richard Nixon and the Shah of Iran might well have remembered: "Those elected to positions of power cannot be outside the scope of the law....Discipline is a quality of individual and group behavior which has to be inculcated and nurtured in an atmosphere of freedom, i.e., in a condition in which there is a choice of action."[25]

While in prison J.P. developed a serious kidney ailment and on November 12, 1975, after 139 days of confinement, was released and admitted to a hospital in Bombay. Meanwhile, desirous of legitimizing her rule in world opinion and perhaps overestimating her popularity, Mrs. Gandhi lifted the Emergency in January, 1977 and called for a national election. J.P. suggested that the opposition parties unite under the Janata (People's) Party banner and make the election a referendum on the Emergency. In the voting in March Mrs. Gandhi and the Congress Party were swept from office by a margin of 299 parliamentary seats to 153.

J.P. played a prominent role in the formation of the new government. Referred to by The New York Times as "the 74-year old mystic whom the Janata Party regards as the keeper of its spiritual force,"[26] J.P. consulted with key party members prior to announcing that Morarji Desai would be the new prime minister. Early in the morning of March 24, 1977 -- the day the government changed hands -- J.P. administered an oath to the new leaders at Rajghat, the memorial site where Mohandas Gandhi had been cremated in 1948. Still seriously ill and confined to a wheelchair, J.P. led the politicians, phrase by phrase, in pledging to "serve our people and give our best to the weakest among them."[27]

Some three weeks later J.P. made a broadcast to the nation from his sickbed. He explained how the Bihar and Gujarat movements centered on demands for political and economic reforms, sought to eliminate corruption and illiteracy, remove casteism, and improve the educational system. J.P.'s kidney condition soon deteriorated further, and he died in Patna on October 8, 1979. Half a million people attended his cremation and the placing of his ashes in the Ganges River. Among those to travel to Bihar to pay their last respects

to the old revolutionary was Indira Gandhi.

Conclusion

We have seen that Jayaprakash Narayan exerted a pivotal impact on Indian politics in the 1970s. True to the tradition of Hindu holy men he never held an official governmental position, yet his influence pervaded the years when civil liberty underwent its severest test in independent India.[28] J.P.'s crusade to purify India of corruption and his resistance to infringements of democratic freedoms made him a hero to millions of Indians.

J.P. was a fallible human being. Critics may rightly charge that he failed to offer specific policies by which to implement the radical social and economic changes he sought. The revolutionary and even anarchistic dimensions of his movement in no small way invited the governmental responses of the Emergency. The lawlessness implicit in J.P.'s own modus operandi contributed to the suppression he so strongly opposed. This fact is often overlooked in romanticized reviews of his life which border on hagiography.[29]

Yet, we cannot deny that J.P.'s diagnosis of India's problems was essentially correct. Moreover, his vision of personal purity and social justice was motivated by the highest moral ideals and touched the conscience and imagination of a people. J.P.'s denunciations of tyranny, embodied most succinctly in his Prison Diary, form an enduring testament to the values of free expression and civil liberty.

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