India’s Freedom Fades
Except for 'J.P.' and Youth

By Richard Lunn

(Richard Lunn, vice-chairman of the Journalism Dept. Ryerson Politechnical Institute, spent two months of a sabbatical last year in India. He toured the northern part of the country from Bombay to Calcutta, via New Delhi and Patna, with a side trip to Darjeeling, in the foothills of the Himalayas. One of the people he met during his visit was Jayaprakash Narayan, then leader of a mass opposition movement to the government of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.)

My first stop when I got into New Delhi was the office of the New York Times. Bernard Weinraub was correspondent and we talked about J.P. Narayan, whom Weinraub referred to as the "most interesting thing happening in India right now."

I'd heard of Narayan before I got to India and he sounded like a cross between Mahatma Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave and, frankly, he didn't sound to me like the kind of man who had a very firm grip on political reality. But all the other journalists I spoke to in New Delhi agreed that Narayan was leading the only political movement that could seriously effect Indira Gandhi and her Congress party: he began to look like someone I really wanted to see.

Getting to see him wasn't that easy.
Through Weinraub - a young, intense and extremely knowledgeable reporter - I got in touch with an organization called The Gandhi Peace Foundation which, among other things, arranged for Narayan's travels outside his hometown of Patna. It was slightly cloak and daggerish but after a couple of days of phone calls and a short but somewhat gruelling interview with the director of the institute ("yes, but just why do you want to see Jayaprakash?", repeated at the least likely moments) I was given Narayan's home address and telephone number and the name of his secretary and the assurance that I would have no trouble getting my interview.

About 5,000 miles and two weeks later I wasn't so sure.

When I got there Patna turned out to be an extremely scruffy provincial capital. The Youth Times of India, in an article I had read on Narayan, had referred to Patna as "shanty" and it certainly is. It is a city of 500,000 situated on the big bend of the Ganges where the river ceases its leisurely wandering across the great northern plain and heads south toward the Bay of Bengal 500 miles away. Patna is the capital of Bihar, the most poverty-stricken state in northern India. It is roughly the size of New Brunswick and has a population of 60,000,000. Narayan had been born near there and when he retired six years ago from his work in the villages - he was a tireless follower of Gandhi all his life - he settled in Patna.

I got into Patna just after dark after a day-long train ride from Benares. I checked into the Republic Hotel and first thing next morning called Narayan's secretary. Yes, he assured me, Mr. Narayan would be glad to see me anytime. Could I come around in the afternoon. This sounded almost too good to be true after some of the experiences I had had in the weeks I had already spent in India. Not to lose the morning,
I went around to the city's only English language daily, The Searchlight, and talked to the editor and some of the reporters. I was trying to get a line on some way to get to Rosera, a village 100 miles away across the Ganges up toward the Nepal border, (another long story) I got the advice and it wasn't very encouraging, so after looking through the paper's files on Narayan to catch anything I might have missed in the Times of India files in New Delhi, I went back to the hotel.

I turned up right on the dot at Narayan's house about 10 blocks from the hotel - by this time I was getting used to being carted around by human power in a bicycle rickshaw - and knocked on the door. There was the shooting of bolts and the turning of keys and I was led through a long dark corridor to the back of the house through another locked door - this one guarded - through two rooms filled with clicking typewriters and whirling mimeograph machines, through another locked door out into a side yard. I was seated at a table given a cup of tea and left to myself.

Young men began drifting out of the house and sitting with me. Pretty soon there were a dozen of them, all students as it turned out, all anxious to meet me and all anxious to tell me of the movement they had started and to tell me of the genius of Jayaprakash Narayan. They called him J.P. - as did everyone in Patna and almost everyone else in India. Soon, the secretary joined me and I got down to learning some of the current things that were happening to J.P. and his movement. Pretty soon I'd had enough background and asked when I might see the man himself. "Oh, next Thursday afternoon would be very good," the secretary said. This was Tuesday. "You mean the day after next?" No, he didn't. He meant Thursday week. This was more like the India I god gotten to know.
To make a long story short, I spent the next eight days travelling. I saw the Buddhist shrines in southern Bihar, flew to Calcutta and north from there to Darjeeling to have a look at Everest in the sunrise from Tiger Hill and was back in Patna on the Wednesday night. The next morning I called the secretary. Could I call back Monday? Monday? What happened to the Thursday appointment? J.P. is flying to New Delhi today to spend the weekend on a speaking tour. I'll go with him, when does he leave?

I met him at the Patna airport and we walked to the plane to the cheers of dozens of his supporters who had come to see him off. "Jayaparakash zindabad! Jayaparakash zindabad!" He was a frail, slightly built old man - he was 72 - dressed in the brown khadi jacket and white, tight-fitting trousers made famous by Nehru. We were ushered aboard the plane like royalty and seated at the front where we could stretch our feet toward the bulkhead.

He talked in a quiet voice, his fingers in front of his mouth. A year before the students of Patna had come to him for leadership, he told me. They had gone to the state governor with a petition asking that their university education be made relevant and that some attempt be made to ensure employment for university graduates. The governor had dismissed them and tore up the petition in their faces. They were back by the thousands a few days later in a march on the state capital. The police had opened fire. Eight students were killed and 80 wounded. A curfew was declared. The students, leaderless, bewildered and enraged didn't know what to do. A few of them went furtively to Narayan's home in the middle of the night.

"I found their needs matched my heartbeat," Narayan told me. He led them in a second march on the capital. He was roughed up and many of the students beaten.
Soon the movement began to grow and within months was a national cry for justice, honesty and efficient government. It has outgrown the students of Bihar.

Narayan had a tiger by the tail but he was used to the impossible. He had gone to jail with Nehru and Gandhi and Bhave in the days of the British raj. He'd been offered a cabinet post by Nehru in 1948 when he formed his first government after Independence. But Narayan had preferred Gandhi's way and had worked with him until Gandhi's death and had continued that work long after his leader was gone. He'd hoped for a quiet old age: his heart was bad and he was just recovering from a prostate operation.

He was virtually certain that jail lay ahead of him. "The government is arrogant and ignorant," he said. "Those in power have no respect for the constitution."

"I met Indira in 1973 and she has an amoral if not immoral approach to politics." Labelled a fascist by the prime minister, Narayan took to the hustings with the message that Indians were living in a paramilitary state where democracy was only a word. "We'll end up with a one-party dictatorship like Bangladesh," he told me as our plane sat at Lucknow Airport.

Narayan disappeared into prison last June 27. He was the first man Indira arrested after she declared the emergency. J.P. was roused out of bed at four in the morning to begin an indefinite stay in prison. He's out now, living in Bombay with his brother and taking dialysis treatments every week for a kidney condition. He had two heart attacks - that the public knows about - while in jail.

Narayan's was a pretty mild revolution at best. It was composed mostly of students and I spent a
couple of days in Patna with those kids: they were indistinguishable from Ryerson students - scarcely a wild-eyed bunch of fanatics; they wanted simple justice. His other followers were middle-class and intellectuals. I went with Narayan to a rally in New Delhi where 30,000 civil servants turned out to sit quietly on the grass in the park along the Rajpath to listen to him with quiet attention and interest.

"A people less long-suffering than the Indians would have created a crisis long before this," Narayan had said on the plane.

It's too bad the old man has been silenced. He had begun to provide a focus to the discontent of the disadvantaged in India but it was just a beginning. He'd just begun to get through to the illiterate, the landless and the urban poor.

Indira has put off elections (to have been held in February) for another year at least. Narayan will certainly never have another chance. It's doubtful anyone will for a long, long time.

**MEDIA PROBE**

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