



## **Gram Swaraj and Rural Reconstruction in the Thought of Jayaprakash Narayan**

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### **Abstract**

Jayaprakash Narayan was one of the most important modern Indian thinkers who connected socialism, democracy, and rural reconstruction with the ideals of Gandhian philosophy. His idea of Gram Swaraj was based on the belief that true social, political, and economic transformation in India could begin only from the village level. He argued that centralized power, state control, and party politics could not create a just and exploitation-free society unless people themselves became active participants in self-governance and moral change. Influenced by Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave, Jayaprakash Narayan supported Bhoodan, Gramdan, Sarvodaya, decentralization, people's participation, and cooperative rural development as the foundations of a new social order. He believed that the village should become a self-sufficient, autonomous, and morally awakened unit where equality, dignity of labour, mutual cooperation, and local decision-making could flourish. This paper examines the concept of Gram Swaraj and rural reconstruction in the thought of Jayaprakash Narayan and highlights its relevance for democratic decentralization, village self-rule, and sustainable rural development in India.

### **Keywords**

Jayaprakash Narayan, Gram Swaraj, Rural Reconstruction, Sarvodaya, Gramdan, Bhoodan, Decentralization, Village Self-Governance.

## INTRODUCTION

Jayaprakash Narayan occupies a significant place in Indian political and social thought because of his deep commitment to democracy, social justice, and the reconstruction of rural India. He believed that political freedom alone was not sufficient unless it was accompanied by social and economic transformation at the grassroots level. For him, the village was not merely a geographical unit but the foundation of Indian civilization and the most suitable base for self-governance, cooperation, and equality. Influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave, Jayaprakash Narayan developed the idea of Gram Swaraj as a system in which villages would function as self-reliant and autonomous communities. He emphasized that real change could not be imposed through law or state power alone; it required moral awakening, decentralization of authority, social participation, and collective responsibility. Through movements such as Bhoodan, Gramdan, and Sarvodaya, he attempted to promote land reform, village unity, community welfare, and people's power. His vision of rural reconstruction included economic decentralization, dignity of labour, local institutions, self-sufficiency, and the elimination of exploitation and inequality. In this context, the study of Gram Swaraj in the thought of Jayaprakash Narayan remains highly relevant for understanding participatory democracy and rural development in India.

### Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the concept of Gram Swaraj in the thought of Jayaprakash Narayan.
2. To analyze Jayaprakash Narayan's ideas on rural reconstruction through Bhoodan, Gramdan, and Sarvodaya.
3. To study the role of decentralization and people's participation in his vision of village self-governance.
4. To evaluate the relevance of Jayaprakash Narayan's rural thought in contemporary India.

## **SOCIALIST THOUGHTS OF JAYAPRAKASH NARAYAN**

JP believed that the new society which socialists and idealists have been dreaming of creating for ages will not come about until man himself changes. He used to say that, " Socialism is not just an economic and political device, socialism is related to socialist civilization and socialist man." <sup>1</sup> He believed that if a socialist culture is to be created, a socialist man is to be created, then such creation cannot be done through law.

JP believed that Marxism had shown him the light of equality and brotherhood. It means freedom for all, that is, freedom of those who are at the lowest level. This freedom should also include freedom from exploitation, hunger and poverty. He believed that gradually I understood that no socialism is possible without democracy. The path to socialism does not pass through dictatorship in any way. What is the will of the people in social revolution? This should be found out. The natural tendency of the people is always in favor of democracy. One thing is clear from the experience of the Soviet Union that socialism is not just the absence of capitalism. It is possible that capitalism may be destroyed, industry, commerce, banking system, agriculture etc. may be nationalized and yet socialism may remain far away. He believed that socialism cannot come from centralization of political and economic power. To bring socialism, it would be appropriate to think about decentralization and social control.<sup>1</sup>

### **Bhoodan and Jai Prakash Narayan:**

JP was greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and Acharya Vinoba Bhave. He liked the constructive works of both of them. He used to say that the path of non-violence is the best way to establish a society free from exploitation. Regarding Bhoodan, he used to say that, " Through the Bhoodan movement, Vinoba ji has not only put the solution of the land problem in front of us but

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<sup>1</sup> Jai Prakash Narayan: In search of total revolution, my journey of thoughts Part- 1, Page- 23  
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has also brought about a social revolution through a non-violent path and has taken the first step towards the reconstruction of society."<sup>2</sup>

J.P. considered the Bhoodan movement to be the Gandhian way of economic and social revolution. He believed that Bhoodan is a moral duty. Through this, the landless not only get land but also their moral upliftment takes place. He believed that if anyone ever thinks about economic-social revolution, his attention will definitely go towards land. He says that when Bhoodan started, I too thought it was a joke that how will the problem of land be solved by this. Asking for donations in this way will take hundreds of years. He says that we understood this when I got seven and a half thousand acres of land in donation in 7 days in Gaya district. I can say that whatever Bhoodan has done for the landless, no one else has been able to do that. Vinoba ji believed that the owner of the land is God. All land belongs to him. Understanding this, donate land for your landless brothers. In this regard, Louis Fisher has written that, " Gramdan is one of the most creative ideas coming from the East."<sup>3</sup>

J.P. believed that in the matter of land distribution, Bhoodan is considered more successful than the law. Prime Minister Nehru wrote many letters to the Chief Ministers of the states for demarcation, the Planning Commission made efforts, the socialists also kept agitating, yet comparatively, in the 25 years of independence, more land was distributed through Bhoodan than the land provided to the landless legally. J.P. says that the Bhoodan movement has worked successfully in Gujarat, Maharashtra and Bihar. He says that the Bhoodan movement has distributed twelve lakh acres of land among the landless in this country and all this has happened voluntarily. Bhoodan brings moral strength. "Bhoodan was a unique experiment of change of heart. It was a unique way of bringing out the qualities accumulated within a man."<sup>4</sup> Vinoba ji had

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<sup>2</sup> Kanti Shah: Life Journey of Jai Prakash, Sarva Seva Sangh Publication, Rajghat, Varanasi Edition 2013, Page- 126

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, page- 127

<sup>4</sup> Acharya Ramamurti: J.P. 's Legacy Edition 2015, Page- 11

envisioned the cooperation of the five great powers for the reconstruction of the nation. "State power, gentleman power, moneylender power, servant power and people power."<sup>5</sup>

He believed that for change in a country like India, the cooperation of the above mentioned five forces is needed. He believed that the awareness that came to landowners through Bhoodan was more among the landless than among the landowners. He believed that this was the right way to eradicate capitalism and therefore he used to say that this social and intellectual revolution should be led by the youth who have a lot of enthusiasm, it just needs to be used in the right direction.

#### **Gramodaya and Jai Prakash Narayan:**

Like J.P. Gandhi and Vinoba ji, he saw the village and the village together and with equality. On one hand, he used to be thoughtful about the problems of the world, on the other hand, the problems of the village level also remained in his mind. He himself was born in a village, the village was a familiar place for him. He liked the rural culture of India and he wanted a new version of the same culture. He had imagined an agrarian industrial village society. In 1940, he prepared an outline of his dream of Swaraj and sent it to Gandhi on the occasion of Ramgarh Congress. In it, he had written that, "As far as possible, self-sufficient, autonomous and independent units of villages will be created."<sup>6</sup>

JP put forward a concrete agenda of social change before the society. He wanted to establish Gram Swaraj in the village with a spirit of collectivism and mutual cooperation. The first form of Gramdan was very revolutionary. Its form was redistribution of all the land of the village along with giving up the ownership of the land. He believed that "So long as there is no social change in the village, social change cannot take place. Unless there is a change in the mutual relations, no progress can take place."<sup>7</sup> He believed that first of all, change will have to be brought about in the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, page- 11

<sup>6</sup> Kanti Shah: Life Journey of Jai Prakash Edition 2018, Page- 142

<sup>7</sup> Jai Prakash Narayan: My journey of thought in search of total revolution, Part -1, Edition 2016, Page -49

minds of the people through Gramdan. Introduction The entire ownership should be with the Gram Sabha.

He says that the landowner will have the right to cultivate the land, consume the produce and pass it on as inheritance. The land is in the name of the village council, the account of the entire village becomes one in the government account, this brings about a change in the minds of the people. J.P. says that if narrow-mindedness, backwardness and casteism prevalent in the village society are to be eliminated, then we will have to become self-dependent. He says that the village will get protection from the government and from mutual cooperation of the villagers. He believed that, "The village will become a unit economically and politically, to make political life stable we will have to give the village the form of a unit of self-governance."<sup>8</sup> He wanted that the roots of political institutions should be deep, for this the village panchayats will have to be strengthened.

J.P. said, " Landowners have to donate one - twentieth of their land to the landless. This will be a new step for everyone. The poor will also feel that these people have done something for us. This will also improve mutual relations in the village. "<sup>9</sup>

He believed that the Panchayat should have the rights of revenue, administration and judiciary. Through law, the ownership of land should be handed over to the state. The Panchayat will distribute it among the villages, the right to collect rent should remain with the Panchayat. The land of the village should not be given to anyone outside the village without the special permission of the state. He used to say that every person will give 40th part of his income from the farm or in cash to the village fund. Workers will donate one day of labour in a month. In this way a village fund will be created.

He said that industries will be established in the village from the village fund. This will help the needy and the people of the village will be able to get relief from the loans of the moneylenders.

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<sup>8</sup> Kanti Shah: Life Journey of Jai Prakash Edition 2018, Page- 143

<sup>9</sup> Jai Prakash Narayan: My life journey in search of total revolution Part- 1, Page- 49

A village assembly will be formed, which will work unanimously keeping in mind the interest of the entire village. In this way, it is clear that, " The nature of land ownership changes through village donation." The land system is transferred to the Gram Sabha and the village is freed from government interference. The Gram Sabha can take measures to control intoxicants and disputes in the village can be resolved through mutual understanding, one can get rid of the hassles of courts. Efforts are made to solve the problems of the village society at the village level itself. This awakens new consciousness and sentiments in the village."<sup>10</sup>

He believed that Gramdan brings a concrete framework of social change in front of the society, in which Gandhiji's Swaraj and trusteeship get a concrete form. Jamin Gram Samaj Ki means 'Trusteeship in Action' i.e. trusteeship in direct practice. He says that in the agriculture dominated country India, what should be the socialism for the rural society, the answer to this is found in Gramdan itself. The most important thing is that Gramdan starts the welfare state immediately. No one should remain hungry in the village, no one should remain unemployed, a feeling of collectivism should come in the village. He believed that, " Gram Sabha can be an excellent means of continuous revolution."<sup>11</sup>

### **Sarvodaya and Jai Prakash Narayan:**

On 19 April 1954, JP announced that he was dedicating his life to Vinoba Bhave's Sarvodaya movement and his Bhoodan campaign. To promote the distribution of land to Harijans, he gave up his land, established an ashram in Hazaribagh and worked towards the upliftment of the village."<sup>12</sup>

Regarding Sarvodaya, he believed that if public policy has to be developed from its foundation, then the entire village society will have to be activated. This is the basic difference in the working method. The working method of the Sarvodaya movement is community oriented.

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<sup>10</sup> Jai Prakash Narayan: My journey of thought in search of total revolution, Part 1, Page - 50

<sup>11</sup> Kanti Shah: Life journey of Jai Prakash, page- 128

<sup>12</sup> Dr. Anil Kumar Singh: Maker of Modern India - Jai Prakash Narayan, Page- 9

Whereas today's election system is party oriented. He called Sarvodaya as real politics and people's politics and called Sarvodaya as politics in a broad sense. Through Sarvodaya, he wanted to bring such a direct democracy in which there is maximum participation of the people. J.P. believed that on the surface, Bhudan seems to be a program of agricultural reform, but the reality comes out on closer observation. He believed that through Sarvodaya, change is brought in the thinking along with the society. He believed that for the establishment of socialism, an exploitation free society is necessary and if this is done through the state, then in the end the state will dominate. He believed that socialism can be established only through mutual cooperation. He believed that 'Gandhi ji had his own philosophy of life, he had some social principles and he had a wonderful imagination regarding the state system.'<sup>13</sup>

J.P. believed that the main basis of Sarvodaya is decentralization of power. Therefore, decentralization should be adopted to remove the evils prevalent in power and party system. He said, " There is no doubt that many flaws of Sarvodaya thought and conduct will be discovered in future and they will also be corrected. In this way, human mind will keep moving towards truth, but I definitely believe that Sarvodaya is an advanced thought which is clearly ahead of today's current social philosophy and systems."<sup>14</sup> He is in favour of making village the primary unit of social life and considering it important. He says that villages should be made strong again and decisions by consensus should be encouraged. J.P. says that Gandhiji believed that the qualification for voting should not be property or position but physical labour. Physical labour provides opportunity to all those who want to participate in the government in the interest of the state. Vinoba Bhave believes that giving importance to the system of physical labour can help in removing the corruption prevalent in the political field. In the Sarvodaya school of thought, it is believed that as much as political decentralisation is necessary, economic decentralisation is also as important. Sarvodaya also opposes machine-run heavy industries because these machines render people unemployed and lead to centralisation of wealth and power.

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<sup>13</sup> Jai Prakash Narayan: My journey of thought in search of total revolution, Part- 1, Page- 41

<sup>14</sup> No. Rajasvi : I am Jai Prakash Narayan speaking, page- 146

They believe that the roots of exploitation lie in centralization. Machines destroy man's creative power and artistic instincts. Therefore, Sarvodaya is in favor of limiting the use of machines. They believe that, " Once upon a time, socialists were compelled to believe that if the means of production, distribution and regulation were nationalized, then economic democracy would be established automatically."<sup>15</sup>

They say that in economic decentralisation, the means of production are not owned by the state or any particular person, but by the producers themselves. For example, a person should have the right over the land which he tills and sows. Sarvodayaists, " do want to establish equality of property, but not by the use of law or power, but by bringing about a fundamental change in the attitude of people."<sup>16</sup>

J.P. says that the special use of Sarvodaya was done by Gandhiji himself during the freedom struggle and if he were alive today, he would have done the work of nation-building more effectively through Sarvodaya. He says that according to me, Vinobaji has done the work of fulfilling Gandhiji's objective. He started Bhudan after being inspired from somewhere. He was in tune with Gandhiji's ideology, so he took the responsibility of fulfilling Gandhiji's incomplete dream. Regarding Sarvodaya, J.P. believed that Gandhiji used the word 'Sarvodaya' to express his entire ideology. He has included the principles of Sarvodaya in his autobiography 'Sarvodaya' as follows, " The interest of an individual lies in the interest of everyone, as far as earning a livelihood by work is concerned, the work of a barber has the same value as that of a lawyer and the life of labour i.e. the life of a farmer and artisan is the real life."<sup>17</sup>

He believed that the Sarvodaya ideology does not believe in the power of politics and governance. He also believed that politics cannot accomplish any useful work because it is based on state power, police and military power. The Sarvodaya ideology supports a system that is free from

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<sup>15</sup> No. Rajasvi : I am Jai Prakash speaking, page- 141

<sup>16</sup> Prem Lal Singh: Loknayaak Jai Prakash Narayan, the architect of total revolution, page- 83

<sup>17</sup> Jai Prakash Narayan: My journey of thought in search of total revolution, Part- 1, Page- 40

party and power and Vinoba Bhave calls it public policy. There is a difference between politics and public policy. While governance is important in politics, discipline is important in public policy, power is important in politics and freedom in public policy. There is control in politics, restraint in public policy. This is the order of Sarvodaya. From governance to discipline, from power to freedom, from control to restraint, from competition for rights to the practice of duties, he says that, " The light of freedom, equality and fraternity that had been guiding me till today, the same light has finally brought me to the destination of this Sarvodaya."<sup>18</sup>

JP believed that public policy believes in people 's power and believes that system change can be done not through laws but on the basis of public awareness. He believed that the scope of Sarvodaya ideology is not limited to any particular area, rather it is an ideology related to the welfare of all. He said that "Sarvodaya" means welfare of all, rise of all i.e. development of all, the aim of which is to provide a high standard of living to all the people of India through complete rural development in a peaceful manner and through cooperative means.

JP believed that, " In the Sarvodaya world society, the position of the states in the present order of nations will have to be changed. Sarvodaya vision is a world vision."<sup>19</sup>

He believed that Sarvodaya considers the caste system to be discriminatory. There should not be competition in social life but there should be mutual competition and a tendency towards the highest. Making rural life self-reliant, developing cottage industries, importance and dignity of labour in life, equality of men and women. He believes, " In fact, Sarvodaya is a humanistic path for moral upliftment. It helps in the virtuous development of man and also accepts that the problems of human life can be solved through a change of heart."<sup>20</sup>

J.P. believed that after Moodaan and Gramdaan under Sarvodaya, Sokhoder Ashram did a good job of village development and village self-rule, which further strengthened the spirit of

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<sup>18</sup> No. Rajasvi : I am Jai Prakash speaking, page- 140

<sup>19</sup> Premlal Singh: The architect of total revolution, Loknayak Jai Prakash Narayan, page- 85

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, page- 85

Sarvodaya. Regarding Sokhoder Ashram, he believed that they used to help everyone in the work of the ashram, work in the fields wearing half pants, about three and a half hours of labour was done daily, levelling the land, ploughing the field, making compost manure, cleaning, running the collective kitchen, etc. The purpose of this ashram was to inspire all the people of the village to work and make everyone understand the importance of labour. To make everyone aware of the usefulness of completing the work through mutual brotherhood and participation among the people of the village.

J.P. says that once Vinoba Bhave said a thing to him, " Don't get entangled in pleasures, renounce them, whatever comes naturally is the right thing to do. The pride of renunciation is more dangerous than that of pleasure."<sup>21</sup>

Through Sokho Devra Ashram, JP got experience of the condition of villages, questions of villagers, creative works, co-existence with activists and intensive work of Gram Swaraj and he always remained in touch with this Ashram and its people. He says, " In Sokho Devra, a new village was established in the name of Gandhi Dham, wells and ponds were built in the villages, irrigation facilities, cattle rearing, Khadi, village industry, freedom from money lenders, destruction, freedom from the atrocities of officers, kindergarten, night school, malaria and cholera eradication, tree plantation, health education etc. were done."<sup>22</sup>

J.P. Sokhodevra narrates an incident that in those days he used to explain to the villagers again and again that, " This is your rule, it is the rule of the people, those who sit on the chair are your servants, in the real sense you are the owners of the chair."<sup>23</sup>

He says that a few days after the above incident, a tribal brother went to the Tehsildar's office for some work. But in the office, he did not feel anything told by the JP that he felt that he was the owner and one day when he met the JP, he said, " You say that the public is the owner. When the

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<sup>21</sup> Kanti Shah: Life journey of Jai Prakash, page- 149

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, page- 150

<sup>23</sup> Kanti Shah: Life Journey of Jai Prakash Narayan, page- 151

block is formed, how can the public become the owner if the BD sahab does not sit and say so, the owner stands and the servant sits on the chair."<sup>24</sup> The JP says that he was very happy with the wisdom of that person and he explained it with love and when someone came to meet him, he would repeat the same thing to them in front of the public and say ask him and the officers also agreed.

J.P. says that gram swaraj means to change the basic mindset, there should be action-reaction with understanding, people should be influenced by one another.

He believed that reaching the root of the problems and finding solutions to them is good for everyone. This spreads the spirit of Sarvodaya and the public gets an opportunity to join it and awareness and consciousness spreads among the people and inspires them for true revolution.

J.P. believed that education is an important weapon for the expansion of Sarvodaya and for making people aware, education generates the power of discussion in people, reduces blind faith and expands the power of reasoning. Therefore, he started a school named 'Ishshu Sadan ' in Sokhdevra Ashram. As far as no work had been done in this field till now, he started a school.<sup>25</sup> And his thinking continued in the direction of its expansion, how to run it in a more effective and meaningful way. He believed that there is no difference between the pathshalas or schools of cities and villages. Perhaps there is some difference in the schools of Nai Talim. He said that there should be a school or pathashala which can actually be called a village school. He was trying to establish such a school in Sokhdevra.

According to him, such a school, "in which small children, youngsters and adults get the opportunity to be educated, its curriculum should be completely different from today's curriculum, and this village school should not become a school to prepare for higher education in future, it should be complete in itself."<sup>26</sup> He believed that such a school should provide the education to be

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, page- 151

<sup>25</sup> Kanti Shah: Life Journey of Jai Prakash Narayan, page- 152

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, page- 153

given in a fixed time in a proper manner. He was in favour of having a separate curriculum for girls. He wanted such a school which can make good farmers, artisans and good villagers. Creating such a school was his vision for the future.

J.P. used to say that Vinoba Bhave took forward the Shanti Sena that Gandhiji had talked about. The idea of Shanti Sena has been given the form of a concrete programme. J.P. used to say that what we want to do is constructive work. Shanti Sena has to be established through groups of volunteers working in the society. This is the need of every place and time. We are always expecting the government to do all the work. Work can be done through collective contribution and in a non-violent way as well. He believed that "In such a large country like India, there will be unrest and discontent somewhere or the other. How can peace be established in a democratic country like India?"<sup>27</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

Jayaprakash Narayan's concept of Gram Swaraj presents a powerful model of rural reconstruction based on decentralization, moral transformation, people's participation, and village self-reliance. He believed that real democracy could survive only when power reached the grassroots and when villages became active centers of economic, social, and political life. Through Bhoodan, Gramdan, and Sarvodaya, he offered a humane and non-violent path for building an exploitation-free society rooted in cooperation, equality, and dignity of labour. His ideas remain important even today because they provide a meaningful framework for strengthening local governance, rural development, and participatory democracy in India.

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<sup>27</sup> Jai Prakash Narayan: My journey of thought in search of total revolution, Part- 1, Page- 110  
Peer-Reviewed | Refereed | Indexed | International Journal | 2026  
Global Insights, Multidisciplinary Excellence

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Jai Prakash Narayan: My life journey in search of total revolution Part- 1, Page- 49

Jai Prakash Narayan: My journey of thought in search of total revolution, Part 1, Page - 50

Kanti Shah: Life journey of Jai Prakash, page- 128

Dr. Anil Kumar Singh: Maker of Modern India - Jai Prakash Narayan, Page- 9

Jai Prakash Narayan: My journey of thought in search of total revolution, Part- 1, Page- 41

No. Rajasvi : I am Jai Prakash Narayan speaking, page- 146

No. Rajasvi : I am Jai Prakash speaking, page- 141

Prem Lal Singh: Loknayak Jai Prakash Narayan, the architect of total revolution, page- 83

Jai Prakash Narayan: My journey of thought in search of total revolution, Part- 1, Page- 40

No. Rajasvi : I am Jai Prakash speaking, page- 140

Premlal Singh: The architect of total revolution, Loknayak Jai Prakash Narayan, page- 85

Ibid, page- 85

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Ibid, page- 150

Kanti Shah: Life Journey of Jai Prakash Narayan, page- 151

Ibid, page- 151

Kanti Shah: Life Journey of Jai Prakash Narayan, page- 152

Ibid, page- 153

Jai Prakash Narayan: My journey of thought in search of total revolution, Part- 1, Page- 110