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# Sarvodaya and the Struggle for Nonviolent Revolution in India

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14 March 2016

In March 1974, following a student demonstration in Patna against the Bihar Government and Assembly that resulted in widespread arson and looting and several deaths, Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) the leader of the Socialist Party and former Gandhi supporter, accepted an invitation from the student leaders to give guidance and direction to their movement. As he was to declare in a speech to these students, 'After 27 years of freedom, people of this country are wracked by hunger, rising prices, corruption... oppressed by every kind of injustice... it is a Total Revolution and we want nothing less!'

His immediate purpose was to ensure that the developing agitation would be peaceful and nonviolent but, in accepting the invitation, he set in motion a train of events which included not merely splitting the Sarvodaya movement of which he was the most prominent leader after Vinoba Bhave but also, and more importantly, polarising all the major political parties and forces in India. Fifteen months later, this polarisation led to a head-on confrontation between the Opposition parties and the Central Congress Govern-

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ment (supported by the Communist Party of India), the outcome of which was the declaration of a state of emergency on 26th June 1975.

In this paper I seek to describe how, and in part to explain why, JP and a large majority of his colleagues in the Sarvodaya movement came to engage in a course of action which led to such spectacular, surprising and, for them, ill-fated results.

To understand their motives, it is necessary to appreciate that the Sarvodaya movement sees itself as the movement for bringing about a nonviolent revolution in India.<sup>1</sup> Its ideas in this respect derive from the social and political philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, and its main organisation, the Sarva Seva Sangh (Association for the Service of All), is the direct descendant of the organisations set up by Gandhi to carry out what he called his Constructive Programme. The Sangh, numbering in 1975 about 5,000 activists, is not a conventional political organisation. Its members pledge themselves not to engage in party and power politics but to work with all people and all parties. It sees itself as a band of nonviolent revolutionaries who, by serving and working with the people, involve them in the task of social change and reconstruction which will lead, eventually, to a nonviolent social order. In outline, this order resembles that envisaged by 19th century anarchist-communists. That is, it would be stateless, casteless, classless and highly decentralised. In structural terms, it would consist of a network of small, largely self-sufficient, self-governing agro-industrial communities linked together for purposes of mutual aid, and in the Indian context, a union of village republics.

For Sarvodaya workers, as for Gandhi, what is of greater importance is not that ultimate grand objective but the practical steps towards it. In 1951, Vinoba, sensing that in India as in other peas-

revolution.' JP's *Appeal to Youth Power* had not in fact been very widely reviewed in the national press, but the events in Gujarat seemed to confirm their analysis of the situation. By way of searching for a new strategy for the Sarvodaya movement, JP and his colleagues had, by early 1974, reached a point when they were psychologically prepared to welcome a popular agitation, initiated by students, as an unparalleled opportunity whereby the nonviolent revolution could take a great leap forward. What they did not foresee in January 1974 was where their new strategy would eventually lead, namely to a splitting of their own movement and a head-on confrontation at the national level between the Opposition and the Government.

#### **Endnotes: (GO)**

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<sup>1</sup> See Geoffrey Ostergaard & Melville Currell, *The Gentle Anarchists: A Study of the Leaders of the Sarvodaya Movement for Nonviolent Revolution in India*, London: Clarendon/Oxford University Press, 1971.

In the same issue of *People's Action* which published JP's programme, Manmohan Choudhuri, another prominent member of the Sangh's Executive, reviewed the use of satyagraha in India after Gandhi. While carefully explaining Vinoba's views on this subject, he nevertheless concluded, 'Only a serious harking back to the basic norms of satyagraha can deliver the goods.' In another article, Ramamurthi, a Sarvodaya leader from Bihar, posed the question, 'Whither the Indian Revolution?' The need for total revolution, he wrote, was urgent. Since independence the country had tried to live without Gandhi. But where had the Western road led? Shall we, he asked, 'continue to walk the sterile constitutional path; shall we choose class war?' Both were unacceptable. 'What we really need is a people's revolution, not only for the people, but of the people and by the people (which) cannot but be open, peaceful, non-party, non-class. One may well ask, Where are the revolutionary pioneers? They are there, though scattered and unorganised. They can be mobilised . . . With its non-party appeal, the Sarva Seva Sangh has the promise to lead an all-India workers' brotherhood dedicated to the cause of revolution with a human face. A people's revolution is our destiny.' And as if to underline the point of these various messages to the readers, the editor, Radhakrishna, changed the sub-title of *People's Action* from 'Journal of the Sarva Seva Sangh' to 'Journal of Sarvodaya Revolution.'

From this brief review of Sarvodaya thinking in the period since 1969 it seems evident that, despite the relative failure of the campaign to implement Gramdan, some of the more prominent leaders of the movement, notably JP but not including Vinoba, had become convinced by the beginning of January 1974 that a revolutionary situation was developing in India. The date by which they had reached this conclusion is of some significance since it *preceded* the student-led popular agitation which began in Gujarat in January 1974 and which helped to spark off the similar agitation in Bihar a few months later. There is no evidence that the Gujarat students were directly inspired by Sarvodaya's call for 'a people's

ant societies, land was the key to any social revolution, hit upon the idea of Bhoodan, or land-gift, a programme which involved walking from village to village persuading landowners voluntarily to donate a portion of their lands for redistribution to the landless peasants who then constituted about 2% of the rural population. By 1957 Bhoodan had developed into the campaign for Gramdan, (gift of village), or voluntary villagisation of land. Gramdan, however, proved to be too radical an idea to attract widespread support and by the early 1960's the movement appeared to be grinding to a halt when Gramdan was revised to enhance its appeal. The idea of villagisation of land was retained, but the donors were allowed to keep possession of 95% of the donated land for their own use, the remaining portion being distributed for the use of the landless. At the same time, stages were clearly distinguished in Gramdan, as a process of social change.

In the first stage a majority of villagers were persuaded to sign a declaration in favour of the idea; in the second, the idea was implemented and a Gram Sabha, or village assembly, comprising all adult residents, was set up to administer the communal land; and in the third and final stage, through the village assembly, resources were mobilised for the task of social reconstruction and development. Neither Bhoodan nor Gramdan, it should be emphasised, were conceived as items in a programme of land reform. Rather, they were seen as symbols and practical steps towards a nonviolent revolution. Underlying these and other items in the movement's programme was the idea of generating people's power, expressed as a new kind of People's politics as distinct from State politics. In this new politics, decisions would be taken by unanimity or consensus, a procedural principle employed in Sarva Seva Sangh. In more familiar Western terms, the movement sought to achieve, by non-violent means, communitarian socialism combined with a radical, participatory democracy.

Armed with the revised concept of Gramdan, in the autumn of 1965, Vinoba Bhave launched a whirlwind campaign which

was concentrated mainly but not exclusively in the populous but poverty-stricken northern state of Bihar. To all appearances, the campaign was remarkably successful. By the end of the Gandhi Centenary Year, October 1969, no less than 140,000 villages, or approximately one-quarter of the total number in India, were reported to have declared for Gramdan.<sup>2</sup> Of Bihar's 67,000 villages, 60,000 had apparently opted to enter the Gramdan fold and Bihar was, therefore, proclaimed by the movement the first 'Statedan'.

The very success of the campaign, however, confronted the movement with new problems. And at the Sarvodaya workers' conference in October of 1969, when the above figures were announced, it was possible to detect beneath the mood of enthusiasm resulting from the achievements in Bihar an underlying sense of anxiety. The main propaganda phase of the movement had clearly ended. Ahead lay the more taxing phase in which the idea of Gramdan had to be translated into reality. In practical terms, this involved redeeming the Gramdan pledges, transferring land titles, redistributing the land reserved for the landless, setting up village assemblies and village funds, and then proceeding to plan and carry out schemes of development. The movement had been promising much; large expectations had been aroused. In this situation, if the new Gramdans were not consolidated and the thousands of declarations of intent were not followed up by observable social changes, then disillusionment with the whole concept of Gramdan might become widespread; as a consequence, the movement for nonviolent revolution might experience a severe, and possibly irreversible, setback.

Anxieties were heightened by the awareness that, although thousands of new people, including Government officials, had been drawn into the whirlwind campaign, the movement still remained a movement of workers *for* the people and had not yet

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<sup>2</sup> By July 1971 the total figure of villages declared Gramdan had reached 168,000.

ary change in education is, no doubt, of prime importance, but the issue to which I am drawing attention is of even deeper and fundamental importance. It is the issue of democracy . . . Corruption of the electoral machinery, commonly manifested in intimidation and buying up of presiding officers, has been growing apace alongside corruption in other fields. . . Students in several parts of the world have played a decisive role in shaping the political destiny of their country. Thailand is the most recent example. It is time for YOUTH POWER in India to enter the national arena and play a decisive role in establishing the primacy of the people and securing their victory over the power of money, falsehood and brute force.'

Later in the same month, in an address to the Radical Humanists, JP put forward 'a programme of immediate socio-political action' to build an alternative type of structure of democracy to the present Party Democracy 'based on and manipulated by political parties.' The alternative was People's Democracy, the foundations of which would be face-to-face organisations of direct democracy, not made up of representatives but comprising all adult residents. Similar bodies, which he called 'communities of work', should be founded in factories, offices, educational institutions and other work places. These primary bodies of People's Democracy had to be active bodies, meeting regularly, discussing common problems and evolving cooperative and collective forms of action to manage their affairs.

JP concluded his address with these words: 'The people's disenchantment with the extant Party Democracy on the one hand, and the Sarvodaya movement's apprenticeship in the working out of Gram Swaraj at the ground level on the other, are the two favourable conditions created from opposite sides, but converging to prepare the ground and the climate for a leap forward to a real People's Democracy. My call to the country's youth is to seize this favourable opportunity to play the revolutionary role that the present age demands of them. Young Men and Women, pick up this torch, and march now. Destiny beckons you. Success awaits you.'

The Tarun Shanti Sena or Youth Peace Corps, the movement's youth organisation which had been set up in 1969, was a major partner in the campaign and Sarvodaya workers figured prominently as speakers in the educational programmes of the camps. For the movement the campaign was a great opportunity to engage with youth in a dialogue on national problems. The problems most frequently discussed in the camps were unemployment, educational reform, economic reform, and corruption, matters looming large as issues in the Bihar agitation. Impressed by the success of the campaign, Radhakrishna, in the August issue of *People's Action* devoted to the theme of 'Youth for Peace and Social Revolution', made an impassioned plea to 'Unleash Youth Power in the Service of the Country.' In the same issue, it was reported that Marayan Desai, secretary of the Shanti Sena, the movement's adult Peace Corps, had suggested as follow-ups two further campaigns independent of Government support: a Clean India Campaign against filthy habits, unhygienic conditions in slums and villages, industrial pollution, and destruction of the eco-system; and a Youth Against Corruption Campaign. With regard to the latter, the author of the report stated that students in the capital whom he had interviewed 'had expressed their strong desire to join such a campaign if started by "someone". It is a question of someone taking a lead in this.'

Ill health had prevented JP from taking an active part in the Youth Against Famine campaign, but he was clearly the kind of 'someone' who could play a leadership role in any new campaign. This he did in December 1973 by publishing *An Appeal to Youth Power*.<sup>22</sup> Ironically enough, he took as his text a statement from Mrs. Gandhi's message to the World Union Parliament of Youth: 'A new force has come into being, Youth Power. All over the world young people are restless and engaged in one form of protest or another . . . there is much to be restless about and . . . youth in our country has much to protest against. The question of a revolution-

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<sup>22</sup> *People's Action*, Dec. 1973.

reached the initial stage of becoming a mass movement of and by the people. But the task of implementing thousands of Gramdan pledges was clearly too great to be tackled without the active participation of the people.

Adding further to the anxieties was a sense of urgency provoked by the emergence in 1967 of a rival, but violent revolutionary movement in India's countryside, the Maoist Naxalite movement with its programme of forcible seizure of land and crops and the murder of selected landlords and officials as 'enemies of the people'. These were tactics designed to mobilise the landless and peasants in a class war directed against India's burgeoning middleclass, enriched by the fruits of the so-called Green Revolution which, by introducing new crops and methods of cultivation, had resulted in a substantial increase in agricultural production but had not alleviated the plight of the mass of the rural population.

By July 1972 the Naxalites had been effectively, if temporarily, suppressed by Government forces, but not before they had helped to expose serious weaknesses in the Sarvodaya movement's strategy. In June 1970, in response to the Naxalite threat, JP made a determined effort to implement Gramdan in a limited area of some 120 villages.<sup>3</sup> Other workers, on the advice of Vinoba, who after 1969 had retired to his ashram and was therefore no longer actively involved in the day-to-day direction of the movement, concentrated their efforts in a larger area, the Saharsha District of Bihar. The idea behind both moves appears to have been to create models of Gramswaraj (village self-government) on a scale sufficiently large to have a visible impact on the politics and society of the first so-called Statedan.

In the process, the Sarvodaya workers involved came, in JP's phrase, 'face to face' with the harsh realities of Indian rural life. In the Musahari block it was found that a large proportion of the villages had been improperly declared Gramdan: they were bogus

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<sup>3</sup> See his report, 'Face to Face', *Interdiscipline*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 1970.

Gramdans in which work had to begin again from scratch. Similar findings were reported from other areas. Although some progress was made in implementing Gramdan and in engaging in a few hundred villages in the task of development, the overall results of all the efforts were extremely disappointing. Gramdan, it seemed, was revealing itself to be the 'hoax' its critics had claimed it to be.

The response of the Sarvodaya workers to finding that, as the President of the Sangh put it, 'We are working hard at our oars but the boat is not moving',<sup>4</sup> was various. Some, as might be expected, quietly dropped out of the movement altogether, while some sought to revive interest in other items of Gandhi's Constructive Programme, notably prohibition. Vinoba himself by 1972 appeared to be losing interest in Gramdan or, at least, reconciling himself to the fact that nothing spectacular could be expected from it in the foreseeable future. In his speeches he began to dwell more on his other concerns, particularly the need to synthesise scientific and spiritual knowledge, and also to suggest other programmes. Among the latter were the generation of women's power, the organisation of teachers as a non-partisan source of social wisdom, and the promotion of Devanagari as the common script for all the Indian languages.<sup>5</sup> But other Sarvodaya workers, including most of the leaders of Sarva Seva Sangh, responded to the new situation by questioning the movement's approach to the task of mobilising the people for nonviolent revolution.

To understand the latter response, it is necessary to appreciate that, under Vinoba's leadership, the movement mostly eschewed the kind of satyagraha which Gandhi had employed in the struggle for independence. Vinoba drew an important distinction between negative and positive satyagraha, favouring the latter with its idea of nonviolent *assistance* in right thinking and action rather than the former with its more familiar idea of nonviolent *resistance* to wrong

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<sup>4</sup> *People's Action*, Dec. 1969.

<sup>5</sup> *People's Action*, Nov. 1972.

ers could not by themselves provide the motive force for a national campaign to generate people's power that embraced the towns and cities as well as the villages. The movement had to tap new sources of strength. One such source was the concerned but politically uncommitted citizens. In an effort to mobilise these, and apparently inspired by JP's aforementioned article, the League of Democrats was founded in September 1972 at a meeting held at the Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi.<sup>21</sup> The new organisation, however, made little or no headway until it was re-launched as Citizens for Democracy in April 1974, shortly after the Bihar movement had begun.

The difficulties in establishing Citizens for Democracy may have suggested that a non-partisan pressure group appealing mainly to middle class intellectuals and professional people could not provide the dynamic force required to carry forward a revolutionary movement. For this purpose, it was necessary to tap another source: the youth of the country. In an article entitled 'Winning friends and influencing people', published in the Sangh's journal, *People's Action*, February 1973, it was pointed out that a movement aiming at social revolution needed to attract more young people. The author lamented the fact that the existing programmes of the Sarvodaya movement did not appeal to the young mind which, mistakenly, identified nonviolence with 'goody-goody idealism.' A few months later an opportunity was provided to change this situation and to project a more exciting image of the movement to upwards of 100,000 young people: the Youth Against Famine Campaign, jointly sponsored by the Union Government, several state governments, and a number of voluntary agencies and universities. In the course of the campaign, 750 summer camps were organised, including 73 in Gujarat and 51 in Bihar.

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<sup>21</sup> *People's Action*, Nov. 1972. The Gandhi Peace Foundation appears to have played a central role in Sarvodaya 'new thinking' and its secretary, Radhakrishna, later became the secretary of the National Coordination Committee of the Political Parties supporting the Bihar movement.

peding the growth of people's power. As he insisted, 'Resistance to evil is the only way to generate people's power.'<sup>19</sup>

The half-yearly meeting of the Sangh immediately followed the national conference. In the opinion of some of the more prominent leaders, it was this particular meeting which marked the real turning point of the Sarvodaya movement. In answer to a question, Vinoba expressed the view that the Sarva Seva Sangh was already in effect the Lok Sevak Sangh that Gandhi had envisaged when, on the eve of his assassination, he had proposed the dissolution of Congress as a political party. Commenting on Vinoba's view, Radhakrishna, the Secretary of the Gandhi Peace Foundation who had prompted the question, declared: 'In its new role the Sangh sees a new opportunity to enlarge itself and become an instrument of creating massive public opinion for the realisation of a society based on Gandhiji's vision.'<sup>20</sup> It seems clear, however, that Vinoba had not intended to endorse the politicisation of the Sangh. At the same conference, he reiterated his long-standing opinion that there was only one royal road to the solution of the many problems facing the people: the solution of the land problem. And when the word 'politicisation' was openly used by the Secretary of the Sangh, some of Vinoba's closest associates, including Nirmala Deshpande, insisted vehemently that the movement stood for 'the spiritualisation of politics' not its politicisation.

By the autumn of 1973, it is apparent that the Sangh, partly in response to the difficulties encountered in implementing its Gramdan programme, and partly in response to a variety of problems developing in the national economy and polity, was groping its way towards a new strategy. But, as things stood, there was an obvious weakness in this strategy: the few thousand Sarvodaya work-

<sup>19</sup> *People's Action*, Oct. 1973.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* In fact as early as January 1970 Vinoba had suggested that the Sarva Seva Sangh could now function as a Lok Sevak Sangh. At that time he appears to have been toying with the idea that the Sangh might exercise 'negative' pressure on the administration.

doers. True nonviolence, Vinoba argued, proceeds in the opposite direction to violence, not from 'harsh to harsher to harshest', but from 'gentle to gentler to gentlest.' His movement's basic approach had emphasised peaceful persuasion, change of heart, search for consensus, the resolution of social conflicts, and the quiet construction of alternative institutions.

There is evidence that a large proportion of Vinoba's activists had never been fully convinced of the validity of his gentle approach.<sup>6</sup> So it is not surprising that, faced with the difficulties of implementing Gramdan pledges, some workers raised the question whether the time had not now come for the movement to organise the landless and small peasants in a massive nonviolent confrontation with the large landowners and power-holders in Indian rural society.<sup>7</sup> Behind this question was the suspicion that in the earlier propagandist phase of the movement, the privileged and powerful groups in the villages might well be prepared to cooperate, at least up to a point. Limited donations of land might represent for them a far-sighted investment to preserve the essentials of the status quo. But, beyond that point, could they really be expected to cooperate in the euthanasia of their own class? The general problem presented itself most acutely in the context of establishing the basic institutions of people's power, the Gram Sabhas or village assemblies, which were expected to operate by consensus.

As one group of Sarvodaya workers saw the problem: 'The reason why the Gram Sabhas were not the kind of institution they should be was that the caste and class forces of the village society, together with party factions operating there, paralysed the Gram Sabhas and made them inoperative. The movement seems to want

<sup>6</sup> In 1965, 66% of the Sangh's officeholders favoured the organisation of satyagraha campaigns as a means of abolishing landlessness. See Ostergaard & Currell, *op.cit.*, p.271.

<sup>7</sup> The issue was raised at the Sarvodaya conference at Bhopal, Oct. 1971, by one of the movement's leading intellectuals. See *People's Action*, Nov. 1971, Dec. 1971 & Jan. 1972 for details of the debate.

to derive its strength and respectability from, and get the sanction of, those very forces it hoped to destroy. This was the inherent contradiction it found itself in. There was a vicious circle: unless the caste forces and party factions are broken, the Gram Sabha cannot become active and unless it becomes active these forces cannot be broken. The real task of the workers (is) to find a nonviolent way to break (out of) this vicious circle.<sup>8</sup>

In April 1972, when this statement was made, the Sarvodaya movement was not ready for the radical revision of its strategy implied by the advocates of confrontation. The debate on the question ended inconclusively, but it had served to deepen the impression of many activists that active struggle needed to be injected into the movement's approach if the nonviolent revolution was to avoid draining away into the sands. Shortly afterwards, such activists did organise several satyagrahas in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, but these were essentially localised affairs.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps a clearer indication that a more militant attitude was developing in the movement as a whole was the Sangh's support early in 1973 of the state wide agitation for prohibition in Rajasthan.<sup>10</sup>

Associated with the militant attitude of advocates of confrontation was a questioning of the movement's relations with Government. These relations had always been ambivalent. Ideologically, the movement was committed to voluntary action: people's politics and people's power are juxtaposed with State politics and State power; and the ultimate objective is a Stateless society. But its policy of seeking the cooperation of all and its programmes of Bhoodan and Gramdan had in practice led to close involvement of the movement with Government. On its side, Government, mostly of course the Congress party led governments, avowedly sympathetic to Gandhian ideas, had encouraged and supported

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<sup>8</sup> *People's Action*, April 1972.

<sup>9</sup> *People's Action*, Sept. 1972.

<sup>10</sup> *People's Action*, Feb. 1973.

wholesale trade in wheat which 'gives rise to black-marketing, puts a premium on corruption, infringes on citizens' liberties, increases bureaucratic bungling, and puts the general distribution system completely out of gear.' The Executive believed that 'there is a third way besides government take-over and private trade. This is the way of people's direct take-over.' The resolution concluded by calling for a national campaign to secure the proper distribution of food grains and other necessities, enlisting the people's active cooperation in it by forming Gram Sabhas in villages and Ward Sabhas in towns and cities.

The terms of this resolution indicate a significant shift in the Sangh's thinking and strategy. The concern is with a wide range of problems rather than with the one major problem of land; there is an explicit identification of the Government as the source of the problems; there is an attempt to extend the idea of popular assemblies to the urban areas; and there is a strong suggestion that the people should exert their power through nonviolent direct action. The passage of the resolution marked a big step towards what later came to be called the 'politicisation' of the Sangh.

A further step in this direction was taken in September 1973 when the Sangh convened a national conference to consider the situation in the country.<sup>18</sup> One hundred-and-fifty leading citizens, including politicians but not political parties as such, were invited to attend. The Sangh's President defined the issues for consideration: the land problem, educational reform, the food situation, unemployment, and corruption in relation to elections. The conference adopted an eight-point programme of action covering these issues, of which the first item was organisation of 'the primary units of people's power', and popular assemblies in villages, towns and cities. The question of politicisation of the Sangh was sharply raised in the discussions by the veteran Gandhian socialist, J. B. Kripalani, who blamed the Sarvodaya movement's apolitical approach for im-

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<sup>18</sup> *People's Action*, Sept. 1973.



he thought, necessary for the successful working of parliamentary democracy, but he doubted whether it would be possible to bind together in any viable manner 'the scattered political fragments of the opposition with their fierce controversies, their widely differing and often contradictory ideologies, (and) the personal ambitions and interests of (their) leaders.' The invitation, he pointed out, disregarded the position and political convictions he had held since 1954. As he said, 'I have no desire to change that position now or later.'<sup>16</sup> But he would, of course, continue not merely to write and speak on political affairs but also to promote political causes and political and social action.

The kind of action consistent with his position was indicated in a resolution on the National Situation passed by the Executive of Sarva Seva Sangh in July 1973.<sup>17</sup> The resolution listed as of serious concern: 'famine, poverty, unemployment, mis-education, skyrocketing prices, the feeling that constitutional directives being flouted, violation of constitutional provisions such as the imposition of the President's rule in the states, increasing concentration of power and widespread corruption.'

Fundamentally, the resolution continued, the present-state of affairs was 'the consequence of the wrong socio-economic and political policies followed by the government over a long period of time. A lasting solution to these problems solely rests with the people's vigilance and organised strength, which the Sarvodaya movement was trying to develop. Our efforts should be to help people take their own steps to tackle these problems on the basis of their own strength and initiative. Looked at from this point of view, we shall find our action in this direction will not impede but only promote our fundamental work for Gram Swaraj.'

To illustrate what they had in mind, the Executive criticised the Government's recent take-over (subsequently rescinded) of the

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<sup>16</sup> *People's Action*, March 1973.

<sup>17</sup> *People's Action*, Aug. 1973.

the movement. The more militant Sarvodaya workers had long been uneasy about the apparently contradictory stance of the movement but they became increasingly uneasy as the movement proceeded from propagating the Gramdan idea to trying to implement it. At a Gramswaraj workers' conference in the summer of 1972 there was a lively and heated debate on the subject of 'relations with the government in reconstruction work.'<sup>11</sup> Nirmala Deshpande, who was later to emerge as one of Vinoba's closest confidantes, wanted no conflict with the Government and pleaded for effective coordination between the movement's and the Government's programmes for rural development, even if this involved making compromises. In sharp contrast, Krishnaswamy of the Voluntary Action Cell wanted 'no surrender of constructive work to the government (and) to keep the government at arm's length, if not completely outside the sphere of such work.' The conference rejected the latter view as unrealistic, but the debate was symptomatic of the increasing militancy and the crystallisation of two distinct attitudes among the workers.

Having shrunk back from adopting a general confrontation strategy in the countryside and with the question of the movement's ambivalent relations with Government still unresolved, the leadership at this point in time began to take a close interest in the political and economic situation of the nation at large. The Sarva Seva Sangh had always shown an interest in national policy and from time to time, especially under JP's guidance, had issued statements calling for a Gandhian approach to solving the nation's current problems. But from mid-1972 onwards a new sense of urgency began to manifest itself in such pronouncements. The main reason for this was, undoubtedly, the proliferation and vexing nature of such problems. After splitting the Congress in 1969, Indira Gandhi had gone on to win a sweeping victory in the general election of 1971. But the Government's programme of radical reforms and its

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<sup>11</sup> *People's Action*, July 1972.

promise to 'abolish poverty' soon began to look hollow as the economy began to stagger from one crisis to another and unemployment and the rate of inflation both escalated. As a consequence, there was a noticeable rising tide of popular unrest throughout the country from 1972 onwards.

The Sarva Seva Sangh's increased concern with the national situation was not, however, unrelated to tendencies developing within the movement itself. For a decade or more there had been an intermittent debate over whether or not Sarvodaya workers should take up current problems, such as rising prices and eviction of tenants, as a way of mobilising the masses. In 1965 a large proportion of activists favoured such a strategy, although Vinoba himself was opposed to it.<sup>12</sup> Advocacy of the strategy was associated with militancy and with the view that single-minded concentration on Gramdan was not sufficient to generate popular support. Perhaps not so obviously, it was also associated with a latent feeling that the movement would make more progress by adopting an approach closer to that of conventional parties whose stock in trade is, of course, the taking up and promising to solve current problems. In 1972, with the Gramdan campaign running into difficulties and with JP, a former politician, coming to the front as Vinoba retired to the background, it was natural for the movement to show a renewed interest in this kind of strategy.

JP, it should be appreciated, had earned for himself a status as a national leader, which was largely independent of his role in the Sarvodaya movement. In quitting the Socialist Party leadership and joining the movement in 1954, at which time he was widely regarded as Nehru's most likely successor, he had renounced party and power politics but not, as he explained, a concern for politics in a wider sense. In the intervening years, from the vantage point provided by Sarvodaya, he had fashioned a role for himself as the conscience-keeper of the nation whose pronouncements on na-

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<sup>12</sup> Ostergaard & Currell, op.cit., pp. 236-9.

tional issues, even when unpopular, merited attention. In July 1972 at a conference of Sarvodaya workers he had made a speech on democracy without political parties, which was widely interpreted in the press as a call to his colleagues to return to the mainstream of India's political life.<sup>13</sup> At the same conference, plans were laid to launch a new journal devoted to political commentary – plans which led to the publication, in the beginning of July 1973, of *Everyman's Weekly*, later to become the main organ of the Bihar movement.<sup>14</sup> In August 1972, in a widely publicised article, 'Can a nation survive without moral fibre?', JP reviewed the country's progress, or rather lack of it, since independence and drew attention to what he perceived as a steady deterioration of Indian democracy as a consequence of Mrs. Gandhi's style of leadership and the drive towards bureaucratic, rather than democratic, socialism. Introducing what was to become a major theme of the Bihar movement, he was concerned particularly to expose what he described as 'the galloping political corruption that was affecting and degrading the entire gamut of national life.'<sup>15</sup>

JP's emergence as a critic of what he later called 'the national malady' was, as might be expected, welcomed by political parties opposed to the ruling Congress and led, in March 1973, to his being invited by Biju Patnaik, an opposition leader from Orissa, to take the lead in new efforts to unite the Opposition parties. In a public statement, JP declined the invitation, although he added that he would lend his 'moral support and be available for consultation and advice' to those prepared to work for such a goal. A strong opposition party, capable of displacing the party in power, was,

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<sup>13</sup> *Indian Express*, July 7, 1972. 'This is good news', commented the editor who then went on to criticise JP's concept of 'partyless' democracy and to warn him that he should 'set his sights accurately before venturing into the jungle of Indian politics where more man-eaters abound than in the terrain along India's foothills.'

<sup>14</sup> Personal interview with Radhakrishna.

<sup>15</sup> *People's Action*, Aug. 1972.