



## Total Revolution: An Analytical Study of Jayaprakash Narayan's Political Philosophy

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### Abstract

Jayaprakash Narayan (1902–1979), popularly known as “*Loknayak*,” remains one of the most influential political thinkers and activists in modern Indian history. His call for “Total Revolution” during the 1970s was not merely a political slogan but a comprehensive framework for moral, social, and political transformation. This study undertakes an analytical examination of Jayaprakash Narayan’s political philosophy, tracing its roots from his early Marxist leanings to his later adoption of Gandhian principles and the *Sarvodaya* ideal. The paper explores the multidimensional nature of “Total Revolution,” which encompassed seven spheres—political, economic, social, cultural, educational, moral, and spiritual—seeking to transform both the structures of governance and the moral fabric of society. It highlights Narayan’s critique of centralized power, his advocacy for participatory democracy, and his vision of a decentralized, party-less political system rooted in grassroots empowerment. By situating his thought within the socio-political context of post-independence India, the paper assesses the philosophical underpinnings, practical challenges, and enduring relevance of his ideas in contemporary democratic discourse. The analysis further reflects on how “Total Revolution” sought to integrate ethical ideals with political action, making it a unique paradigm in Indian political thought. This study thus offers a critical lens through which to understand Jayaprakash Narayan’s legacy as both a political

### Original Article

**Open Access** 

**Received:** 06.09.2025

**Accepted:** 30.09.2025

**Publication Date:** 30 September 2025

**Volume:** 1

**Issue:** 2

**Doi:** <https://doi.org/10.65842/nbpa.v1.i2.002>

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**Published by:** North Bengal Philosophers Association

**Website:** <https://nbpajournal.com/>  
<https://nbpa.org.in/>

**Key Words:** Jayaprakash Narayan . Total Revolution . Political Philosophy . Participatory Democracy . *Sarvodaya*

## **Introduction**

Jayaprakash Narayan (1902–1979), popularly known as the “*Loknayak*” or “Leader of the People,” occupies a distinct and enduring position in the history of Indian political thought and activism. His life and work reflect a rare combination of ideological commitment, moral courage, and deep empathy for the struggles of the common people<sup>1</sup>. Unlike many leaders who confined themselves to the sphere of electoral politics, Narayan’s political engagement was rooted in a broader vision of social transformation, informed by both philosophical inquiry and grassroots experience.

Narayan’s intellectual journey was marked by a dynamic evolution of thought. In his youth, he was drawn to Marxism, which appealed to his sense of justice and structural change<sup>2</sup>. However, disillusionment with authoritarian tendencies within communist movements, coupled with the inspiration drawn from Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy, gradually led him towards democratic socialism and later to *Sarvodaya*—the Gandhian ideal of the welfare of all. This ideological trajectory culminated in his most comprehensive and ambitious political formulation: the doctrine of “Total Revolution” (*Sampoorna Kranti*)<sup>3</sup>. Articulated in the early 1970s, particularly during the Bihar Movement of 1974, Total Revolution was Narayan’s response to what he perceived as the moral, political, and institutional degeneration of Indian democracy. It was not merely a call for a change in government, but for a radical restructuring of society and polity. The concept encompassed seven interrelated spheres—political, economic, social, cultural, educational, moral, and spiritual—underscoring his belief that genuine transformation must be holistic. At the heart of this vision was the conviction that political freedom without moral and social renewal would remain incomplete and fragile.

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<sup>1</sup> Sen, S. P. (1977). *The life and work of Jayaprakash Narayan*. Calcutta: Institute of Historical Studies, pp. 12–14.

<sup>2</sup> Narayan, J. P. (1980). *Towards total revolution* Bombay: Popular Prakashan, pp. 33–36.

<sup>3</sup> Dubey, S. M. (1997). *Total revolution: The JP way*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, pp. 76–80.

Narayan's critique of centralized power and party politics was central to his call for a decentralized, participatory, and "party-less" democracy<sup>4</sup>. He envisioned governance rooted in local self-government (*Gram Swaraj*), where citizens would exercise direct control over decision-making processes. His emphasis on moral leadership, civic responsibility, and non-violent change reflected his deep faith in human dignity and ethical politics. The historical backdrop to his philosophy—rising corruption, social unrest, economic disparities, and the imposition of the Emergency (1975–1977)—further amplified the urgency of his message. For Narayan, Total Revolution was not an abstract utopia but a practical moral-political imperative. It sought to combine the Gandhian ethos of non-violence and self-reliance with the socialist commitment to equality and justice. This paper seeks to analyze the philosophical foundations, practical implications, and contemporary relevance of Jayaprakash Narayan's Total Revolution. By examining his speeches, writings, and political interventions, this work aims to present a comprehensive understanding of his vision, while also critically evaluating its feasibility in the context of India's democratic and socio-economic challenges.

### **1. Contextualizing Jayaprakash Narayan's Political Philosophy:**

Understanding Jayaprakash Narayan's (JP's) idea of *Total Revolution* requires first placing it within the trajectory of his life, the socio-political conditions of India during his lifetime, and the intellectual traditions that shaped him. JP was born in 1902 in Sitabdiara, a rural area that often suffered floods due to its location near the confluence of the Ganga and Ghaghara rivers. This early exposure to rural hardships sensitized him to poverty, economic insecurity, and the vulnerability of agrarian communities<sup>5</sup>. His family was modest but valued education, sending him to Patna and later to the United States for higher studies in the early 1920s.

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<sup>4</sup> Narayan, J. P. (1974). *A plea for reconstruction of Indian polity*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, pp. 22–29.

<sup>5</sup> Sen, S. P. (1977). *The life and work of Jayaprakash Narayan*. Calcutta: Institute of Historical Studies, pp. 3–5.

The years in America were intellectually transformative. While studying sociology, political science, and economics—first at the University of California, Berkeley, and later at the University of Wisconsin—he encountered Marxist literature and was drawn to socialist ideals. The works of Karl Marx, Lenin, and progressive American thinkers convinced him that inequality was rooted in structural exploitation and could only be overcome through systemic change. However, JP was not an uncritical follower. He appreciated Marx's analysis of class struggle but resisted deterministic or authoritarian interpretations<sup>6</sup>. This tendency towards independent thinking would later be a hallmark of his philosophy.

On returning to India in 1929, JP joined the Indian National Congress and became a close associate of Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, and other socialist leaders within the Congress. His commitment to socialist transformation was evident in his role in founding the Congress Socialist Party in 1934. But the turning point came during the **Quit India Movement (1942)**, when JP was imprisoned for long periods. These years of reflection led him to reassess the role of violence and centralized state control in revolution. Gandhi's emphasis on *ahimsā* (non-violence), *satyāgraha* (truth-force), and *Grām Swarāj* (village self-rule) offered an alternative path—one that sought social justice without authoritarianism<sup>7</sup>. By the early 1950s, disillusioned with both the compromises of parliamentary politics and the rigidities of orthodox Marxism, JP withdrew from party politics entirely. He embraced *Sarvodaya*—Vinoba Bhave's movement, inspired by Gandhi—which emphasised decentralisation, community cooperation, and moral regeneration.

For JP, politics was inseparable from ethics. He rejected the notion—common among realists—that politics was about power alone. Instead, he saw politics as a tool for human betterment, grounded in truth, moral discipline, and service to the weakest sections of society (*antyyodaya*). This moral foundation is essential to understanding *Total Revolution*. JP believed that without a

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<sup>6</sup> Chopra, P. N. (1992). *Political philosophy of Jayaprakash Narayan*. New Delhi: Criterion Publications, pp. 18-22.

<sup>7</sup> Narayan, J. P. (1974). *A plea for reconstruction of Indian polity*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, pp. 11-15.

simultaneous renewal of individual character and civic responsibility, structural reforms would collapse under the weight of selfishness and corruption. His faith in **people's capacity for moral self-governance** became the ideological seed for his later call to transform not just institutions but also values, education, and everyday social relations.

## **2. Philosophical Foundations of Total Revolution:**

Jayaprakash Narayan's concept of *Total Revolution (Sampoorna Kranti)* was not a spontaneous political slogan born out of agitation. It was the philosophical distillation of decades of ideological engagement, ethical reflection, and practical activism<sup>8</sup>. To grasp it fully, we must examine its conceptual roots, theoretical structure, and guiding principles. JP argued that true transformation could never be achieved by changing only the political leadership or replacing one set of laws with another. Instead, revolution must address **seven interconnected spheres** of life:

1. **Political Revolution** – Restructuring governance to ensure decentralization, participatory democracy, and accountability.
2. **Economic Revolution** – Ending exploitation, promoting cooperative ownership, and ensuring equitable distribution of resources.
3. **Social Revolution** – Eradicating casteism, gender discrimination, and social hierarchies.
4. **Cultural Revolution** – Reviving ethical values, artistic creativity, and a sense of community belonging.
5. **Educational Revolution** – Reforming education to cultivate critical thinking, moral responsibility, and practical skills rather than mere rote learning.
6. **Moral Revolution** – Fostering honesty, non-violence, self-discipline, and integrity in both private and public life.
7. **Spiritual Revolution** – Awakenning an inner sense of purpose, compassion, and universal brotherhood beyond sectarian religion.

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<sup>8</sup> Dubey, S. M. (1997). *Total revolution: The JP way*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, pp. 76-80.

These dimensions were **interdependent**—failure in one would weaken the rest. Jayaprakash Narayan's *Total Revolution* was not a vague utopian slogan; it had a **clear structural design** for change, addressing different but interconnected spheres of life. Each component was a building block in a **holistic social transformation** aimed at liberating India not just from political corruption, but from social injustice, economic inequality, moral decay, and spiritual stagnation. In his vision, *Total Revolution* was **both a philosophy and an action plan**—a complete reorganization of society built on moral and democratic foundations.

The philosophical core of *Total Revolution* was a synthesis of **Marxism** and **socialism**. JP took the emphasis on systemic change, economic equality, and class justice. From **Gandhian philosophy**, he adopted decentralization, non-violence, moral leadership, and the belief in transforming individuals as well as institutions<sup>9</sup>. This integration allowed JP to avoid two extremes: (i) **Revolutionary violence** that undermines democracy, (ii) **Liberal reformism** that fails to challenge deep-rooted injustice.

A major philosophical claim in JP's framework was that **democracy cannot be reduced to elections**. Parliamentary democracy, as practiced in post-independence India, had, in his view, been corrupted by power politics, money influence, and centralized control. He called for "**party-less democracy**", where governance would emerge from consensus in local communities (*Grām Swarāj*), and political parties would not monopolize public life<sup>10</sup>. This was both a **political ideal** and a **moral necessity** because, for JP, the **quality of democracy depended on the moral quality of its citizens**. JP's *Total Revolution* had an ethical anchor absent in many political theories. For him, revolution without moral renewal would simply reproduce old oppressions under new forms. The transformation of individual consciousness was not optional—it was the foundation of lasting

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<sup>9</sup> Narayan, J. P. (1974). *A plea for reconstruction of Indian polity*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, pp. 21–26.

<sup>10</sup> Narayan, J. P. (1978). *Prison diary*. New Delhi: Popular Prakashan, pp. 115–118.

change. In this sense, his revolution was as much **inner and personal** as it was **outer and institutional**.

### 3. Historical Context and the Bihar Movement of 1974:

The Bihar Movement of 1974 was the **practical crucible** in which Jayaprakash Narayan's idea of *Total Revolution* gained mass visibility and political urgency. To understand why it emerged, we must examine the **political climate of India in the early 1970s**, the **conditions in Bihar**, and how JP's leadership transformed a regional student protest into a nationwide democratic movement. The early 1970s were a time of **political turbulence** and **economic strain** in India:

- **Economic crisis** – Rising inflation, unemployment, and shortages of essential goods eroded public confidence in the government.
- **Political centralization** – Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's leadership style increasingly concentrated power in the Prime Minister's Office, sidelining democratic institutions.
- **Corruption scandals** – Allegations of political corruption undermined public trust.
- **Youth unrest** – College and university students, facing joblessness and poor educational infrastructure, became a vocal political force<sup>11</sup>.

Against this national backdrop, Bihar became the epicenter of dissent. Bihar in the early 1970s suffered from a **multi-layered crisis**. There were **feudal land structures** that kept rural poverty entrenched. **Administrative inefficiency** and **corruption** in government offices alienated citizens. **Student frustration** over unemployment and poor academic facilities erupted into campus protests. The *Bihar Chhatra Sangharsh Samiti (BCSS)*, a coalition of student organizations, emerged in March 1974 as the key organizer of protests. Initially, their demands were limited to educational reform and job opportunities. When student leaders requested Jayaprakash Narayan to lead the movement, he initially declined, citing his retirement from active politics. But after witnessing the moral and political decay in Bihar, he accepted, framing the struggle not merely as

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<sup>11</sup> Hasan, Z. (1989). *Politics and the State in India*. Sage, p. 214.

a state-level protest but as the seed for a **national democratic renewal**<sup>12</sup>. JP's leadership shifted the **focus from immediate grievances to systemic change**—he called for ending corruption, decentralizing governance, and empowering people at the grassroots.

On **5 June 1974**, in Patna's Gandhi Maidan, JP delivered his historic speech calling for *Sampoorna Kranti* (Total Revolution). He explained that the movement was not just about replacing a government but about transforming **politics, economy, society, education, morals, and personal conduct**. His call resonated deeply, especially with youth, farmers, and workers. Under JP's leadership, the Bihar agitation inspired similar movements in Gujarat and elsewhere. The movement's moral force threatened the central government, eventually contributing to the declaration of the **Emergency (1975–77)** by Indira Gandhi—a period of suspended civil liberties that ironically vindicated JP's warnings about the dangers of authoritarianism.

#### **4. JP's Methods and Strategy for Change:**

Jayaprakash Narayan's *Total Revolution* was not only a theoretical framework—it was meant to be a **living, participatory movement**. His methods were grounded in **Gandhian non-violence, moral persuasion, and grassroots mobilization**. He believed that *means* must be as pure as the *ends*; thus, any use of violence would corrupt the revolution itself. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, JP's first and unwavering principle was **ahimsa** (non-violence). He believed that **violence could overthrow a regime, but not change the moral fiber of society**<sup>13</sup>. The Bihar Movement of 1974 was a testament to his success in mobilizing students, farmers, and workers into large-scale peaceful protests. Non-violence was not just about avoiding physical harm—it was about respecting opponents as fellow citizens who could be persuaded, not destroyed.

JP rejected the over-centralized, top-down model of governance. Advocated **Gram Swaraj**—self-governing villages as the building blocks of democracy. He promoted *Lokniti* (people's politics)

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<sup>12</sup> Narayan, J. P. (1975). *Selected Works of Jayaprakash Narayan, Vol. Manohar*, p. 98.

<sup>13</sup> Narayan, J. P. (1975). *Total Revolution*. Popular Prakashan, p. 21.

over *Rajniti* (power politics), meaning that political engagement should arise from citizen initiatives rather than party agendas. Encouraged local decision-making, direct participation in governance, and accountability through open forums. JP strongly criticized the **corruption, factionalism, and power struggles** inherent in party politics. Envisioned a **party-less system** where elected representatives worked for the people rather than for party interests. In his model, political competition would be replaced by cooperation, and leadership would emerge from social service rather than electoral manipulation<sup>14</sup>.

He believed that **true revolution begins with constructive work**, not just political agitation. He encouraged activities like literacy campaigns, cooperative farming, public health drives, and anti-corruption vigilance committees. These efforts were meant to create a **self-reliant, morally conscious citizenry** ready to sustain democracy. His opinion was for **moral and spiritual Persuasion**. JP often said that the **battle for India's future was a battle for its moral soul**. He appealed to citizens' ethical sense, calling for personal transformation alongside structural reform. He saw political corruption as a symptom of deeper moral decay, which could only be cured through values such as honesty, humility, and public service. When persuasion failed, JP was willing to adopt **non-violent civil disobedience**. His approach was to use *Satyāgraha* (truth-force) to compel the state to respect democratic rights. Even during the Emergency (1975–77), when he was imprisoned, he insisted on peaceful resistance, avoiding any call for armed rebellion.

## 5. Criticism and Challenges of Total Revolution:

Jayaprakash Narayan's idea of *Sampoorna Kranti* (Total Revolution) attracted nationwide attention and moral support, but it also faced **significant criticism and practical challenges**—both during his lifetime and in later evaluations. Critics argued that *Total Revolution* was **too broad in scope**, trying to simultaneously reform politics, economics, society, culture, education, morality, and spirituality. The sheer scale of change demanded by JP seemed **impractical** in a

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<sup>14</sup> Narayan, J. P. (1974). *A Plea for Reconstruction of Indian Polity*. Asia Publishing House, p. 67.

country as large, diverse, and deeply entrenched in traditional structures as India. Many felt it was **idealistic without clear, step-by-step implementation plans.**

JP deliberately avoided creating a rigid political organization, preferring a loosely connected movement of students, workers, and social activists. While this avoided party politics, it also led to a **lack of coordination, discipline, and continuity** once the initial enthusiasm faded. The decentralized model meant that there was no strong institutional framework to carry forward reforms after the Emergency ended. JP placed **too much faith in the moral transformation** of politicians and citizens. In a political environment dominated by vested interests, corruption, and power struggles, **moral persuasion alone** often proved insufficient<sup>15</sup>. Many leaders who supported him during the Emergency later returned to traditional power politics, undermining his vision.

Some political groups **used JP's movement as a platform** to weaken Indira Gandhi's government rather than to genuinely push for structural reform. After the Janata Party came to power in 1977—thanks in large part to JP's mobilizations—**internal infighting and political opportunism** eroded public trust in the movement's objectives<sup>16</sup>. This disillusioned many who had believed *Total Revolution* was beyond party politics. Bureaucrats, political elites, and vested interest groups actively resisted JP's proposals for decentralization and participatory governance. Radical reforms like **party-less democracy** were seen as threatening to the political establishment, so they were **never implemented seriously**. JP's own **declining health** during the late 1970s weakened his ability to guide and monitor the movement. Without his personal moral authority and leadership, the movement **lost momentum**. While many still regard JP as the “Loknayak” who fought for democracy during the Emergency, others view *Total Revolution* as **an inspiring moral call that**

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<sup>15</sup> Hasan, Z. (1989). *Politics and the State in India*. Sage, p. 232.

<sup>16</sup> Guha, R. (2007). *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy*. HarperCollins, pp. 448–450.

**lacked sustainable execution.** His ideas remain influential in theory but are rarely applied in full in contemporary politics.

## **6. Relevance of Total Revolution in Contemporary India:**

Even though Jayaprakash Narayan's *Total Revolution* was conceived in the political climate of the 1970s, many of its principles **still speak to India's present-day challenges.** The essence of his vision—**moral politics, decentralized governance, and people's participation**—remains unfinished work in the Indian democratic project. JP's criticism of **corruption, nepotism, and misuse of power** is still painfully relevant. Large-scale scams, electoral malpractices, and the influence of money in politics mirror the very issues JP sought to eradicate. His call for **ethical leadership** and citizen vigilance resonates with contemporary anti-corruption movements like the 2011 India Against Corruption campaign<sup>17</sup>.

The idea of **Gram Swaraj** (village self-rule) and **participatory democracy** finds partial expression in today's Panchayati Raj system. However, JP's vision was for **genuine grassroots empowerment**, where decision-making happens at the local level without excessive interference from state and central authorities. This remains crucial in addressing governance gaps, especially in rural development, public health, and education. JP relied heavily on student movements for social awakening, and today, youth activism continues to shape political discourse—whether in environmental protests, farmers' movements, or debates on social justice<sup>18</sup>. His emphasis on **non-violent, issue-based mobilization** can guide young activists in avoiding polarization and destructive politics. While a fully **party-less democracy** remains impractical, the idea of **minimizing partisan politics** and focusing on issue-based governance is still attractive. Civil society groups, independent candidates, and people's movements embody parts of this philosophy, even if the mainstream political system resists it. In his theory, we find the integration of ethical,

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<sup>17</sup> Teltumbde, A. (2012). *India Against Corruption: A Study in Civil Society and Democratic Politics*. Routledge, p. 63.

<sup>18</sup> Sen, S. (1988). *The Crisis of Indian Democracy: JP Movement and the Emergency*. Oxford University Press, p. 137.

social, and political change. JP's insistence that **structural reform must go hand-in-hand with moral renewal** is increasingly relevant in a time when rapid economic growth has not always brought corresponding social justice or ethical governance. His framework reminds us that democracy is not just about elections—it is about building a **culture of public service, accountability, and compassion**. With global concerns about inequality, climate change, and democratic backsliding, JP's multi-dimensional revolution offers a **holistic template for change** that goes beyond narrow electoral reform.

## 7. Conclusion

Jayaprakash Narayan's Total Revolution was an audacious attempt to align political action with moral philosophy. It offered a vision of democracy as a lived ethic rather than a procedural mechanism, rooted in empowered communities and guided by moral integrity. While its practical implementation faced formidable obstacles, its normative framework remains a powerful critique of both authoritarianism and shallow electoralism. Narayan's life demonstrates that political leadership can be grounded in humility, ethical consistency, and a refusal to separate means from ends. In revisiting Total Revolution today, we are reminded that the health of a democracy depends not only on institutions but on the moral capacities of its citizens. As India and the world grapple with crises of governance, inequality, and public trust, Narayan's call for holistic transformation challenges us to imagine politics that is at once ethical, participatory, and transformative. While *Total Revolution* remains an inspiring and morally compelling political vision, it has not been without its critics. However, scholars, politicians, and even some of Narayan's contemporaries have pointed out practical, ideological, and structural challenges to its implementation.

### (i) Vagueness and Idealism

One major criticism is that the concept of *Total Revolution* was **too broad and idealistic**. By covering political, economic, social, cultural, educational, moral, and spiritual spheres all at once, JP risked making the program **too diffuse to be actionable**. Critics argue that without a clear step-by-step framework, such sweeping goals can remain aspirational rather than achievable.

(ii) Party-less Democracy Feasibility

Narayan's idea of a **party-less democracy** attracted skepticism. Political parties, despite their flaws, are considered essential to modern representative systems for organizing ideas, leadership, and legislative processes. The absence of parties could risk decentralization without coordination, potentially creating local power monopolies.

(iii) Dependence on Moral Leadership

JP's framework assumes the availability of **morally upright leaders**, but in practice, leadership quality is inconsistent. Without strong institutional safeguards, overreliance on personal integrity could leave governance vulnerable to corruption or authoritarianism.

(iv) Short-Term Mobilization vs. Long-Term Reform

The Bihar Movement and later anti-Emergency struggles demonstrated JP's capacity for mobilizing masses. However, sustaining such momentum for **gradual, structural change** proved difficult once the immediate political crisis ended. Many of his organizational networks weakened after his health declined.

(v) Overlap with Existing Constitutional Framework

Some constitutional scholars argue that much of what JP envisioned—decentralization, moral governance, social justice—already exists in India's Constitution and Gandhian legacy. The challenge lies less in *new ideals* and more in **implementing existing provisions effectively**.

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