

A Memoir of Dr. S. Jeyapragasam: The Great Tree

I count it one of the great blessings of my life that I encountered and then came to know—even though in my later years—Dr. S. Jeyapragasam. I imagine him still, as I first met him on that late afternoon in the haze and heat of Madurai, sitting on a white plastic chair, in a neatly pressed white, short-sleeved shirt and lungi, his shirt pocket sagging with pens, his legs crossed under him and his bare feet dangling. He is smiling so broadly and warmly that his eyes are almost squeezed shut. Behind him, on the white board is sketched out a complex diagram of arrows and words, both Tamil and English. ‘I am trying to identify all the elements of a holistic view of nonviolence’, he explains to me quietly, his face still beaming from the excitement of what he appears to be in the process of just now discovering. ‘What do you think’, he asks me in a soft voice, ‘What is still missing’? And I know immediately, that I have found a kindred spirit, across a great cultural divide, who is reaching out in friendship.

A few years later he would confide to me about that afternoon encounter, ‘I saw you were suffering’. We were sitting then on a dusty downtown side street under large banyan trees by the rickshaw stand in front of his favourite tea shop. ‘But you know, great works can come out of suffering’. ‘Great works’ was what JP’s life work was about, not only performing them himself but above all inspiring others to perform them. JP was not just a ‘Gandhian’ in the loose way that iconic metaphor is still tossed around in India. He embodied, like a true disciple, the values, sympathies and beliefs in human self-transformation that Gandhi himself had embodied. Indeed, as I came to realize over time, he was one of last ripples from that great wave of magnificent, seismic disturbance that Gandhi had wrought in the ocean of India. In that very concrete way, his friendship, his kindness and his love became for me the vital instructive work of a teacher and mentor.

As natural as our first encounter seemed from JP’s side, it was by the most unlikely, karmically hidden, path that I came to it. My first trip to India followed a series of bitter personal disappointments in Canada, all the weight of which I had carried with me as mute witnesses to my first encounter with the old world. It was the winter of 2008 that I first met him and then at the end of a hair-raising six week trip through India in which I had been passed from hand to hand across the country by volunteers of Ekta Parishad, a grassroots, Gandhian organization advocating for the livelihood rights of marginalized and Adivasi peoples. I had been well-cared for, but not coddled, and so I was given to experience first-hand some of the realities of the country. One typical night, after a week of meetings with activists in Delhi, I was put on a night train south with the certain promise that someone would pick me up at the station in Katni Junction. When I climbed over the sleeping bodies on the floor of the car to get off there at two in the morning, no one awaited. By 6 am, after I had walked in a controlled panic countless times around the deserted market, someone did arrive, recognize me and take me merrily in hand. ‘No problem, sir. Welcome! We are honoured to meet you.’ This happened again and again until I was wide-eyed with wonder at the constant gratuity of it. By such small steps, over the course of six weeks, I came eventually to Madurai and to the ashram called CESC.

CESC was a rural residential centre set up 17 km from Madurai on the road to Dindugul, just past the tiny village of Kadavur. It had been created by another

western wanderer, a psychiatric nurse from Switzerland named Maia Koene. Maia had fallen in love with India, rural India in particular, over the course of many winter visits there. She got to know an Gandhian activist from the north, Rajagopal and then an academic, Dr. JP. Rajagopal inspired Maia with the vision of a rural centre where activists could come for training while meeting supportive Europeans who in turn could encounter the real India, and JP, then a well-known Professor of Gandhian Studies at Madurai Kamaraj University, lent his considerable local support to it. CESC was built with local materials (like the red bricks made onsite) among the eucalyptus groves and the villagers who lived across the road, Cinnaka and Poonikali (among others) came to staff it. Through CESC, Maia had brought together the activist, Rajagopal and the academic, Jeyapragasam into a unique collaboration. After accomplishing all of this, she died much too soon, of cancer.

By the time I got to meet him, JP had been working independently for several years, using his retirement pension and donations to fund the English/Tamil journal he published called *Ahimsa/Nonviolence* (with some 500 worldwide subscriptions) and also running weekend programs in holistic nonviolence for local people through what he called 'The Betsy Institute for Nonviolence'. He had rented a small office on the second floor of doctor's house in the city where he, along with two young women and his sister-in-law, Anandhi, worked on the journal and an array of other projects. On the weekend, he would come to CESC to teach his classes. I often saw him sitting on the porch of his suite between classes with a line of people waiting to eagerly chat with him. Eventually, over the time I knew him, both projects merged into a new form, The International Gandhian Institute for Nonviolence and Peace (IGINP). Rajagopal was the convenor of that organization, but JP was the heart and soul.

What was most remarkable about all of his work was the collaboration that lay behind it and that arose from JP's spontaneous way of working by encouraging those around him to rise to what he called 'excellence'. He had a large number of ex-students who continued to work devotedly with him, calling and dropping by throughout the course of the day to report on various projects he had passed on to them. He also had come to know many Europeans and North Americans who had passed through and developed long-lasting friendships. It was not just the fact that these people submitted articles for the journal or volunteered to attend the workshops, or worked on translations into Tamil and back again to English or went to the Tuesday night inter-religious prayer service that he had begun in 1983, it was that in all of these things his quiet enthusiasm, encouragement and friendship was the catalyst for a great chain of collaboration that stretched around the globe and was open to everyone. "Integral process" he wrote, "is based on the assumption that we are all part of one another and we all inherit a common heritage". For JP, that process meant a commitment on the part of each of us, a commitment to realize a series of small but powerful acts toward each other:

Holistic knowledge (truth), forgiving and forgetting, justice, setting right the past mistakes, compensatory action, penance, rightful action, healing the wounds, transformation practices are all tools for the integral process. This is the way for human survival and excellence in the Nuclear Age.

I often thought of the maxim 'Everything belongs' when I worked with JP; his vision was broad and open. Everyone he met had something to contribute and he was eager to elicit it. In the years just before I had gone to India, he had worked extensively over several years with an American Professor of systems analysis Leo Ellis. Ellis had travelled to India many times, given lectures, written articles, and helped JP found the IGINP. Before he left the final time, he left behind a book size handwritten volume on systems analysis and nonviolence which was stored reverently at CESC. I do not know how they met but once they did a year long collaboration sprang naturally from their encounter. But Leo had been just one among many who discovered the collaborative web that JP wove. And not all were academics by any means. While I was there, JP introduced me to a local farmer, who lived a few miles up the road from CESC. He proudly explained that the man was trying to farm on a Gandhian basis. Though he was illiterate, he came to many of the CESC workshops, often bringing baskets of his cucumbers as payment. JP delighted in bringing these disparate worlds together and he did it in a uniquely Indian way it seemed to me. Later, as if to give this chain of collaboration a wider reach, JP conceived the idea of independent, diploma program in peace and nonviolence open to all. It was to be a distance education and open learning model: participants worked through each of the eight volumes of essays on various topics, submitting their answers to written questions and then gathered at CESC for a practicum weekend.

When he was developing that program JPji invited me to come to live at CESC for three months and write one of the volumes for the course (on Nonviolent Conflict Resolution) with him. It was my third trip to India and was a rare chance to work closely with him. I relished every minute we spent together discussing the topics and our lives in general. I often rode the crowded city bus into Madurai to spend the morning working together with him. Afterward, we would eat our simple, home-cooked lunch together in the back room before I returned again by bus to CESC. Sometimes, I would stay later and he would take me with delight to one of the local Muslim restaurants where chicken was served. He worried that I would not thrive with only vegetarian food—and, I think, he enjoyed the chicken as well! By then, I had come to terms with some of the difficulties posed by living there and had also become keenly aware of some the delights of it: the easy, communal friendship, the rich and dense culture, monsoon nights sitting under CESC's thatched roof, the wild bus rides with young students in pigtails hanging off the sides of the city bus, walking past the rice paddies full of egrets in the early morning and the long graceful chats with JP about the work of nonviolence, the cultural differences we had grown up with and his plans for new projects.

'You are a great writer', he said to me during one of those conversations with conviction and gleam in his eye. 'I think you must continue to write for the good of humanity'. JP could say those kinds of things without sensing the least exaggeration. He really believed that each of us had a role to play and an arduous path of commitment to follow for the good of the whole. Once, when I had emailed him from the darkness of February in Canada and must have sounded despondent, he answered:

Dear Paulji,

Yours letter always brings me joy and inspiration. I am glad your spirit is up. We are born as humans since we are blessed. We need to move forward using this birth as an opportunity for our onward journey even under impossible circumstances.

with gratitude, regards and prayers,
Yours sincerely,
S.Jeyapragasam

I only learned much later, and from others close to him, about some of 'the impossible circumstances' he himself had endured. He had been forced out of his post at the University most unfairly by political pressure from the government for some things he had written. That set him on the path to the journal *Ahimsa* and the popular education work. Then, his son had been found inexplicably dead in a University residence. The family mourned for three years and he threw himself into his work more joyfully than ever, as if to say that the sadness of loss simply could not be allowed to be the final word. From his little office he created yet another forum for discussion and debate to honour his son, The Rajarajan Institute for Holistic Science. Later still, when his wife's struggles with mental illness became more intense in later life, he took her with him to the office everyday, gave her work to do and encouraged her with great patience and love. He knew how to take on such struggles and transform them as the 'opportunity for our onward journey.' But his nature was also intrinsically joyful and positive. I never heard a harsh word or the least criticism of anyone. In the small Gandhian universe of Madurai there were some personal jealousies, as I heard, about his simple way of life and simple practice of nonviolence, but he rose above even those. Once, when there was a flare up of anger against him, he simply absented himself from an important local Gandhian conference. "I do not wish to give offence", he told me. It was not just that, it was also his vision of acting for the good of others: "From self-actualization", he wrote, "we need to move to selfless actualization for all. That would open a new era of human excellence and superhuman evolution. However there is always the danger of giving up."

Back in Canada, I would often receive emails headed 'most urgent'. These were usually requests for new articles for *Ahimsa*. Sometimes I thought, cynically, 'JP just needs more articles' but I slowly came to realize his requests were not really about his needs but about mine. As I continued to write in order to try to find my way through my experiences in India, he was the heart of encouragement and subtle guidance. I wrote about my initial understanding of Gandhi and nonviolence—struck by the transformative work I had seen in Ekta Parishad. And there was JP waiting to guide me in that regard—"Write about aparigraha (non-grasping)", he would say. 'It was important to Gandhiji and you will find out how it can be important to people in your country'. I would think to myself, 'JPji is naïve; he doesn't know how thoroughly we have given ourselves over to grasping and greed. It is what we do and who we are'. But then I would do it, moved on some deeper level to find my way back to this ideal. JP knew that I had left Christianity discouraged after a lifetime of work as a theologian and that I carried some real bitterness about it. 'You could write about Thomas Merton' (a Christian monk) he suggested in another email. 'He truly understood Gandhiji'. Again, I thought it too simple, but I did it and I found myself learning from Merton's open path of wisdom. In this way, I found myself discovering other westerners who had been inspired by Gandhi, the Canadian philosopher

George Grant and then (through him) the young French mystic Simone Weil. Soon I was grappling with my Christian roots again not in bitterness but with some hope. I continued to think that JP's view of North America was idealistic—much too hopeful about the possibility of transformation for the good. But his idealism moved me slowly in a different direction, wave by wave. The last project I undertook at his behest was a book length analysis and interpretation of the work of Richard Gregg, the American Quaker and organic farmer who was inspired by Gandhi's agricultural and economic revolution. JP published it in a single edition of *Ahimsa*. 'Wonderful' he wrote to me. 'A truly important project'. I wondered if anyone but him had read it and then again I realized that was not the point. The point had been my transformation into a re-committed thinker and writer. I began to realize that I owed him a debt of gratitude for his unwavering naïveté, his idealism and his hope; I had not yet let go of my North American 'cynicism' but I was beginning to become aware of it.

The next spring I received another urgent email. JP was planning a conference for September in Chennai on the topic of 'creating grassroots circles of consultation and transformation'. Since I had not known him to ever leave his quarters in Madurai near the Ganesh Theatre, I imagined that something extraordinary was afoot and decided to go immediately. When the time came, some thirty people showed up at the Blue Lagoon Beach Resort, almost all were Indian (except for one other European and myself). It seemed an unlikely spot for a Gandhian gathering but the owner of the resort was an admirer of JPji and also perhaps looking for good karma in his next life had given us free reign (and food) for the weekend. We all made ourselves warily at home there in the vacation settings of upper middle class Indians. To remind myself I was in India, I often walked down to the nearby beach early in morning. To the left and right lay two still-working ancient fishing villages which had not been yet squeezed out by the spread of the beach resorts. The wooden boats were run up and perched in scattered bunches above the tide line and the sand the path was dotted with small piles of human feces. Often you would see the rail-thin fishermen themselves crouching or just getting up and re-wrapping their dhotis while casually staring out at the wide expanse of the Bay of Bengal where they made their living.

Meanwhile back in the air-conditioned rooms of the beach resort where by 10 am the temp was in the 40's, we solemnly discussed how to radically transform the social fabric from the grassroots up, how to empower the marginalized and build consensus across our differences. Everyone was eager to engage on the topic, both the activists and the academics. JP listened carefully to all the thoughts, often with his eyes closed in contemplation, then he would break into that wonderful, spacious smile of his and say, 'I now welcome Paulji to share with us his ideas and insights on this topic'. As I recalled the fishermen I had seen in the morning, I reflected that JP's vision of the circle which brought together all in equality, ran counter to many of the tensions endemic to the traditional culture of Tamil Nadu, tensions between rich and poor, men and women, Brahmins and Dalits, Tamils and Hindus. I had discovered by then that Tamil Nadu had a remarkably fractious political scene where political conflict was mimed on the public stage often by ex-movie stars posing as gangsters. The movies (which ran everywhere at all times) also showed a penchant for gratuitous violence and male rage. I could never reconcile this culture of antagonism with the remarkable joviality, vibrancy and practical hospitality of the

people there. Those qualities, *also* rooted in the traditional culture, were what JP himself embodied and what gave texture to his unique Gandhianism.

His was an inclusive Gandhianism, without judgement or hard edges, a Gandhianism which began and ended in *anttyodaya* (concern for the least one). He often used the word old Victorian word 'uplift' but what he seemed to mean by it was a combination of humbling service and empowerment. He loved to tell the story of the Churning of the Ocean (Samudra Manthana) from the Puranas and the Mahabharata. In that story, the jealous conflict between the Asuras and the Devas in quest of immortality (through *amrita*) leads instead, through the churning of the ocean, to the releasing of a blue poison which threatened the whole world. In a divine act of compassion or uplift, Shiva himself consumes the poison to save the three worlds and is marked forever after by a blue neck. 'This is like the act of Jesus', JP told me. 'Even though it is a minor story in Hinduism, it is important for us'. Shiva's act of uplift *empowered* creation to be creation again. That was, for JP, the pinnacle of an ethical life and the human onward journey. This crucial aspect of empowerment was something we, in the west, had mostly lost sight of. In the struggle to maintain our 'rights' we had forgotten our obligations and our possibilities. We had reconstructed ourselves and our the social order around the 'need to be taken care of' but, as Ivan Illich had seen so clearly, the need to be taken care of is also a way of disempowerment.

Of course, JP would never himself engage in such a critique of western culture. Although our greed and our desire to escape through intoxication puzzled and troubled him, he still saw the rise of the cultures of science and technology as expressions of great human potential. He was especially excited about inter-religious and intercultural dialogue. 'We must learn from you how to see the equality of women with men', he said to me on several occasions. 'We must strive to understand each other and share our insights for the benefit of all '. And that is exactly what he spent his time doing. I often marvelled at how, from his small cramped office in the backwater of Madurai and with limited computer skills, JP somehow managed to remain in vital touch with the diverse international peace community. Long before I met him, JP had had a long-term collaborative relationship with an American Professor of sociology and Quaker, Betsy Moen (Elizabeth Mathiot) and traveled with her to the Colorado in 1992. Through her, he met and collaborated with another professor of economics, Kenneth Boulding. Boulding, also a Quaker, wrote many books but his 1966 essay on *The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth* was prescient for recognizing the ecological destructiveness of capitalist economy. JP wrote extensively about Boulding's insights using his studies of different kinds power to develop his own holistic vision. Meanwhile Betsy returned to Madurai many times to visit and to pursue her research on poverty and eventually died there of a heart attack at the age of 54. (JP honoured her by adopting as his own email address the word, 'majabetsy'). Through collaboration with his sister in law, the indomitably positive, Anandhi, he set up the Valliamal Institute for translation (named after a young Tamil woman who died in jail in South Africa during a satyagraha campaign with Gandhi). He published many articles on peacemaking by the Irish activist and Nobel laureate, Mairead Corrigan Maguire. Through another friend in Canada, Bill Bhaneja a retired diplomat, he became vitally involved in the development the 'Nonkilling Principles' of nonviolence emerging in the work of the late Glenn D. Paige who developing them as new and more radical

version of nonviolence. He was a good friend of the Jain leader Acharaya Mahaprajaji and, of course, an admirer of the principles of ahimsa. (He once took me along to meet a visiting Jain monk, who sat before us on the floor with his solemn white mask and answered questions with great seriousness). He also befriended a resident Japanese monk of the Nipponsan-Nyohoji tradition of Peace Pagodas who came to live in Madurai after having worked for peace in the war zone of Sri Lanka. And of course, finally, he was an utterly devoted supporter and advocate of the work of Rajagopal and Ekta Parishad.

His relationship with the peripatetic Rajagopal, who came from neighbouring Kerala, always intrigued me. The contrast between these allies and collaborators somehow began at the physical level. Rajagopal was constantly on the move, on padyatra as it were, riding in Jeep convoys from village to village, meeting with people, making suggestions, moving on to the next village. And in between this flood of continual visits, he fielded a daily stream of calls from local activists around India—all of which seemed urgent. As I observed him while he dispensed advice, raised questions, or simply listened to the struggles of the activists hidden in villages around India, I pictured him as an electron jumping from orbit to orbit for a brief but significant moment around many different nuclei. All of them seemed reoriented by his brief but electrifying contact. He told me once that he did not pray in a traditional sense, 'but each evening I reflect on how I have been available to each person I have met during the day'.

By contrast, JP, when I come to know him, moved very slowly and painfully on two bad knees. It was as if he traced a very small arc on the soil around him: he moved laboriously up the steps into the classroom at CESC and then collapsed in a chair, content to be the silent centre of all the activity that buzzed around him, gesturing with his long arms for someone to come and chat or to go and meet another. He was a catalyst for so much of what happened around him and yet he himself remained in a kind of stillness. Over the time I knew him, he continually deferred surgery on his knees, and hoped to ease the pain by yoga, Ayurveda or Reiki treatments. But this physical infirmity somehow also expressed his rootedness, a rootedness in his place and culture, a circle within circles. When Rajagopal came south and took up residence at CESC, they would meet there like two planets on orbits that were intersecting—but only just for the moment. They deferred to each other genially, Rajagopal usually with a joke or witty comment, JP, earnestly but with his broad smile. Two South Indians who, with very different styles, had woven a net of connections and collaborations which reached across India, and indeed across cultures, around the globe.

Both men were 'storied' as well, that is, their lives took the form of a narrative. I had often heard the legends around Rajagopal's youth, his years of training in an elite school of Kathakali dancing in Kerala and then the abrupt decision to follow in his father's footsteps as a Gandhian activist which led, eventually to his original nonviolent training among the mafia-like bandits of the Chambal Valley in Madhya Pradesh. He carried his youthful performance skills with him throughout and turned them into tools of the activist. I had often heard him in dramatic dialogue with villagers skillfully laying the foundations for their enabled activism. By contrast with this legendary story, JP's very different journey I learned only in bits from conversations with him and others. Once when I visited him on the second floor of

his family home (after he had given up the rented office and merged it into his own dwelling), he told me proudly, that his father had been a villager. 'He came to Madurai and opened a store, and after many years of saving, he himself built this house. This is his inheritance to me'. But there was more, I thought; his father had also given him the name Jeyapragasam in tribute to the radical Marxist and then Gandhian leader, Jayaprakash Narayan, who led a revolt against Indira Gandhi in the seventies.

JP's youthful activism, however, soon turned in a different direction: he found himself drawn to study, not just Gandhi, but the tradition of the early, Tamil philosopher-poets like Ramanuja. Ramanuja had a complex of vision of both divinity (Brahman) and the world of materiality as being equally real. However since both were in process, this was not the ultimate state. This precarious balance allowed Ramanuja to assert that the differences in the world were real (not illusions) but that unity was and would be the ultimate reality. I suspect that JP saw this affirmation and appreciation of our differences held within a unity of all things as an important background to Gandhi's nonviolent activism. He spoke to me of it often and with deep conviction: 'We need each other Paulji. We must learn from one another'. JP was not simply a man of ideas, he embodied those ideas in his practice. In any case, he followed the path of study to the university and then to career of teaching. He told me once that his father could not at first understand this choice of career. "He was a practical man, and he asked me, 'what will you build by doing this work?' I told him I would build something that would take a long time to be completed. I told him then when it was completed it would become like a large banyan tree with many branches reaching down to the ground, all connected. I think then, he understood". It is this great banyan tree which I see before my mind's eye as I now remember my friend and mentor, Jeyapragasam.

I want to conclude with a few of his own words, written at the end of paper which he wrote in his final years. They are a summary of his vision of what one human life can expect to accomplish and should aim for in its short course of time:

Life is a mystery, challenge, risk and ever expanding complexity. We are called upon to move forward, to set right things and also carry others with us in the endless journey / pilgrimage / adventure. However we should also be prepared for failures, defeat and setbacks in our endless journey. Integral aspects and visions of co-creations may be very important. Individual humans are bound to perish but still they can facilitate the marching ahead of humanity. Let us do our best with our human body, which has no parallel as far as we know, before we lose it.