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Chief Guest -1999

As a student of History and particularly as a student of biographical literature, I wish to share my thoughts with you about the assessment history has made of Seth Jammnalal Bajaj's contributions to India. Whenever I read accounts about him, whenever I reflect on his contributions not merely to freedom struggle but contributions to many other nation building activities in the very limited period God had given him, whenever I think of the immensity of the services he had given to the nation, the greatness of the contributions he had made to the nation's development, the feeling that had occurred to me and continues to occur to me is that history has not been fair to Seth Jammnalal Bajaj. Even the books on the freedom struggle for India have dismissed his contributions in a very casual way.

There are two reasons which I can think of: one is- Jammnalalji himself was a very self retracing man. He always preferred to be silent, to be behind the scene. That may be one reason that others also consigned him to the area behind the scenes when they wrote the history of the freedom struggle. And the second reason, I am sorry to say this, is the prejudice in the minds of historians and chroniclers against those who are born rich in our country -that class consciousness in the minds of some people. I am going to try a fair assessment of the role of this great man in the freedom struggle and the national development.

Let us go back to 1915, the year in which Mahatma Gandhi arrived on the Indian scene from South Africa and that is where the political or public career of Jammnalalji starts. If we recall the conditions prevalent in India at that time, we will understand much better the greatness of the contributions made by Jammnalal Bajaj to the promotion of Gandhian ideals, his thoughts and teachings.

In 1915 the spiritual and moral conditions of the average Indian were at very low ebb. In spite of the spurt of spiritual energy released by Ramkrishna Paramhansa and further strengthened by Swami Vivekananda for regeneration of the spiritual power in our country, the society had not progressed to the levels that we found in say after 1930 or after 1940s when it came to obscurantism, casteism, tyranny on the Dalits, and sticking on to old world ideas for the education of women.

At the political level, the Indian National Congress had been in existence for 30 years but it had remained as an elitist group passing well worded resolutions, drafted in the drawing rooms of great lawyers and intellectuals demanding this or that for the people of India, without any involvement or active support, even awareness on the part of the ordinary people of India. Even the message of swaraj which had already been raised through the resolutions, meetings and seminars had just not percolated to the real people of India who are still living in conditions totally different from the people in urban areas.

On the social plane, fear had gripped the society - fear of the peasant about the landlord, fear of the ordinary person in the rural areas or towns about the oppressive powers or the minions of the Government, whether a sub inspector or a Tehsildar or whoever. Even the maharajas and princes who had life and death power over their own people lived in great fear of the political legend or the Resident in their own states. They were terribly scared of the British representative in their midst. Even the rich people of the country, those who had established industries or started businesses were afraid of the British rulers and they were doing everything possible to cultivate the support or sympathy of the ruling classes. And nobody had the courage to come forward and speak his mind.

Thus, on the whole, people were in a highly demoralized state- spiritually, socially and politically - without having courage even to think aloud, leave alone speak aloud their minds. The first thing that Gandhiji did after assuming the leadership in the most unofficial and an informal way of the Indian National Congress was to try to remove the fear from the minds of the people. He asked the people to disobey the Roullette act in 1919. That was the first step he had taken in a positive way to tell the people that merely because it is the law of the British, you should not hesitate to violate it. It is an unjust law, therefore it has to be violated.

When he went to a next stage of violation of the Salt law, again he was sending the message to shed fear and disobey an unjust Act or an unjust law; then only you can feel the dignity of a citizen in the country. Jammnalal Bajaj was one of the very first from the so-called rich class in the country who took the plunge. It was not an easy step for a man of enormous wealth at that time. Living in an era when every bit of activity on the part of a rich man was controlled by the British Government; living in an age when nobody could prosper in business without the patronage of the ruling class. At that age, for Jammnalal Bajaj to come forward and demonstrate that in spite of the affluence he had by the virtue of wealth inherited from his grand father, he was willing to take the risk, shed his fears and face the consequences. That is a contribution, which has not been adequately acknowledged or understood by those chroniclers of Indian history.

Take it from me, he was the only one belonging to the so called capitalist class at that time who openly came forward and identified himself with the call for satyagraha given by Mahatma Gandhi. There were others equally rich who would very surreptitiously convey their support, sometimes give some donations without being noticed by others, by the British government. Sometimes giving donations with their special request that these should not be published in a manner so that the British will come to know of it. There were a few others, but he was the only one who showed the courage to identify himself openly without reservations with the Satyagraha movement started by Mahatma Gandhi, participated in all the movements which Gandhiji had started, suffered imprisonment and that too hard imprisonment totaling five or six years. I wish the future historian who writes biography of this great man would really bring in this great contribution.

The second most important point that I wish to bring to your notice is that he was a Gandhian in the full sense of the term. He and Jawaharlal Nehru were of the same age. They admired each other. They knew each other very closely and very well. Nehru was not a Gandhian in the true sense of the term. There were so many others who were attracted to Gandhiji, who were willing to go along with him. Great intellectuals of that age, great leaders of people on their own right, people with great educational background, great political acumen, they were ready to go along with Mahatma Gandhi in the struggle for the country's freedom. But there were very few people who would go along with Gandhian ideology 100%. There were people who would wear khadi but they would not spin the yarn as Gandhiji wanted them to do. There were people who would insist on having their non-vegetarian food and wherever possible other things to go with that. There were people who would go along with Mahatma Gandhi's teachings about equality and all that, but when it came to their own social life, they would keep the scheduled castes and dalits at a distance, would not allow them even to enter their homes. Many people were willing to accept Gandhiji's leadership unquestioningly; when it came to the freedom struggle, they assisted him. But they would always draw lines convenient to them - "I go this far, I go that much, I will not go that far". But for Jammnalal Bajaj when it came to Mahatma Gandhi's teachings it was complete 100%, conformity. In 1928, long before people talked about temple entry for the scheduled caste, he threw open his private temple to the dalits. In every respect he was willing to go the whole distance along with Gandhiji. And thereby identify himself as a true Gandhian. That is the second point about Jammnalal Bajaj which is not made known to others by historians and chroniclers.

Jawaharlal Nehru, who returned from England in 1912, writes about the impact of Gandhiji thus- "Mahatma Gandhi was like a powerful current of fresh air. A whirlwind that upset many things. Most of all the working of people's mind". That was the revolution which Mahatma Gandhi brought in this country- a revolution without weapons. A revolution without terror, He lived in an age of great revolutions of violence. Fascist revolution of Mussolini, in 1920 in Italy. The Nazi revolution of Hitler, Kamaal Ata Turk revolution in Turkey, Lenin's revolution in Russia. All of them brought about changes only by violence and terror. But this great man brought about the revolution in India without violence, without terror, without weapons, without force, without even a harsh word. For him the freedom of the country was one of the many objectives he had in view. Social revolution, changing the peoples minds, attitudes, creating in them that sense of Nirbhayata or fearlessness; these were all as important objectives as getting in at the British. But people in India did not understand it at that time. They thought that Gandhiji was there to give us freedom, to break the

shackles of slavery. But equally important was his mission to make men out of the slavish Indians. And that is what Jawaharlal meant when he said- 'the whirlwind that changed the minds of people'. Jammalal Bajaj's mind was totally changed. He became a new man. And that metamorphosis, that transformation of the person was because of the impact of the Gandhian influence on him, that is something which has not been adequately brought out by the biographers n historians.

