

Jamnala Bajaj: Ethics of business and politics

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It has always been a major question as to what should be the basis of division of wealth in society. Throughout History one observes even till now humanity has not been able to solve this problem. Its a major challenge facing humanity as to how the lives of 'have nots' can be made dignified and affordable for them. After the success of 'Bolsheviks' in Russia in 1917 this debate raked up everywhere if at all, equitable distribution of wealth creation and distribution could only be achieved by the institution of 'state' at the cost of state violence, individual liberty and democracy.

Could there be fair ways of wealth creation and distribution without any unscrupulous means—could it be ethical, could the means of wealth creation be pure without 'state' being the master of every aspect of the life of an individual.

By delving into the life of 'Jamnalal Bajaj' who was an ardent follower of Gandhi, one would like to comprehend how could he be so ethical in business? Through him this paper proposes to explore if moral values, ethical practices can get along in running a business! Is it possible to be first and foremost a 'Gandhian' and a 'business person'..... was there any convergence in real terms? Jamnalal Bajaj who considered Gandhi as greatest 'national asset' whose energies had to be conserved for the good of nation how could be navigate with business and Gandhian principles.

Secondly, through this paper one wants to understand the 'Jeevan darshan' (philosophy of life) of Jamnalal Bajaj who hardly figures in popular imagination or in accounts of freedom struggle. This paper is a kind of an effort to revisit the life of a wonderful devotee of Mahatma Gandhi for whom it mattered most as to how he could lighten the burdens of the him. He wanted to a create such conditions where Gandhi could give his best to the country!

It was somewhere in 1915 that Jamnalal first met Gandhi, he was twenty five at that time.¹ He was considered as a successful businessman and a social reformer. He had a deep religious streak that made him to look for a 'Guru' who could help him sail through the journey of life. In this endeavour to find a 'guru' he met people from diverse fields—from Swamis, Sadhus to scholars and political leaders. After his return from South Africa he seemed to him (as to many other people) more like a religious and social reformer rather than a person of any political inklings, which was obviously not the case. By the 1920s Jamnalal's bond with Gandhi had become so strong he even joined the political field as well despite having an aversion towards 'politics'.

It speaks of a very courageous and a bold personality at one level to have the guts to associate himself with Gandhi's mission of national struggle against the British Raj. It could invite the wrath of British authorities but he took the risks fully aware of the consequences he might have to pay.

Its remarkable that before he came into contact with Gandhi he earnestly believed that the honesty and success in business are not incompatible. But of course under Gandhi's influence he became sensitised about the connect between the 'ends' and 'means'. In 1921 when he had just turned thirty he could write such a will that he assigned three fourth of his estate to the objectives set forth by Gandhi. He expressed a wish that after his death either his business should be wrapped up or if

continued then it should be carried on with honesty and truthfulness.

To comprehend the outlook of Jamnalal Bajaj one will have to take into account the Gandhian philosophy of consciously putting the cravings of acquisition at bay

“The satisfaction of one’s physical and even intellectual needs of ones narrow self, must meet at a certain point a dead stop before it degenerates into physical and cultural voluptuousness. A man must arrange his physical and cultural circumstances so that they do not hinder him in the service of humanity on which all his energies should be concentrated.”²

It was indeed remarkable that Jamnalal was always more than eager to translate Gandhi’s vision into practice. After the Karachi session (March 1931) Congress passed its historic resolution on ‘fundamental rights’, Jamnalal asked Gandhi about the crux of the resolution. And since it was Gandhi’s ‘Maun vrat’ that day (day of silence) so he replied back by writing a note saying that “It is stated in the resolution that there will be no untouchability. Have we discarded it today? There will be no room for drinking of intoxicants in independent India? Do the rich own their kinship with the poor?... The maximum income for an individual under Swaraj has been fixed at Rs. 500 a month. Are the wealthy people today prepared to live within this self imposed limit and give the rest to public causes? Are the millionaires going to refashion their lives according to this ideal?..... I hope we shall act on this resolution wherever we can And make a beginning from today. The best beginning is with oneself.”³

Jamnalal Bajaj while delivering presidential speech at the Karnataka Provincial Political Conference in May 1931 quoted these words of Gandhi. He could do so as he had already started to work on this by limiting the expenditure on himself and his family to Rs. 500. He travelled in third class compartments of railways. Not only this he walked the ten miles to Sevagram and if he used a conveyance then it was bullock cart! One can obviously understand that the Gandhian ethics in business called for utmost discipline as far as business practices were concerned. This happened with Jamnalal many a times. Once he was in fail during the National Flag Satyagraha and as his company had done well in that year so the income tax demand was Rs. 98000. Before going to jail he had instructed the staff not to do anything which is not admissible under law to save income tax. But somehow his staff managed to get the reduction upto a very nominal figure of Rs. 9800 (of course with the help of a Chartered Accountant). When he came out of jail he was informed about this and he was so distressed by this that he shared this with Gandhi. To this Gandhi advised him to spend the remaining amount Rs. 82000 in charity which definitely would convey a message to his staff as well that wrongly saved money is not pocketed here and in future they would never indulge in such unscrupulous acts.⁴

It was at Gandhi’s instance that Jamnalal had plunged into politics and then there was no retreat. No doubt he felt a strong bond towards him and fully identified with his causes. One could never imagine that at one point of time before being influenced by Gandhi he shunned politics. He always contributed substantially to the funds of the Congress and to Gandhi’s social reform activities. He was imprisoned in 1923, 1930, 1932, 1939 and 1940.⁵

If one compares the trajectory of Jamnalal to likes of G.D. Birla one observes that economics never took precedence over politics. However it has to be acknowledged that Birla was not the only exception as far as his very cautious approach towards the nationalist movement was concerned. Politics did not deter him from trade and industry and in 1924 he wrote to Jamnalal—

“I am enmeshed in business. My revered father and elder brother do not like abandoning business. I do everything to please them. This is also my dharma... However if any financial help or personal service is required by Mahatmaji, I

shall be happy to render it. My situation is peculiar : I want one thing and do another.”⁶

Jamnalal himself had experienced Birla’s astute diplomacy when the tension between the state authorities of Jaipur and the Praja Mandal had built up. Gandhi and Vallabhbhai Patel wanted him to spearhead a campaign for assertion of political rights in the state. He sought the assistance of G.D. Birla, a native of Jaipur state who claimed to have an interest in the welfare of this state. Birla offered to use his influence with political advisor of the viceroy, Sir Bertrand Glancy and with the inspector General of police in Jaipur. The reality was that he never took part in the struggle over recognition of ‘Praja Mandal’ it was even more doubtful if he had any influence over these above mentioned officers. Jamnalal Bajaj was naïve and when the worst of the crisis was over, he proposed Birla to join the Executive Committee of the Praja Mandal. Birla refused, he wrote to Jamnalal—

“You have written to me that I or my son Lakshmi Niwas should join the Executive Committee of the Praja Mandal. This advice is ill conceived. This work is against my nature and I do not want to put my foot into something for which I have no natural enthusiasm.”⁷

It must be noted that most capitalists in India had a very calculative, pragmatic approach towards national movement. For them family fortunes, economics of their businesses took precedence over national movement. Jamnalal was an exception—despite not being a great magnate of Bombay or Calcutta, he always devoted generously to the fund raising campaigns of Congress Party. The big merchants and industrialists were always very cautious, their mantra was ‘safety first, no risks’ to irk the British Government. Almost all of them refrained in 1921 from contributing towards the ‘Tilak Swaraj Fund’.

If the target of one crore could be attained then it could be because if a massive campaign to rope in thousands of petty merchants, farmers, workers and professional men. Small donations made the difference there were hardly any donations of even Rs. 100! Even in provinces like Bombay and Bengal where big tycoons had not contributed towards the Tilak Swaraj fund, but the main contributors were ‘merchants’ who helped to complete the quotes of collection fixed for the province.

Infact Jamnalal had already contributed for ‘Tilak Swaraj Fund’ in January 1921, but on June 30, 1921, it was found that the collection had reached upto 98 lakh, at that point Umar Sobhani and Jamnalal Bajaj fulfilled Gandhi’s desire of a collection of a crore rupees.⁸

Gandhi’s enthusiasm for the collection of funds was proportionately equal to his anxiety for its proper usage. In Jamnalal he found an ideal ‘working treasurer’ whose organisational ability and integrity saved the Congress from the allegations of corruption and extravagance!

The non co-operation movement brought about a total change in Jamnalal’s life. From now onwards family business ceased to be his primary concern, he was so neck deep into national activities with Gandhiji that he hardly had anytime for it, his staff very diligently started to take care of it strictly following the Gandhian principles of ethical business practices. He was a Congress working committee member as well as a treasurer and sometimes Gandhi took him along on some of his tours or sometimes sent him on special missions. Jamnalal’s family hardly got to see him during this time as is testified by a letter which he wrote to his wife ‘Jankidevi’ on 22 August, 1921, ‘We should not think of other things even-in a dream.’⁹

It would be naive to take Jankidevi as a person who made such drastic changes in her comfortable, luxurious life style just because of devotion to her husband. It was not the case, she carried on the Congress work in Wardha, spreading the message of the spinning wheel and even recruiting members for Congress. She not only herself learnt to use the spinning wheel but bought sixty ‘charkhas’ and conducted classes to train woman for spinning in her home. She went door to door to enroll members for the Congress.¹⁰ She wasn’t even thirty when Jamnalal wrote to her that Gandhi

frowned on jewellery she willingly took off all her ornaments even the silver piece on her foot, which had always been considered very auspicious by Marwari community! She burnt all her foreign clothes and even curtains and upholstery as they were also made of foreign fabric.

It seems Jammalal Bajaj diligently used to write letters to his wife and keep her informed of his activities. It would not be out of place to mention one of her letters to her husband saying, 'You have dedicated your life to Bapu.... So far as I am concerned, I see him even in dreams. I pray to God to give Bapuji the spiritual strength to reach his goal, and to grant me and you the right understanding. I am confident that we shall succeed. Others may falter, but I hope God will give us the strength to stand the test when it comes... You have written that the fewer the worldly goods one has the better it is... So far as I am concerned finery and jewellery now seem to be fetters. If it is your wish, I could manage just with one white sari...' ¹¹ Such was the resolve of this lady and its really unfortunate that while discussing the sacrifices made by men we seldom bring these into the limelight who supported whole heartedly these warriors in the form of mother, sister and wife!

Jammalal was blessed to have such a wife who was willing to embrace Gandhian Principles which would be guiding principles of their household, business and public activity.

On the day when Gandhi was sentenced to six years imprisonment, he wrote to Jammalal on the boycott of foreign cloth. He wrote, "Speaking purely from an economic point of view... I venture to say that unless the merchants dealing in foreign yarn and cloth give up their trade and the people get rid of their infatuation for foreign cloth, the greatest disease of the country, viz., starvation can never be cured." ¹² The Congress working committee pursued in the direction of constructive programme, it was decided that the task of organising a Khadi department of AICC would be headed by Jammalal Bajaj which would provide loans, technical instruction and useful information.

It was decided that Khadi department would have three divisionsthe technical division (at Sabarmati Ashram) would impart training courses for its manufacturing. The production division would oversee the standardisation of cloth & yarn. And sales division would open Khadi stores at chosen sites. Jammalal was entrusted with the task to coordinate the work of these three departments and make 'Khadi' popular. It was decided that all applicants would first be referred to him for grants of loan and then to Congress working committee.

In 1923 Jammalal had set up 'Gandhi Seva Sangh' with an initial donation of Rs. 250,000. This was wholly devoted to Gandhi's constructive programme. Vallabhbai Patel, Rajagopalachari, Rajendra Prasad and Gangadhar were members of its executive committee. In 1924 when Gandhi was released from jail he took great interest in its work, drafted its constitution even. In 1934 he widened its base by permitting its members to take part in parliamentary activities. Though Jammalal was not in this favour, though later on in February 1940 Gandhi conceded in Malikanda in Bengal that it was wrong to reject Jammalal's advice and allowing the members of Gandhi Seva Sangh to participate in parliamentary democracy. He expressed that the Sangh should now remain henceforth 'untouched by the politics of power and groupism.' ¹³

The nationalist politics of 1930s was repulsive for Jammalal Bajaj. After 1937 election disputes became much sharper as holding an office in Congress Committee would be an entry point to power and patronage. It appeared that the primary task of Congress was not to fight the British but to create a hierarchy of committees at various levels of village, taluks, district & province.

Congress membership had shot up from five lakhs in 1935-36 to forty five lakhs in 1938-39. Gandhi was so upset by this and labelled it as a 'bogus register of the party'.

Gandhi's constructive programme always had a very special place in Jamnalal's scheme of things. He actively promoted Khadi, village industries, primary education, Hindu Muslim unity and campaigned against untouchability.

Jamnalal died six months before 'Quit India Movement'. Gandhi wrote after his death "Whenever I wrote of wealthy men becoming trustees of their wealth for the common good, I had Jamnalal in mind."¹⁴

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