

Ethics, Governance, and Statecraft: A Study of Morarji Desai's Political Ideas and Social Values.

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Abstract

Morarji Desai stands as a singular figure in post-independence Indian political history, distinguished by an unwavering adherence to ethical, spiritual, and Gandhian values in both personal conduct and governance. This paper examines the political ideas and social values that shaped Desai's leadership, analyzing his administrative philosophy, domestic policies, and foreign policy orientation during his tenure as Prime Minister (1977–1979). Drawing on Desai's autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, and contemporaneous scholarly and journalistic sources, the study explores his commitment to democratic restoration after the Emergency, his advocacy for Prohibition and linguistic nationalism, and his pursuit of non-aligned yet assertive foreign relations with the USSR, China, and the USA. The paper argues that while coalition constraints limited his policy achievements, Desai's principled governance represented a rare convergence of moral integrity and political pragmatism in Indian democratic tradition.

Keywords: Political History, Statecraft, Governance, Social Values, Prohibition, and Democratic Tradition.

Introduction

Morarji Ranchhodji Desai was one of the few statesmen who survived to a century old with intact mental capabilities. He lived a disciplined life, guided by his ethical and spiritual values. He belongs to a rare species of political leaders who are an uncommon breed of politicians whose lives are fully guided by the dictates of their conscience. Principles had always been the most important thing to him. It is not only outstanding but also quite unusual "in the contemporary social climate for him to possess such sterling traits as firmness, the ability to face issues head-on, steadfast patriotism, and genuine faith in the Indian way of life and spiritual character" (Bhargava 1977, 10).

Desai's life consists of "remarkable occurrences interlaced with underlying beliefs and ideas that shaped his personality. He valued and pursued the values of truth and non-violence, morality and uprightness, democracy, secularism, and devotion to the nation forcefully, uncompromisingly, and with undivided concentration" (A. Singh 1994, 15). Morarji served in the Bombay Cabinet before becoming Bombay's Chief Minister in 1952. Despite his outstanding political and administrative credentials, he was denied "the position of Prime Minister. The Congress Parliamentary Party initially did not support him, and Shastri became Prime Minister" (Vachaspathi 1977, 95). After Shastri's untimely death in 1966, he lost the battle again, and Indira became Prime Minister. Desai himself wrote about this election in his autobiography, *The Story of My Life*-

"It was possible that if I had made some bargains with some members, I could have won the elections. Some colleagues even told me it did not pay to be quite straight in politics and that one must resort to maneuvers and intrigues. However, I do not believe in such methods" (Desai 1974, 7-8).

In 1969, when Mrs. Gandhi nationalized fourteen banks, Desai resigned from Mrs Gandhi's cabinet in protest (A. Singh 1994, 110). He would have resented Mrs Gandhi for denying him the post-Shastri premiership. Perhaps her imprisonment of him and other opposition leaders during the Emergency increased this unfavorable emotion from a lone sentinel. Nevertheless, his faith in God was strong, albeit he avoided ceremonies. The Bhagavad Gītā was one of his religious sources. He said, "By reciting the Gita every day, meditating on it, and applying it to my life, all my doubts were progressively resolved, and I was convinced of its truth beyond any doubt. If I had not committed the Gita to memory, I would perhaps not have understood it as I do today. What we call Gyan in Sanskrit is realized only when there is no difference between action and Gyan. There is no appropriate and effective equivalent for Gyan in English" (Desai 1979, 154).

It is widely accepted by all that Desai had unrivaled administrative skills. His administrative outline included planning at all stages for the successful execution of administrative policies. Even in his autobiography, he states that-

"The strategy in planning should be to achieve more than what we plan for and not less. If we can accomplish more than planned, greater enthusiasm and hope will be created in the country. The self-confidence of our people will be enhanced. It will also create a healthy impression in foreign countries...the people will be frustrated, and foreign countries may also have less confidence in our country...but if we do not keep our limitations in mind and

plan only based on our desires and hopes, we shall not be able to develop speedily. Therefore, it will also lessen our capacity" (Desai 1974, 80).

Desai, as a Prime Minister

Desai, who was elected Prime Minister following a landslide victory in the general elections, successfully held together with various political parties that merged to form the Janata Party for just over two years, which necessitated exceptional political abilities on his part. It was observed that G. S. Bhargava, in his seminal work *Morarji Desai: Prime Minister of India*, mentioned that Peter Lyon, Head of the Institute for Commonwealth Studies, University of London, also believed that "the act of emergency was an act of political suicide by Mrs. Gandhi and that it would be only a matter of years, if not months, before, like the indestructible Lucifer, Desai would rise from what many thoughts were his political grave" (Bhargava 1977, 55-56). Therefore, many political experts noted that the day he was sworn in as Prime Minister, he faced extraordinary challenges and thus held a unique opportunity.

Meanwhile, one of the first acts of the Desai government was to restore the democratic rights of the citizens, abridged during the emergency. Desai's government was bound "to impart, according to its promises, new vitality to the Indian democratic system, restore all the liberties and set the country on a new course in economic and social spheres" (Karak 1965, 12). After the darkest hours, i.e., the Emergency, establishing the rule of law was another significant achievement of Desai's government. He, being the Prime Minister, restored the concept of equality before the law and stated that "no person, however high they may be, was above the law of the country. The law is no respecter of persons...further, he stated that "every citizen, whatever office they held, was equal before the law. One must have the humility to submit themselves to the law of the land" (Pandit 1977, 120). Desai's next big accomplishment was in foreign affairs. There was no drift or self-contradiction in foreign policy during this period. The credibility of India as "a representative of a democratic nation committed to peace has unquestionably been established among the majority of nations. Desai's triumph was achieved in this manner. His diplomacy had left each world leader clearly understanding where he stood about Morarji and India" (A. Singh 1994, 156). A discernible, coordinated, and constructive policy was also evolving regarding India's relations with its immediate neighbours, which was encouraging.

Under Desai's leadership, "the Janata Party's manifesto emphasizes Gandhian principles, particularly decentralization and appropriate technology to boost small-scale and rural business. However, Desai's government inherited persistent poverty and unemployment, exacerbated in rural regions" (K. V. Singh 2010, 234). A flexible and realistic approach is essential, considering "the Indian economy's current state and its role in an increasingly interdependent world. The 1978-83 plan, with its agriculture and rural development programme, aimed to achieve growth in rural regions within 10 years and eradicate poverty. The 1978-83 plan calls for vigorously developing 3500 of 5100 development blocks, with full employment achieved in 2000" (Puri 1978, 9).

Under Desai's leadership, the Janata Party accorded primary importance to agriculture and rural reconstruction in its election manifesto, "which must constitute the base of our development and planning" (Aiyar 1979, 9). The focus on agriculture has been beneficial. Following a vital crop in 1978, "prices of key agricultural goods have stabilized. In 1978, 126 million tonnes of food grains were produced. Between 1961-62 and 1973-74, the agricultural industry grew slightly over 2% every year. It has now skyrocketed" (Pandit 1977, 140). Notably, Desai's government established programs to provide bread and liberty. All individuals fired for "political reasons or because their employers profited from the deterioration of the rule of law have been reinstated. The government resurrected it by calling a meeting with a broad agenda and participation from all Central Trade Union Organizations (CTUO)" (Prakash 1979, 13). This restored their workers' and employees' confidence.

Unfortunately, "the greatest discrepancy between Desai's words and actions appears in employment. Both the election pledge and the policy plan (1978-83) prioritize full employment, promising to end unemployment in ten years" (Prakash 1979). The plan proposes to regulate technology developments "to protect and increase jobs and encourage regional planning for full employment. During the plan period, 49.36 million standard person-years will be created" (Mavalankar 1979, 5).

On Prohibition and Linguistic Disorder: A Study of Domestic Concern

Prohibition is a critical challenge for the Indian government and its inhabitants (Desai 1974, 156). Many people are under the impression that Desai is just concerned with Prohibition. Prohibition is unquestionably his main, though not his only, belief. Desai stated he had adopted Prohibition not out of fanaticism. The pattern of life that he took for himself, he did not expect others to follow, but "when it was the decision of the government, and he was the head of the government, then it was his duty to enforce prohibition because it was the policy of the government" (Desai 1979, 175). He argued that "the majority supported Prohibition and urged the drinking minority to follow suit. Prohibition was the cornerstone of every development program, and the government's objective of enforcing comprehensive Prohibition would be carried out in the true spirit of prohibition" (Bhargava 1977, 180).

Laws, though necessary, were not adequate for Desai (Mavalankar 1979, 9). It required social work support. For example, civil servants should not drink. They should realize they were the (actual) implementers of Prohibition and abstain from drinking. Meanwhile, on the success of the enforcement of prohibition laws, Desai himself argued that-

"As each new situation arises, the government has to find a new remedy to tackle it. The success of Prohibition depends on who will tire first- the government or the lawbreakers. Moreover, I can assure you that the government will not be the first to get tired... whenever we tackle a problem such as Prohibition, we cannot expect a hundred percent result. For instance, I would want everyone to speak the truth, but I cannot enforce it. I would be stupid to try. Thus, how far can I enforce Prohibition, and what will the result be? That is the criteria for me" (Desai 1978, 3).

For him, "the most crucial part of implementing prohibition is the financial side, ensuring that the Union compensates the States for 50% of revenue loss due to prohibition" (ibid). Desai said that "he does not care whether his prohibition policy brings down the government or not. The problem is, however, more serious than the mere downfall of the present government" (Kurtakar 1978, 11). Desai further said that "it was generally accepted that liquor had the worst effect, especially on people living in hot climates. Therefore, he desired to introduce total Prohibition to save the poorest sections of the people from the clutches of the drinking habit. He was convinced that the living standards of the weakest segments could not be raised without weaning them away from the drinking temptation by enacting strict legislation and through intensive educative propaganda in favour of prohibition" (Desai 1978, 4).

After the Janata government came to power, the language problem resurfaced. However, the linguistic debate is not new. Its origins lie in the Indian National Congress's national freedom campaign. According to Desai, the language issue in this multilingual country is highly explosive and must be handled with care and attention. The problem is confusing: "When demand for the displacement of English from its present vantage position as a link language is wrongly regarded as the imposition of Hindi on the non-Hindi region. However, Hindi will have to become the link language one day or another" (Desai 1979, 110). Desai argued that "we have not been able to produce an adequate number of experts in any field. The main reason for this deficiency is that education is imparted in a foreign language. India will produce experts in sufficient numbers only when education is imparted in the regional language" (Kotcher 1978, 8). Desai clarifies that he is not against English, but that it should not be given precedence over other Indian languages. As a matter of fact, "the Indian languages should have greater importance in India" (Desai 1979, 135).

Language is not just a tool for him. It has more or equal domains of usage. Interpersonal, informal, and formal language usage. Not introducing Hindi means rejecting an alien language. The role of language in society is to be considered. It is mainly intended to gain knowledge in particular areas of life or to share one's opinions with others. Further, Desai argued that-

"A large majority of the Indians had accepted Hindi as the national language before the advent of freedom. Nobody claims that Hindi, as a language, has greater importance than other Indian languages. It is, however, a fact that a large proportion of Indians understand and use Hindi. It is not difficult to create conditions in which all people will understand Hindi, and it should replace English in these fields. On the other hand, English should be taught to students to acquaint themselves with the literature of the Western world and follow developments in modern science" (Desai 1979, 87-88).

In his other explanations, Desai further clarifies that "there is no danger to any other Indian language. If any harm has been caused to the Indian languages, it has been because greater importance has been given to English. Hindi will become richer as it becomes the country's common language, helping other Indian languages grow richer. It is better to have regional languages, and Hindi should be the medium of instruction at the university level" (Desai 1979, 121). According to the Southern part of India, persecution, not imposition, should be the political method of those who favour Hindi as the national language. Desai argued, against all the possible aspects of opposition, that "the opposition to Hindi in the south would never have been so vehement if the Hindi enthusiasts had not been so impatient and had realised more on persuasion and tried quietly to propagate Hindi whenever people were prepared to learn it. This process might appear indefinitely long, but on deeper thought, it might be the most practicable" (Bhargava 1977, 134).

Desai recalls Lohia's substantial proposal on this language concern from 1966. Desai points out the significant outline of Lohia's solution that-

"It comes in the correspondence between the Central government and the State government. First, the State government should correspond in the regional and state languages and the Central government in Hindi or any State language. Secondly, in Central government offices, work should be transacted in Hindi, and at the regional level, in the concerned regional language. The same will be regional and national languages" (Desai 1979, 145).

Many political and media experts advised the government to focus on economic and social development rather than on philosophical concepts such as Prohibition and a national language. Development along the appropriate lines will eventually eliminate all of these significant concerns.

On Foreign Policy: How India bonds with others

After Desai was sworn in as Prime Minister, one feature of the government's performance in the international arena has been generally welcomed. The fact is that "Desai has never been particularly good at foreign policy. His understanding of foreign policy is typically platonic. Nevertheless, the changing global political paradigms necessitate quick but powerful solutions" (Desai 1979, 178). The Desai government has established close and successful connections with several nations. Meanwhile, a more assertive stance is required for more fruitful international cooperation. So, every country wants amicable neighbors, even if they disagree on bilateral or international matters.

Prime Minister Desai emphasized "India's willingness to develop Indo-Soviet ties, demonstrating their shared goal to build a relationship based on equality, national interest, and enlightened common purpose. The depth of Indo-Soviet roots is amazing considering the plant is young" (Taksal 1979). The 30th anniversary of Indian Independence and the 60th anniversary of the October Revolution took place in 1977, strengthening Indo-Soviet ties. Indo-Soviet trade will be doubled by 1980 (Taksal 1979). The affinity between India and the USSR has been reflected in economic and political fields. Whenever India's territorial integrity was threatened, the Soviet Union stood with her. Therefore, while considering the relevance of foreign policy, "Indo-Soviet friendship, in particular, has stood the test of time" (Desai 1979, 181). Even the then Foreign Minister, Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, argued that "changing Kaleidoscope of the international situation over the years, the friendship has remained a constant factor of peace and stability in Asia and the world" (A. Singh 1994, 134).

The only area where Desai and Nehru agreed was Sino-Indian relations. Like Patel, Desai said India should not have unconditionally recognized Chinese control over Tibet. It should have emphasized institutional and other safeguards for Tibetan cultural autonomy. No one expects him to rehash the issue and prevent the normalisation of relations between India and China as the Prime Minister presently. Desai, while defending Vajpayee's visit to Peking, said that-

"India had made it clear to China that the problem of the land they have taken from us has to be solved to our satisfaction. There can be no compromise on that issue at all... if the issue of land occupied by China were resolved satisfactorily, India and China could be friends. For that purpose, talks had to be held, and if China extended an invitation, India should be ready to negotiate" (Desai 1979, 185).

With the election of Carter in America and Desai in India, "a new chapter in Indo-American ties appears to have begun. President Carter's visit provides an opportunity to reflect on past developments and anticipate future developments" (K. V. Singh 2010, 245). President Carter spoke in the Indian Parliament while explaining his perspective towards India's (political) ties with America) that-

"We are eager to join you in maintaining and improving our valuable and natural partnership of political and economic cooperation...I have learned to know, respect, and love the Prime Minister of India, Mr Desai. He represents a country in many respects and, indeed, a unique man himself. Prime Minister Desai, undoubtedly, sets an example for all those who served in leadership positions" (Sloan 1978).

Desai, later in his reply to one of the leading journals, *The Voice of America*, states that-

"Both of us have faith in the truth. We share common human values, and no one will be able to create any differences between us. Indo-American relations are already excellent and will improve further, and we believe they will improve to the point that there will be no misunderstandings. Though our paths may sometimes differ, our ultimate goals will always be the same" (Sloan 1978, Desai 1979, 188).

Desai covers several important global topics while strengthening India's overseas connections. India's position is well-known and should assuage US concerns. India will not manufacture nuclear weapons, but will not sign the deal since it is worthless in its current form. Desai further states, "Our External Affairs Minister, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, already cleared India's stand that the old suspicions between the United States and India have disappeared and that the two countries are keen to remove differences over their relations. Thus, India's firm stand was that once America committed a breach of agreement, India would no longer be bound by the agreement" (Vajpayee 1979). Except for a few dynamic and rising difficulties, India, under the leadership of Desai, has accomplished what it had hoped for. Desai deserves credit for strengthening India's ties with its neighbours, especially with superpowers like the USA and the USSR.

Sum Up

At every critical juncture, India has had exceptional leaders. Desai was the driving force behind the Janata (party) wave that swept the nation in 1977. Fortunately, Desai was sworn in as Prime Minister of India during a critical period in India's history. Desai now holds the destiny of India. As India's prime minister, Desai has candidly voiced his views. After Patel, no one has been compared to Desai in terms of self-will, determination, purity of heart, simplicity, and righteousness. Desai has restored Gandhi's (true) spirit, and signs of relief are everywhere. Desai's triumphs are modest, but his shortcomings are not disastrous. Perhaps he deserved appreciation for his success since he had to act as Prime Minister in unfavorable circumstances that his predecessors did not have to. However, his record of unmet promises stems less from his insolence than from his cabinet's and party leaders'

lack of cooperation. His tenure as Prime Minister was "marked by incessant squabbling among the Janta Party coalition partners" (Bhagwati 2019, 178). Even Arvind Bhandari, in his book, 'India under Janata,' aptly interprets this lack of cooperation and coordination in his style that "the party did not realize that it might be called upon to fulfil them... we place our hopes on the wrong men and that all they have given us in return for all our faith and confidence is a big zero" (Bhandari 1978, 145). As a result, Desai's government's efforts to rule were hampered by the coalition partners' divergent ideologies..

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