



MORARJI DESAI



Lok Sabha Secretariat
New Delhi
2019

MORARJI DESAI

Shri Morarji Ranchhodji Desai was an exemplary national figure ranking quite high in the list of nation builders of our Republic. A veteran Gandhian having firm faith in the spiritual injunctions of the Hindu Scriptures, he cherished and pursued the values of truth and non-violence, morality and uprightness, democracy, secularism and service to the nation vehemently, uncompromisingly and with undivided attention. Starting from his days in the Provincial Civil Services and during the struggle for freedom under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, he rose to become the Chief Minister of the then State of Bombay, a Union Minister holding many responsible portfolios and became the Deputy Prime Minister and the Prime Minister of the country in course of his long and eventful political life. In all these positions, he left his indelible mark as an able administrator, a core disciplinarian and as a statesman, always keen for the welfare of the poor, the peasantry and the upliftment of the dominantly rural base of India. An ardent believer in nationalism and sovereignty of the State, he saw to it that the pursuit of economic cooperation and collaboration with other countries never compromised India's national interest. He wholeheartedly supported and championed the national liberation movements in other countries of Asia and Africa. And above all this, a devout Gandhian that he was, his lifestyle remained simple to the core with him being a strict teetotaller and a vegetarian.

Morarji Desai was born on 29 February 1896 at Bhadeli near Bulsar in Gujarat. His father Shri Ranchhodji Desai was a school teacher in the English Middle School. He imbibed the values of hardwork and truthfulness in life from him. Morarji lost his father at the age of 15 while he was studying in Matriculation and as the eldest son in the family, the responsibility of breadearner fell on his young shoulders. Shortly thereafter he had to marry Gajraben in 1911. He accomplished all his familial duties in a befitting manner.

Young Morarji was very good in his studies. After passing his Matriculation, he went to Bombay* on a scholarship from Maharaja of Bhavnagar and studied Science at the Wilson College. Living as a free boarder at the Gokuldas Tejpal Boarding House, he used to send the scholarship money as well as the money he used to make through tuitions to his mother for meeting family expenses.

After graduating from the Wilson College in 1917, he joined the Bombay Provincial Civil Services in 1918 and was posted as Deputy Collector of Ahmedabad. He held various posts in the service till 1930. During these years, he learnt the basics of administration, which stood him in good stead.

In 1930, when India was well in the midst of the freedom struggle, Morarji Desai resigned from the Government service and plunged into the movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. From then onwards, he continued to be an ardent freedom fighter, becoming a staunch follower of Mahatma Gandhi not only in politics but also in his personal life. He joined the Indian National Congress and became the Secretary of the Gujarat Provincial Congress Committee in 1931. Later, he was elected to the All India Congress Committee. In 1937, he was elected to the Bombay Legislative Assembly subsequent to the elections held under the Government of India Act, 1935. He became the Minister of Revenue, Cooperation, Agriculture and Forests in 1937 and relinquished this post in 1939 for participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement. He was detained for nearly three years in connection with the 1942 Quit India Movement. From 1946 to 1956, he again became a member of the Bombay Legislative Assembly and remained Minister of Home and Revenue from 1946 to 1952. As a Minister, he had an instrumental role behind granting of pensions to government employees who had resigned to participate in the freedom struggle. He also raised such pressing issues like debt relief to farmers and bringing in improvement in the administration. Later, from 1952 to 1956 he served as the Chief Minister of Bombay.

*Now known as Mumbai.

Morarji Desai was a member of five consecutive Lok Sabhas from the 2nd Lok Sabha (1957-1962) to the 6th Lok Sabha (1977-1979). As an outstanding parliamentarian, he believed that both the Opposition and the Ruling party should strive for the progress and prosperity of the country and the maintenance of the dignity of Parliament and parliamentary institutions.

The important phase in Morarji Desai's life started in 1956 when following the reorganization of the States, he joined the Union Cabinet as the Minister of Commerce and Industry on 14 November 1956. From then onwards there was no looking back for him and he continued to take an active part in national affairs. Following T.T. Krishnamachari's resignation from the Union Council of Ministers, he became the Union Finance Minister on 22 March 1958 and served the country in that capacity till 31 August 1963. Besides this, he held many key portfolios in the Union Cabinet including Shipping, Transport and Home Affairs. After the General Elections in 1967, he became the Deputy Prime Minister with the additional charge of Finance portfolio. However, with changes made in the Council of Ministers, he resigned subsequently in 1969.

Morarji Desai had played a significant role in the Movement for Restoration of Democracy in the country subsequent to declaration of Emergency in 1975 and suffered imprisonment. However, with the Congress Party losing majority in the General Elections held in 1977 and with the Janata Party coming to power at the Centre, he was unanimously elected as the leader of the Janata Parliamentary Party. He became the Prime Minister of India on 24 March 1977 and held the position till 28 July 1979. Thereafter, he retired from active politics.

As a Minister either in the then State of Bombay or at the Centre, Morarji Desai always worked with the larger public good in view. He pioneered in enforcing law on monogamy and divorce, while he was a Minister in Bombay in 1947. He was also instrumental in repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act in the State under which several castes and tribes in the country were considered criminal from birth and restrictions were put on their daily movement.

A vehement upholder of free enterprise and free economy, Morarji Desai presented a record nine budgets in Parliament as the Union Finance Minister. He took several steps to meet the needs of Defence and development. He raised large revenues and reduced wasteful expenditure. He kept deficit financing low by enforcing fiscal discipline. While he managed to obtain external assistance for the Second Five Year Plan, he did not advocate acceptance of foreign assistance at the cost of national interest.

For Morarji Desai national interest was always predominant. As the Prime Minister, he told a visiting United States business delegation that the terms for economic collaboration should be fair to both the countries. He also stressed that India needed aid for development of its villages where three-fourth of its population lived and that they were welcome only if they would invest in areas that directly improved the lot of the ordinary Indian.

Morarji Desai held the view that the civil services have an important role in the country's development. For this, he advocated impartiality and independence in its functioning. As the Chairman of the Administrative Reforms Commission from March 1966 to March 1967, he had mooted valuable suggestions and reforms with regard to restructuring of the administrative system in the country. He felt that the Cabinet Secretary, as the head of the civil services, must have a fixed tenure. As Prime Minister, he implemented this recommendation.

With regard to foreign policy, Morarji Desai favoured friendship and cooperation with national liberation movements in other parts of Asia and Africa. He was opposed to colonialism and fascism.

Morarji Desai deeply cherished and ably nourished the rich and diverse cultural heritage of India. He was an ardent advocate of communal harmony. He had an abiding interest in the field of education, agriculture and cooperatives. He championed the cause of adult literacy and inculcation of finer values in the educational system. In the literary sphere, his books, viz. *'Discourses on the Gita'*, *'The Story of My Life'* and *'A Book on Nature Cure'* are worthy of mention. He was conferred

honorary degrees by several prominent universities and institutions. He was associated with the Gujarat Vidyapeeth and remained its Chancellor for a considerable period. He was also the President of various other social, cultural and educational organizations. He also served on the Executive Boards of several trusts. Several honours were conferred on him. The grateful nation honoured him with the *Bharat Ratna* in 1991. Pakistan's highest civilian award *Nishan-e-Pakistan* was also conferred upon him.

Morarji Desai passed away in Bombay on 10 April 1995. Condoling his death, the then President, Dr. Shanker Dayal Sharma said that Morarji Desai belonged to a generation of leaders who participated in the freedom movement and underwent imprisonment on a number of occasions.

In Lok Sabha, paying homage to the departed soul, the then Prime Minister, Shri P.V. Narasimha Rao said: "All through his life, he remained steadfast on his principles..... He was always forthright and straight and would never hesitate to speak the truth even if it were bitter".

Paying glowing tributes to his selfless service to the nation, the then Speaker, Lok Sabha, Shri Shivraj Patil said that Shri Desai who was endowed with an indomitable will, tried to "consolidate the freedom of India".

Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the then Leader of Opposition, said, he was "a potential personality linking the past with the present".