

Morarjibhai Desai

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In news : The Prime Minister of India paid tribute to Morarjibhai Desai on his birth anniversary recently

A brief history of Morarji Desai(1896-1995)

- He was an Indian independence activist and served between 1977 and 1979 as the 4th Prime Minister of India and led the government formed by the Janata Party.
- Birth: He was born on February 29, 1896 in Bhadeli village, now in the Bulsar district of Gujarat.
- He was educated at St. Busar High School and passed his matriculation examination.
- After graduating from the Wilson Civil Service of the then Bombay Province in 1918, he served as a Deputy Collector for twelve years.

Role in Freedom struggle

- In 1930, when India was in the midst of the freedom struggle launched by Mahatma Gandhi, Shri Desai, having lost his confidence in the British sense of justice, decided to resign from Government service and to plunge into the struggle.
- It was a hard decision to take but Shri Desai felt that 'when it was a question of the independence of the country, problems relating to family occupied a subordinate position'.
- He was imprisoned thrice during the freedom struggle.
- He became a Member of the All India Congress Committee in 1931 and was Secretary of the Gujarat Pradesh Congress Committee until 1937.
- When the first Congress Government assumed office in 1937 Shri Desai became Minister for Revenue, Agriculture, Forest and Co-operatives in the Ministry headed by Shri B.G. Kher in the then Bombay Province.

- The Congress Ministries went out of office in 1939 in protest against India involvement in the World War without the consent of the people.
- Shri Desai was detained in the individual Satyagraha launched by Mahatma Gandhi, released in October, 1941 and detained again in August, 1942 at the time of the Quit India Movement(released in 1945).

Role in Bombay government

- After the elections to the State Assemblies in 1946, he became the Minister for Home and Revenue in Bombay.
- During his tenure, Shri Desai launched a number of far-reaching reforms in land revenue by providing security tenancy rights leading to the 'land to the tiller' proposition.
- In 1952, he became the Chief Minister of Bombay.

Role in the Union government

- After the reorganisation of the States, Shri Desai joined the Union Cabinet as Minister for Commerce and Industry on November 14, 1956.
- Later, he took the Finance portfolio on March 22, 1958.
- In 1963, he resigned from the Union Cabinet under the Kamraj Plan. Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri, who succeeded Pt. Nehru as Prime Minister, persuaded him to become Chairman of the Administrative Reforms Commission for restructuring the administrative system.
- In 1967, Shri Desai joined Smt. Indira Gandhi's cabinet as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister in charge of Finance.
- In July, 1969, Smt. Gandhi took away the Finance portfolio from him.
- After India's first nuclear test in 1974, Desai helped restore friendly relations with China and Pakistan, and vowed to avoid armed conflict such as Indo-Pakistani war of 1971.

- While Shri Desai conceded that the Prime Minister has the prerogative to change the portfolios of colleagues, he felt that his self-respect had been hurt as even the common courtesy of consulting him had not been shown by Smt. Gandhi.
- He, therefore, felt he had no alternative but to resign as Deputy Prime Minister of India.

Congress split & role of opposition leader

- When the Congress Party split in 1969, Shri Desai remained with the Organisation Congress. He continued to take a leading part in the opposition.
- He was re-elected to Parliament in 1971. In 1975, he went on an indefinite fast on the question of holding elections to the Gujarat Assembly which had been dissolved. As a result of his fast, elections were held in June, 1975.
- The Janata Front formed by the four opposition parties and Independents supported by it, secured an absolute majority in the new House.
- He was arrested and detained on June 26, 1975, when Emergency was declared. He was kept in solitary confinement and was released on January 18, 1977, a little before the decision to hold elections to the Lok Sabha was announced.

Role as Prime Minister : first non-congress Prime Minister of India.

- As elections were announced, he campaigned vigorously throughout the length and breadth of the country and was largely instrumental in achieving the resounding victory of the Janata Party in the General Elections held in March, 1977 for the Sixth Lok Sabha. Shri Desai was himself selected to the Lok Sabha from the Surat Constituency in Gujarat.
- He was later unanimously elected as Leader of the Janata

Party in Parliament and was sworn in as the Prime Minister of India on March 24, 1977.

- He was honoured with the highest civilian award of Pakistan, the Nishan-e-Pakistan on 19 May 1990.
- He is the oldest person to hold the office of prime minister, at the age of 81, in the history of Indian politics
- As Prime Minister, Shri Desai was keen that the people of India must be helped to become fearless to an extent where even if the highest in the land commits a wrong, the humblest should be able to point it out to him.
- “No one, not even the Prime Minister”, he was repeatedly said “should be above the law of the land”.
- For him, truth was an article of faith and not an expediency. He seldom allowed his principles to be subordinated to the exigencies of the situation.