

Morarji Desai

(Homage to Shri Morarji Bhai at a meeting held at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Bombay on 10.05.1995)

The history of a nation is nothing but the chronicle of the lives of great men said Carlyle. Whether true or not of any country or any century, the history of India's 20th century appears to fully support the view. Barring peripheral things, the history of India of this century is mainly its struggle for freedom and the lives of the stalwarts who led the movement is indeed of absorbing of interest to the present generation as well as posterity. In the galaxy of national leaders headed by Gandhiji, Morarji Desai occupies the front rank. Sacrificing a lucrative career as Deputy Collector, Morarji Bhai plunged into the national liberation struggle and participated in every one of the movements launched by Gandhi. Many wavered and left the arduous campaigns but Morarji Bhai was steadfast; he put up with every hardship, discomfort and tribulation. The grit and determination which helped him to complete his University Degree living frugally, on the barest necessities of life, walking his way from the free boarding house to the college and still maintaining the large family left helpless by the sorrowful end of his father's gave him the courage and fortitude to face the hardships of political life later. Morarji Bhai had known poverty and all through his life, he emotionally felt one with the deprived while others only intellectually appreciated their problems. Nor did domestic calamities, which plagued Morarji Bhai's life deter him from the sacrifices involved in the political career of those days. Morarji Bhai was stoic and firm during all adversities. History is full of martyrs who held firmly to their faith and though they lost their lives, they always won the right and righteous cause, which they exposed.

Morarji Bhai was a living portrait of a Gandhian. We can even call him a proto type of the Mahatma. Frugal and austere, clean in thought, word and deed, utterly selfless and dedicated to the cause and totally committed to satya and Ahimsa, Morarji Bhai was in a sense the image of Mahatma. Both rejected orthodoxy, archaic ritualism and superstitions that had enveloped the Hindu religion but at the same time were firm devotees of the Supreme, and the Absolute Paramatma. Both mastered Bhagavat Gita and endeavoured to live up its goals and ideals. Their faith in the supreme gave them the poise, equanimity and detachment.

Morarji Bhai was a model of efficiency. Whatever work he undertook, he carried it out in an absolutely perfect manner. He was impatient with slovenly, half-hearted and inefficiently work. This won him the reputation of an able administrator from the first office of Revenue Minister of Bombay to the last office of the Prime Minister of India. He was systematic, methodical and punctual. He was well informed and no one could ever pull the wool over his eyes.

As an administrator, he maintained exemplary relations with the bureaucracy. He delegated authority, seldom interfered with the details but maintained an overall control over the Department. The Civil Service was very happy with him and gave him their best cooperation. A true leader is one who gets the work done by others. Inability to choose the right person and to entrust him with responsibility has been the bane of our administration.

Morarji Bhai established his reputation as a fair and impartial administrator very early in his life. When communal riots broke out in Ahmedabad in 1946, he courageously faced the situation and asked Police to act fearlessly against all those responsible for violence. Many complained that Morarji Bhai was harsher towards the Hindus than Muslims. But Morarji Bhai

replied that all persons, Hindus or Muslims responsible for the riots, should be subject to the same kind of law. He also warned those Mill owners who were surreptitiously financing anti-Muslim activities that he would send them to jail.

Morarji Bhai like Gandhiji was a true Satyagrahi. He courted imprisonment by violating the law but strictly observed the jail regulations. He would not receive any clandestine material from outside which others freely used to do. When an influential person from Delhi managed to come to see him along with the members of the family who were permitted to meet Morarji Bhai in jail, he refused to meet the unauthorised visitor.

Like Gandhiji, Morarji Bhai resorted to a number of fasts against improprieties and injustice. The last one was in 1975. It may be recalled that after the resignation of the Chief Minister Chimanbhai Patel, President's Rule was proclaimed in Gujarat. It was first extended for six months in September 1974 and again extended for another six months in March 1975 on untenable grounds. Morarji Bhai who was totally opposed to deprivation of popular rule in Gujarat had two options. Either start an agitation for holding elections **or** alternately to undertake a fast for revocation of President's rule and restoration of popular government in Gujarat. Morarji Bhai realised that the former step would have led to blood bath and terrible loss of life. Like a true Gandhian, he resorted to an indefinite fast seeking election in Gujarat. The fast was a success and the Centre had to relent and hold elections in Gujarat. For Satyagraha to succeed, the cause has to be just and the person who resorts to the fast must be of impeccable character. In Morarji Bhai's case these tests were 100% satisfied and therefore he emerged successful in his endeavour.

Morarji Bhai was a man of principle. He would never deviate or countenance deviation from the path of rectitude. When India launched the Goa Action, Morarji Bhai courageously took the unpopular line of criticising the action. According to Morarji Bhai, Goa issue was an International Dispute and that the Indian Constitution had specifically provided for settlement of international disputes by arbitration and that India should have issued an ultimatum to Portugal and Western Powers before taking action. Whether this view was correct or not, it shows how steadfastly he stood by principles even when the ends were justified.

In this we find a parallel to stand that Gandhiji took in respect of amounts due to Pakistan on the partition of India. As part of the settlement, there were a number of mutual obligations on the part of India and Pakistan. Pakistan did not fulfil any of them. When India naturally withheld a sum of Rs.50 crores payable to Pakistan, Gandhiji insisted that India should meet its obligation irrespective of the fulfillment of the conditions by Pakistan. To the Mahatma an undertaking was sacred and had to be fulfilled regardless of the lapses of others.

Interestingly, during my state visit to Portugal, in March 1990 President Surares who was then a liberation leader against the dictatorship of Salazar told me that the attitude taken by the Salazar Government was untenable and that if his party had been in Government at that time, he would have negotiated with Nehru. It shows that even in those days a section of the Portuguese people belonging to the Socialist Party was against confrontation with India.

Morarji Bhai spoke bluntly, never indulged in double talk and never concealed his likes and dislikes. He proved that even such an undiplomatic person could be a successful Prime Minister and maintain excellent international relations. To him, as to Gandhiji, Truth was God.

India has lost one of its noblest sons, one who personified the Indian culture. He had his share of disappointments in public life but it never clouded his vision of the right path. He was *sthitha pragnya*.

*Dhukeshu anu vignamana
Sukeshu vigatas pruha ha
Vithi raga bhagak Krdha ha
Sthitadir Munir Uchayate:*

One who is never elated by success,
Nor depressed by failure
And free from affection, fear and wrath
Is called a Muni (sage) of steady wisdom

To err is human but to own it is divine. In our living memory it was only Mahatmaji who owned his “Himalayan Blunder”. Morarji Bhai was the next person who owned a mistake.

When in response to President Sanjiva Reddy’s direction to both Charan Singh and Morarji Bhai to submit the names of their respective supporters, Morarji Bhai under pressure of time gave a list which included names who did not support him, Morarji Bhai wrote “I must take full responsibility and blame for this, even though I could urge that the inclusion had not been made at my instance”. He further added: “I have decided that it is my moral duty to atone for this lapse and I accordingly resign from the leadership of Janata Parliamentary Party”.

He was much misunderstood. His firmness, fairness and impartiality was often mistaken for rigidity, his adherence to the Gita Code of Conduct for Conservatism and his forthright and blunt utterances for contempt or conceit. But what others considered, as his foibles were his virtues. He lived a noble life.

Lives of great men remind us that we make our lives sublime Morarji Bhai’s life will ever be a beacon to light the path of generation to come.