

PRIME MINISTER MORARJI DESAI

'Is Drinking A Ritual ? Then I Think It Is Better To Close Our Diplomatic Missions!'



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CREATIVE EYE

The appointment is at 1 pm at the Prime Minister's Office in South Block. These imposing stone buildings, a few hundred yards away from Rashtrapati Bhavan, contain the offices of most of India's government leaders. A surprisingly courteous Reception Officer enters visitors' names in a register, and phones upstairs for clearance with the official concerned. In my case, it is Mr. H.Y. Sharada Prasad, the Prime Minister's Information Adviser. At exactly ten minutes to one, I am shown into the visitors' waiting room, its domed ceiling painted over with illustrations from a Hindu Aryan's life, its furniture distinguished in upholstery. Five minutes later, an usher conducts me into the Office of Mr. V.Y. Tonpe, the Prime Minister's Special Private Secretary. Mr. Sharada Prasad is there, too, and we chat about nothing in particular till the moment comes for going into the Prime Minister's room, which is adjacent. I am preceded by Sharada Prasad, who introduces me to Shri Morarji Desai, and followed by Mr. Tonpe, and two stenographers who will record the interview. I have been granted half an hour.

The Prime Minister is signing some papers when we enter his room. He looks up, acknowledges my *namaste*, stands up, proffers his hand for a warm handshake, and asks me to sit down. The officials settle down in chairs beside mine. There are two taperecorders whirling away on the wide, curving desk—theirs, and mine. My photographer begins to click away. The interview begins. Surprisingly again, despite talk of correspondents being silenced by the Prime Minister's quick and sharp replies, he is mild in tone, although impatient with questions that he calls "the usual ones".

Transindia: Mr. Prime Minister, you have repeatedly stressed that India will never go in for nuclear weapons, and yet insist that we will never sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty....

Morarji Desai: I have said all that there is to be said. I don't know why people want to create controversy, when there need be none.

Transindia: Both President Carter and you, Mr. Prime Minister, are noted for your strong accent on moral standards in your public life. How far do you think it would be possible to impose morality on a nation?

Morarji Desai: Morality cannot be forced on a nation. Nothing can be forced on a nation. But a country can

"A country can develop with morality. It can be made a part of education."

develop with morality. It can be made a part of education. It is not a question of imposition. It is a question of convincing people.

Transindia: The rising labor unrest all over the country, Mr. Prime Minister, has alarmed many people. The situation does not seem to be improving at all. You had said soon after your government took over in March last year that it was all due to the reaction against the Emergency, that it was like "froth issuing forth from a freshly uncorked bottle", to quote your words. What is your government doing in this regard?

Morarji Desai: We are tackling the situation. It will not last long. We are trying to see that there are no strikes in factories and other institutions. After all, even one year has not elapsed since we took over. Can such things be solved in a few days?

Transindia: Mr. Prime Minister, critics of your government charge that factions within the Janata Party seem to be working at cross-purposes quite often.

Morarji Desai: What factions do you mean? I have no difficulties at all in my Cabinet.

"I have no difficulties at all in my Cabinet."

Transindia: Let me give an example. Recently you had asked the striking State government employees in Maharashtra to stop their agitation and to enter into negotiations with the Chief Minister. Soon afterward, the Union Industry Minister, Mr. George Fernandes, said at several public meetings in Maharashtra that the attitude of the State government was unjustified and that the employees were right in carrying on their agitation.

Morarji Desai: Somebody may give some other opinion. That does not mean that there is difference of opinion in the government. Don't try to make mountains out of molehills.

Transindia: Nevertheless, such incidents give rise to the opinion that there is still no cohesion within the ruling Party.

Morarji Desai: There is complete cohesion in the ruling Party and government. There is also freedom in the Cabinet.

Transindia: Observers point out that in the northern states in particular, the old party divisions of the Janata constituents still exist.

Morarji Desai: Let them feel that way. Why do you want to accentuate such things? There is too much loose talk! Are there no differences among journalists? Are there no differences in the AINEC (All India Newspaper Editors' Conference)? Then why are you singling out the Janata Party? Are there no divisions in other parties? Why are these questions brought up again and again? Ask me questions that are inconvenient! I will be happy!

Transindia: About your son Kantibhai, Mr. Prime Minister, there have been many rumors in the recent past. He is accused of interfering in governmental work. It looks as though there is a concerted movement within the Janata Party to discredit him. Would you comment on that?

Morarji Desai: I don't think so. People are spreading all kinds of rumors. There are some people who are interested in spreading rumors of my son interfering in the government. I have said on more than one occasion, point out one case, and prove it. You will see then what action is taken. Why make vague allegations? What are the charges? Is staying with me an offense? Is travelling with me an offense? Is looking after me an offense? Let there be one case...

Now, if you go and call on my son tomorrow, and then say that he is interfering in the government, if you interview him and then say he is interfering, is there any meaning? People go to my son and ask him to arrange interviews with me and he tells them to go through proper channels, to go to my office, and they go and write things against him! Should it be believed? So does it mean I should have no son? Is that the idea? Why doesn't the press

"Are there no differences in other parties? Why are you singling out the Janata Party?"

investigate all these rumors and write their findings?

Transindia: Another sensitive issue, Mr. Prime Minister, is Family Planning. Your government appears to be afraid of any measures in that field for fear, some say, of losing elections.

Morarji Desai: Who said there is fear? In the first place, disabuse your mind of any feeling that the Janata Party is afraid of anything or anybody. We don't do anything out of fear. Prud-

ence and convenience are not symptoms of fear. But in the matter of Family Planning, there is no question of all this. What we don't want is only forcible sterilization. Otherwise we are trying to see that more people go in for Family Planning voluntarily than can be achieved otherwise. In one or two States, there were more operations this year than during last year. We are slowly persuading people.

Transindia: Mr. Prime Minister, there is a feeling that the press in India has not yet shed its uncertainties regarding the government, that there is still subtle pressure on the media. Would you comment on that?

Morarji Desai: I see it the other way around. I think there is more criticism than can be justified.

Transindia: Do you feel there is sufficient freedom of the press today?

Morarji Desai: I have no doubt that there is more than enough freedom. I think freedom is often misused. Freedom is there, but the press is not using it properly. It is their responsibility, not mine. The press is free, it is free even to slander.

Transindia: Why is it that you and the press do not get on all that well together?

PRIME MINISTER MORARJI DESAI BEING INTERVIEWED BY TRANSINDIA'S CHAITANYA KALBAG



Morarji Desai: Who said so? It is definitely not my impression. I think I get along with the press better than any other politician. Why do you think others don't get along? Have you come across any friction at my press conferences?

"So does it mean I should have no son? Is that the idea?"

Transindia: Well, there is certainly a lot of verbal sparring.

Morarji Desai: There will always be some people who spar! Do you think everyone ought to sing the praises of the government?

Transindia: About the reconstitution of 'Samachar', the Kuldip Nayar Committee's report was disregarded...

Morarji Desai: It was not disregarded. We did what had to be done. Only, its recommendations were not carried out.

Transindia: ...and what was actually adopted was a dissent note submitted by two of the Committee's members.

Morarji Desai: It was not a dissent note. It was what we *had* to do. There was no other way out.

Transindia: Recently, talk of subtle censorship of the press has again cropped up, and one incident that comes to mind is the documentary of events during 1977 produced by the Films Division that omitted all reference to the former Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi.

Morarji Desai: I don't think there was any censorship involved in this case. I don't have any idea of it. I am sure there is *some* mention of the Congress party and government between January and March 1977. Have you found out? (To Mr. Sharada Prasad)

Sharada Prasad: I shall find out.

Morarji Desai: I don't know about it.

I would be happy if *my* name did not appear at all in the media!

Transindia: Do you agree with the point of view that the press in India is leaning over far too much in one direction even today?

Morarji Desai: I would not like to comment.

Transindia: We would like your opinion.

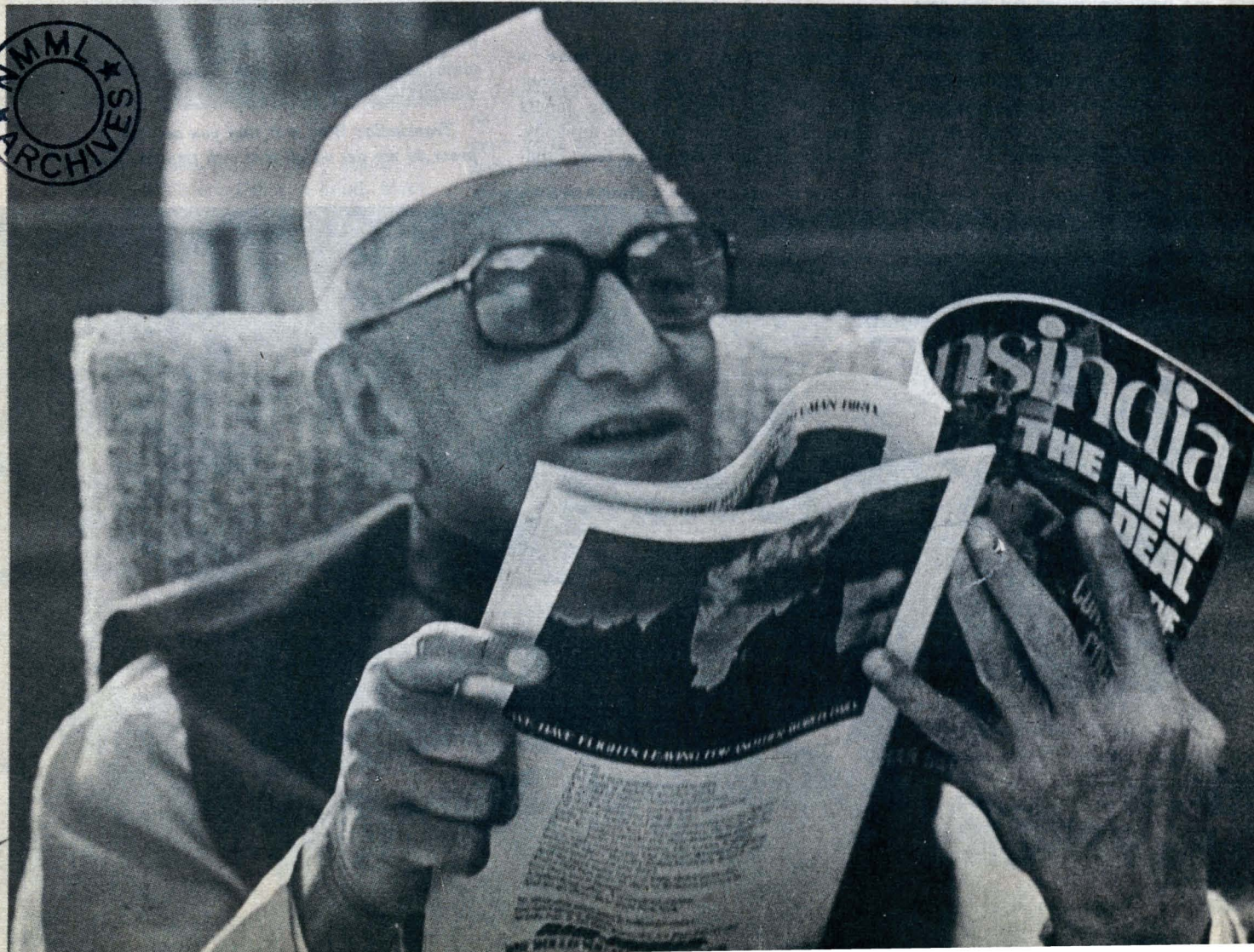
Morarji Desai: I don't want to comment. I consider the press to be free.

Transindia: Mr. Prime Minister, Mr. Jayaprakash Narayan started off being quite a major figure in the formation of the

"I think there is more criticism than can be justified."

Janata Party and government, but later on, there seems to be a noticeable falling-off in the importance accorded him by

THE PRIME MINISTER FINDS TRANSINDIA VERY INTERESTING



your government. On a few occasions, his statements have contrasted sharply with those made by members of your government.

Morarji Desai: No one man is responsible for the formation of the Janata Party and government. There is no question of the Janata government giving importance to any one person. We listen with respect to the opinions of many people including JP.

Transindia: In the last few months, there have been many instances of sabotage, particularly in the railways. Does your government intend taking any deterrent measures to prevent such incidents in future?

Morarji Desai: Those incidents are being inquired into. We are taking steps to see that such things do not happen. Patrolling, for instance, has been increased along railway tracks. If we locate the culprits, they will be dealt with properly according to law.

Transindia: Mr. Prime Minister, do you think all the Janata leaders have been adhering to the Gandhian vow of austerity taken soon after your electoral victory last March?

Morarji Desai: Everybody worships god, but people worship Him in different ways. There is bound to be some difference in the approach.

"The press is free, it is free even to slander."

Transindia: There is talk that Mrs. Gandhi might resort to a civil disobedience movement if she continues to lose support like this. How would your government tackle it?

Morarji Desai: If it is real satyagraha then we will tackle it justly.

Transindia: The various inquiry commissions, notably the Shah Commission, seem to be taking far too long in reaching conclusions. Key witnesses have refused to cooperate, and the commissions are becoming quite diversionary, diverting people's attentions. Why is this delay not being tackled?

Morarji Desai: Considering the number of complaints before the Shah Commission, it is bound to take a long time.

Transindia: Was your government's recent demonetization move aimed at the illegal funds amassed by political parties?

Morarji Desai: It was aimed at all illegal funds. We do not know which funds are legal and which illegal. The high-denomination notes could be easily stored in small packets. And it is not a question of political parties alone.

Transindia: Mr. Prime Minister, some newspapers recently carried reports that Indian diplomatic missions abroad had been instructed not to serve liquor at their functions in future. Isn't this carrying

"We don't do anything out of fear."

Prohibitionism too far, considering the fact that alcohol is served as a matter of course at diplomatic get-togethers, almost like a diplomatic ritual, even by teetotaling Arab countries?

Morarji Desai: Is drinking a ritual? Is drinking necessary? Then I think it is better to close our diplomatic missions!

Transindia: Your Prohibition policy is looked upon as suppression of a fundamental right....

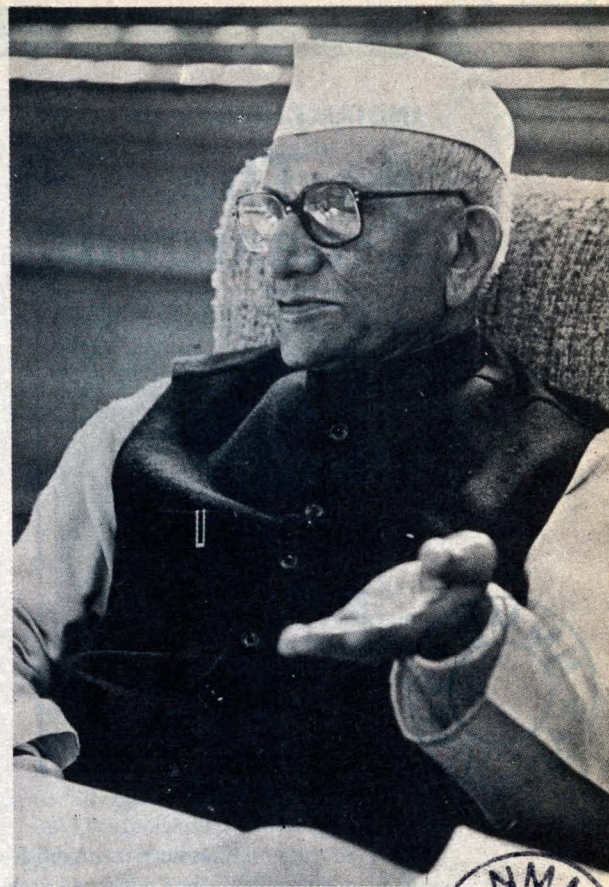
Morarji Desai: Is drinking a right? You were not born with drink! You were born free, therefore you are free. Those freedoms which are natural to you are your rights, not all. If your argument holds, then you also have the right to steal! Drink is at the root of adultery, of womanizing, of corruption, and of all kinds of evils. But we are not stressing the moral viewpoint. Drink economically ruins poor people.

Transindia: Mr. Prime Minister, what has been done with regard to the activities of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) which carried out surveillance on a large scale during the Emergency? You had refused to comment on it last year, saying

"I think I get along with the press better than any other politician."

it was a secret organization. Has it been revamped?

Morarji Desai: It has been revamped, and its scope has been lessened, too. It will only carry out legitimate activities — getting information from other countries. It will not act as an internal CID in future.



Transindia: One last question, Mr. Prime Minister. The mood of the nation as 1978 started off was quite gloomy. There is uncertainty both on the economic and political fronts. There seems to be no concretization of direction.

Morarji Desai: What do you mean by "no concretization"?

"(RAW) will only carry out legitimate activities...it will not act as an internal CID in future."

Transindia: Your government has said that a lot of things will "take some time".

Morarji Desai: Implementation will take some time! But we have given the direction completely and clearly. We have clearly said that there will be no contradiction between heavy industries, medium industries, and cottage industries. We are not wedded only to one kind to the exclusion of others. We have always stressed that rural development must take precedence over everything else. What more policy direction do you need?

Interview by CHAITANYA KALBAG