
UNIT 9 A R DESAI*

Structure

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9.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you should be able to

- outline the biographical details of A R Desai;
- explain the contribution of A R Desai to sociology in India;
- discuss his central ideas; and
- list some of his important works.

9.1 BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Akshay Ramanlal Desai was born on April 16, 2015 in Nadiad in Gujarat. His father, Ramanlal Vasantlal Desai was a civil servant in the princely state of Baroda in 1920s and 1930s. He was a well-known litterateur, who inspired the youth in the 1930s. The travels with this father across the state of Baroda left a deep impression on his sensitive mind. Ramanlal Desai, apart from being an officer of the Baroda state, was also a well-known litterateur who wrote many novels depicting the lives of the peasantry which influenced and inspired the youth towards social transformation. The exploitation of the peasants due to

* Written by Vasanthi Raman, formerly Professorial Fellow at the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), and Member of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi

excessive rent, a searing critique of colonialism and the role of citizens in the making of a new India were all themes that occurred repeatedly in his novels. He also had a great admiration for Gandhi and some leaning towards Fabian socialism. The young Akshay Desai absorbed all these influences. From his father he imbibed the idea of taking an active interest in the world around with the intention of intervening to transform it. This was to stay with him till his end. He was also exposed to a range of literary and musical giants in his childhood through his father. His deep political consciousness came from a family milieu that was highly sensitive to social oppression. In 1947, he got married to Neera Desai who played a pioneering role in the growth of Women's Studies in India. Their son Mihir Desai is a leading human rights lawyer and practises in Mumbai.

He began his teaching career as a lecturer in Siddharth College in Bombay 1946 and joined the Department of Sociology, University of Bombay in 1951, became Professor and Head of the Department in 1969 and resigned from the Department in 1976. Desai was appointed a Senior Fellow and a National Fellow in the Indian Council of Social Science Research from 1973-75 and 1981-85 respectively. He was President of the Indian Sociological Society in 1980-81 and Gujarat Sociological Society in 1988-90. He was the only Indian sociologist who was active in politics and was also a member of different non-mainstream left political parties at different points of time, even though during his early days in the 1930s he was a member of the Communist Party of India for a brief period. He was a committed Marxist since his early undergraduate student days and remained one till his death in 1994.

He gravitated to radical politics in his undergraduate student days. The 1930s was also the decade when a left alternative to the mainstream nationalism represented by the Congress was also emerging. There were ideological conflicts between the relatively more left oriented sections within the Congress and that of the right oriented sections. However, the alternative which was the left, and distinct from the Congress was also clearly emerging, posing a challenge to the Congress. The *kisan* movement had started in Gujarat in the 1930s. Baroda was an important centre for radical and left politics including the activists of the nascent Communist Party. It is said that Akshay Desai was suspended for his activities from his college in Baroda. He moved to Surat and then to Bombay to pursue his studies and his activities. Bombay was the nerve centre of trade union activism and also the burgeoning communist activity.

What is interesting about this entire period was that there were many currents of political activity both at the national level and in Gujarat as well. There was a struggle for gaining influence over the anti-colonial movement among the various ideological and political currents. The workers in the textile mills in Bombay, jute mills in Calcutta and mine workers were on the path of struggle against inhuman exploitation, grueling working hours and low wages. The trade union movement was in the forefront of both the struggle of the workers and the nationalist movement. This was also the period of the Great Depression. The industrial recession that followed it hit major industries and this gave a further

fillip to the militancy in the labour movement. The communist presence and leadership of the labour movement deepened during this period.

There was a mushrooming of people's organisations, ranging from trade unions, Kisan Sabhas, students' federations, women's organisations and cultural and literary forums, all of which were imbued with a strong anti-colonial consciousness. In all these various forums, various political parties and forces, ranging from the Congress, socialists and the communists worked together at different points of time. Needless to say, the attempt to jointly work in various organisations was not easy given the diverse and sometimes even divergent perspectives. However, one remarkable feature of the national movement has been its inclusiveness, despite discordant strands of separatism. However, the end of the 1930s and the early 1940s saw the ominous shadow of the partition looming over the country which was soon to become a dreadful and frightening reality, accompanied as it was by mutual slaughter in Punjab and Bengal.

These were challenging times for any sensitive young person. Desai got involved in the communist movement and joined the Communist Party in 1934. But he left the Communist Party after a brief period of five years since he found the bureaucratic structure of the party suffocating. More importantly, he opposed the change in the Party's stand regarding support to British war efforts in India when the Soviet Union was attacked by Nazi Germany in 1939. He resigned from the party in 1939. Desai continued to pursue his research and activism through his entire teaching career and subsequently as well leading to a plethora of publications both in English and Gujarati.

9.3 CENTRAL IDEAS

As you would have learn from the previous section, Desai was involved in radical politics and later on in leftist and Marxist groups that were active in the nationalist movement in Surat and later in Mumbai where he pursued his higher studies. Expectedly then, his central ideas were concerned with Indian nationalism, role of the state in social and political transformation, development, and Marxian perspective on Indian society. Let us discuss each of his ideas in following sub-sections.

9.3.1 Indian Nationalism

Nationalism was the canvas and the backdrop against which social sciences took root in India. His social enquiries arose out of the questions and issues that were facing Indian society and the Indian people and their struggles of which he was an integral part. This is the most significant fact that needs to be kept in mind while assessing his life work.

A large part of his work was based on the method of historical materialism. His doctoral work was published as a book titled, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*. Later he brought out another volume, *Recent Trends in Indian Nationalism*. Originally his doctoral work, the former was published in 1946 and has run into several editions. Characterised by a broad historical sweep, this work

was written during the high point of the anti-colonial movement, and captures the diverse contradictions that the country was passing through, including the imminent partition of the country.

Desai analyses the various forces at work at the time and the changes brought about by colonial policies in the basic structure of Indian society. He views nationalism as a historical category, a modern phenomenon which comes into existence at a certain point in history. In India, it evolved as result of a combination of objective factors and subjective factors when the Indian people were political subjects of the British Empire. While the initial stirrings of Indian nationalism arose in the early nineteenth century, it took concrete shape only in the latter part of the century. The nation that emerged was not a homogeneous one; it comprised of different classes that arose in the course of colonial intervention.

British colonial rule initiated a deep structural transformation in Indian society which led it to a new path of development, capitalist development and initiated changes in almost spheres of Indian social life, from modern means of transport and communication, capitalist property relations in land, the establishing of a centralised state, introduction of western education, new forms of administration and even limited forms of self rule at the provincial levels. It destroyed the older order and unleashed many dynamic new forces which revolutionised Indian society, though to sub-serve its own interest, which was the colonial exploitation of India. Colonialism had a contradictory dimension to it and Desai analyses that. Marx had argued that capitalism would play revolutionary role in altering the nature of the productive forces in Indian society characterized by the caste system; however, Marx's own ideas changed in this regard. But Desai was clear that colonial rule did not play a revolutionary role since it destroyed the very institutions that could facilitate the growth of capitalism, i.e. the factories of the pre-capitalist period.

Desai's concern was also to highlight the specificity of the Indian pre-capitalist social formation with its caste system. He highlights the nature of the 'self-sufficient' village community lacking private property in land, which was the key component in the agrarian system in pre-British India. He outlines the social consequences of the transformation of agriculture, the decline of town handicrafts and the decline and destruction of village artisan industries. According to him, 'It was the village artisan industries that constituted the industrial pillar of the economic autarchy of the village, the other being the self-sufficient village agriculture' (Desai 1976:92).

The new social forces and classes that emerged led over time to the contradiction with British colonial-imperialist rule giving rise to Indian nationalism. What is remarkable is that Indian nationalism emerged in the midst of geographical vastness of sub-continental dimensions, social and religio-cultural diversities of immense complexity, powerful institutions and traditions. In the encounter between British colonial rule and Indian society, various movements emerged which encompassed intellectual, political, economic, social, religious and cultural

spheres. These endeavours initiated by various strata and classes to alter the situation created by British rule either to assimilate or challenge its varied effects led to 'various complex movements which created a new, exciting, interesting, heroic and unique history for Indian people' (Desai 1976: viii).

While there were various phases of Indian nationalism, it was the last phase begun in 1918 under the leadership of Gandhi that was critical for the nationalist movement. This period was characterized by a strong mass base and many classes and groups were active participants in the national movement, even though sections of Indian capitalists had extended support to the Indian National Congress from the 1920s onwards. Their influence over the national movement increased steadily and with independence they dominated the movement.

The manifold dimensions of colonial exploitation under British rule have been analysed with a rare perspicacity. Thus the destruction of the old social order, based on the unity of agriculture and handicrafts, and simultaneously the rise of new social forces, the growth of new social classes, the role of education, the question of caste (referred to as 'the steel frame of Hinduism'), the various social reform movements against caste, the question of political representation and the issue of nationalities and minorities are all addressed. What is remarkable is that all the critical questions that were being debated at the time either intellectually or politically find place in the book. For example, the potentialities of capitalist development in pre-colonial Indian society is seriously discussed and whether India could have embarked on a capitalist path is analysed (Desai 1976).

In *Recent Trends in Indian Nationalism* (1960), Desai assesses the path of development and sums up the significant characteristics of the post-independence trajectory. He highlights the uneven nature of capitalist development and a bourgeoisie (capitalist class) tied to feudal and semi-feudal origins. The feudal social origins and composition of Indian bourgeoisie made it incapable of fulfilling the tasks of a bourgeois democratic revolution, i.e. the destruction of feudalism and the organization of the national economy and an overall democratisation of the society. Besides, the state apparatus inherited at independence was almost a replica of the colonial state apparatus since independence was not a genuine independence but a transfer of power in which the Indian National Congress, heavily influenced by business and capitalist interests, played a leading role. For Desai, the choice of the path of development was clear: it was bourgeois industrialization versus socialist industrialization. He argues that a clear distinction between the two is necessary since this would result in qualitatively different types of social, institutional, ideological and cultural patterns and thereby the kind of structural pattern of the society (Desai 1960).

In the pre-Independence period, colonialism and nationalism as concepts and fields of action were central to Desai's intellectual and political engagement,

while in the post-Independence years it was the character of the State and the path of the development.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) In two sentences outline Desai's approach to the understanding of nationalism in India.

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- 2) What was the difference in Desai's intellectual and political engagement in pre-Independent period and post-Independent period in India?

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9.3.2 Role of the State in Capitalist Transformation in India

In exploring the post-Independence period, the two concepts that recur consistently are the State and its crucial role in social and political transformation, specifically in rural transformation and the question of the path of development. Contrary to the expectations of the nationalist movement, the State in the post-independence period initiates a capitalist process of transformation. The historical method remained central to his work throughout. There is continuity between his earlier work – *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* – wherein he developed Marxian historical method and his later work wherein he focused on the class character of the State and the nature of classes that characterise the society and their relationship to the State. Significantly, he traces the origins of the post-independence path of development to the trajectory of the nationalist movement and dominance and influence of the capitalist class on the movement and to the choices that were made during the course of the national movement.

In the two edited volumes, *Rural Sociology in India* (1969) and *Peasant Struggles in India* (1979), Desai has put together a rich collection of articles and reports that map the changes in rural society over many decades. In the volume on *Peasant Struggles in India*, he has critically analysed the role of the peasantry in an article, "Unconventional Anthropology of the 'Traditional' Peasantry" highlighting the historically important work of Eric Wolf – *Peasant Wars in the Twentieth Century*. In a remarkable introduction, Desai has woven all the material across centuries and regions to highlight the major socio-economic policies and processes initiated by the State specifically focusing attention on their impact on the peasantry. Through the first three decades after independence, the State focused attention on the transformation of rural society. Desai analyses the policies implemented by the State, the main thrust of which

has been to transform agrarian structure from pre-capitalist to capitalist relationships. Agrarian society and relationships have been transformed due to conscious State intervention. The thrust of agrarian policy was the elimination of parasitic landlordism and absentee intermediaries, Zamindari and in its place to create a class of agricultural capitalists, rich farmers and middle peasant proprietors directly linked to the State. This was accomplished through 'development' programmes and land legislations, leading to differentiation among the peasantry, with the emergence of a class of agricultural capitalists, rich peasants and simultaneously the emergence of a pauperized, hungry, landless rural proletariat.

9.3.3 Path of Development

One central concern of Desai which recurs consistently throughout his work is that of the path of development. He relates this question to a variety of issues that the country faced in the post independent period. His principal critique has been of the "modernization syndrome", i.e. development along a capitalist path and also those of its proponents, specifically, of academics and social scientists who view this as 'a desirable value premise'

Two of the volumes: *State and Society in India* (1975) and *India's Path of Development: A Marxist Approach* (1984) comprise his writings on the path of development and the nature of the social transformation in India. In the volume, *State and Society in India*, he critically examines the assumptions underlying the modernization thesis which was propounded by the academic establishment and shaped the content of the curriculum in the expanding educational apparatus. The famous 'tradition-modernity' thesis was an important component of the modernization thesis which held sway among mainstream academics and which effectively camouflaged the capitalist path of development pursued by the State. Such intellectual activities were financially supported by the State and helped in pursuing development along capitalist lines. This helped to generate valuable data which was useful in formulating concrete policy measures. It also helped to create and consolidate an educated stratum to run the administration, services and other professions. More importantly, it was useful as an ideological tool in socializing the younger generation in a particular mould (Desai 1984: viii)

The principal focus of his work is the capitalist transformation of India and the role of the State as a prime mover in this process. The relationship between the capitalist class and the State, the moulding of different institutions, i.e. legal framework and administrative apparatus for facilitating capitalist development, along with the major policy initiatives, the public sector, planning as a major instrument, the mixed economy and even the welfare state are all designed to facilitate capitalist development.

In the latter volume, *India's Path of Development: A Marxist Approach*, he engages seriously with the practice of Marxism in India and with the Communist parties' theory and practice. The main thrust of his critique of the Communist Parties is the critique of the two stage revolution, i.e. a democratic stage when

the bourgeois democratic tasks would be completed and a socialist stage which would follow. This would necessitate correspondingly different alliances of social forces, the former envisaging an alliance with sections of a ‘progressive national bourgeoisie’. Along with this, he sharply critiques the theory of ‘peaceful and parliamentary road to socialism’.

The critical question according to Desai, is: what should be the nature of the revolution during the imperialist phase of capitalism, especially after the October revolution, in a backward, predominantly peasant country? It was his firm assertion that in a country like India, the bourgeoisie was too weak to move the economy and society from colonial underdevelopment to even a bourgeois stage of development. Hence the need for a socialist revolution to complete the bourgeois democratic tasks under the leadership of the working class in alliance with sections of the marginalized rural proletariat.

His concern in analyzing the processes in post-independence India was the nature and path of development that was being adopted by the Indian State. Indian society was being shaped along capitalist lines and the State that has emerged in India after independence was a capitalist State and was following the capitalist path of development. Therefore, sociologists and social scientists need to address the question of the path of development and analyse the class character of the Indian state in order to understand the processes at work and the impact of these on the Indian people.

Thus the central concepts are class and the state in attempting to understand the processes at work in Indian society. In his endeavour to understand Indian society and the social, economic and political processes at work in post-Independence India and the impact of these processes on the Indian people, he found the Marxist approach most relevant.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Why did Desai leave the Communist Party?

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2) List the main factors that facilitate capitalist development in India.

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9.3.4 Understanding Indian Society from Marxian Approach

Desai's principal purpose was to understand Indian society from a Marxist point of view and to apply the Marxian method in studying the various contradictions of Indian society with the aim of transforming the society. Contradictions does not mean merely conflict or tensions but refers to the structural and systemic conflicts that shape the basic structure of the society, like, for example, that between working class and the bourgeoisie or that between the peasantry and landlordism. In his world view the Marxian method was not only significant and necessary for an understanding of Indian society but also that the Marxist method and viewpoint was an integral part of the discipline of sociology and social anthropology.

His Presidential address to the Indian Sociological Conference in Meerut in 1980 was on the Relevance of the Marxist Approach to the Study of Indian Society (Desai, 1984:1-19). There are many points that are being made here. Desai highlights the major developments since the 1950s which need to be taken note of, one of which being the massive expansion of higher education. He refers to the phenomenal growth of institutions of higher learning like universities and colleges with social sciences acquiring an increased importance: "Knowledge generators and knowledge transmitters in the social sciences are operating on a big scale on the national scene". In the field of sociology and social anthropology, there is quite a sizeable number of trained persons. He describes the institutional framework for training and research in sociology as a gigantic knowledge factory engaged in large scale manufacture of knowledge products comprising of micro surveys and micro field reports (Desai 1984:3).

The whole address is to his professional colleagues partly voicing the serious misgivings of social scientists but also in a sense engaging the profession in a dialogue about the social significance of the research that is being generated. Some of the important issues raised can be summed up as follows:

- (i) The colonial mould within which sociological research is trapped, constricting its vision and sapping creativity, and overall operating within a dependency framework, with borrowed concepts and methods from the 'high prestige centres of learning' in the US and the UK. This uncritical acceptance of exogenous models without gauging its relevance to Indian conditions and society has distorted perspective and stunted the growth of Indian sociology.
- (ii) The hardening of disciplinary boundaries leading to a segmented perspective and related to this is the reluctance to draw from both indology and history.
- (iii) The important question of the value-free stance and a supposed neutrality while simultaneously accepting uncritically the values adopted by the policy makers; related to this is the wider question of ethical dimension of sociology, it has become 'a discipline without human meaning purpose'.

- (iv) Despite the fact that Indian society is undergoing major social transformation, social scientific analyses are essentially ahistoric, static and synchronic in their approach, pursuing a structural-functional, equilibrium model.
- (v) Sociology is not engaging itself with the critical questions facing Indian society and thereby is unable to contribute meaningfully towards the dilemmas of development. What is significant is that most of the issues were articulated by the leading practitioners of the discipline of sociology and social anthropology.

9.4 IMPORTANT WORKS

Some of A R Desai's important works are:

- (i) *Recent Trends in Indian Nationalism* (1960)
- (ii) *Rural Sociology in India* (1969)
- (iii) *State and Society in India: Essays in Dissent* (1975)
- (iv) *India's Path of Development: A Marxist Approach* (1984)

9.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we learnt about the biographical details of A R Desai. We found that his central ideas revolved around issues of nationalism, development, peasantry and social and political transformation. We could see the influence of both Gandhi and Marx on his ideas and approach to understand society in India. Finally, we may conclude that in addition to being a sociologist, A R Desai was an activist involved in labor union activities.

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9.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Desai views nationalism as a historical category, a modern phenomenon which comes into existence at a certain point in history. In India, it evolved as result of a combination of objective factors and subjective factors when the Indian people were political subjects of the British Empire.
- 2) In the pre-Independence period, colonialism and nationalism as concepts and fields of action were central to Desai's intellectual and political engagement, while in the post-independence years it was the character of the State and the path of the development.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Desai left the Communist Party after a brief period of five years since he found the bureaucratic structure of the party suffocating. Also, he opposed the change in the Party's stand regarding support to British war efforts in India when the Soviet Union was attacked by Nazi Germany in 1939.
- 2) Factors that facilitate capitalist development in India are: relationship between the capitalist class and the State, and the moulding of different institutions (i.e., legal framework and administrative apparatus for facilitating capitalist development, along with the major policy initiatives, the public sector, planning as a major instrument, the mixed economy and the welfare state).