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P V Narasimha Rao and India's Foreign Policy

P V Narasimha Rao is known for his contribution towards uplifting India from a serious balance of payments crisis and liberalising the economy in 1991. On 9 February 2024, in honouring Rao with the Bharat Ratna, the Prime Minister emphasised Rao's instrumental role in "making India economically advanced, laying a solid foundation for the country's prosperity and growth." But what is often less recognised is the significance of Rao in providing a pragmatic shift to Indian foreign policy.

Rao became the Prime Minister at a crucial juncture when world politics was undergoing a pivotal change with the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the end of the Cold War. The then structure of the international system reflected the changing power dynamics with the United States (US) asserting its dominance in the international community. In the changed circumstances, Rao took a vital decision to deviate from the conventional approach to foreign policy by establishing diplomatic relations with countries having strategic significance for India.

Rao transformed India's foreign policy paradigm in a significant way. To begin with, he strived to develop relations with major powers by opening up India's economy to the rest of the world through economic reforms. Economic and trade relations were established with countries from Europe. The changed international power dynamics in the post-Cold War era compelled India to establish a strategic alliance with Washington. Rao realised that India-US relations would improve significantly if India decided to establish a diplomatic relationship with Israel. Due to India's dependence on Arab oil, Congress was inclined towards supporting Palestine. Rao decided to go against this status quo by voting alongside the US in the 1991 United Nations resolution to revoke the designation of Zionism as "a form of racism and racial discrimination."

The same year, he invited Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat for a state visit.

When Arafat came to India in January 1992, he convinced Arafat that India could put pressure on Israel only if it established active diplomatic relations with the country. By the end of January 1992, India started its full-fledged diplomatic ties with Israel. Rao later visited Iran seeking its support against Pakistan and trying to regain the confidence of the Muslim world after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. These efforts contributed towards improving India's relations with countries in West Asia. Later, his visits to the US and Russia in 1994 led to the establishment of renewed diplomatic relations on the new global stage.

Moreover, Rao played an important role in operationalising India's nuclear programme. In 1985, as a minister of defence in Rajiv Gandhi's cabinet, Rao was one of the few individuals involved in the decision-making process regarding the nuclear programme and passing orders for assembling nuclear weapons. Later as Prime Minister, Rao prioritised developing India's nuclear deterrence. He handled the nuclear programme with great caution and took it forward at optimum speed. To ensure continuity, he even briefed Atal Bihari Vajpayee about the developments in the nuclear programme. His efforts implicitly culminated in the Shakti nuclear test that happened in 1998 under the prime ministership of Vajpayee. In an obituary tribute to Rao, Vajpayee credited the former as the "true father" of India's nuclear programme. Rao displayed remarkable non-partisanship in his handling of the programme, and never sought credit for his efforts.

Realising the potential of East and Southeast Asian economies, Rao took measures to enhance relations with them resulting in the formulation of the "Look East" policy. The policy aimed at the gradual integration of the Indian economy with the East Asian economies

NOTICE

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and reviving people-to-people contact in the region. He nurtured a comprehensive neighbourhood policy by reviving India's relations with Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and other neighbours to strengthen economic development in South Asia. This idea was later promulgated and popularised by Prime Minister I K Gujral as the "Gujral Doctrine."

Rao also understood that defusing tensions between India and China is key to ensuring development in the South Asian region. To attain this objective, during his visit to China in 1993, he signed an "Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India–China Border Areas" with Chinese Premier Li Peng and trade relations boomed for a while between both the countries.

During his tenure, Rao was committed to responding to global challenges by reorienting the foreign policy of India based on national interest and bringing several shifts in India's foreign policy amid unfavourable domestic conditions. Rao led a minority government for a full term, winning three no-confidence motions in Parliament, overcoming an economic crisis, and the demolition of Babri Masjid despite not being a mass political leader.

Stefy V Joseph, Rishvanth Reddy Mucheli
BENGALURU

Ageism, Euthanasia, and Crimes against the Elderly

Sumanta Banerjee, in his response titled "Ageism and the Rights of Older People" (*EPW*, 3 February 2024), thoughtfully raises a pivotal question concerning octogenarians. Often, these individuals become dependent on others at the cost of their self-respect and may find themselves contemplating the bleak prospect of "geronticide." An essential question emerges in this regard: Should these elderly individuals be afforded the right to choose euthanasia and the option to donate their organs for medical purposes? However, it becomes imperative to delve into the legal intricacies that argue against the endorsement of euthanasia, especially in light of the documented cases of senicide in India.

Senicide, defined as "the killing of elderly people," has manifested as a concerning issue, particularly in some parts of Tamil Nadu, where the age-old ritualistic practice of *Thalaikoothal* prevails. This ritual involves the intentional termination of elderly lives, driven by economic challenges and societal burdens, raising ethical and moral questions surrounding this ancient practice.

Within the Indian legal framework, Article 21 of the Constitution explicitly declares that "No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to the procedure established by law." The right to life, deemed a natural right, does not inherently encompass the right to die. The legal landscape in India only permits passive euthanasia under specific conditions, as established in the landmark case of *Aruna Ramchandra Shanbaug v Union of India*.

The occurrence of crimes against the elderly is unfortunately not a rare phenomenon, and data from the 2023 National Crime Records Bureau report indicates an increase in such incidents in Tamil Nadu in 2022 compared to 2021. Despite a decrease in crimes against senior citizens in Chennai from 2021 to 2022, Tamil Nadu ranks third overall, with Maharashtra leading in the number of reported crimes against the elderly. As the elderly population is projected to rise by 2031, permitting euthanasia for octogenarians raises concerns about the potential for coercion by their children.

Journalist Pramila Krishnan's in-depth investigation into the practice of *Thalaikoothal* shed light on the economic hardships that drive family members to consider the unthinkable

act of terminating the lives of their elderly parents, who become financial burdens, especially in terms of escalating medical expenses. This distressing scenario underscores the importance of addressing societal attitudes towards ageing and the elderly, challenging the prevailing perception that advancing age equates to becoming an unbearable burden on one's family.

Moreover, a darker motive behind the killing of aged parents surfaces in certain cases, where children resort to such extreme acts to gain control of ancestral property. This disturbing trend is not confined to the economically disadvantaged but appears to be prevalent across various strata of society, including the affluent.

Given this intricate backdrop, allowing euthanasia for the elderly presents complex ethical, legal, and societal challenges. While the cause of organ donation is commendable, linking it to the termination of one's life raises multifaceted concerns that demand careful consideration and a nuanced approach. Moreover, altering societal attitudes towards the elderly and debunking the notion that ageing inherently translates to becoming an insurmountable burden are vital steps towards fostering a more compassionate and supportive environment for the ageing population.

Pyali Chatterjee
RAIPUR

Erratum

In the book review titled "Shaping Indian Polity" by Ratnakar Tripathy (*EPW*, 3 February 2024), the price of the book, *The Hunger of the Republic: Our Present in Retrospect*, edited by Ashish Rajadhyaksha should have read as "₹1,200."

The error has been corrected on the *EPW* website. *The error is regretted—Ed.*

EPW Index

An author-title index for *EPW* has been prepared for the years from 1968 to 2012. The PDFs of the Index have been uploaded, year-wise, on the *EPW* website. Visitors can download the Index for all the years from the site. (The Index for a few years is yet to be prepared and will be uploaded when ready.)

EPW would like to acknowledge the help of the staff of the library of the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai, in preparing the index under a project supported by the RD Tata Trust.

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The *EPW* editorial team reserves the right to slot an article in a specific section, as deemed fit.

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Short, analytical articles on topical and contemporary social, economic and political developments will be considered for this section.

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Engage

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