



TALE OF THE TWO GENTLEMEN

Biographer Rajmohan Gandhi brings back the saga of Darbar Gopaldas Desai, a progressive prince of Gujarat forgotten by history

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It's hard to imagine that a man completely forgotten today, was, next to Mahatma Gandhi, one of the most discussed men in Gujarat at one point of time," says Rajmohan Gandhi, as we settle in his cabin at Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar, where he is scholar-in-residence. We are discussing his latest biography about one of the most progressive names in the history of Gujarat. As he shares his journey of discovery and what inspired him to pen *Prince of Gujarat: The Extraordinary Story of Prince Gopaldas Desai (1887-1951)* launched earlier in the week, we see before us unfolding the story of a man who was way ahead of his time and the passion of Gandhi, the writer.

YOUR 'MUSE'

It was 1950, around the time Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel had died, when I asked my father about other interesting political figures from Gujarat. I was 15 years old, raised in Delhi and hadn't visited Gujarat yet. My father, who was editor of *Hindustan Times*, said, "There is this very remarkable man called Darbar Gopaldas Desai." Years later, in the mid 1980s, when I was researching for my biography on Sardar Patel, I spent a long time in Gujarat and discovered several things about Darbar Desai, also mentioned in Sardar's biography. But it was when I met Barindra Desai,

youngest of Darbar's four sons, that I decided to write this book.

KNOWING DESAI

When the Governor of Bombay presidency was visiting parts of Saurashtra, Gopaldas was ordered to visit a reception in a formal dress. He said, 'If you insist, I will come, but I'll wear *khadi*.' In those days, this was a sign of rebellion. When denied permission, Gopaldas did not go and thus, his property was confiscated. In 1921, even Vallabhbhai Patel was not as well-known as Darbar, because the latter had dared the British to confiscate his territory. Interestingly, the prince had a great talent for arts, and he created a dance troupe which had participation of people, irrespective of caste (1915-'20). It was a radical step at the time. It was one thing for a prince to observe a dance, but for him to enter the arena, bow before a man of a lower caste who was his subject, was astonishing.

This news of social equality and familiarity was amazing. Not only this, after he lost his property, he went to live in an *ashram*, accompanied by his wife, where they washed dirty clothes and vessels. A man who does extraordinary things, is loved, revered and then forgotten.



At one point, even Vallabhbhai Patel was not as well-known as Darbar Gopaldas Desai was. People loved him.

UNRAVELLING DESAI

The family provided majority of information. Barinder gave me a lot of information, but I also met the daughters of Mahendra Desai (the eldest of Darbar's sons). They just had to be prodded and probed. For instance, it was when I asked Barinder about what made Darbar so respectful, concerned and sensitised towards women, that the son told me that at one point, a brother and sister-in-law had been killed in an accident which was meant to kill Gopaldas. In the royal family, he saw the atmosphere of intrigue and I think, from an early stage, he felt such an oppressive rule had to end. I also spent a fair amount of time in Rajkot's records office where I got names and information about British agents, including people Gopaldas dealt with and those who monitored his movements to exercise control over his life.

Around 1922-23, Kalyanji Mehta wrote a biography on Darbar Gopaldas after talking to him and his wife. While there are just a few cop-

ies of the book left, it was a wealth of information. In 1955, another person from Vaso collected amazing anecdotes about the man. Ravjibhai Patel wrote an article about the boyhood of Darbar. All these are compiled in a Gujarati book on him.

NOT THE 'STEREOTYPE' PRINCE

Researching him was the very hope of correcting the stereotype. Gopaldas joined the movement in 1920 and his princely life ended in 1922 when he became a pauper (when his state was confiscated by the British Raj). Thereafter, he lived a dedicated and selfless life of hardship and poverty till 1951. From what I gathered, Gopaldas was unhappy he could not give his sons a comfortable life. But he never regretted it, because he felt the reason for which he left his property was noble, and that in due course his sons would be proud of him. The kids were often taunted by hostel-mates, but each of his sons refused when they were offered the state by the British on turning 21.

DARBAR GOPALDAS TODAY

In today's cynical age, where people think rulers and politicians are corrupt, here is a likeable man, somebody you can genuinely respect. In his novel, *Sorath Tara Vaheta Pani*, Jhaverchand Meghani wrote

about Saurashtra. The novel has several characters including a prince called Surendra Dev who has some amazing qualities. When people asked him about the identity of this man, Meghani said, 'This is Gopaldas'. He ends the book saying Surendra Dev must return. I am glad I have enabled his return.

FAVOURITE OF YOUR 'CHILDREN'

I'm sure you've heard this before and it's true, a book is like a child. It takes time for it to emerge, often there is suspense over whether it will turn out right or not. So, when the book finally appears, it's like a child appearing. And, like most parents, who are very fond of their youngest child, I am very fond of this book. My next book is about south India, primarily because I enjoyed writing *Punjab: A History from Aurangzeb to Mountbatten* which was appreciated by Punjabis across sections. We are aware of different cultures like Telugu, Kannada, Tamil, Konkani, but there is a south Indian culture, too. How much did one part of south India know about another in the last 200 years, before communication mediums improved? Who were the most interesting people? These are things I want to investigate. But it is a long term project and I don't even know if I'll be able to finish it.