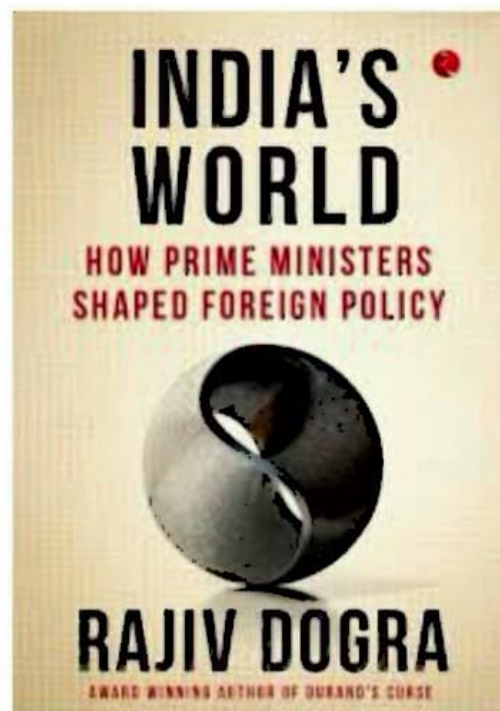


India's World: How Prime Ministers Shaped Foreign Policy by Rajiv Dogra

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"You are what your deep, driving desire is. As your desire is, so is your will. As your will is, so is your deed. As your deed is, so is your destiny."

-- Brihadaranyaka Upanishad IV.4.5



"The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting." Wrote historic Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu in 'The Art of War,' his magnum opus. In contemporary times, amidst the era of nuclear deterrence and pacifism, foreign policy and diplomacy are the instruments employed by states and diplomats in order to secure their interests on the world stage. Winston Churchill, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, is famously quoted as saying, *"Diplomacy is the art of telling people to go to hell in such a way that they ask for directions."* However, not a master diplomat himself, Churchill, condensed the crux of modern international relations in a gist. 'India's World: How Prime Ministers Shaped Foreign Policy,' published by Rupa Publications, is an interesting account of how different Prime Ministers, as the head of government, have played their role in moulding and directing Indian foreign policy. Rajiv Dogra, the author of the book, has served as the Indian Ambassador to Romania and the Italian Republic. The book begins with a prologue, before moving forward to eight chapters, each revolving around a Prime Minister, before concluding with a stimulating epilogue. The first chapter revolves around Jawaharlal Nehru; not solely the first Prime Minister of India, but also his own Minister of External Affairs, for a seventeen-year tenure. Interestingly, the author provides a rather

detailed account of the circumstances under which Nehru was chosen to be the President of the Indian National Congress (INC), and hence by that virtue, the first Prime Minister of an independent India. He hints at Nehru being the first 'accidental Prime Minister', a term often attributed to Manmohan Singh. The greatest feature of the author's writings on Nehru is the quintessential balance between due credit and due criticism. At one point, the author writes *"...Nehru had some unique gifts: the intellectual capacity to motivate people with the idealism of a new beginning, the ability to fire their imagination with passionate rhetoric and vision to aim high... The nobility of Nehru's words provided a newly born India with a lodestone that was ambitious and humane."* Yet, at another point, he writes *"Nehru was no saint, nor was he an unblemished icon of Gandhi's stature... He was an aristocrat who belonged to the masses, a dictatorial taskmaster who was a great democrat. He was not comfortable with the negative-sounding term 'non-alignment,' yet became its high priest."* The second chapter is based on policy decisions taken by Lal Bahadur Shastri, Nehru's successor as Prime Minister, during his brief tenure. The author presents an analytical account of the decision taken by Shastri delivered on the grounds of Ram Lila Maidan after the war concluded – *"Whereas Pakistan*

proclaims herself to be an Islamic State and uses religion as a political factor, we Indians have the freedom to follow whatever religion we may choose [and] worship in any way we please. So far as politics is concerned, each of us is as much an Indian as the other." This statement by Shastri had two implications – First, it highlighted the heinous nature of the radical political communalism of Pakistan which resulted in the war. Second, it gave a clear message to the country that united we stand; that war between India and Pakistan did not mean war between Indian Hindus and Indian Muslims.

The third chapter describes in detail the times of Indira Gandhi and how she shaped Indian foreign policy while in office. Her domestic policies shadowed the legacy of Jawaharlal Nehru – The imposition of the state of emergency, the Nationalisation of Banks, the Abolition of the Privy Purses, the Khalistan Movement and Operation Blue Star. Emphasis on her foreign policy decisions are miniscule if not none. Against this backdrop, the author writes *"However, given the odds that she was working under, it will be fair to characterise Indira's foreign policy as bold in conception and execution. If the test of a great leader is the ability and will to take quick and transformative decisions, then too she qualifies eminently for the honour."*

In an assessment of her foreign policy credentials, the author writes *"It is worth repeating that the Bangladesh war & the nuclear test stand out as testimonies to the boldness of her vision and the clinical efficiency in its implementation. She did falter in Shimla, but then there was no one to whisper caution in her ears, as was done in the case of victorious Roman Generals: 'Memento mori (You are only mortal).'"*

The author prudently spits out the fact that Indira, like her father, was contradictory in nature. Under the coat of democracy and socialism, lurked somewhere within the ghosts of tyranny and autocracy. The author ends the chapter on a rather sombre yet proud note *"The frail goddess fell and her blood began to seep into the ground below her, just as she had said the previous day at Bhubhaneshwar: '...when I die...every drop of my blood will invigorate India and strengthen it."*

The next chapter explores the reluctant

prince of Rajiv Gandhi, who took reign after his mother's assassination. Rajiv, the youngest ever Prime Minister of India at 40, represented the rise of new blood in Indian politics. His tenure marked a departure from the policies of his mother Indira and grandfather Jawaharlal. His visits to the United States and China were intended to warm up bilateral relations which were frozen after the 1971 and 1962 wars respectively. *"... he was sincere in his effort to put India in the technological stream that was sweeping the world. And he successfully presented an image of India that was persuasive, modern-minded, and free of opportunism. Like many others, he may not have delivered entirely what he had promised, but he was certainly not cast in the standard mould of the Indian politician; he was more of a prince charming, suave of manner, and sophisticated in his conduct. Alas, this reluctant politician was outwitted by the professional ones."*

The next four chapters explore the foreign policy decisions of P.V. Narasimha Rao, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Manmohan Singh, and Narendra Modi. Applauding the book's merits, it is worth mentioning the domains in which it falls short. Narrating the story of Nehru, the author does not provide much substance on the creation of the Non-Alignment movement, in which Nehru played a pivotal role. In writing about Indira Gandhi's foreign policy too, the author does not mention the formidable bond she shared with leaders like Fidel Castro of Cuba or Yasser Arafat of Palestine. It appears that the author has spent more words on commentary on political events rather than foreign policy issues. The author has not included in his book, the stories of Prime Ministers like Chandrashekar, who was the first Prime Minister to authorize the US Airforce fighter jets to land and refuel in India; and I.K. Gujral, a worthy diplomat himself and proponent of the 'Gujral Doctrine'. Also, the author, a former diplomat himself, could have shared insights of his own career in the book. In totality, this book is a fine piece of literature on the personal and political dynamics involved in the trade of foreign policy. This book also carries the weight of conveying the personal extent of contributions by distinct Prime Ministers in shaping the destiny of India's relations with the global village.