

INTERVIEWS: DR
FMR
LCD

Not for transmission to
colleagues in INDIA

The Honorable Morarji Desai
Minister of Finance
Government of India

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The opening gambit in the conversation between DR and Mr. Desai proved in some ways revealing of what was to follow. DR remarked that the only tangible thing the RF might show to visitors in New York is our virus research laboratories, but we hesitate to take in visitors because of possible risk from dangerous viruses. Desai replied that viruses don't bother him because "I don't believe in that theory." He went on implicitly to deprecate over-concern about "presumed causes of death," since everybody knows that everyone has to die and it isn't too important when. He is amused by the current excitement about the number of deaths reported to be due to heart failure because "all deaths have always been caused by heart failure; no one dies until his heart stops."

DR turned to the major topic for serious discussion, namely, the renewed suggestion from an official in one of the Indian government ministries that any outside agency, including a private foundation like the RF, should negotiate its proposed grants in India through the government. Desai immediately interposed that he and no one else was responsible for renewing emphasis on this policy. It is a necessary policy, he says, in order to insure that the RF and other agencies make the best possible use of their funds in India and to enable the government of India to take appropriate account of outside grants when making its decisions about allocation of government funds.

Desai adds that he has read DR's letter explaining the RF's position on this matter and he can see no necessary conflict between that position and his own. He fully understands that the RF wishes to spend its money in India in the best possible way to help India and India greatly appreciates this. The government's desire to be consulted is motivated only by the wish to help the Foundation make good choices. Obviously the Indians are in a far better position to know the best opportunities and greatest needs in India than RF officers can be.

DR agrees that this is manifestly true respecting knowledge of Indian conditions and of needs from the government's point of view. But, DR points out, this may be less true with respect to selecting the best opportunities for important advances in science. No, says Desai, in science, too, Indians know better than others how to make the best selections in India.

DR adds that the RF is not primarily engaged in making selections among alternatives in India but is attempting to select the most promising opportunities on a world-wide basis. Nevertheless, says Desai, RF needs the help of the Indian government to avoid making bad

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blunders in India. He adds that we should not object to accepting their help since it is obvious that our philanthropic activities are motivated by a desire to do good, and, hence, we must welcome the help of the Indian government which is needed to save us from failures in our well-intentioned efforts. Unfortunately, there are some Indians who would take advantage of us and the government can protect us against them.

DR comments that RF has considerable experience and sophistication in such matters. To which Desai replies that this is exactly the trouble: "too much sophistication has done great harm in the world." Moreover, there is also risk of undue pride on the side of donors and loss of self-respect on the side of recipients, which damage the character of both. Operating with government aid and advice will help to avoid these evils. If donors are unwilling to extend their aid in due humility and through procedures which protect the self-respect of the recipients, India will gladly do without their gifts.

DR turned to a different point: RF, in order to make its limited resources count, seeks out only a few of the very best and strongest universities or research laboratories and provides additional funds over and above those provided by government and other sources, when it appears that such additional funds may help the recipient institution to develop to the point where it can make an important contribution of far-reaching significance to the world as well as to India. Obviously this purpose of RF grants would be frustrated if government support were reduced in proportion to RF contributions. Moreover, RF cannot, of course, undertake corresponding assistance to the many other universities and laboratories throughout India; their problems must necessarily be left to governmental and local sources of support. Does this practice of singling out a few centers for preferential treatment present any problems from the point of view of the Indian government?

"Not at all," says Desai. The government welcomes RF assistance to the institutions in which it is interested and there is no danger that the government would withdraw grants already made to such institutions. The government merely wants to assist the Foundation, as was said before, to make wise choices about the institutions it selects and about the amount and type of assistance given to particular institutions. Moreover, the government needs to know about such grants so it can take appropriate account of them in making its own decisions about future assistance to these institutions. It would not be good for some institutions to get too far ahead of the other institutions throughout the country; jealousy must be prevented. The government would wish to expend its funds where relative needs are greatest.

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DR inquires, does Desai believe it possible for India to develop truly outstanding universities of world renown like Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, the Sorbonne, Harvard, without selecting a limited number of institutions and giving them very substantially more support than can be given to universities generally throughout India? Desai replies: India cannot afford universities like Oxford and Harvard at the present time. India is not seeking to achieve equality among all individuals or institutions--this is manifestly impossible--but it is seeking to keep inequality to the practicable minimum. This means giving extra help to those who need it most to keep up with the rest and restraining the others who might pull too far ahead. If too much preferential treatment, through either government support or Foundation gifts, is allowed to go to particular institutions, envy is aroused in the others. The government wishes to prevent this.

DR says, most RF activities in India involve dealings with Indian universities or research institutes with whom we ordinarily carry on direct negotiations. Is it possible that these institutions might themselves conduct any desired consultation with the Indian government? Or does Mr. Desai feel that the RF should itself consult government officials about its negotiations with prospective recipients of grants? Desai replies that the government does not want the universities coming to it but wishes to deal with RF directly. This does not mean, however, that RF should consult the Ministry of Finance. The University Grants Commission is the appropriate agency to consult respecting RF negotiations with universities in India.

DR concludes with the comment that RF has discussed many problems with the University Grants Commission in the past and that he hopes to see and talk with Mr. Deshmukh about these and related matters during a probable visit to New Delhi in mid-October.

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