

## **POLITICAL JOURNEY OF PV NARASIMHA RAO FROM STUDENT LEADER TO PRIME MINISTER OF INDIA**

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### **Abstract**

Pamulaparathi Venkata Narasimha Rao popularly known as P.V. Narasimha Rao born on June 28, 1921, near Karimnagar, was 9<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister of India from 1991 to 1996. Widely recognized for his efforts to liberalize the Indian economy in the early 1990's, Rao was conferred the eventually receiving a law degree from the latter institution. He entered politics as a Congress Party activist working for independence from Britain. He served in the Andhra Pradesh state legislative assembly from 1957 to 1977, supporting Indira Gandhi in her split from the Congress Party organization in 1969; initially called the New Congress Party, the splinter group took the name Congress (I) Party in 1978. He held various ministerial positions in the Andhra Pradesh government from 1962 to 1973, including that of chief minister (head of government) from 1971. In that latter post he implemented a revolutionary land-reform policy and secured political participation for the lower castes. He was elected to represent Andhra Pradesh districts in the Lok Sabha (lower chamber of the Indian parliament) in 1972 and, under Gandhi and her son and successor, Rajiv Gandhi, served in various ministries, notably as foreign minister (1980–84, 1988–89). Besides his political career, Rao was known as a distinguished scholar-intellectual who once was chairman of the Telugu Academy in Andhra Pradesh (1968–74). He was fluent in six languages, translated Hindi verses and books, and wrote fiction in Hindi, Marathi, and Telugu.

**Keywords:** Political journey, early life, freedom movement, political participation.

## Introduction:

Pamulaparthy Venkata Narasimha Rao popularly known as P.V. Narasimha Rao became India's 9th Prime Minister after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991. Rao almost immediately began efforts to restructure India's economy by converting the inefficient quasi-socialist structure left by Jawaharlal Nehru and the Gandhis into a free-market system. His program involved cutting government regulations and red tape, abandoning subsidies and fixed prices, and privatizing state-run industries. Those efforts to liberalize the economy spurred industrial growth and foreign investment, but they also resulted in rising budget and trade deficits and heightened inflation.

Pamulaparthy Venkata Narasimha Rao, affectionately known as P. V. Narasimha Rao, was a transformative figure in Indian politics. He was born on June 28, 1921, in the remote village of Vangara in the Telangana region, Rao rose to become the ninth Prime Minister of India, serving from 1991 to 1996. His tenure marked a significant turning point in India's economic history, earning him the moniker "Father of Indian Economic Reforms." This paper explores his early life, political journey, leadership skills, discipline, and the indelible mark he left on India's socio-economic fabric. P.V. Narasimha Rao served as Prime Minister of India and presided over the country's economic liberalisation, yet his legacy is highly contested. Hence, this paper has designed to study the political journey of PV Narasimha Rao from student leader to Prime Minister of India with the following objectives.

## Objectives

1. To study the early life of PV Narasimha Rao
2. To study the role of PV Narasimha Rao in Freedom Movement
3. To the political journey of PV Narasimha Rao
4. To study the role of PV Narasimha Rao as 9<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister of india

## Early Life of Sri PV Narasimha Rao:

Sri Narasimha Rao was born in a Telugu Niyogi Brahmin (Vinod Kumar Rawat, 2014)<sup>1</sup> family in the village of Laknepalli, where his father Sitarama Rao and mother Rukmini hailed from agrarian families (Aggarwala, Adish C., 1995).<sup>2</sup> Later he was adopted by Pamulaparthy Ranga Rao and Rukminamma and brought to Vangara, a village in Bheemadevarpalle mandal of Hanamkonda district in Telangana when he was three years old (Sitapati, Vinay, 2016).<sup>3</sup> Narasimha Rao completed part of his primary education in Katkuru village of Bheemdevarapalli mandal in Hanamkonda district by staying in his relative Gabbeta Radhakishan Rao's house and went on to enroll himself in a Bachelor's Degree in Humanities at College of Arts in Osmania University in the city of Hyderabad. After completing his graduation, P. V. Narsimha Rao further pursued higher studies where he completed his Master's Degree in Law from Hislop College that is today affiliated to the Nagpur University (Pallab BOSE, 2020).<sup>4</sup> P. V. Narashima Rao is known to have phenomenal linguistic skills. His multilingual abilities were beyond match where he mastered ten Indian languages with and additional six foreign tongues. Apart from Telegu, which was his mother tongue, P. V. Narasimha Rao spoke Marathi, Urdu, Sanskrit, Bengali, Hindi, Gujarati, Oriya, Tamil and Kannada. To further add to his linguistic prowess, P. V. Narasimha Rao was also

comfortable with Persian, Spanish, German, French, English and Arabic. P. V. Narasimha Rao was engaged in the freedom struggle for India's independence long before he became a mainstream member of the Indian National Congress. Needless to say, his impeccable command over the languages made him a very effective orator where he could communicate effortlessly to the regional population making him an extremely successful frontrunner of the local masses. Hence, a brief outlines of his early life are listed below and analysed.

- **Birth and Family Background:** Born into a farming family, Rao's early life was rooted in the rural landscape of Telangana. Despite his modest upbringing, his family prioritized education, a rarity in the region at the time. This foundation of strong educational values played a crucial role in shaping Rao's future. He was married with Satyamma who unfortunately passed away in the year 1970. Their marriage bore eight children.
- **Education:** Rao's academic prowess was evident from a young age. He completed his primary education locally before moving to the prestigious Osmania University in Hyderabad, where he earned a bachelor's degree in Arts. Pursuing further education, Rao obtained a law degree from the University of Mumbai. His exposure to diverse academic environments broadened his horizons and sharpened his intellectual capabilities.
- **Early Involvement in Politics:** During his college years, Rao became deeply involved in student politics, joining various movements that championed India's independence and social reforms. This early engagement laid the groundwork for his future political endeavors, providing him with firsthand experience in leadership and public service.

#### **Participation in Freedom Movement:**

Before becoming a prominent member of the Indian National Congress after the independence of India from the British Raj, P. V. Narasimha Rao actively took part in protests and demonstrations against the colonial administration. P. V. Narasimha was an active student leader where he spearheaded many satyagrahi movements in the different localities of the previous state of Andhra Pradesh as a mark of dissent against the draconian British administration of exploitation and impoverishment the people of the Indian subcontinent. He was also an active participant of the Vande Mataram Movement that took place in the 1930s in the state of Hyderabad (Indian National Congress, Jan 3, 2019)<sup>5</sup>. As a result, there were many instances where he along with his companions was arrested by the British officials amidst their acts of protests. P.V. Narasimha had a tremendous caliber for languages. Though his mother tongue was Telegu, he had superior command over nine other Indian languages apart from six foreign languages. This arsenal enabled P. V. Narasimha Rao write for a Telegu weekly magazine along with his cousins Raja Narendra and Pamulaparathi Sadasiva Rao. Along with his distant cousin Pamulaparathi Sadasiva Rao, Ch. Raja Narendra and Devulapalli Damodar Rao, Sri Rao edited a Telugu weekly magazine called Kakatiya Patrika in the 1940s (Kakatiyapatrika.com, 2013).<sup>6</sup> The trio regularly participated in adding articles in the weekly journal under the pen-name of 'Jaya-Vijaya'. Sri Rao served as the Chairman of the Telugu Academy in Andhra Pradesh from 1968 to 1974 (Shiva Kumar Pinna, 27 June 2020)<sup>7</sup>.

#### **Political Journey of P. V. Narasimha Rao:**

P. V. Narasimha Rao's political journey began at a relatively nascent stage before he had the membership of a major national party. From as early as the 1930s, P. V. Narasimha Rao along with other freedom fighters regularly protested against the colonial government and their administration. He was one of the prominent members of the Vande Mataram Movement that the state of Hyderabad Movement saw in the 1930s (Indian National Congress, Jan 3, 2019). His frequency in the miscellaneous political mobilizations related to the freedom movement frequently got him arrested. However, this did not deter him to continue his quest as a freedom fighter for India's independence. His abilities as a polyglot helped him tremendously to stir the local masses as well. After India gained independence, P. V. Narasimha Rao officially became affiliated to the Indian National Congress.

Narasimha Rao served as an elected representative for Andhra Pradesh State Assembly from 1957 to 1977, and he served in various ministerial positions in Andhra government from 1962 to 1973. He became the Chief minister of Andhra Pradesh in 1971 and implemented land reforms and land ceiling acts strictly. He secured reservation for lower castes in politics during his tenure (britannica.com)<sup>8</sup>. President's rule had to be imposed to counter the Jai Andhra movement during his tenure (The Daily Telegraph, 24 December 2004)<sup>9</sup>. Soon after, he took the responsibilities of the Chief Minister of the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh from 1971 to 1973. Andhra Pradesh under P. V. Narasimha Rao saw land reforms with the effective implementation of land ceiling acts especially in the region recognized as Telangana today.

As a Minister of the Union Cabinet, he also held a multitude of port folios related to the Home Ministry, the Foreign Ministry and the Defence Ministry among the others. P. V. Narasimha Rao was a Minister of the Union Cabinet for both Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi when they were Prime Ministers respectively. After the ghastly assassination of the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in the year 1991, it was P. V. Narasimha Rao who succeeded as the Prime Minister after the Congress having won the largest number of seats in the elections of 1991. He was the first non-Hindi speaking Prime Minister to hail from the southern region of the country in the history of India politics and served a full tenure from 1991 to 1996 (Ratika Rana, 2021)<sup>10</sup>. P. V. Narasimha Rao then took part in the by-election in Nandyal in order to join the Parliament as he had previously not contested in the General Elections. With a record victory backed by a margin of well above five lakh votes, P. V. Narasimha Rao emerged victorious from Nandyal. One of the most important decisions of P. V. Narasimha Rao as the Prime Minister was the appointment of a non-political candidate as the Minister of Finance. Thus the renowned economist Dr. Manmohan Singh and P. V. Narasimha Rao profoundly shaped India's New Economic Policy where they saved the country from slipping into the looming abyss of debt and economic crisis. It was P. V. Narasimha Rao who chaired the session of the Indian National Congress at Tirupati in the year 1992.

#### **Architect of India's economic reforms:**

Narasimha Rao emerges as a man who provided transformational leadership to India at a time of deep financial crisis. The Congress party has assiduously given credit for the 1991 reforms to Dr Manmohan Singh, Rao's finance minister and to Rajiv Gandhi, a former prime minister from

the Nehru-Gandhi family. However, the author provides key insights and ‘behind-the-scenes details of how Rao neutralised criticism to the radical economic reforms both from sections of the opposition and from within his own party.’

21 June to 24 July 1991 witnessed a revolution in India’s economic policy, born out of a financial crisis that had been some years in the making. ‘I didn’t know it was this bad...’ was Rao’s reaction to the briefing on the balance of payments crisis, the unprecedented devaluation of the rupee and the mortgaging of gold bullion, when being updated by his cabinet secretary; a day before he was to be sworn-in as India’s tenth prime minister. ‘The economy was so wrecked that India was pawning its family jewellery. There have been crises in 1965-67, 1973-75 and 1979-81. None, however, was more alarming than what India faced in 1991.’ To mend the situation, India needed ‘fiscal discipline, dismantle trade barriers, and remove licenses, permits and anti-monopoly laws that bound domestic entrepreneurs.’

By the time Rao understood the gravity of the situation, a formerly ‘protectionist Rao had given way to the pragmatic Rao.’ He handpicked experts, ‘regardless of their political affiliations’, and sought advice from them. Interestingly, while deciding on his new ministerial cabinet, Rao, ‘wanted an apolitical economist with an internationally credible face capable of dealing with the west’ and was offered two names – Professor I.G. Patel, former Director of the London School of Economics, and Dr Manmohan Singh, Economist and former Governor of the Reserve Bank of India. Patel declined the job so Dr Singh was sworn in as finance minister.

Earlier governments, led by Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and V.P. Singh, also were aware of the significance of liberalising the economy. Rajiv Gandhi had even attempted such reforms in 1985 but he ‘lacked the skills to manage the politics of reform.’ In pulling off the reforms his predecessors had failed to implement, Rao proved to be a shrewd strategist. Sitapati writes, ‘though Manmohan was critical to Rao’s team, he was not indispensable. Had I.G. Patel become finance minister in 1991, liberalisation would have likely persisted. But had Narasimha Rao not become prime minister, India would have been a different country.’

### **Babri mosque demolition:**

Many consider Rao’s role in the Babri Masjid demolition to be the darkest time of his tenure as prime minister. They accuse him of being a conspirator by deliberately not acting to stop the demolition of the mosque that December. Sitapati makes good of his training as a lawyer to delve into the legal constructs of the Indian constitution alongside gathering evidence and concluded that “history has judged Narasimha Rao harshly’. He writes that, in the lead up to 6 December, the only option Rao had was to impose President’s rule, but he could not even do this because members of both his own party and the opposition were against it. The Supreme Court refused to give Rao a receivership and the Governor suggested that president’s rule should not be imposed.

Narasimha Rao, who had a very high opinion of himself as a Hindu leader thought he could out-manoeuvre Hindu saints, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh leaders and convince them to protect the mosque without having to impose President’s rule. He was, however, mistaken and his actions during the crisis led political rivals like Arjun Singh to

level charges against Rao of being incommunicado or was performing puja (religious rituals) or even sleeping during the destruction of the Babri mosque in their biographies and memoirs. Sitapati dismisses all of these as either conspiracy theories, largely floated by the Congress party, or outright lies.

### **Role of P.V. Narasimha Rao as 9<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister of India (1991-1996):**

- **Economic Reforms:** Upon assuming office in 1991, Rao faced an unprecedented economic crisis. India's foreign exchange reserves were perilously low, and the country was on the brink of default. In response, Rao, along with his Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, introduced sweeping economic reforms. These reforms included liberalizing the Indian economy, reducing import tariffs, deregulating industries, and encouraging foreign investment. These measures not only averted the crisis but also set India on a path of sustained economic growth.
- **Political Challenges:** Rao's tenure was fraught with challenges. The demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 led to widespread communal riots, testing his leadership. Despite criticism, Rao managed the situation with a pragmatic approach, emphasizing the need for communal harmony and taking steps to restore law and order.
- **Foreign Policy:** Rao's foreign policy was marked by pragmatism and strategic thinking. He strengthened ties with the United States, fostering a relationship that would prove beneficial for India in the long run. He also improved relations with neighboring countries and laid the groundwork for India's Look East policy, which aimed to enhance economic and strategic relations with Southeast Asian nations.

### **Leadership Skills**

- **Visionary Leadership:** Rao's vision for India was ahead of its time. He recognized the need for economic reforms to pull India out of stagnation and set it on a path of growth. His willingness to embrace change, even at the risk of political backlash, demonstrated his commitment to the nation's future.
- **Crisis Management:** Rao's ability to manage crises was a hallmark of his leadership. Whether dealing with economic turmoil, political instability, or communal tensions, he remained calm and composed, guiding the country through turbulent times with a steady hand.
- **Inclusive Governance:** Believing in the importance of inclusive governance, Rao often sought inputs from a diverse range of stakeholders. His cabinet included experienced politicians and technocrats, reflecting his commitment to informed and balanced decision-making.

### **Discipline and Work Ethic**

- **Scholarly Approach:** Rao's scholarly temperament was well-known. Fluent in multiple languages, including Hindi, Telugu, Marathi, Bengali, Urdu, Tamil, and Kannada, he was a voracious reader and a prolific writer. His intellectual pursuits informed his policies and decisions, providing a depth of understanding that was rare among political leaders.

- **Dedication to Public Service:** Rao's dedication to public service was unwavering. He often worked long hours, meticulously going through policy documents and reports. His commitment to his responsibilities was evident in his hands-on approach to governance.
- **Personal Discipline:** Rao led a simple and disciplined personal life. He was known for his frugality and modesty, shunning the ostentatious lifestyle often associated with political power. This personal discipline lent credibility to his public image and reinforced his reputation as a leader who was genuinely committed to the well-being of the nation.

### **Legacy and Impact**

- **Economic Legacy:** Rao's economic reforms have left a lasting legacy. The liberalization policies he introduced laid the foundation for India's transformation into one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. His vision and leadership set the stage for the economic dynamism that characterizes modern India.
- **Political Legacy:** Despite the controversies and challenges he faced, Rao's tenure is often seen as a period of significant transformation. His ability to navigate complex political landscapes and implement far-reaching reforms has been widely acknowledged and appreciated.
- **Intellectual Contributions:** Even after retiring from active politics, Rao continued to contribute to intellectual and academic circles. He wrote extensively on politics, economics, and governance, sharing his insights and experiences. His writings remain a valuable resource for scholars and policymakers.

### **Conclusion**

P. V. Narasimha Rao's journey from a student leader to the Prime Minister of India is a testament to his resilience, intellect, and leadership. His tenure as Prime Minister marked a watershed moment in Indian history, transforming the nation's economic landscape and redefining its place in the global arena. Rao's legacy continues to inspire future generations of leaders and policymakers, reminding us of the power of vision, dedication, and disciplined governance. Rao's formal entry into politics was through the Indian National Congress during the pre-independence era. His dedication to the cause of freedom and his intellectual depth quickly caught the attention of senior leaders within the party. Post-independence, Rao's political career took off in the state of Andhra Pradesh. He held various ministerial positions, including those of Law, Education, and Health. During his tenure, he implemented significant reforms, such as modernizing the education system and improving healthcare infrastructure. His efforts in land reforms were particularly noteworthy, aiming to redistribute land to the landless and thus reduce economic disparity. Rao's transition to national politics was marked by his election to the Lok Sabha in 1972. His competence and versatility led to his appointment to several key ministerial positions, including the Minister of External Affairs, where he played a crucial role in shaping India's foreign policy, and the Minister of Home Affairs, where he tackled internal security issues with a firm hand. Within the Congress Party, Rao was seen as a moderate and a bridge-builder, often mediating between various factions. His ability to maintain a balance between different ideological streams within the party helped in maintaining cohesion during turbulent times.

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