

Matters of Discretion - An Autobiography

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I.K. Gujral (2011). Matters of Discretion - an autobiography, Hay House India, New Delhi. Price: 795; Pages 519, Hardbound, ISBN: 9789380480800.

There are a few business schools which have been able to arrange an internship at a constituency or parliamentary office for their students. The book under review is a valuable aid for all those students who have not been able to shadow a minister, because many of the necessary administrative skills can be acquired through experience or can be aided by attending a few courses or through a careful reading of some stimulating books.

The book under review is a treatise on contemporary political history and provides a deep insight into the roles played by several politicians, bureaucrats and other people in positions of power. The timeline which the book covers is quite vast. It traces India Inc's odyssey from the pre-partition days of brutal carnages to the present era. At some places the description of certain events is bound to bring tears in the eyes of the reader but such description is warranted as it makes the reader realize the pain which our ancestors have borne silently, the ordeals and the travails which they underwent, and the harrowing experiences they suffered.

The superlative ton has been effectively divided into four parts. The first part examines I. K. Gujral's entry into the maelstrom of politics through three chapters. The second part delves into Sh. Gujral's transition from politics to diplomacy and it contains twenty-two chapters. The third part consists of thirty chapters and examines Sh. Gujral's reentry into the whirlpool of politics. The fourth part contains thirteen chapters which provide a look into Sh. Gujral's tenure as the Prime Minister of India.

The book is an autobiography of a person who served as a Union Minister, as India's ambassador to the USSR and as the Prime Minister of India. The book is written in a descriptive style and is a treasure house of knowledge; it highlights several historical figures - some good and some not-so-good. It presents certain facts in

a neutral perspective. The book does not give tips on leadership; therefore it is not for people who are seeking shortcuts to positions of leadership or management. It describes some incidences which have actually occurred and shaped the things the way they are today. It will be helpful to managers of all hues. Reading the book may be an enlightening experience as it helps in learning something which is normally not taught in institutes and colleges, but, is essentially required for crossing the University of Life. The book analyses the interplay of sundry forces such as political, economic, and social which can help the policy makers in formulating suitable policies for the overall development.

The second chapter describes the last moments in the life of Jawaharlal Nehru, the election of Lal Bahadur Shastri and the election of Indira Gandhi as Prime Ministers of this country. The third chapter explores the split and complex personality of a very powerful politician. It also describes how some people like yoga guru of one of the Prime Ministers can threaten politicians, reshuffle the cabinet and get their work done. The early part of the fifth chapter delves into the differences between a Prime Minister and her daughter-in-law. It describes the extent to which people may proceed in order to vent out their personal vendetta. The ninth chapter is devoted to the first non-Congress Government at the centre. Some of the chapters in the book may help the reader in realizing that the fate of the country could have been different had the power wielding politicians not dismissed the pleas of certain intellectuals. In the following section I have touched on some of the chapters. The thirteenth chapter is devoted to the Shah Commission which had been constituted to inquire into the excesses committed during the emergency imposed in India that lasted from June 25, 1975 to March 21, 1977. The twenty-first chapter contains eight principles for the success of an ambassador as

enunciated by the former US ambassador to India, Mr. John Kenneth Galbraith. It also contains an account which explains how some big players from other countries came up with a proposal to end the turmoil in Afghanistan. The thirty-first chapter provides a superficial view of an operation (but deeply dissects the aftermath) which had been included in the 'Top 10 Political Disgraces' by India Today magazine. The thirty-third chapter explains the formation of a party by the name of Janta Dal. Chapter-forty one is devoted to a painful imbroglio that rocked the nation in 1990.

The book provides a glimpse into the lives of several eminent ministers, Prime Ministers and Presidents of India. It contains several startling revelations. It also offers a detailed account of certain laudable actions and despicable incidents. Several chapters in the book provide deep insights into some historical events which took place in Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and the erstwhile Soviet Union. It speaks about minute electronic bugs that may be placed by intelligence agencies in order to gain access to confidential information. It also explains how innocent people have suffered because of irrational decisions originating from the fiefdoms of power.

Sh. I. K. Gujral has been able to unfurl a country's transformation with great skill and passion. I personally feel that such a book can be a part of the regular syllabi of a Management programme. The book delves into several issues to be understood: minority rights, cultural marginalisation, multiculturalism, state powers, plural society, secularism, social justice, national unity, Mandal Commission recommendations, the power struggles and

the power networks in our country, the relationship between business and polity, hegemony of bureaucrats. By all means it is a tour de force of contemporary Indian history. There are no loose threads in the book. All the events mentioned are related in some order and sufficient background information pertaining to each event has been provided. The information contained in the book will help the reader increase his/her knowledge of the constitutional rights conferred on the citizens of India. The book contains photographs, copy of hand-written letters (written by none other than the first woman Prime Minister of India), excerpts from communications between highly important dignitaries which coupled with the author's rhetoric will keep the author glued to the book. The tome actually provides information that may, in part, be otherwise inaccessible to the masses. The book contains a description of several incidences which were fostered by greed for political power nurtured through a well orchestrated publicity campaign to mislead and misguide the masses. Thus it helps in developing a deeper understanding of the country's social and political fabric.

Marketers often speak of eight Ps of marketing: Product, Price, Place, Promotion, Packaging, Power, Pace, and Politics. A careful reading of the work under review will enable the reader in gaining deep knowledge of at least two Ps of marketing i.e. Power and Politics. The book will be helpful to the champions of Human Resource Management as it provides a true picture of the tensions and conflicts which working politicians have to pass through or face. Nonetheless one question remains unanswered: Whether the course of history is often predictable or often unpredictable?

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