A critical study of the thrust areas of the thought of Akshaykumar Ramanlal Desai brings us to the conclusion that we are looking into the thought of a person with multi-faceted talents. He was, at the same time, a Marxist—not only a philosopher but a practitioner as well—a sociologist, a teacher and an activist seeking to eradicate the ills of his society. Taking Karl Marx's famous saying to heart that philosophers only interpret the world, what is important is to change it, Desai, throughout his life, took it as his life's mission and tried to fulfil it. As his wife Prof. (Mrs.) Neera Desai recounted (in an interview taken on June 3, 2009 at her residence in Mumbai), Desai's interest was not restricted to the understanding of theory only. On the contrary, he wanted to establish a two-way relationship between theory and practice. For him comprehension of theory in itself was not enough, it had to be made applicable to social situation and transferred into social action for bringing about changes in social relationships. For this objective, study and understanding of theory was important, which in its turn, would reveal the various dimensions of social reality and the specific channels through which change can occur. For this project Desai had adopted the Marxist methodology—he interpreted and applied Marxism, says Sujata Patel (2007: 417), "as a perspective that understands and explains the specific Indian context in relation to a general Marxist theory of classes." As his lifelong concern had been investigation of the possible channels of change, so he applied Marxism as a methodology of change and created the Sociology of Social Change.

Desai was a pioneer in adopting the Marxist methodology of Historical Materialism to study Indian society and polity. Not only so, his attempt at implementing the Marxist methodology to the Indian context was done much before such academic and theoretical interest had been institutionalized
formally through the university system. Ghanashyam Shah pays tribute to Desai when he says (Gorman 1986: 93), “Desai is one of the first Marxist sociologists to use historical materialism to analyse the structural transformation of Indian society during the British and post-independence periods. He shows that Indian nationalism was generated by the political subjection of the Indian people by the British....The rise of an Indian bourgeoisie and an educated middle class came into conflict with British imperialism and became the basis of, and motive for, the rise and development of Indian nationalism.” Through the methodology of Historical Materialism, Desai developed his version of Marxist Sociology which, according to Patel (2007: 417) “was envisioned at a very important juncture in the history of the subject.” Says Ghanashyam Shah (1990: 4), “He did this at a time when Indian historians had yet to explore the field of social history. Kosambi’s historical writings were in a formative stage. Marxist historiography on India was not yet born. There were at the most Rajni Palme Dutt’s and R.C. Dutt’s books, Marx’s writings on India, the accounts of British administrators-cum-historians and some other stray writings. Indian Sociology under the leadership of Ghuriye and Radhakamal Mukherjee was in a formative stage.”

Desai’s Marxist Sociology provides an alternative historical materialist perspective against the conservatism running through contemporary Indian Sociology and Social Anthropology of the 1960s and the 1970s. A comparative analysis of both portrays Desai’s innovative ideas. For general sociology and social anthropology the focal point was the village and other small-scale units as the nucleus of micro studies. Desai, on the other hand, felt that (1984: 6), these concerns of the discipline made it regard the small-scale units as segments of autonomous systems torn out of the context of the larger society. He, thus, concentrated upon the macro and meso levels involving the study of state, capitalism, nationalism, class, agrarian structures, movements of peasants and other groups etc. Sujata Patel regards (2007: 439) Desai as a scholar-activist “with
his scholarship defined by a political perspective, a commitment to assess facts in
the context of values. It was this perspective that led him to ask sociological
questions and evaluate contemporary processes in the context of the nation-
state rather than the microscopic local that dominated the perspective of social
anthropology.” Indian social anthropology tried to create a space for the ‘social’
unmarked by discourses relating to history, politics and economics. But Desai
realised that no phenomenon pertaining to human society, can be kept within a
watertight compartment segregated from other human activities. Hence, he
framed an interdisciplinary sociology where the issues pertaining to different
human activities and therefore, different social sciences interacted with each
other and frequently overlapped. He correctly realised that society, economy,
polity, culture etc. interacted with each other constantly against the backdrop of
history. Hence, to understand any phenomenon historical knowledge is
paramount. Furthermore, solitary study of polity or economy or society or
culture or even law would make the endeavour woefully incomplete. As Desai
says (1984: 4), current sociological teaching and research “are being undertaken
in isolation from indology and history.” This creates a lack of awareness of
Indian sociological tradition. If the boundaries of the discipline are hardened
and an exclusive territory is carved out then, says Desai (ibid: 5) there develops
“a restrictive segmental perspective and an allergy towards the insights and
postulates of other disciplines.” This results in nothing but “indulgence in
fruitless debates over distinctions between pure and applied research” (ibid). So
total knowledge demands an interdisciplinary approach— another feat in which
Desai had been one of the pioneers.

In this context Desai lays bare what he thinks are the limitations of
current sociological study in India. He summarises (1984: 4ff) the assessments
made by sociologists and social anthropologists from “the writings of various
scholars, the presidential addresses to the last two All India Sociological
Conferences, and from the special numbers of certain journals, including the
October issue of *Seminar* entitled ‘Studying our Society’. Desai finds (ibid) several methods of research to comprehend social reality in India to be “inappropriate” and “of doubtful value in unraveling the true trend of transformation under way.” In his opinion traditional sociological research and teaching has not been able to liberate itself from the colonial mould after three decades of independence, “Sociology in India is largely a discipline of borrowed concepts and methods derived from high-prestige centres of learning in the affluent west, especially in the U.S.A. and the U.K.” (ibid). Hence, it, on its turn, has led to uncritical acceptance or imitation of foreign models and techniques “without assessing their relevance in or suitability for Indian conditions” (ibid: 5). Thus, it has resulted in distortion of perspective and stunted growth of Indian sociology. The problem, Desai feels (ibid), is that the sociologists have still not related themselves directly to the people and their problems, “to the living concerns of today and tomorrow.” As Indian sociology is not addressing itself to identifying critical problems, posing the right questions and devising appropriate procedures of investigation, it is, thinks Desai (ibid: 6ff), “not able to contribute meaningfully towards resolving the many dilemmas of development, immense poverty, growing inequality and other aspects of its backwardness.” Last, but not the least, Desai finds (ibid: 8) a tendency of the practitioners of dominant approaches to underrate or “summarily dismiss prima facie” the potential of the Marxist approach “by castigating it as dogmatic, value-biased and, therefore lacking objectivity and value neutrality.

With this approach Desai employed the historical method in the application of the Marxian notion of structure to comprehend the various elements of Indian reality like feudalism, capitalism, relationship between class and state, rights of the deprived, caste as a system of social stratification outside the notion of class etc. In contrast, to understand Indian social structure and capture the processes of change the social anthropologists perfected the methods of participant observation and fieldwork, suitable to their micro
studies. But this “‘over’ scientific” approach, feels Desai (ibid: 4), has “dehumanized” the “tone of much of contemporary sociology.” It has become “a discipline without human meaning and purpose” (ibid: 5). For them the audience was a micro section of society—educated intellectuals like students, scholars and researchers in universities and research institutes. Desai’s vision being larger included not only students and researchers but political activists as well. It should also not be forgotten that he had also tried to convey his thoughts to the common people by his copious writings in Gujarati. Recalled his one-time student and later colleague, Prof. Udai Mehta (in an interview taken on June 6–7, 2009 at his residence in Mumbai) that Prof. Desai encouraged his students to take active part in movements, community programmes etc. and then enrich the written body of Indian sociological knowledge and the reading public from their practical experiences. So being an activist and contributing to the expansion of the theoretical body of knowledge were equally important to him as well as going a step forward in expanding his audience by writing for the literate population—both in English and his vernacular, Gujarati. His efforts at circulation and popularisation of Marxist Sociological Literature gave birth to the Samaj Vigyan Mala series and were also evident through his editorial works in the Gujarati journal Padkar and his weekly column between 1985 and 1991 in the vernacular daily Pravasi.

The last distinction between conventional Indian sociology and Desai’s Marxist sociology was in its approach to the question of nationalism. For the former, nationalism was the event which gave rise to many questions, issues and problems for discussions, and oriented the perspectives of modern social theory in India. In other words, the nation has framed the intellectual location of modern social theory. For Desai the position was just the reverse because his sociology was embedded in the questions and issues that dominated nationalism. That is to say, the questions, issues and problems were present in society; they came to the surface because of nationalism. His concepts,
categories and theoretical approach are organically connected with the left perspectives that theorised nationalism. For other theorists and practitioners of Marxism in India like M.N.Roy, the various issues and problems demanding discussion had already come to the forefront because Indian society at the time of British colonial expansion was in a stage of transition—nationalism had sharpened them. Dange viewed nationalism as a movement of the educated middle-classes which brought into perspective the class differentiations and the issues requiring structural transformations. To D.N.Sen, nationalism was “a project of modernity” (Sen 2005: V) and upper-caste as well as anti-democratic in orientation as it did not bring to the forefront the issues pertaining to the oppressed and deprived sections of society. Hirendranath Mukherjee comes nearest to Desai because in his opinion (1962a) nationalism thrust forward the issues related to colonialism—at the same time several sub-national tendencies and issues also found expression through the most dominant movement of the times, i.e. nationalist movement. Even after political liberation from colonialism, nationalism to Desai remained one of the most important determinants of Indian politics—the politics of the post-colonial state and the reactions and responses to it can best be understood in reference to national aspirations and nationalism. To Desai it was a theoretical frame to evaluate the causes as well as the consequences of contemporary processes.

To analyse and assess the contribution of A.R. Desai to the development of Marxist Sociology in India, I would like to pose certain issues and try to understand Desai’s response to the same. These are the following:

What was Desai’s interpretation for the breakdown of the pre-capitalist, pre-colonial feudal order?
What were the objective and subjective factors that led to the emergence of nationalism in India?
What was the character of the nationalist movement—was it a unified and unilateral movement or were there competing and conflicting strands within it?
Could nationalism and the ensuing movement fulfil the dreams of the people at the time of independence?

In a predominantly agrarian country like India, what would be the role of the peasantry in the nationalist movement, as well as in post-colonial state-building and reconstruction?

Are the new classes, which emerged during the course of the nationalist movement, homogenous entities in the Marxist sense of the term or are there internal divisions within classes which could be considered as natural?

Is the Indian State a class state and does its class identity reflect on the modernisation and developmental projects?

Can the post-independence social protest movements be called variants of the nationalist movement?

Can there be really a socialist revolution in India's near future?

Pre-British Indian society, economy and polity underwent major qualitative changes during the British colonial era. To understand this development one has to take a brief glance at the pre-British stage and the structural-functional transformations initiated by the British colonial ruler. Before the advent of British colonialism the basic economic unit had been the agro-based village system where the prime objective of production was local consumption. This system was characterised by its lack of any appreciable exchange relations with the outside world as well as the absence of the phenomenon of a market.

Another distinctive feature of this system was the low level of division of labour due to little or no differentiation between agriculture and industry. The latter was almost wholly of cottage and household variety with family labour being employed in both—each village formed a compact whole producing all that it required. They remained practically untouched by political events and turmoil because the rise and fall of empires rarely touched the self-sufficient village system.
Desai saw British colonial conquest first making a radical transformation of the village-system in those parts of the country which were under direct British control. The features of this transformation were: first, private ownership of land was introduced by the creation of landlordism and individual peasant proprietors through Permanent Settlement and Ryotwari system. Second, to make agriculture a part of market-based capitalist economy, land became a commodity to be mortgaged, sold or purchased in the market in exchange of money. Desai viewed this—the colonial-capitalist conversion—as the most vital factor which transformed the whole pre-capitalist feudal economy of India into the existing capitalist economy. Privatisation of land connected the individual owner directly to the new colonial state for maintaining his ownership over land and fulfilment of financial obligations. The revolution in the existing land system eliminated once and for all the productive and distributive functions of the village and transformed India into a single economic unit by the introduction of the capitalist forces of production. Third, commercialisation of agriculture was achieved by making production market-oriented rather than for local consumption. Peasants were encouraged to cultivate cash crops which could be sold in the international market, thereby establishing a link between Indian agriculture and the international market. Consequently, more production of cash crops led to the neglect of food crops whereby the production of the latter became insufficient and the peasant had to buy it from the market. Hence, the peasant, for his survival, was connected to the market. Such agricultural policies had two effects. Negatively, as Desai noted (1981:47) competitive economic relations resulting out of private property and market replaced former cooperative socio-economic relations. But positively, the narrow, culturally poor, unprogressive and passive lifestyle of the village could be eliminated to transcend the village outlook and consciousness in order to evolve higher forms of economy and social collaboration. As Desai observes (ibid: 49), "It became the material premise for the emergence of the Indian nation out of
the amorphous mass of the Indian people” living “in the hermetically sealed village.”

In the industrial sector also whatever development occurred was geared to the requirements of British industrial efforts. For instance, Desai cites (ibid, 103-4) the example of the construction of railways in India which “was primarily undertaken to meet the raw material and market requirements of the British industries.” Desai supports the view (ibid: 106) of Sir Valentine Chirol (in the Observer on April 2, 1922 that) “it was only under the pressure of war necessities that Government was driven to abandon its former attitude of aloofness if not jealousy towards purely Indian enterprise.” Desai found that a good proportion of foreign capital had been invested in non-industrial economic fields since this was found to be more profitable. Even regarding industries, light industries were given preference. Again, British domination in the financial sector “retarded the rapid tempo and free growth of the industrial and general economic development of India…” (ibid: 115-6). Nevertheless, though the goal was profit-making rather than genuine development, such ‘insufficient’ and ‘unbalanced’ industrialisation played a revolutionary role as it “made the Indian economy more unified, cohesive and organic” (ibid: 124), thereby creating the objective, material condition for the growth of nationalist feeling. As this economic transformation occurred under colonial direction so the people were first united in their exploitation, deprivation, sufferings and misery. As the economy assumed a national character, so the problems also acquired national dimensions rather than remaining local or regional.

The British rulers destroyed all indigenous forms of economy, polity and society in India and constructed alternative counterparts to suit their own interests. To Desai the changes were initiated not with a view to develop or modernise India but to serve the purpose of European in general, and British industrial efforts in particular. Hence, the transformations were neither natural, nor spontaneous, but were imposed from elsewhere and often by force.
However, these transformations brought about a qualitative change in Indian political, economic and social systems which negated any possibility of retreat to the pre-colonial stage. This new system, on the one hand, provided the material basis of nationalism in a colonial country. On the other hand, persistence of the system, created by colonialism, has been somewhat responsible for the surge of nationalism in the post-colonial period.

The subjective-ideological basis for the emergence of nationalism was provided by the spread of western education in India by the efforts of the British themselves and also some educated and enlightened Indians. This actually had a profound impact upon the character and content of nationalism. First, this education was really liberal and secular as it liberated knowledge from Hindu upper-caste monopoly and made it universal, thereby laying the foundation of mass education in future India. Second, dissemination of this education through the medium of English enabled the educated Indians to overcome the obstacle of multilingualism and communicate with each other on a national scale. Third, this education exposed the Indians to rational, scientific, democratic thought as opposed to the irrational, superstitious, hierarchic, absolutist thought of the medieval period. Hence, English educated Indians could initiate social reform movements against reactionary social practices and institutions on the one hand, and give a democratic content and orientation to the nationalist movement, on the other. Finally, this education had a profound impact on the advancement of intellectual thought during the nationalist movement and in the formation of the post-colonial state. Mention must be made of the emergence of the popular press in India which contributed to the formation and dissemination of nationalist sentiments and ideas. For instance, various nationalist groups could popularise their ideologies, policies, programmes and methods of struggle among the people on a national scale. Again, large-scale, swift and constant exchange of views could be made possible through the press. Furthermore, the vernacular press—provincial in origin but
national in content and orientation—played an important role in generating awareness against social maladies and evils on the one hand, and colonial exploitation on the other. The press also initiated closer intellectual contact between countries struggling for national liberation. Actually, says Desai (ibid: 238), “the Press has been one of the principal forces which has helped various nations to build up a world outlook and shape their own national programmes and policies on the basis of a comprehension of world development as a whole” and “construct solidarity ties between the progressive forces of different countries.”

However, according to Desai (ibid: 158) neither the press nor the progressive role played by modern education in India were fully instrumental in generating nationalism—“it would be incorrect to conclude that Indian nationalism was the child of this education.” On the contrary, Indian nationalism was the outcome of new material-social conditions which generated new forces—both being consequences of British colonialism in India. Both Palme-Dutt (1997: 304ff) and Desai (1981:158) are of the opinion that imperialist conquest unleashed new productive system and classes whose material interests were fundamentally contradictory to those of British capitalism. Thus, “the movement arose out of the conflict of British and Indian interests in the economy and other spheres. This conflict of interests is the genetic cause of the Indian national movement.” (Desai 1981: 158). R.Palme-Dutt also echoes this opinion (1997: 303), “The Indian national movement arose from social conditions, from the conditions of imperialism and its system of exploitation, and from the social and economic forces generated within Indian society under the conditions of that exploitation.”

The latter was the period of the birth of Indian nationalism which continued upto the post-colonial independent stage. Nationalism, to Desai, remains one of the most dominant determinants of Indian politics, even after liberation from
colonialism, because politico-juridical-administrative independence was not accompanied by genuine socio-economic liberation. Desai is also skeptical about the nation-building process in India. However, to him, nationalism is a multifaceted movement, assuming different forms in different periods of Indian history. Desai, in fact, saw nationalism as the only ideology that could confront colonialism. Nationalism, due to its multiple class bases could play a positive role in confronting colonialism. Colonialism and nationalism to Desai are the two key concepts to understand colonised India—its politics, economics and most importantly, its transformation. In his own words (1981: XVI), “a concrete and comprehensive understanding of the structural transformation of the Indian society during the British period” can be effected through a study of nationalism. Nationalism, on its part, is closely connected to colonialism. The latter played dual roles in India. On the one hand, it played a retrogressive role as it destroyed all the existing institutions, relations and systems in India which could have made possible the natural growth of industries in India. Furthermore, destruction of the existing system had not been compensated by capitalist development of the kind seen in Europe after the Industrial Revolution. Feudal elements were allowed to survive in India for two principal reasons: one, help British colonial power to maintain control over the country; and two, keep India backward and generally prevent her from becoming a developed industrial nation. However, on the other hand, colonialism had a positive impact as it made possible the birth of nationalism in a diverse, plural and multiple society like India where it is very difficult to forge any kind of unity. Nationalism developed as a protest against the occupation and exploitation of the country by foreign power and thrived on the basis of the goal of independence. This urge for political liberty kept the people focused while the differences took a secondary position. For Desai the various issues pertaining to feudal exploitation and oppression, unholy nexus between feudal and capitalist elements due to the historical weakness of the latter, coexistence of pre-capitalist
and capitalist values, outlook and ideology etc. also came to the forefront through the most dominant ideology and movement of the times—nationalism. As has already been mentioned earlier, these issues, to Desai, were not a fall-out of nationalism but had been present in society but attracted attention and came to the forefront through nationalist consciousness and movements. In other words, if nationalism had not emerged or become strong then these issues may not have come to the surface. Hence, nationalism is the key to comprehend the massive structural transformation which touched every facet of Indian socio-political-economic-cultural life.

Desai’s contribution lies in the fact that he came to these conclusions long before the emergence of Indian scholarship on Nationalism. In fact, in his doctoral dissertation, titled *Social background of Indian Nationalism* (1945) he was discussing these issues and made a chronological division of the stages of nationalism. We find these stages in the Epilogue—he writes that in phase one, nationalism was an expression of the interests of the intelligentsia. Phase two includes the aspirations of the intelligentsia and the educated middle class. In phase three we find the entry of the indigenous capitalist class whose expectations and desires are included within the agenda of nationalism. Phase four incorporates the aspirations of workers and peasants though those of the intelligentsia and the capitalists hold positions of primacy. The fifth phase becomes complicated with Indian nationalism reflecting the conflict between the interests of the capitalists on the one hand, and the workers and the peasants on the other. In addition, various nationalities, both dominant and minorities, enter the fray and try to use the nationalist movement as the platform for voicing their demands as well as striving for political hegemony within the movement and political liberation from foreign rule comes at this juncture. Thus, he sees the nationalist movement as an unfolding of the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the labouring classes. As Ghanashyam Shah wrote (1990: 4) that one may agree or disagree with Desai regarding many
of his observations especially on the lack of private property in land in pre-
British India, the 'autarchic', 'self-sufficient', 'unprogressive', 'passive' village-
system and his sweeping generalisations regarding the emergence of new classes,
his contributions cannot be denied. Though he is often criticised as a
"mechanical Marxist", it is Desai who provides an alternative view of the
nationalist movement as also of struggle between classes, i.e. the labouring
classes against both feudal and bourgeois elements.

Nationalism, however, does not reach its point of culmination at the time
of political liberation from colonial rule. This is because the antagonisms which
came to the forefront during the fifth phase were not resolved. Hence,
independent India was born in the midst of peasant movements to be followed
by workers' movements, movements by various nationalities and depressed,
minority groups. The demands ranged from a share in the state power to better
job protection laws, protection and development of indigenous languages,
traditions and cultures, to end of exploitation and oppression, and guarantee of
human dignity. To Desai, the movements to fulfil all these objectives are
variances of the nationalist movement itself. It is true that after independence,
the State, till date, has been trying to brand all these movements as anti-national,
subversive etc. But Desai thought that being 'anti-state' was not necessarily being
'anti-national'. Protests against state terrorism, atrocities, repression and
oppression are democratic rights of the citizens—the state does not have the
'right' to take away the democratic rights of its citizens, including the right to
protest, to pursue its authoritarian rule in the name of maintenance of law and
order. The citizen has the right to protest against the state while remaining loyal
to the 'nation'. Thus, we also find that Desai in the 1940s had already made the
distinction between 'state' and 'nation'.

Due to all these reasons, one can say that Desai had correctly concluded
that Indian nationalism was a very complex phenomenon as it incorporated
features unique and specific to the making of Indian society. To understand this
Desai made a specific contribution to the Marxian notion of structure which he employed to the exploration of notions incorporated in the Constitution as well as feudalism, capitalism, relationship and interdependence of both in the Indian context, relationship between class and nation or peasants and working class, the evolution of the post-colonial state, rights of the deprived and institutionalized violation of rights, etc. Bipan Chandra (1979: VI) acknowledges the contribution of A.R. Desai in this regard. In the Preface to his essays on nationalism, he states, "The social character of the [national] movement, its origins, stages of development, the nature of social support and popular participation, the tactics and strategies evolved or used, and stages of development were not properly studied. There have been of course exceptions; for example the works of A.R. Desai... during the 1920s and 1930s" (also cited in Patel 2007: 434). Actually Desai regarded nationalism as a theoretical frame to evaluate both the causes as well as the consequences of contemporary processes. "It", says Sujata Patel (2007: 440) "became a mediatory link to build a Marxist sociology for India." Not only so, "Desai's Social Background of Indian Nationalism became the text for new histories to be constructed" (ibid: 434). David Ludden (2005: 6) acknowledges the contribution of A.R. Desai in opening up the field of historical study of political institutions, relationships, power of specific class interests inside political parties and factions etc. as far back as in the 1940s. In his words (ibid: 33), "A.R. Desai had opened up this line of inquiry in 1948. His 'Social Background of Indian Nationalism'...was the first 'attempt to give a composite picture of the complex and variegated process of the rise of Indian nationalism and its various manifestations.'

Desai propagates the understanding of Indian society during British period from an Indian point of view, particularly at a period when such understanding, he says (1977, 1:1) "is caught in the quagmire of a historical value-free, natural science, pro-establishment structural-functional approach dominated by the Neo-Capitalist Western Bourgeois Scholarship. This
scholarship has served both the Neo-Capitalist West and the Bourgeois Ruling Classes of the Third World countries." Desai highlights the availability of considerable amount of literature which portrays the difference between the feudal personal rule of the native Princes and the bourgeois impersonal military-administrative steel-frame evolved in British India. However, it is Desai who draws our attention (1938: 63–64) to the unholy nexus between the two apparently disparate and antagonistic sections—feudal lords and the foreign bourgeoisie as "the interests of the Princes and British Imperialism are identical and indissolubly bound together. The united front of the relics of Indian Feudalism and Foreign Imperialism ... is indispensable for the continued existence and prosperity of both." Desai's contribution has been that by projecting these issues he attempts a systematic study of various categories of class movements of the exploited classes which, he shows, continue unabated in the post-independence era, bringing a new connotation to the idea of 'nationalism' in a plural, multinational society.

Furthermore, a detailed account of the conditions of the people living in princely States, nature of their struggles and the manner in which their movements were suffocated to suit the vested interests of the Indian National Congress were, according to Desai (1977, 1 & 1977, 2) mainly neglected by historians and social scientists. This neglect, thinks Desai (1977, 1: 4), was deliberate because "it may raise numerous issues, which may undermine the credibility of the myth being built up by Ideologies of Ruling Class and the Indian National Congress, of their achievements." As Ghanashyam Shah thinks (1990: 4ff), he has analysed the strategies and policies of the Indian National Congress in the dialectical context of gigantic ferments that were taking place in India during that period. Desai has concluded (1977,1:19) that the Congress was "the classical party of the Indian Bourgeois" and "it should also be recognised that Indian national Congress never permitted itself to become an all-India Party, enveloping both British India and Indian India ...." (1977, 2: 4) but
remained a party of only the former. The reason for this, as well as the acceptance of the feudal Princes as representatives of the people of the native States by the Indian National Congress was due to the alliance between the bourgeoisie and the feudal elements in a situation where the former needed the latter as its ally because of its inherent weakness and inability to capture power on its own. Desai's problem had been in identifying the Indian National Congress with the bourgeoisie. It is true that the bourgeoisie was a very important segment of the Indian National Congress. But scholars like Sudipto Kaviraj thinks (1979: 329) that the Congress leadership had a mediated relationship with the bourgeois class, “not working obviously and crudely as its agent.” In fact, he is of the opinion that it was the professional intelligentsia which formed the political elite of the Congress and the bourgeoisie exercised its power through this elite. Based on this argument the Indian National Congress cannot be called an agent of the bourgeoisie.

Desai was also one of the pioneers of bringing the complexities and struggles of the peasantry within his academic canvas long before the ‘subaltern studies’ made the study of peasants fashionable. Through his studies on the peasantry, by making visible a set of peasant histories, in both colonial as well as post-colonial days, he constructed the foundations of the Sociology of Agrarian Structure and Issues in India. His canvas was wide enough to accommodate a huge phase of rural India, starting from the pre-capitalist-pre-colonial period to continue in colonial period and ultimately into the post-colonial era. Unlike most debates and scholarly research among Marxist academics Desai views agrarian production and production relations in the context of the overall transformation of Indian society that is being undertaken actively by the post-colonial State of India (Desai 1984: X). He is not so much concerned with quantitative transformations in the countryside i.e. whether mode of production is still semi-feudal or being dominated by capitalism based on the criterion of
the emergence and expansion of free labour. For him the qualitative transformation indicating transformation of land and resulting land relations from a means of subsistence to commodity is more important and this should be the principal criterion to analyse the peasant question. As land becomes a commodity, says Desai (1984:151), the economy, polity and social institutions of the rural scene becomes subservient to the needs of bourgeois industrialisation. To maintain this situation a strong stratum of rich peasants and powerful trading groups are created “who are increasing by transforming the agrarian areas into a gigantic source of capital formation through the profit-chasing indulged in by the richer sections in the countryside” (ibid). As a result the Indian agrarian society has been sharply polarized—on one side is the small group of landlords and rich peasants whose basic interests coincide with the bourgeois-led Indian State; on the other side are “the vast armies of agrarian proletariat and pauperising peasants, with vast numbers of human derelicts—the unemployed or economically superfluous population” (ibid: 159). The latter group is the exploited, oppressed section and when they mobilise themselves for redressal of their grievances against the state, they become enemies of the state as the latter is always apprehensive that popular movements might lead the overthrow of the capitalist hegemony and power system. Here Desai’s contribution has been the increase of the class base of the rural population. In pre-colonial India the rural populace was thought to be comprised exclusively by the peasantry. But for Desai, the peasantry was a part of the rural population, the latter having elements who were in no way connected to land and agricultural production. He identified the non-cultivating classes as moneylenders and traders representing private interests, who were very much a part of the rural society. Furthermore, Desai also pointed out that the peasantry was not a homogenous class; on the contrary, the ‘peasantry’ may be said to be an overarching term used to denote multiple classes connected with agricultural work. These classes range from rich peasant proprietors to small peasants, tenants and landless
agricultural labourers. The aspirations and desires of these classes are quite distinct from each other and they all viewed the national liberation movement as well as the colonial state from their respective class perspectives. Consequently, their perceptions regarding the post-colonial State and their responses also vary significantly from each other.

K. Balgopal (1986), however, is critical of Desai’s classification of landed classes in Indian agriculture. His criticism is centered on the issue that in Desai’s edited volume entitled ‘Agrarian Struggles in India after Independence’ the social structures of rural India are conceptualised through the various articles. But what he finds (ibid: 1401) “most remarkable... about this selection is that it completely ignores the protracted debate on ‘mode of production in Indian agriculture’ that excited many economists in the 70s.” Balgopal thinks that Desai’s a priori theoretical position precludes any such debate on the issue. Of course, the former accepts that Desai’s perspective—analysis of agrarian relations beginning with the study of the Indian State—makes his analysis superior to the ‘mode of production’ debate which is based on concentration upon empirical data and statistics on landholding patterns, tenancy, tractors and tubewells, etc.

However, Balgopal criticises Desai’s perspective from a different angle. But before going into it, it is necessary to review his understanding of the latter’s perspective. In his opinion (ibid) Desai’s comprehension of the matter starts with the presumption that the Indian State, on gaining independence, set out to consciously develop agriculture along capitalist lines. Land reform measures including abolition of revenue intermediaries are said to have led to the consolidation of a broader class of rural rich; a class, that Desai says, the State created deliberately to hasten capitalist development in agriculture. Balgopal agrees with Desai’s opinion that due to the land reform measures a part of the huge estate-owning classes, along with a small upper section of the tenants a broader stratum of landowners were created. This class, Desai calls (1994a) the
capitalist farmers. But the point on which Balgopal disagrees is Desai's supposition that this class will be the active agents of capitalist development. In the words of the former (1986:1401), "There are two separate issues here: one is what the Indian State intended to achieve, and the other is what it actually achieved. It is by no means clear that the two are the same, nor that either of them is the 'creation of profit-maximising capitalist agriculturalists'." He speaks of an alternative perspective which, according to him, Desai had not considered at all. This perspective is as follows: The Indian State after its birth had "inherited the responsibility of holding together a diverse bunch of propertied classes, and of attracting to itself the loyalty of a terribly restive mass of peasantry and workers. It further had to enrich the ruling classes and to create the institutions necessary for this enrichment." Seen from this angle Balgopal says that neither did this multiple burden result in the conscious promotion of capitalist enterprise nor can the configuration of class relations be seen as an evolution of profit-maximising capitalist farmers on one hand, and an agrarian proletariat on the other. He, furthermore, does not accept Desai's class differentiation of the rural rich into rich farmers, kulaks, feudal lords and the rural bourgeoisie comprising of moneylenders, traders, middlemen etc. on the ground that how much differentiation is real and how "much is a product of a priori theoretical reasoning" (ibid) is difficult to distinguish. There is also no empirical substantiation of such class differentiation among the rural rich. On the contrary, says Balgopal (ibid), the ensemble of social relations that define the rural rich have not crystallised into distinct classes; all that exists is a variation in the composition from region to region, the variation being determined by soil conditions, irrigation, history and politics. In fact, "Balgopal wonders whether the problems lie in Desai's orientation. Is Desai being political and ideological rather than sociological? Is he interested more in changing the world rather than interpreting it?" (Patel 2007: 438). Furthermore, the comprador and bureaucratic nature of Indian capital has prevented the
uniform class differentiation among the rural rich. This is because as Indian capital did not have to “depend upon its internal strength and dynamism for its self-expansion...” it was not “...forced to contend with and destroy, or at least totally subsume, the pre-capitalist relations” (ibid). Balagopal continues (1986:1401–02) that since Indian capital has not been so constrained as its expansion had been provided by the State on the one hand, and by imperialism on the other, “it has never found it necessary to rid itself of pre-capitalist qualities.” Moreover, as he comments, there has not been a single instance of ‘profit-maximising capitalist farmers’ fighting feudal landholders in the history of post-independence India. On the contrary, there have been agitations of all the rural rich for a greater share of resources advanced by the State.

Balagopal acknowledges that Desai had correctly put the State at the centre of agrarian transformations. His objection lies in the analysis of the content of the State’s role. Unlike Desai, Balagopal does not think that the real content of the role of the State lies in the promotion of capitalist agriculture; it lies, on the contrary, in the bureaucratisation of capital, especially in the agrarian sector. This was accompanied by a parallel development in the shape of parliamentary and panchayat politics in India. “The meshing of the two in Panchayat Raj institutions and their role in development strategies, in cooperative institutions and their role in the sharing of political spoils, within the overall context of State-sponsored and imperialist-supported technological modernisation of the forces of production, has created a situation where the newly consolidated class of rural rich lives in painless harmony amidst a welter of what would otherwise be serious contradictions” (ibid: 1402). Balagopal continues that just as it is difficult to distinguish between ‘capitalist’ landlords and ‘feudal’ landlords, it is “equally impossible to differentiate the rural poor into the capitalistically exploited agricultural proletariat and the feudally exploited landless peasantry” (ibid). The point is that both categories are
exploited and none possess any land worthy of profitable cultivation. Furthermore, due to their poverty, they all fall prey to the moneylender who, in many instances, is the landowner as well. One may say that it is ultimately capitalist exploitation since the product, produced by any peasant, is profitably sold in the market. Hence, "one preserves one's theoretical sanity by realising that one is searching for a non-existent differentiation" (ibid).

In his rural sociology Desai questions the received knowledge that peasants never were and are not militant. He was firmly convinced about the potential militancy of the peasantry but that militancy had never been raised to the revolutionary zeal due to lack of leadership, organisation, motivation etc. During the nationalist movement also the militancy of the peasantry had been strictly controlled and they had been used mainly as a numerical force against the colonial rule. It had been apprehended that if peasant militancy was allowed to increase unchecked then it would break the back of not only colonialism, but of capitalism as well. However, peasant movements had occurred in India during the last few centuries to continue after independence and with experience these movements have also gained maturity. Desai's observations regarding the 'closed', 'self-sufficient' and 'autarchic' village-structure of pre-colonial India has come under criticism and contrary evidence has also come to light. Nevertheless, his assessment about the changes taking place in the countryside through new legislations, new programmes and policy interventions like Community Development Programmes, Panchayati Raj are worth noticing. Desai's division of post-independence agrarian struggles into pre- and post-Green Revolution phases has also been criticised by K. Balagopal. For Desai in the first period there was a low level of agrarian struggles due to lack of political direction and leadership. Moreover, during that time the landed peasantry was more dominant in comparison to the landless labourers. The ascendancy of the latter can be noticed in the second phase which was "marked by differences among classes and groups that revolt, a variety of protests, and differences in
political ideology among agrarian struggles” (Patel 2007: 435). Furthermore, Patel finds it “interesting to note that Desai does not here distinguish between tribal and peasant struggles” (ibid). What should be remembered is that tribal struggles cannot be restricted to the issues of the peasantry only. For one thing, tribals who were not peasants were also part of the struggles. The other thing to remember is that the tribals were fighting for the loss of their hereditary occupational rights to natural resources apart from violation of their democratic and human rights including loss of habitat, shelter, livelihood etc. What can be said here in defence of Desai is that though he may not had distinguished between peasant and tribal struggles, he had been very aware of the differences in the oppression and exploitation of tribals from other marginalised sections. He recounted in his article on “Agrarian Movements” (1994a: 36) how the tribals were losing not only their habitat or livelihood but their “ethnic identities, dialects, social structure and cultural ethos and norms" in addition.

The hallmark of Desai’s rural sociology has been to identify the landless agricultural labourers as a distinct class with their specific interests, demands and significance and not merely as an appendage of the peasantry. His reformulation of the concept of class alliance with the agrarian labourers as the vanguard of the forthcoming revolution is also worth serious consideration because it is this class which is actually proletarianised within capitalist economic system. However, Balagopal (1986) also finds the division of agrarian struggles into pre- and post-Green Revolution phases problematic. In his opinion as the Green Revolution had not occurred all over the country, so how can it be taken as a benchmark for an analysis of the contradictions generated in society.

In the course of his investigations of Indian nationalism, Desai simultaneously undertakes critical studies of various dimensions of capitalist development and their ramifications on political, economic, social and cultural lives of the country. His principal focus of interest was the study of capitalism and how it
unfolded in India since the advent of British colonial rule. As Patel points out (2007: 427), to Desai “a critical sociology of India has to undertake the study of the capitalist system as its main focus.” The entire process, according to Desai, has to be understood through the historical method. To him the nationalist movement is the historical backdrop against which the entire process of capitalist development has to be situated. Thus, in *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* he developed the Marxist framework to outline the growth of capitalism in India. He provided an analysis of the emergence of the various social forces which radically altered the economy and society of India within the context of colonialism. The bourgeoisie in India had emerged out of a colonial situation in a period of worldwide capitalist recession; hence, historically the bourgeoisie had an inherent weakness. However, in spite of that the Indian bourgeoisie had gradually taken control over the nationalist movement and through it over the post-colonial state. In this context Desai points out (1977,1:17), that “It is unfortunate that Indian Marxists belonging to certain categories do not recognise that the steel-frame created by British India was basically bourgeois, and...it eminently suited Indian Bourgeoisie for its own administrative framework after independence.” From his study of nationalism in India, Desai comes to the conclusion that due to the historical weakness of its emergence, the indigenous bourgeoisie cannot accomplish the task of nation-building. This weakness is compounded by the twin facts of India’s backward economy on the one hand, and the general crisis and recession of world capitalism at the current stage, on the other. Hence, the tasks left unfinished by the nationalist movement cannot be fulfilled by the bourgeoisie—they will have to be completed by a series of popular movements, culminating in a socialist revolution.

Desai’s seminal contribution has been in the analysis of the post-colonial state in India. The theme of the State was explored in several of his studies like *India’s Path of Development: A Marxist Approach* (1984), *State and Repressive Culture*...
Desai's analysis of the post-colonial State in India is intricately connected with his discussions of capitalist development because, as he has shown in his numerous works, the Indian State accepted the path of capitalist development and modernisation as its basic premise. Capitalist development in India had begun during the colonial period which had facilitated the birth of the indigenous bourgeoisie. In fact, this capitalist development had been summed up by Levkovsky in his *Capitalism in India*, p. 379 (cited in Sen & Sen 1972: 7) where he says, "...the development of capitalism in India during the general crisis of capitalism led to the formation of a small stratum of indigenous monopolies. In this respect India was unique because nowhere else did monopolies spring up under conditions of colonialism." He continued further (ibid) that "between 1939 and 1947, despite all obstacles, elements of capitalist relations in rural India took firm root and grew. The contradiction between developing commodity-money relations and developing capitalism on the one hand, and persistent feudal-landlord exploitation on the other, grew more acute after the end of the second world war." Gradually this bourgeoisie assumed control over the nationalist movement and ultimately over the post-colonial State in India. These events constitute the starting point of India's independent economic development along the capitalist path.

However, before going into its developmental experiments it is necessary to see how Desai regarded this State. He very correctly states at the outset that due to its historical weakness the bourgeoisie had not been strong enough to capture state power on its own. Instead it had aligned itself with the feudal elements in society to take control over the state after independence. After discussing the various features of this state, Desai comes to the conclusion that it is a bourgeois state. While the Indian State is largely capitalist, it should not be
forgotten that the feudal elements still play an important role. The unholy nexus between feudalism and the bourgeoisie since the colonial days has continued after independence and the latter has been unable as well as unwilling to do away with this alliance. It has been unable to eliminate feudalism from society due to its historical weakness which has prevented a uniform and vigorous capitalist development in India. The productive forces have not been completely liberated from their pre-capitalist fetters. E.M.S.Namboodiripad (1971: 435) has been of the opinion that the practices and policies of the Indian State are oriented towards protecting the interests of both the bourgeoisie as well as the landed interests. Despite the abolition of the parasitical zamindari system, most people belonging to the class of landed gentry could avoid the land-ceiling act and other land reforms—the State also did not implement the land reform measures wholeheartedly. Desai very truly grasped the focus of agrarian reforms where the policy was to eliminate feudal landlordism and create in its place a class of agricultural capitalists, rich farmers and viable middle peasant proprietors who are directly dependent on and linked to the State. Either way, land has never been transferred to the actual tillers of the soil. Hence, Basavapunniah in his introduction to the Draft Programme of the C.P.I., C.P.I.(M) in 1964, p.16, stated that so far as land reforms were concerned, 'state capitalism loses its progressive character." The aim of Congress land reforms was not to liberate the peasantry, but to 'turn feudal landlords into capitalist landlords'. We find, as a result, the landed rich constituting the ruling elite along with the bourgeoisie. Hence, as Desai is of the opinion, the bourgeoisie is not the sole stakeholder of the State—the landed rich also have an important role in the matters of the State. One can perhaps conclude, based on the findings of Desai that the Indian State, rather than a pure bourgeois state, is more like a Bonapartist State where on the one hand, no class can exert total control over the State machinery, and on the other hand, the State rises above classes and assumes an autonomy of its own.
Consequently, as Sujata Patel notes (2007:430ff) the welfare measures of the state have not been oriented towards the poor, down-trodden and marginalised but towards the propertied classes. As Desai evaluated the ideologies and practices of development and planning he became convinced of the trajectory of development along capitalist lines. He correctly analysed that in the age of monopoly capitalism the main burden of financing the plans falls upon the common people. On the other hand, it also leads to centralisation and concentration of capital into a few big industrial houses, throwing small and medium businesses out of the market. Hence, under the guise of 'socialism' the Indian State is moving more and more towards capitalism.

Furthermore, as the bourgeoisie is inherently weak so the State has to give it its support and strength to enable the former to become strong and advance. Consequently, Desai says, the State has an undeclared war against the democratic aspirations and liberties of the people. The State with its superior strength intervenes against the class enemies of the bourgeoisie i.e. the labouring and toiling classes, to curb the discontent and protests of the latter against the former. Hence, “Desai suggests that in order to protect and preserve the capitalist foundations of society, the state has to sacrifice democracy” (ibid: 431). However, as G.Haragopal says (Haragopal & Jagannatham 2009: 76), “It has been the worldwide experience that it is in the very nature of the state to transgress the limits of the law.” The State transgresses the law to protect the interests of the dominant class or classes which use the freedoms given by the State for fulfilment of their class aims. In this endeavour the State is supported and helped by the rich sections—the rural rich, as said earlier, are dependent on the State for their riches, strength and power. The urban rich, combining the “authoritarian upper-class and upper-caste values of both capitalist and feudal India …” (Patel 2007: 431) seek to maintain their position, status and power by suppressing and repressing the poor. Desai argued that policies of the State were, on the one hand, sharpening the contradictions among various classes,
and, on the other hand, strengthening the richer sections of society, both leading to increasing tensions, antagonisms and conflicts in society. Thus, it can be said that in this context Desai makes (1990:144) a very good analysis of capitalism in India and how it has influenced the “economic, sexual, cultural and political policies shaping the whole society.” Under State-initiated and State-controlled developmental programmes, dependent upon the proprietary classes, the rich-poor gap in India is ever-increasing. The State, through the government, has an important role in perpetuating exploitation upon the people, violation of human and democratic rights and sponsoring of governmental lawlessness and repression. Desai was of the opinion that only by a “historical-comparative analysis of state-civil society dynamics in India” (Patel 2007: 434) the answers to these issues can be found. Hence, to Desai the increasingly undemocratic role played by the State is the key to understand the changes occurring in both urban and rural India which, in his own words (1990:145), he has “tried to assess the implication of the capitalist path of development pursued by the Indian state on various classes, strata and communities in my various studies.”

The undemocratic nature of the State can be attributed to the weak capitalist industrial and the shattered agrarian economies of India—both legacies of colonialism. The latter created a huge surplus labour force resulting out of loss of land and occupations which the former was unable to absorb. The resulting unemployment became a big source of antagonisms and conflicts as Independence had increased the expectations and aspirations of the people which could not be accommodated by the weak capitalist economy. As Desai points out (2000: 75ff) in this context, the State remained loyal to its bourgeois origins while giving promises to the people which were not fulfilled. Consequently, popular discontent gradually strengthened to be transformed into agitations and movements against the State as well as the capitalist class. The State, in order to preserve its capitalist base, naturally had to suppress the
popular agitations and movements and more the latter gained strength the State became more undemocratic and brutal in its suppression. Desai, like many other Marxist scholars, is of the opinion that in India, like in other post-colonial countries, as the comprador bourgeoisie and semi-feudal classes constitute the ruling elite, they have never been able to rid themselves fully from the colonial hangover—long after independence they cannot break free from the yolk of subservience and dependence from their erstwhile colonial masters. Naturally, as per the agenda of neo-colonialism, limited amount of development takes place in infrastructure-building, heavy industries, transport and communications, modern service sector, etc. But this development has not been able to feed the millions because such developmental works are not basically people-oriented. As India's policies have largely been pro-rich and pro-propertied on the one hand, and anti-poor and anti-toiler on the other, so various types of conflicts have erupted all over society (Desai 1989:1887–89). Here Desai makes an interesting conclusion that these conflicts are not always a result of the crisis facing the State; on the contrary, they are often manufactured by the ruling elite to divert the attention of the people from the ruthless and inhuman effects of capitalist development on the one hand, and prevent the downtrodden and oppressed masses from uniting against the consequences of capitalist development, on the other. On this point, the position of the C.P.I., as highlighted by Namboodiripad (Note for the Programme of the C.P.I., C.P.I. (M), New Delhi, 1964, p.1; also cited in Kaviraj 1979: 542), comes close to Desai though there are divergences as well. Namboodiripad recognised that the power at independence passed into the hands of the national bourgeoisie. But he thought that in spite of pressures from Anglo-American imperialism, the ruling circles in India did not rally or surrender totally to the imperialist camp. “The policy of the national bourgeoisie was to maintain relations with the U.K. as a friend and ally, rather than as a satellite” (Namboodiripad 1964: 6). The RSP, in this context, differed sharply from the position held by the other Leftist Parties.
The former was of the opinion that it was “apparent to every Marxist-Leninist that the ‘independence’ which was being granted, was but independence for the native bourgeoisie and other allied vested-interest holders to exploit the masses of the people...” (DRSP.II 2003: 57). In other words, it implied that ‘transfer of power’ which was being enacted was not a transfer of power to the common people but to the “reformist-bourgeoisie, national leaders and to the representatives of communal vested interests, who had already been installed in position and authority in the so-called Interim government” (ibid). It was also clear to the RSP that no Marxist-Leninist could believe that the colonial bourgeoisie could ever play a consistently revolutionary role against imperialism upto the last. Furthermore, they always seek to share power with imperialism in order to protect their own class interests on the one hand, and “secure constitutional reforms by exerting the pressure and sanction of cautiously developed mass movement behind their demands. They always betray the national mass movement at the time of its greatest revolutionary potentiality, for that potentiality ultimately threatens their own fundamental class interests” (ibid: 65). Hence, “any deal between the bourgeoisie and imperialism would surely not lead to the final accomplishment of the bourgeois-democratic revolution or its tasks” (ibid: 76). It can be summarised after Namboodiripad (1964:15) that the Congress slogan of a socialistic pattern of society was an attempt to head off the radicalisation of politics in the country—a ploy by which “they could use in their own interests the growingly radical mass sentiments.”

A.R.Desai had been extremely sensitive to the growing lawlessness and brazen violation of the people’s democratic rights by the Indian State. In this context, the comments made by Upendra Baxi (Shah 1990:185) are very relevant and appropriate. In the words of Baxi, “Akshay Desai has been among the very few eminent Asian thinkers, and is perhaps a solitary Indian thinker, to feel tormented by the expanding frontiers of state lawlessness and the illegality of
rights ... Unlike most other social theorists, the law and the constitution for him are not fugitive figures, rather he conceives the law as dynamically providing the basis for hegemony as well as signposts of and for struggle. Akshay Desai is a theoretician of the concrete practices of power and resistance to power; in an intellectually more engaging milieu he would have grown into India's own Foucault. His abiding archival labours in depicting state violence and brutality and popular struggles provide endless insights into the nature of contemporary India's political economy of violence, terror and illegality." In this context it would perhaps not be irrelevant to say that a government of leftist/communist parties often sacrifices rule of law and perpetuates only reign of terror in the discharge of hegemonic tasks and functions of governance. This issue, surprisingly, did not feature in Desai's criticisms against state atrocities. Desai had been concerned by the anti-democratic stance of the central government under the Prime Ministership of Rajiv Gandhi but did not bring in examples of state violence and repression under leftist governments in some states in India. He disregarded history which has shown that with all its brutality, terrorism and oppression the capitalist states have a much more firm basis and stability than a socialist-communist state. Hence, state always includes violence—the question is how to strike a balance between enjoying maximum freedom without challenging the legitimacy of the state which becomes unavoidable if the state fumbles in the discharge of one of its basic functions, namely, guaranteeing and upholding the right to security to its citizenry.

From this point of crisis, as a consequence of capitalist-imperialist agenda of neo-colonialism, Desai brings up the question of socialist revolution in India. The question that comes up is how realistic was Desai's goal of a socialist revolution in India? It is evident through his writings that during his time Desai did not consider the material and socio-cultural forces mature enough for a socialist revolution. In many instances (Desai 1994) he had highlighted the need
for increasing revolutionary consciousness among various oppressed and marginalised groups in society like dalits, tribals, women, etc., and organising them for revolutionary activities. In the opinion of Uday Mehta (in an interview taken on June 7, 2009 at his residence in Andheri, Mumbai)—long-term student, associate and later colleague of Dr.A.R.Desai—the Trotskyite thinkers including C.G.Shah, A.R.Desai had been sure of a socialist revolution in India eventually. Desai had very correctly analysed that due to the circumstances of its origin the bourgeoisie is historically weak and will not be able to bring the nationalist movement to its logical conclusion by fulfilling the bourgeois-democratic tasks. After independence the bourgeoisie, rather than eradicating feudalism from Indian society, had actually aligned itself with the latter. In place of establishing the secular, scientific culture of capitalism, the bourgeoisie had encouraged the continuation of the reactionary, regressive, religion-cum-superstition centric culture of feudalism for electoral gains. Quite naturally, Desai and the others had assumed that as the bourgeoisie had not been able to play a progressive role, so the unfinished tasks of bourgeois-democratic revolution will have to be accomplished by the proletariat. Furthermore, for Desai bourgeois system and democracy cannot coexist together or be reconciled to each other. He thought after independence the bourgeoisie will establish a dictatorship which, in turn, will lead to the maturity of the forces to a revolutionary level. In fact, he viewed with growing distress the violation of democratic and human rights, growing lawlessness and terrorism by the State as pointers leading towards the collapse of the capitalist State system. Desai highlights the violence and violation of democratic rights perpetrated on women, slum-dwellers, workers, peasants, dalits, tribals and minority sections in both urban and rural India. In other words, to quote Desai “elementary aspirations, demands and assertions of the economically-exploited classes and socially, politically and culturally oppressed sections of the Indian people, for satisfying basic needs, elementary human rights, in fact, even to survive are
viewed with alarm by the rulers and are being suppressed by adopting more and more brutal and sophisticated techniques of repression" (Munshi & Saldhana 1994:3070). Desai, seeing the growing lawlessness and brazen violence of the State, came to the conclusion that the rulers were slowly shedding their democratic mask and transforming the State into virtual military-police rule. His experience of the Emergency in 1975 confirmed his opinion that the Indian State was moving towards a bourgeois dictatorship. Once that became an established fact, the conditions for a qualitative transformation of the State will ripen towards a socialist revolution.

However, the Indian State never moved towards the same except for a brief few months in 1975 and the public response to that became evident in the results of the subsequent Lok Sabha elections of 1977. What actually happened in India was unthinkable to him—bourgeois-democracy stabilized and gradually strengthened itself through the parliamentary system. What they had not been able to foresee was the stabilisation of the bourgeois-democracy in an economically backward country like India. Desai understood quite correctly that the capitalist system of development pursued in India would inevitably lead to a crisis of capitalism. What he failed to grasp was the resilience and adaptability of the parliamentary democratic system in India which has been revealed over the last few decades. Capitalism itself creates the crisis but through its state machinery also keeps control over the level of crisis—crisis is managed in such a way that it is never allowed to spiral out of control. The capitalist state in India has not only been able to control crisis but has also stabilized and strengthened itself in the course of managing the crisis. Hence, crisis in the capitalist world as well as in India has never assumed revolutionary proportions.

Actually, Desai had not differentiated between shades of capitalist development. Nehru, while initiating India’s developmental project had opted for a kind of a ‘third path’. In terms of “the social systemic differences between capitalism and socialism,” says Sudipto Kaviraj (1979: 332), “Nehru was with the
capitalist formation, but his capitalism was quite different from the neocolonial excesses of South Vietnam or South Korea. Nehru was very far from being an Indian Chiang Kai Shek. The communists including Desai had misjudged Nehru and his intentions. Consequently, his theorisation about the correct strategy of communist revolution had been made without an accurate reading of contemporary reality. The parliamentary democratic system which developed after independence saw an overdevelopment of the superstructure over the base. Consequently, as the base remained narrow and weak, this structure of parliamentary democracy was confronted with a number of shocks and strains at regular intervals. However, crisis-management helped the system to stabilise and gain strength. Another element overlooked by Desai had been the political sophistication of the national bourgeoisie. The latter, instead of backing-up, as a class, conventional laissez-faire schemes, had actually given its general support to Nehru for his more untried and creative strategies. Writes Sudipto Kaviraj (ibid: 333), "As a composite of the economic class and its organic political elite, it has adapted to changing situations, innovated new political forms, accepted a certain logic of reformism, the utility of socialist rhetoric, constantly shifted its specific mode of control (like balance between coercion and ideological control), and by its strategic planning kept its political opponents continually surprised." Thus, India had a bourgeois leadership which was anti-imperialist to some extent without being socialist. Actually in the communist vision of a bipolar world there was no concept of a capitalist state in a post-colonial society which could be independent of imperialism and thus fight against neocolonialist control.

In the face of the challenge by the national bourgeoisie, the Communist parties in the Indian situation had to face the politics of both absorption as well as containment. According to Sudipto Kaviraj (1979: 572ff), the major issue confronting mass communist parties in societies with capitalist socio-economic structure and bourgeois-democratic political institutions is whether radical
parties have been able to divert discontent from various sources into “a sufficiently powerful stream to threaten the structure or the structure has found answers to communist dissidence and absorbed or at least contained it...” (ibid: 572). In India the C.P.I. and later the C.P.I.(M) and other leftist parties, inspite of inner party debates and rhetoric, actually accepted the strategic impossibility of a revolution within a few years after independence. As early as in 1951 the C.P.I. made a retreat from its position of armed insurrection of the 1940s and declared that “though armed revolution was the only possible means, the time was premature” (ibid: 339). This, according to Kaviraj (ibid), was a fateful turn because this amounted to the revolution being postponed indefinitely and “instead of a theoretical repudiation of armed insurrection, they used the other logical device: pushing it deeper into the future.” The left parties gradually came to visualise their roles as effective pressure groups for the proletariat. Their success in trade union movements for securing economic gains for the workers actually pushed them further and further away from the goal of revolution. Actually, the objective political situation in India had prevented the feasibility of a revolution at the time immediately after independence and these parties had had no alternative but to play the parliamentary game. So trade union and parliamentary politics together actually led to a substantial change in the organisational nature of the party which made it impossible for the party to make any revolutionary intervention in the situation inspite of its radical intentions. The RSP, however, took a completely different stand on this issue. It, while retaining complete faith in world communist movement, took a stand independent from the leadership of the CPSU as well as the Cominform, and gave primacy to Indian socialist revolution. For instance, they rejected outright the concept of parliamentary road to socialism and “one-stage” revolution or skipping of stages. They retained faith in active revolutionary activities which included launching the revolutionary struggle and for preparing the masses for a prolonged and determined onslaught against the bourgeois,
imperialist and still surviving feudal elements. This would be the task of the proletariat and their true vanguard will be the RSP. The proletariat will find its ally in the peasantry and the lower-middle classes who despite their deficiencies are in the present historical phase revolutionary elements. (DRSP.I:113ff). For them as the bourgeoisie was already established in state-power in collusion with imperialism, so it was not to be accepted as part of the national revolutionary front. To carry out the anti-feudal democratic and anti-imperialist stages of the revolution what was first needed was to “overthrow and dislodge the capitalist class from power. Because it is the power of the capitalist class and bourgeoisie-domination which acts as the defence barrier or cover for imperialist exploitation.” (DRSP.II:247). Hence, by virtue of the power wielded by the Indian capitalist class as the new ruling authority that the capitalist socio-economic system in India, the successor of British parliamentary democracy, could accomplish the dual tasks of absorption and containment of communist politics very effectively.

Professor Su-lipto Kaviraj gives an explanation for such a turn of events. In his opinion (1979: 325), due to the expansion of the “political base of the bourgeois system, communists are forced to ‘come to terms’ with reality. They are forced to enter into electoral politics. Once they get in the compulsions increase and the logic intensifies. Finally, what had been a temporary tactical shift for the Communist Parties becomes a permanent strategic revision. Communist parties become prisoners of the parliamentary political system. Their trade union gains give them a surer base among the workers, but at the same time stabilise the system and provide it legitimation.” The Communist parties are faced with a dilemma: on the one hand, the pledge to eliminate the capitalist system, and on the other hand, acceptance of the limitations of this system and participate in the parliamentary system. Whether these two opposing trends can be reconciled became the subject of intense debates within the C.P.I. since the time of independence. Hence, even if the communist parties
command a sizeable part of the electorate, they cease to be any threat to the system. Moreover, the bourgeoisie, through the ruling political stratum had established real hegemony in a limited sense. In cases of economic stress and strains it could fall back on a considerable fund of political legitimacy that it had accrued in the course of the nationalist movement. This is exactly what happened in India, though not envisaged by Desai, when the C.P.I. came within the sphere of electoral politics, giving up the more radical path of guerilla activities.

During the war years and immediately after independence the C.P.I. had been committed to violent revolutionary overthrow of capitalist state power and guerilla warfare. But by mid-1950s we find that their ideological position was shifting. After the Fourth Congress in 1956 the Party initiated certain changes in the party line. For instance, the central government was no longer seen as a government of national betrayal but of national independence. They acknowledged that the policies of the Nehru government were not actually perpetuating feudalism and imperialism but striving for independent capitalist development. Furthermore, the class character of the national government was deemed to be bourgeois-landlord and not one dominated by monopoly capital though in the ruling elite the bourgeoisie was the more powerful partner. Modeste Rubinstein of CPSU gave his opinion in “A Non-Capitalist Path for Underdeveloped Countries” (Sen 1978: 603–613; Kaviraj 1979: 408). He wrote that, “It would of course be naïve to expect monopoly capital to strive for socialist reconstruction. Nevertheless, in India, which is advancing along the road of independent political and economic development, the objective possibilities exist for obviating the continued growth of monopoly capital and, by peaceful methods, in conformity with the will of the overwhelming majority of the people, taking the socialist path. That path has been advocated for many years by Jawaharlal Nehru.” This socialist path included development of heavy industrial base in the state sector. The C.P.I. in such circumstances advocated
what Lenin had said repeatedly, namely, state capitalism is a step towards socialism. Thus, the C.P.I. thought that “Given close cooperation by all progressive forces in the country, there is possibility for India to develop along socialist lines” (ibid: 608; ibid: 409). Rubinstein further declared that each country would follow its own path of development to socialism as the paths to socialism are multiple. Hence, India’s path will be different from China’s and also much slower. Multiplicity of paths and forms of transition could comfortably include India’s capitalist growth.

Ajoy Ghosh clarified (ibid: 510; ibid: 399) the matter in such a way that he said, “The question is not which countries can have socialism peacefully? The question is: what conditions must be created to effect such a transition?” He continued that the former question would create endless academic debates while the latter would lead to practical activities which can create the necessary conditions. Ghosh, however, was critical of Rubinstein’s position. He said the first task for any Marxist or any serious student of economics would be to examine which class has profited most from the economic policies of the government to determine whether the path of development taken by the government was at all socialist. This is because the bourgeoisie, no matter how radical or progressive, cannot build socialism. Finally, Ghosh concluded that there “undoubtedly exists a non-capitalist path of development for the underdeveloped countries like India. But it would be an illusion to think that the present government headed by the bourgeoisie can advance on that path...” (Kaviraj 1979: 411). In fact Ranadive commented (ibid: 429–30) in 1957 on the Second Five Year Plan that the “Party is aware that the second plan is not a socialist plan but a plan for independent capitalist development.”

According to the CPC (ibid: 502) socialism in underdeveloped countries had to be established by fighting both imperialism as well as feudalism through one broad united front, and winning over the middle forces. This obviously required the identification of the chief contradictions of the concerned society.
Broadly, these are between imperialism and socialism; between proletariat and the bourgeoisie in the capitalist countries; between imperialism and national movements; and between the imperialist countries themselves. The CPC reiterated in “A Proposal Concerning the General Line of the International Communist Movement”—Letter from Central Committee, CPC to Central Committee, CPSU, June 14, 1968, p.13; (also cited in Kaviraj 1979: 503) that, “It is impossible for the working class in the European and American capitalist countries to liberate itself unless it unites with the oppressed nations and unless those nations are liberated.” In fact, the CPC felt that this was “an important criterion for differentiating those who want revolution from those who do not.” Curiously, the CPC went to great lengths to emphasise that the bourgeoisie in most underdeveloped countries was to be a part of the anti-imperialist combine, though they did not regard the Indian bourgeoisie as nationalistic at all; they were seen as comprador. Furthermore, the CPC believed that there was no historical precedent for peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism. Hence, it would be inadmissible to turn that into the general strategic perspective of communist movement and transition to socialism. And lastly, “peaceful coexistence cannot replace the revolutionary struggles of peoples” (ibid: 504).

The RSP too believed that liquidation of feudalism on the one hand, and overthrow of finance-capitalist thraldom to which the ruling Indian bourgeoisie have kept the Indian people yoked till now, were the historical tasks of the proletariat. But they rejected the inclusion of the bourgeoisie within the revolutionary vanguard and the formation of one broad united front. In its opinion the bourgeoisie was essentially compromising with imperialism and this attitude actually encouraged the fissiparous communal tendencies which were inherently disruptive in nature. There was only one way out, namely, “that of building up the sanction behind complete national emancipation and democracy from below, depending upon the fighting revolutionary strength of the masses of the people—of the workers, peasants, middle classes and common
men and women who are already on the move, who had already come out on the field of battle on their own initiative to settle accounts with foreign imperialism (DRSP.II 2008: 54).

Desai had never envisaged such a turn in communist politics. He had always advocated independent movements of workers, peasants and other exploited groups but could never come to terms with the objective situation. He could never reconcile himself to the fact that the objective situation in India had never been in favour of a revolutionary intervention. He did not realise that, paradoxically, trade union movement strengthened the communist party economically but took it further away from the political goal of revolution—the stronger a trade union movement became, the parliamentary-democratic system became more stable. Quite naturally, after many internal debates, the C.P.I.s choice of a peaceful transition to socialism through the parliamentary path was not supported by Desai. In 1958 Amritsar Congress of the C.P.I. (ibid: 432) the party formally accepted the path of peaceful, parliamentary transition to socialism. “It considers that by developing a powerful mass movement, by winning a majority in Parliament and by backing it with mass sanctions, the working class and its allies can overcome the resistance of the forces of reaction and ensure that Parliament becomes an instrument of people’s will for effecting fundamental changes in the economic, social and state structure” (ibid). It seems that unlike Desai, the C.P.I. could visualise the stabilisation of the parliamentary democratic system in India and also understand “the resilience of bourgeois democracy” (ibid: 441).

On the other hand, maladministration, corruption, misgovernance etc. can lead to breakdown of law and order creating potential revolutionary situations. However, in today’s world the proletariat—the potential/probable revolutionary vanguard—has lost much of its militancy and revolutionary zeal. It has, to a large extent, been co-opted within the professional middle classes. The proletariat, on its part, has found it to be more advantageous materially to
cooperate with the bourgeoisie rather than open confrontation. The demarcation line between the middle class and the proletariat becomes fluid with more and more members of the latter opting for the lifestyle of the former. This shows capitalism’s ability to bring more and more people within its fold and this has been complemented by its ability to absorb the shocks that it has faced over time. This development had been totally unexpected to Desai who could never reconcile himself to the stabilisation and gradual strengthening of the bourgeois parliamentary State in India on the one hand, and dearth of revolutionary zeal on part of the labouring classes, on the other.

Here lies a major flaw in Desai’s thinking. He, on the one hand, did not support the more popular form of communist rule, i.e. Stalinist totalitarianism which was a dictatorship of the Communist Party. Yet, he thought on the other hand, that, a bourgeois dictatorship in India would pave the way for a socialist revolution. His flaw was that he likened bourgeois dictatorship to communist dictatorship; for him any kind of dictatorship would inevitably lead to a revolutionary situation. He actually disregarded the prospect of structural differences between the two. The former always incorporates sufficient elements of democracy by which it gives the people enough incentives, facilities and material comforts so as to keep them away from the path of revolution. Furthermore, through a façade of constitutional rights and freedoms it gives people enough political, social, legal or cultural rights to keep them ‘satisfied’ that they are also part of the decision-making process whereas, in reality, powers of decision-making and policy formulation always belong to a small coterie. In other words, the state does not resort to brute force always. It also makes use of what Althusser (1971:139) would say was the Ideological State Apparatus, the success of which prevents the mass actions from becoming full-fledged revolutionary movements. In fact, Upendra Baxi is of the opinion (Shah 1990:185) that, Desai, more than any other Indian social scientist “has continually illustrated how the Indian State skillfully combines both the rule of
law and the reign of terror into the hegemonic tasks and apparatuses of governance.” In the light of such opinion, Desai’s hopes of a socialist revolution in India seem to be more utopian than practical. Moreover, by creating and aligning itself with the educated, professional middle class the bourgeoisie has increased its social base to a large extent. In case of India specifically, the institutional system, bearing the tradition of British parliamentary democracy, has been an important pillar in the stabilisation of the system. There is corruption, nepotism, malfunctioning, bureaucratic red-tapism and delays—but the foundations of representative institutions like the parliament, the court system, the electoral process, the media, etc., are well-grounded in India’s political system. Desai had not been able to foresee the role these institutions would play in stabilising bourgeois rule in India; in fact, due to its institutional strength India is an exception among the underdeveloped and developing world—Indian bourgeois-democracy with all its weaknesses and faults has provided one of the most stable systems in the developing world.

So far as the middle classes are concerned, they have an important role to play. For it will be difficult for the Left movement to survive on the basis of workers and peasants only—it will have to accommodate the middle class within its fold. This middle class has a very important role to play in the shaping of ideas, attitudes, beliefs, cultures and lifestyle in society—it is the vanguard of ideological class struggle. Desai, on his part, had highlighted the role of the intelligentsia in the nationalist movement. He himself belonged to this class and had imbued a very strong and rich cultural tradition from his family; in his working life he had wanted to build a bridge between intellectualism and activism. But most surprisingly in his written accounts he does not devote much attention to the intellectuals and educated professionals as a class in the state-and-nation-building project. In this regard the position of Bhupendranath Datta, one of the pioneers of Indian sociological investigations, was diametrically opposite. For Datta though the labouring classes constituted the revolutionary
backbone of any society, it was the task of the intellectuals to instill the revolutionary consciousness among the people. Hence, a politico-economic revolution must always be preceded by a revolution in the world of thought and letters. Desai, on the other hand, speaks of increasing the consciousness and organising the oppressed downtrodden masses but forgets that the intellectuals and educated middle class have a pivotal role to play in the discharge of these functions. May be Desai wanted the leaders of the movements to rise from the masses themselves because middle-class leadership has a tendency of diluting mass-militancy.

Furthermore, Desai alleges (1984: X) that the communist parties regard the forces and classes assisting and encouraging capitalist development in ex-colonial, backward countries to be progressive and therefore to be supported in their efforts to complete the first stage of the revolution. But the bourgeoisie, though progressive in contrast to the feudal elements, will always play a retrogressive role in relation to the toiling masses. The former will complete the first stage of the revolution for its own class interests but will hinder the climax to the stage of socialist revolution. Thus, Desai calls the bourgeoisie 'historically outmoded' because it will always obstruct the struggles by the masses. However, Desai failed to understand that the bourgeoisie does not always play a retrogressive role. Like M.N.Roy, Desai also failed to grasp the dual role of the national bourgeoisie in both colonial and post-colonial periods. For Roy, the imperialist bourgeoisie had wanted, to some degree, industrialisation of India due to their class interests; but they had been unable to prevent either the emergence of the indigenous bourgeoisie or the inclusion of the latter in the profit-sharing process. Hence, though economic circumstances had prevented the national bourgeoisie from playing a revolutionary role in the socio-economic transformation of India during the colonial period, it did not imply that the national bourgeoisie did not have any contribution in post-colonial advancement. As Bhowani Sen writes (1972: 2–3), "True, the leadership of the
Indian National Congress pursued a policy of compromise, ultimately India achieved her national independence through movements and struggles in which the Communist Party of India played its glorious role but the overall leadership of the movement as a whole was of the Indian National Congress. True, the top section of the national bourgeoisie always stood for a deal with British imperialism, but the workers, peasants and the petty bourgeoisie had always got on their side some sections of the national bourgeoisie to overcome the vacillations and opposition of the compromisers." Desai too had failed to understand this and the potentialities of differences within its ranks under colonial conditions. He missed the contradiction between British imperialism on the one hand, and the Indian people as a whole of which the national bourgeoisie was a very vital part, on the other.

From this perspective what Desai gives us is the Sociology of the Underprivileged. Long before the 'subaltern' became a subject of Indian academia we find Desai incorporating their struggles in his analysis. A sizeable portion of his thought is concerned with the marginalised sections of Indian population like the adivasis or tribals, the dalits, the rural poor comprising of other backward castes, the urban poor or slum dwellers, etc. He also included 'women' as a category in his analysis of the marginalised because he found women facing double exploitation and oppression. Women were discriminated on grounds of caste, class, economic situation on the one hand, and were also victims of patriarchy on the other. Hence, Sujata Patel comments (2007: 437), "What is remarkable is the fact that, for the first time, Desai incorporates in his analysis struggles not only of classes but also other groups who cannot be defined as a class in Marxist language." Thus, his study was not restricted to any particular class but included all sections that were being oppressed and exploited. Desai was one of the first to notice that these oppressed people most often were not part of the work force in the organised sector. On the contrary,
they comprised an 'informal sector' which came to the notice of economists and anthropologists much later. His analysis of the struggles of these oppressed, marginalised sections shows that Desai was not dogmatic in maintaining the purity of Marxist methodology—he applied the methodology to understand particular situations. For that, as Dr. Neeraben Desai recounted (in the interview mentioned earlier) A.R.Desai had been criticised for diluting methodology. But he never regarded methodology as a purist because he did not regard reality to be a replica of theory. As reality changed so methodology had to be flexible enough to be adaptable to social situation. Due to his flexibility, Desai tried to find the methods by which these groups are kept marginalised in Indian socio-political scenario, their position due to such marginalisation and the atrocities committed against them. He had codified the violation of rights against them and defined their struggles as 'rights struggles' rather than 'class struggles'.

Hence, he was open to the idea that all struggles are not 'class struggles' and other types of struggles can be equally or more important than the latter, depending on specific situations. Desai also put forward the idea that these groups would have to unite themselves and fight for their rights. Here we do not see Desai giving much importance to the Communist Party as being vanguard of the marginalised, exploited sections fighting for their rights. Possibly his long political association with various communist parties like the Communist Party of India, Revolutionary Socialist Party, etc., political experiences as a researcher and an activist and the degeneration of the Left movement into electoral politics led him to place more faith in Citizen’s and Community groups apart from the own organisations of the marginalised groups.

Desai has been criticised by K.Balgopal (1986), Sujata Patel (2007), etc., for diluting methodology as he opted for grand narratives and never gave empirical verifications. For instance, he had argued that private property had not existed in pre-colonial India or that the contemporary Indian village had been self-sufficient, autocratic and unprogressive without substantiating his
observations empirically. Not only so, as Patel says (ibid: 438), when enough historical material was discovered to question these assessments, "Desai did not retract these errors in subsequent editions of his book." One is also not clear why he used the term 'Rural Sociology'—a term that emerged in the context of developments in agriculture in the U.S.A.—"when terms like peasant society and agrarian society were available within Marxism" (ibid). Furthermore, his writings on peasant society give a classification of aspects of rural life rather than a historical-materialist rendering of the nature of rural structure. Patel wonders (ibid), "If he became aware of these concepts later, why did he not change the titles of his books, or insert addenda? An entire generation of students has read and organised their ideas of agrarian systems on the basis of a very specific definition of rural sociology. One wonders why Desai allowed this conservative categorisation to continue in his own work. Surely it does not advance scholarship or extend his political project?" KBalgopal has also criticised (1986:1401) Desai for diluting methodology as he opted for grand narratives and never gave empirical verifications. This, according to the critic (ibid), has been especially evident in his writings on the peasant question. Desai wrote about peasant movements and struggles in a general way rather than highlighting specific cases. However, what must be remembered is that in his accounts on the peasant issue, namely, Peasant Struggles in India, Agrarian Struggles in India after Independence, Rural Sociology in India, etc., he, as chief editor had introduced the various themes in his general and sectional introductions. He may have not given empirical verifications through case studies but his editorship over a number of articles dealing with various facets of peasant movements and struggles points to the fact that Desai was not negligent about empirical data. He had identified the peasantry as the potential revolutionary class over the industrial proletariat whereas Marx himself had never considered the potentiality of revolutionary militancy of the peasantry. What is necessary is to highlight the differences in situation of both. For instance, Marx was writing
in nineteenth century Europe, mainly in Britain and France which had become the cradle of European capitalism. Thus, by the time capitalism had already flourished in Western Europe and France the working class also was experimenting with communism as in the Paris Commune. So Marx had the opportunity to observe the European capitalist class as well as the proletariat whose antagonisms and contradictions were already well-entrenched in society. However, he was not very hopeful upon the latter for revolutions in Germany and Russia where the capitalist material forces had not matured sufficiently to usher in a revolutionary situation. It had been Lenin, to be followed by Mao, as practical revolutionaries who had modified the concept of the vanguard class. Lenin faced a situation where Russia was predominantly an agrarian hinterland with pockets of high level industrialisation. However, the Russian proletariat was numerically insufficient to constitute a vanguard class which would lead the revolution. For Mao in China the proletariat was practically non-existent. Hence, for both Lenin and Mao, an alternative vanguard class had to be found. They could not afford to treat the peasantry ‘as a sack of potatoes’ (Marx 1977: 479) but had to be elevated to the level of the revolutionary vanguard class. Desai did exactly the same thing in the Indian situation. India was traditionally an agrarian society with industrialisation beginning after the second half of the nineteenth century. Then also this process had been uneven, sporadic and lopsided, suited to the needs of British colonial exploitation. Even during Desai’s period—from roughly the middle of last century—the proletariat was neither numerically nor culturally equipped to become the revolutionary vanguard. The peasantry, though culturally extremely backward, had at least the numerical strength. So Desai thought that with proper injection of Marxist ideology they would attain the revolutionary consciousness to become the vanguard. Actually Desai had always been of the opinion that to be a Marxist it was not necessary to follow Marx blindly—it meant applying the various aspects of Marxist methodology according to specific situations. Marx’s ideas and works leave ample scope for
interpretations and applications according to different times and requirements. This is the reason why Marxism provokes so much debates and discussions among scholars. Thus, various strands of Marxism can co-exist while discussing the same issues. Seen in this way, Marx's works are 'Texts' to be interpreted by scholars and students according to their socio-cultural-time specifications. If the notion of 'difference' is disregarded in any interpretation of Marxism then the voluminous scholarly works will be lost to social science. Based on this logic, if Western Marxism is not taken as a parallel stream to official Soviet Marxism, then social science will be the loser. Hence, Desai neither diluted methodology nor did he become disloyal to the Marxist tradition.

However, it is true that Desai was not provoked by the intense debates on theoretical controversies going on in the world of Western Marxism as well as in the Indian academia. Desai had been aware that there were different brands of Marxism and he broadly accepted the Historical Materialist standpoint while remaining critical of Stalinist totalitarianism. According to modern vocabulary he was a classical Marxist and his prodigious writings prove that he had the capability to provide original inputs into Marxist sociology. But theoretical intricacies which had rocked the western world were of no consequence to Desai—he was indifferent to it. Probably he was of the opinion that theoretical discourse had been well elaborated by Marx and Engels and needed no further inputs. Actually, he remained loyal to the Historical Materialism throughout his life. Neither did Desai participate in the Mode of Production debate that was raging Indian academia. The main points of this debate were the existence or lack of private property in pre-colonial India and the current stage of mode of production in the post-independence phase. So far as the existence of private property in pre-colonial India was the issue, Desai gave his position very clearly. As already stated (see Chapter 4) Desai believed that land, in general, was held in common by the whole community and private ownership was either totally non-existent or negligible. Regarding the debate on the stage of mode of
production in the immediate post-independence phase, Desai made his position equally clear. He simply did not participate in this debate because for him transformation of the land from means of subsistence to commodity was more important to him than the current stage of mode of production. To him this transformation of the nature of the land had begun during the colonial period and was nearly complete in the post-colonial phase. He believed that India had already become a full-fledged capitalist state. With the C.P.I.(ML)'s declaration that India was a semi-feudal semi-colonial state, this debate on the current stage of mode of production arose and Desai saw no reason to participate in it due to his convictions.

In the final analysis of Desai as a sociologist the comments made by Sujata Patel are important. In her words (2007: 440), “Desai’s corpus of work is an attempt to educate sociologists and the general public about the contradictions that affect Indian society. When he is arguing for nationalism or making visible the complexities of peasants’ movements in India,...or analysing communalism and claiming human rights for all, he shows an understanding of Indian society unparalleled among social scientists of the day.” There is no doubt that Desai’s comprehension of his contemporary reality was profound—the issues which he brought forward as important enough to be researched actually paved the way for future studies. In his wide canvas he tried to capture a holistic image of Indian socio-political-economic-cultural reality which made many scholars like Sujata Patel appreciate his work as that of an ‘archivist’ which “helped to make visible the complexities of the colonial and post-colonial experiences that shaped sociological processes in India” (ibid). He has been criticised for suffering from too much generalisations without adequate empirical verifications, but he himself gives certain defenses. While he lauds (1984: IX) the scholarly endeavours which “have generated very valuable and significant empirical material...” they nevertheless, “overlook or bypass many vital
perspectives and elements which are indispensable for a proper Marxist comprehension of the developments taking place in the country after independence." For instance, he says that in too much concern for empirical data, the researchers carry on their studies "undialectically, without viewing the part in the context of the whole." Furthermore, over-emphasis on empirical data often compromises on the quality of interpretation and analysis. Studies on segments of Indian society will have to be studied in the context of the overall Indian society. Again, if capitalism and its relation to agrarian production is studied only in terms of the stage of mode of production then it will be woefully insufficient; it has to be studied in the perspective of overall transformation of Indian society according to capitalist postulates.

Desai has offered us a consistent and continuous account of the evolution of Indian society, polity and culture though his study suffers from certain limitations which have already been highlighted. One can say that the seminal importance of his contribution lies not only in the historical totality presented by him, but also in the exposure of the hollowness of contemporary sociological intellectual tradition which portrayed a partial image of Indian socio-political reality. He has raised a number of issues and in trying to suggest their answers he has successfully applied dialectical and historical materialism in his sociological investigations. For Desai, as said earlier, sociology was never a pure intellectual enterprise. On the contrary, he accepted it as a guide to action. He was of the opinion that a human individual could influence his circumstances and existential reality only when he became aware of his historical situation and the avenues of action open to mould, influence and change that historical situation. He criticised existing social theories which justified a social order which condemned the vast majority to exploitation, oppression, injustice and indignities. Being an individual as well as an activist, his study of socio-political reality was not as it was, but as what it could be—this was the basis of his commitment to sociological understanding of society. Hence, in spite of various
limitations, Desai's theoretical and methodological perspective gives Indian Sociology a comprehensive basis for further investigations necessary for understanding Indian social reality. Besides, we find in him a commitment for transformation of theoretical understanding into radical political practice.

Thus, his theories and arguments actually "paved the way for new arguments to be presented and new positions to be taken" (Patel 2007: 440). In this sense, his works can be taken as 'Texts' which leaves a scope for re-reading and presenting new findings and new interpretations. Here Desai transcends his own historical period and leaves something back that can be applied to understand situations and events occurring long after his death.