

Indira



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India's Most Powerful Prime Minister

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*For my parents,
who grew up in Nehru's India*



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Preface

President Pranab Mukherjee once remarked in an informal conversation that only two people would attract instant crowds even in inaccessible parts of the North Pole: the Pope and Indira Gandhi. In January 2006, a nationwide survey conducted by the political science think tank Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) ranked Indira Gandhi as the second most recognized Indian, just after Mahatma Gandhi and ahead of her father, Jawaharlal Nehru. The Father of the Nation is still universally revered, his face is embossed on currency notes and he lends his name to at least one major street in almost every Indian city. By contrast the legacy of Indira Gandhi is much more fraught and contested.

Indira Gandhi died in 1984, killed by her own Sikh bodyguards. Like the Mahatma, she too was assassinated, but where the Mahatma's rallying cry for freedom had once united Indians against the British Raj, Indira Gandhi's combative brand of politics is seen as sharply polarizing. She suspended individual rights by declaring an Emergency in 1975, split the Congress, was accused of subverting institutions and giving democratic India its first taste of dictatorship.

And yet, twenty-two years later, in 2006, she was still firmly etched in the popular imagination, admired and reviled in almost equal measure. Even the man whose approval she sought the most, Jawaharlal Nehru, her beloved 'Papu', was ranked behind her in the poll.

What explains the enduring mystique of Indira Gandhi? Why is it that in remote hamlets of north India senior citizens will succumb to a welter of emotions and memories on hearing her name? Why is it that in villages in south India her portrait is still displayed in homes? Why is it that at her memorial museum in her former home, 1 Safdarjung Road in New Delhi, swelling crowds pour in, in far greater numbers than even to Mahatma Gandhi's memorial, the Gandhi Smriti, or even at his cremation site, Rajghat? Why is it that the Congress even two generations later is forced to turn to her as their passport to relevance at the ballot box?

'Indira-amma' to her devoted supporters south of the Vindhyas, 'Indiraji' in the Hindi heartland, venerated as an avatar of Durga but also vilified as the woman who turned politics into family raj, no other Indian politician has attracted such acutely contrasting responses.

Perhaps Prime Minister Narendra Modi could claim to similarly divide public opinion and his style of highly personalized politics certainly draws on the Indira example, but even Modi has not been able to bridge the north-south, urban-rural and rich-poor divide as only Indira Gandhi, India's original mass leader with the famous despotic streak, managed to do.

Which is why the centenary year of Indira Gandhi is an opportune moment to unravel the many layers that defined the former prime minister's personality and create a portrait of her in the context of present-day realities. Who really was this child of privilege and of struggle who spent her early years surrounded by the towering men and women of destiny who won us freedom, but who in her adult life appeared to turn her back on the democratic idealism that had inspired such great sacrifice from so many? Who was this shy, lonely young woman who was never taken seriously by her political peers – or indeed by her husband and father – but who ended up checkmating her rivals and becoming the most powerful prime minister India had ever seen? Daughter of Jawaharlal and Kamala, wife of Feroze, mother to Sanjay and Rajiv, mother-in-law to Sonia and Maneka, grandmother to Priyanka, Rahul, Varun, but above all Mother to

a Nation, Indira Gandhi essayed many roles like an accomplished actor for whom India was a stage.

No other Indian prime minister has experienced the kind of highs and lows that she did. Her leadership in the 1971 war against Pakistan is still held up as an example of formidable courage in the face of adversity, of undaunted spirit and unflinching patriotism in taking on the national enemy. Her rousing election slogan of 'Garibi Hatao' is still seen as a template for politicians seeking to sway the voter with populist rhetoric. By mid 1972, her popularity was at its zenith: the Goddess analogy an apt reflection of the near-divine status she had acquired, especially among the multitudes of the Indian poor.

And yet, in 1977, she had lost power. She was defeated by the very same voter who once worshipped her. The imposition of the Emergency in 1975 turned the searchlight on her darker side: the imperious, authoritarian figure who would not tolerate dissent and was a prisoner of her suspicions, insecurities and devotion to her son. That she came back to power only three short years later mirrored how her dominating presence dwarfed everyone else at the time, even when she was in the opposition. She was the original political beneficiary of the TINA (there is no alternative) factor, yet she also had an instinctive connect with people that enabled the kind of spectacular comeback that no other politician has been able to achieve within such a short time of a hammering at the polls.

Few politicians have practised realpolitik with greater ruthlessness and a desire for total control: she was, in that sense, India's original high command leader. And yet, the hankering for power, the near-conviction that she alone knew what was best for India, coupled with a deep insecurity about her own future, meant that Indira Gandhi ended up undermining and destroying the very institutions that her father had so painstakingly nurtured. She split and took over the Congress, won several elections, but ended up destroying the party by making the organization subservient to the individual, and bereft of regional political talent. She was guided by powerful

bureaucrats but made the bureaucracy committed and servile to the prime minister's office. While she asserted India's status at the global high table, she also pushed Nehruvian non-alignment into the arms of the Soviet Bloc. She spoke of ridding the country of poverty but allowed her socialist zeal to result in the further impoverishment of millions. She was a passionate defender of secularism but chose to compromise with religious extremists to keep her political rivals guessing. And while she claimed to take the moral high ground on corruption, she ended up creating a system that was soaked in venal, manipulative politics.

And yet, she was a tough, courageous patriot, with a firm commitment to the idea of a strong, self-reliant India, someone who never backed down in a crisis or ever lost her nerve. She may have pushed the country into the darkness of the Emergency, but she also let in a ray of sunshine by voluntarily lifting it. She wasn't a natural orator but it didn't stop her from establishing an instant rapport with large crowds: it was almost as if they could identify with her when she claimed to represent their interests against traditional elites.

Is it any wonder then that from Amit Shah and Narendra Modi to Sonia Gandhi and regional bosses, politicians across the spectrum still refer to the Indira Gandhi playbook?



Indira's life can be divided into distinct parts: From her birth in 1917 to India's independence in 1947 when she was the young woman who grew up in Anand Bhawan, the Allahabad home that became one of the hubs of the freedom movement, the girl who had an interrupted education studying in Allahabad, Poona, Santiniketan and Oxford but whose emotions and intellect were uniquely – and obsessively – shaped by her father whom she adored but also rebelled against by marrying Feroze Gandhi, the anti-Jawaharlal. From 1947 to Nehru's death in 1964, she was her father's companion and hostess in the prime ministerial home, primarily a mother and wife, yet someone

who perhaps secretly knew that politics was her true vocation, into which she made occasional and determined forays like becoming Congress president in 1959.

From 1964 to 1966 she was a member of Lal Bahadur Shastri's ministry, and from 1966, when Shastri died, to 1971 she was the prime minister who decimated her detractors in the Congress, the grandmaster of political chess who split the Congress and created a new party around her own persona. From 1971 to 1977 Indira went from pinnacle to nadir, achieving dizzying heights of power with a spectacular mandate in the elections of 1971. In 1971 she also became the only prime minister to win a decisive military victory against Pakistan in the Bangladesh war. However, triumph sharply descended into loss of momentum and legitimacy, with the lowest point in her public life being the declaration of Emergency and the subsequent defeat in the 1977 polls.

From 1977 to 1980, Indira Gandhi was the outcast, thrown out from the centre of public life, a place she had occupied as Nehru's companion for seventeen years and as prime minister for eleven. These were her years in the wilderness when she was defeated, harassed and humiliated. Then her last phase, from 1980 until her assassination in 1984, when she returned in an electrifying comeback but never seemed to recover her political instincts and shrewdness, a time when she floundered as fires exploded in Assam and Punjab, her last years marked by violence and conflict until she was killed in 1984 by her own Sikh bodyguards.



Growing up in the 1970s, I am a child of the Indira age. By examining her life and times, I seek my own answers as a journalist and a citizen to the troubling questions that have confronted many Indians of mine and other generations. The central question is this: would this country have been very different if Indira Gandhi had not presided over its destiny for two decades? This book seeks answers

from close friends, associates and observers to recreate a period that continues to flummox and fascinate. Most crucially, it seeks answers from the main character herself. Indira Gandhi may have died in 1984 but her spirit lives on. In a fanciful attempt at a dialogue with her, I interrogate that ghost of Indira, as any citizen of India might want to do, I ask questions that I imagine citizens would want to ask. The questions I pose in my letters to her are questions that I am convinced many readers would like to ask too.

Four 'what-ifs' suggested themselves to me as I examined her life. First, what if Feroze Gandhi had not died as early as he did? Would Indira, as his wife, have been able to give full rein to her political ambitions? Second, what if Lal Bahadur Shastri hadn't died when he did, would she have abandoned politics and departed from India as she confessed to wanting to do in her letters to the American writer Dorothy Norman? Third, what if she had continued the Emergency instead of lifting it, would India have been a one-party dictatorship today? And finally what if she hadn't been assassinated, would the Congress have limped towards an inevitable waning by the end of the 1980s? After all it was her death that gave new life to her party. Rajiv Gandhi's 400-plus seat haul in the 1984 elections was only an accidental result of her assassination. Did her death hold off the Congress's inexorable decline, if only for a while?

There is voluminous biographical literature available on Indira Gandhi – she's been called the sluice gate from which has flowed a flood of writings. There are at least six major biographies and several other books on her life. All told there are over a hundred books on her, many written by those who knew her intimately or observed her closely. I am not a professional historian and this is not a book bringing to light primary archival investigation. Instead mine is a biographical portrait and a journalistic interrogation of Indira the woman and the politician, which seeks to locate Indira Gandhi in today's context. I try to connect her with India's present and seek answers to questions of dynasty, democracy, religious strife, autocratic

leadership and gender equations, questions which are of increasing relevance in contemporary India.

Equally, I tried to excavate Indira the woman – not just Indira the power politician – from the history books. I was looking for a flesh-and-blood person, not just the iron lady, and, in the process, I discovered a young girl both protective of her constantly ailing mother and cowed by her accomplished, haughty aunt. I discovered a teenager struggling to keep up with the expectations of her illustrious and demanding father. A woman torn between an unhappy marriage in Lucknow and the thrill of being near the action and her father in New Delhi. A mother compensating her son for her bad marriage by overindulging him, creating a Frankenstein's monster in the process. And finally a paranoid, battle-weary woman whose survival and political instinct were dulled by personal loss.

For this book I have drawn on Indira Gandhi biographies by Pupul Jayakar, Katherine Frank, Inder Malhotra, Usha Bhagat, Mary C. Carras, Dom Moraes and Zareer Masani as well as on her revealing exchange of letters with her American friend Dorothy Norman. All Indira Gandhi's personal papers are still not publicly available but the two volumes of letters between her father and her, edited by Sonia Gandhi, *Freedom's Daughter* (1989) and *Two Alone, Two Together* (1992), throw a lot of light on her early years. I have also drawn on insightful and detailed accounts by Krishna Hutheesing, P.N. Dhar, Bertil Falk (on Feroze Gandhi), Emma Tarlo (on the Emergency), Vinod Mehta (on Sanjay Gandhi), Pranab Mukherjee, H.Y. Sharada Prasad, B.N. Tandon, Uma Vasudev, Anand Mohan, Janardan Thakur, B.K. Nehru, Kuldip Nayar, K.P. Mathur and Nayantara Sahgal and a host of articles and interviews. The Shah Commission Report remains an important record of the Emergency. A stroke of luck for me was being given a copy of her long interview to Emmanuel Pouchpadass, which I found to be a treasure trove of her views since the entire book is in her own words. I also had the privilege of several long conversations with many who knew

her closely, such as Natwar Singh, R.K. Dhawan and Manmohan 'Moni' Malhoutra.



Initially, when Chiki Sarkar and Nandini Mehta of Juggernaut commissioned me for this book I was a bit daunted. I'm not an academic, only a rather battle-hardened journalist and column writer who has always been fascinated by the Indira persona. History has always been a passion though. My graduate and undergraduate degrees from St Stephen's College, Delhi, and Magdalen College, Oxford, were in history and I have always loved the subject. Researching Indira's life I felt history's rough magic wash over me once again. Indira came alive to me in technicolour, her life and its secrets suddenly an intimate world next to mine. It is quite fitting that in her centenary year we recall and attempt to understand the intriguing, attractive, powerful and paradoxical woman that she was. It has been a joy to rediscover Indira Gandhi and I hope you, dear reader, will share my excitement in this rediscovery.