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### Indira Gandhi: India's Destined Leader

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the life and political career of Indira Nehru Gandhi and analyzes how the historical circumstances of her era shaped her character in a manner that made her uniquely prepared to confront the numerous political challenges that she faced during her tenure as India's Prime Minister. Indira Nehru Gandhi was Prime Minister of India from 1966 until 1977, and again in 1980 up until her assassination in 1984. Indira Gandhi was seemingly destined to rule over India. She was born into a prominent family who led the way to Indian independence from Great Britain. She was also born in a time in which women in India had become more involved in politics. The circumstance surrounding Indira's life made her the best candidate to rule India at a time when no one else could.

State University of New York  
College at Buffalo  
Department of History

Indira Gandhi: India's Destined Leader

A Thesis in History

by

Josclyn C. Green

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of the requirements  
For the degree of

Master of Arts  
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## INTRODUCTION

Indira Gandhi is a remarkable figure, not only in Indian history, but in world history as well. Indira Gandhi ruled India as Prime Minister for three consecutive terms from 1966 to 1977 and a fourth term from 1980 until her assassination in 1984. Indira became an incredibly powerful force, even as a woman in a society dominated by patriarchal ideologies. From birth onward, her life had been in the public eye as the daughter of the illustrious Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India's first Prime Minister. Her upbringing foreshadowed her political life, as she was seemingly destined to rule India. To many, she was warm and caring, but she could also be controversial and cruel in her attempts to crush her opponents. It was her uncanny ability to adapt to the political landscape that helped her retain and increase her power while demonstrating her prowess as a leader. Indira Gandhi was born in a time in which the challenging historical circumstances molded her into an exceptionally capable leader. As India grew into a politically independent state, Indira became the ideal agent to bring together the fractured elements of Indian society.

Indira Gandhi experienced a phenomenal rise to power followed by a dramatic fall and then an incredible political resurgence eventually leading to her assassination in 1984. In her youth she became immersed in politics after watching her parents and many members of her family become deeply involved in the Indian independence movement against Great Britain. Even as a child, Indira helped to form a political youth group to help the adults. For instance, children passed on information between Indian Congress members when circumstances would not allow them, and delivered warnings to those who had arrest warrants. After graduating from Oxford, she continued her political career by becoming a member of the working committee of the ruling Congress Party in 1955, and in 1959 she was elected to the largely honorary post of

party president. Lal Bahadur Shastri, Jawaharlal Nehru's successor as prime minister in 1964, named her Minister of Information and Broadcasting in his government.

After Shastri's sudden death in January 1966, Indira Gandhi was named leader of the Congress Party and then Prime Minister in a compromise between the right and left wings of the party. Once she became Prime Minister, however, her politics were often challenged by right wing politicians, especially the former Minister of Finance, Morarji Desai. Although she won the election of 1967, she reluctantly had to accept Desai as deputy Prime Minister. In 1971, she won the majority in the electoral victory over a coalition of conservative parties. Indira Gandhi was also heavily involved in global politics. Indira strongly supported East Bengal in its secessionist conflict with Pakistan in late 1971, in which India helped the people of West Bengal become victorious over Pakistan leading to the creation of Bangladesh. In March 1972, strengthened by the country's success against Pakistan, Gandhi again led her new Congress Party to a major victory in national elections.

Despite her victories in foreign relations, Indira had to contend with many internal struggles. Shortly after her Congress Party win at the polls, she was accused of violating election laws. In June 1975, the High Court of Allahabad ruled against her, which meant that she was denied her seat in Parliament and had to stay out of politics for six years. In response, Indira chose to declare a state of emergency throughout India, imprisoned her political opponents, and assumed emergency powers, passing many laws limiting personal freedoms. During this period she implemented several unpopular policies, including large-scale sterilization as a form of birth control. When national elections were eventually held in 1977, Indira and her party were defeated and she left office. The *Janata* Party, or the People's Party, was a coalition of political

parties in opposition to Indira Gandhi assembled by Desai. Following her defeat, the Janata Party then took over the government.

Following these events, political parties became divisive leading to many factions within the government. Early in 1978, Indira's supporters split from the Congress Party and formed the Congress (I) Party, with the "I" signifying Indira. She was also briefly imprisoned on charges of official corruption. In spite of these obstacles, she won a new seat in Parliament in November 1978, and her Congress (I) Party began to gather strength. Conflict within the ruling Janata Party led to the fall of its government in August 1979. New elections for the *Lok Sabha*, or lower house of Parliament, were held in January 1980. Indira and her Congress (I) Party were swept back to power in a landslide victory. Her son Sanjay Gandhi, who had become her chief political adviser, also won a seat in the Lok Sabha. All legal cases against Indira, as well as against her son, were withdrawn.

As Prime Minister once again, Indira faced several major challenges. Foremost among these was a separatist movement by the powerful Sikh community of northern India. After a Sikh rebellion broke out in northern Punjab, Indira sent troops to the Golden Temple, the most sacred Sikh site. The rebellion resulted in a bloody battle, including civilian casualties. This incident greatly angered the Sikh community, and, indeed Indira's return to power ended with her death on October 31, 1984 after being repeatedly shot by her Sikh bodyguards.

Depictions of Indira Gandhi vary greatly from an authoritarian tyrant to a great democratic leader. Throughout her life she was compared to deities, people, and even animals, according to Vipul Tripathi including the goddess Durga, a lioness and even Napoleon.<sup>1</sup> She has also been compared to other powerful women, including Britain's Margaret Thatcher, some calling her India's Iron Lady. At the beginning of her career she was labeled a "dumb doll" due

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<sup>1</sup> Vipul Tripathi, "What is Indira Gandhi's Legacy?" Reuters, October 30, 2009, U.S. Edition.



to her shyness and lack of public speaking skills. This quickly changed however, and she became a highly regarded orator. At times she was referred to as the only man in her cabinet, and was even addressed humorously as “sir” by many in her government. Some of her enthusiastic followers even coined the phrase “India is Indira and Indira is India.” World leaders also had their opinions about Indira. Richard Nixon described her as an “old witch” in leaked documents, while George H. W. Bush later recalled her as a “dedicated and inspirational leader.”<sup>2</sup> Fidel Castro would remember her as a “sensitive and profound woman,” while King Juan Carlos I of Spain saw her as a contributor to “peace, liberty and progress.”<sup>3</sup>

Indira’s complexities have also been noted by several authors who have studied her life. In *Mother Indira: A Political Biography Of Indira Gandhi*, Pranay Gupte writes, “Indira Gandhi had a personality replete with contradictions. Greatness and pettiness went hand in hand... Good intentions were often sabotaged by the exigencies of politics. Yet there is a grandeur even in failure.”<sup>4</sup> Biographer Jacob Rahul notes that “democracy was not Mrs. Gandhi’s style . . . In a world where leadership had to be one of two kinds, coercive or persuasive, she could not resolve her dilemma and fell between the two.”<sup>5</sup> He also observes, “She showed herself unburdened by conscience, scruples, or soul-searching. Her profound belief in her own indispensability adds weight to the argument that she could not risk getting less than a two-thirds majority at the polls and solved this dilemma matter-of-factly and efficiently through artifice.”<sup>6</sup> Many did not see Indira as a shining example of democracy. In Ajit Roy’s article, “The Failure of Indira Gandhi,” he says “in her pursuit of... power, Indira Gandhi never hesitated to break any rule-moral-ethical

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<sup>2</sup> G. Parthasarathi and H. Y. Sharada Prasad, *Indira Gandhi: Statesmen, Scholars, Scientists, and Friends Remember*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1985) 94

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 99, 104

<sup>4</sup> Warren Unna, “Indira Gandhi,” review of *Indira Gandhi: Grandeur in Failure*, by Pranay Gupte, *The Washington Post*, April 26, 1992, 1

<sup>5</sup> Jacob Rahul and Nayantara Sahgal, “Indira Gandhi,” review of “*An Iron Lady before Thatcher: Indira Gandhi, An Intimate Biography*,” by Pupul Jayakar, *The Toronto Star*, February 5, 1994, 16

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 17

or political-constitutional-without as much as batting an eyelid...legitimizing amorality and corruption.”<sup>7</sup>

Many written works have been completed on the late Indira Gandhi. Some are biographies while others focus on her politics, while still others detail the dynastic of rule the Nehru-Gandhi family established. This thesis will assess Indira Gandhi’s historical role in the context of twentieth century global history. Her character as well as her political policies will be examined. This focus will explain how she was able to succeed as India’s leader at a time when seemingly no one else could. Indira Gandhi was raised in a way that made her rule almost inevitable. To begin, therefore, it is vital to identify the historical circumstances surrounding Indira’s birth, and discuss the deep divisions in Indian society. The Indian nationalist movement after World War I greatly influenced Indira’s life and political career. The political figures during this independence movement, such as Mahatma Gandhi, were also instrumental to Indira’s future politics. Examining the events of this period helps the reader understand the society Indira was born in and how it helped shape her earliest political endeavors. Indira continued to progress politically, eventually becoming a major national figure. Indira began as hostess to her father, and then became a member of parliament, followed by becoming a member of Lal Bahadur Shastri's cabinet as Minister of Information and Broadcasting leading to 1966 when she became Prime Minister.

It is also important to examine the events from Indira’s election as Prime Minister in 1966 to the Emergency declared by Indira in 1975. Indira was able to become as powerful as she was by not adhering to rigid political, religious, or social conventions, but rather making decisions based on what made the most sense to her at the time. Indira’s economic policies and

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<sup>7</sup> Ajit Roy, “The Failure of Indira Gandhi,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 19, No. 45, November 10, 1984, 1896

social reforms, however, were met with opposition by some and immense support by others. Indira's role in the international scene is also significant. For instance, she had strained relationships with both the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War era. She also played an important role in Middle Eastern politics. The Emergency ended with Indira's call for elections in 1977, which despite her great confidence she lost disastrously, leading to her temporary arrest and removal from politics for a brief period. The Emergency was seen by many as her biggest political error and must be addressed to understand.

Finally, it is important to examine Indira's rise back to power in 1980 and her assassination by her Sikh bodyguards. Indira Gandhi was a dynamic and decisive leader. While she made decisions that gained enemies, she always acted in a way that she felt best served India. Indira Gandhi led India into the modern world. The power of Indira Gandhi's personality still influences Indian life today. Her ability to walk a fine line politically in a country dominated by deeply rooted religious and social traditions allowed her to be a representative for all of India. According to G. Parthasarathi, Indira had a wide constituency of "civilized people extending across all divisions and barriers and men and women of decency and vision in all countries."<sup>8</sup> Villain or champion of India, Indira Gandhi was arguably one of the most powerful women of the twentieth century.

Indira Gandhi's life has been examined by many authors. Many of these written works intend to give the reader insight into a woman who became the leader of the largest democracy in the world. Inder Malhotra's *Indira Gandhi: A Personal and Political Biography*, draws upon his recollections of conversations with Indira that provide a different perspective of Indira's life.<sup>9</sup> Katherine Frank delves deeply into Indira's childhood, young adult life, and her life as a leader

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<sup>8</sup> G. Parthasarathi, *Indira Gandhi: Statesmen, Scholars, Scientists, and Friends Remember*, ix

<sup>9</sup> Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi: A Personal and Political Biography*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989)

in her book, *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*.<sup>10</sup> In *My Truth*, Indira tells her own life story, filled with anecdotes from her childhood, her opinions on certain events, and how she felt during a given moment in her life.<sup>11</sup>

Inder Malhotra was an established reporter and was the chief of the New Delhi News Bureau in 1964, who had met Indira through his acquaintance with Indira's husband, Feroze Gandhi. Malhotra had been present from Indira's beginnings as the Minister for Information and Broadcasting up through her elevation to Prime Minister; then he began correspondence with Indira again after the Emergency. Malhotra wishes to present an objective and comprehensive view of Indira, and he points out that most other books were written at either her highest moments or the lowest points in her career.<sup>12</sup> Malhotra's relationship with the Gandhi family allowed him to acquire a knowledge of their complexities, which is reflected in his writing, especially when explaining Indira's relationship with her father. He describes Indira as her father's confidante, and it was Jawaharlal that really began her political rise by having her frequently serve as a hostess during his term as Prime Minister. The book helps the reader to appreciate Indira's almost accidental rise to power. The book also provides an overview of the complex political dynamics of the time that also boosted Indira's political status. Malhotra describes the many circumstances that drew her into Indian politics, and how she was often the compromise figure between differing factions, leading to her becoming Prime Minister.

Indira's autobiography *My Truth*, allows reader into the mind of Indira Gandhi and her view of India and the world. The book traces Indira's life and events that made her into the person she was. Through Indira retelling her life story, she allows the reader to see her life from her point of view. For one, her childhood was very much politicized, with many members of her

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<sup>10</sup> Katherine Frank, *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002)

<sup>11</sup> Indira Gandhi, *My Truth*, ed., Emmanuel Pouchpadass, (New Delhi: Vision Books), 1982

<sup>12</sup> Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi*, 11

family involved in the Indian independence movement. Indira recounts how she would pretend to be Joan of Arc as a child, and deliver speeches to servants in her house. As an adult, she had intended to become a devoted wife and mother, but once her father became Prime Minister she claimed to have no choice but to set up the household. She also explains how her duties continued to expand because she would go where her father could not. Indira's father had such a full schedule that he could not visit every place that invited him to; instead Indira would make an appearance to extend her father's greetings, which established her as a widely known figure in the Indian world.

One of the most recent books on Indira Gandhi, Katherine Frank's *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, provides an extensive overview of Indira's personal and political life. Frank's book explains how the Nehru family line has always been allied to power dating back to the Mughal Empire. Frank even includes an epilogue that describes how the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty continued with Rajiv, and even after his death, his widow Sonia became President of the Congress Party. The book details Indira's reluctance to enter politics, but how she felt a duty to India. To many, Indira was considered to be her father's heir, and to some even his reincarnation. Frank includes many personal letters between Indira and close friends, and her father. The book gives a very personal look into Indira's life and how it affected her politics.

In addition to these book length biographical and autobiographical overviews of Indira's life and political career, her role in history has been the subject of various academic articles and compilations. Sudipta Kaviraj's "Indira Gandhi and Indian Politics," explains how Indira came to power because she was thought of as someone weak who could be manipulated.<sup>13</sup> The author notes that this opinion of Indira changed quickly as she became a mighty political figure. Indira

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<sup>13</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, "Indira Gandhi and Indian Politics," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 21, No. 38/39 (Sep. 20-27, 1986), pp. 1697-1708

Gandhi's first cousin, Nayantara Sahgal, traces the development of Indira's personal and political character in the article "Nehru's Quiet Daughter."<sup>14</sup> Other authors write about her policies, including A. G. Noorani's "Indira Gandhi and Indian Muslims," which addresses Indira's relationships with the Muslim minority in India.<sup>15</sup> Transcripts of various speeches and interviews of Indira Gandhi also shed light on her life and politics. Indira addressed subjects such as scientific advancements and population policy in India.<sup>16</sup> Indira's life is remembered by world leaders, important figures, and friends in *Indira Gandhi: Statesmen, Scholars, Scientists and Friends Remember*, edited by G. Parthasarathi and H.Y. Sharada Prasad. Contributors to this compilation include Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, Muammar Al-Qadhafi, U.S. Senator Edward M. Kennedy, and President of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Kim IL Sung, among others.<sup>17</sup> The authors of these essays share their memories of Indira Gandhi and her impact on history.

Indira Gandhi was set on a path to becoming an important Indian figure from infancy. Born into a prominent family, Indira was exposed to politics at an early age and led a highly politicized life. Once her father became the first Prime Minister of independent India, Indira's political responsibilities expanded. After the death of her father, the nation needed someone who could carry on his work, and many agreed that there was no better choice than Indira Gandhi. Once perceived as weak, Indira proved to be a powerful and yet sometimes controversial leader. Indira did not adhere to factions, religions, gender roles, or social mores, but endeavored to

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<sup>14</sup>Nayantara Sahgal "Nehru's Quiet Daughter," *The Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 5, Special Issue (1982), pp. 160-170

<sup>15</sup> A. G. Noorani, "Indira Gandhi and Indian Muslims," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 25, No. 44 (Nov. 3, 1990)

<sup>16</sup> Indira Gandhi, "Scientific Endeavor in India" *Science*, Vol. 217, No. 4564 (Sep. 10, 1982), pp. 1008-1009; Gandhi, Indira and Rami Chhabra, "Population Policy in India: Two Comments," *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Mar., 1981), pp. 168-171

<sup>17</sup> G. Parthasarathi and H.Y. Sharada Prasad ed., *Indira Gandhi: Statesmen, Scholars, Scientists and Friends Remember*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House), 1985

represent all Indians and all interests. This thesis will explore her remarkable life and political career and evaluate the importance of her historical contribution in the challenging context of her times.

## **Chapter 1**

### **BRITISH INDIA AND THE RISE OF INDIAN NATIONALISM**

India has long been a religiously, culturally, and linguistically diverse country. This diversity has caused deep divisions in Indian society. India's fractured society was only exacerbated by the increase in European presence in India. European nations, including the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British, all competed for power in India. Great Britain's interest in India began in the early 1600s with the establishment of several trading posts through the British East India Company. By the mid 1700s, The British East India Company secured British primacy in India by taking advantage of India's caste, class, and communal divisions. In the process, the British East India Company was transformed from an association of traders to imperial rulers exercising political sovereignty over a largely unknown land and people. The consequences of British rule over India were felt up through the twentieth century into the time of Indira Gandhi's birth in 1917.

The presence of the British in India did not go unnoticed by the people. Indian national consciousness was born out of the consolidation of British power. While India had seen foreign invaders conquer parts of India before, the British were the only ones to gain control over the entire subcontinent. Indian reactions to the British rulers varied. Some Indians started newspapers and created cultural societies to keep cultural traditions alive in Indian society. Other Indians would take a more militant approach. The British first recruited native citizens as



soldiers to maintain order during trading operations. The native soldiers later became part of the British army in India, known as *sepoys*. On May 10, 1857, sepoy soldiers in Meerut attacked their British officers, as well as their wives and children, in an uprising that would become known as the Sepoy Rebellion.

Several theories attempt to explain the origins of the Sepoy Rebellion. One theory suggests that the attack took place as a result of the introduction of a new weapon, the Enfield rifle. The cartridge for the rifle was of paper construction and was loaded by a process that included biting off the tip of the cartridge, which was greased to enhance the loading of the paper cartridge into the barrel.<sup>18</sup> The Indian soldiers heard rumors that the new weapons were greased with either pig or cow fat. Many sepoys would refuse to use these new rifles because the cow and pig are sacred to the Hindu and Muslim faith, respectively. Alternatively, some scholars believe that the rebellion was a result of past grievances committed by the British. Many Indians feared that their customs and rules would be replaced by those of the British government. Regardless of their reasoning, on that day in Meerut, the Indian soldiers attacked and chose a time when the European officers and their families were at church and therefore unarmed. The attack also took place at a time when several British garrisons who finished their services had returned home to Britain. From Meerut, the sepoy soldiers marched towards Delhi and the city was captured by the following day. The mutiny sparked bloody outbreaks throughout India that would result in merciless killing on both sides. Finally, in September of 1858, British and loyal Indian forces stormed Delhi, retaking the city, essentially ending the rebellion.

The Sepoy Rebellion threatened British power over the subcontinent and therefore the British parliament passed the Government of India Act of 1858, transferring the administrative rights of the Company to the British Crown. India officially became a British colony to be

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<sup>18</sup> P.H. Starling, "The Indian Mutiny 1857-1858," *Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps* (June 2010), 104

governed directly by Parliament, with an acting Viceroy or Governor-General in India.

According to Stanley Wolpert's *A New History of India*, some educated Indians would attempt to participate in the British colonial government. The Indian Civil Service (ICS) examination promised an opportunity to any position, up to Chief Commissioner, to any male born in British India. In 1869, a young Bengali brahman named Surendranath Banerjea, scored higher on the ICS examination than most of his British contemporaries. Banerjea could finally attempt to advance Indian interests from within the ranks of the British government, but the British bureaucracy eventually managed to disqualify him because he "lied" about his age, given that many Indians count the nine months in the womb as part of life.<sup>19</sup> Banerjea did win his post after an appeal, but was dismissed three years later for a minor infraction. Reflecting on his defeat, Banerjea wrote, "I had suffered because I was an Indian. The personal wrong done to me was an illustration of the helpless impotency of our people."<sup>20</sup> It was clear to Indians that no matter how educated or upstanding they were, the system was unfair and did not meet basic Indian needs, aspirations or desires. By 1877, Britain's hold over India was so strong that British Prime Minister Disraeli added "Empress of India" to Queen Victoria's imperial title.

### **The Indian National Congress and the Early Nationalist Movement**

Many educated Indians were interested in advancing Indian interests, yet motivations varied among them. In 1885, a group of well educated, politically motivated Indians joined together to form the Indian National Congress (INC). Though at first ignored by the British government, these Indians became the core leadership for the future Indian nationalist movement. The Indian National Congress consisted of mainly upper class Hindus, which left out

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<sup>19</sup> Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 252

<sup>20</sup> Cited in Ibid.

the voice of many minorities, such as India's Muslim community. This eventually led to the formation of the Muslim League. While both the INC and the Muslim League both wanted increased Indian involvement in Indian affairs, ideologies clashed and the two groups could never form a united front against the British.

The diverging interests of both the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League halted temporarily with the outbreak of World War I in 1914. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand sparked a global outbreak that unexpectedly led to a war involving many nations throughout the world. Indian nationalist politicians of all parties were incredibly supportive of the Crown. Many Indians anticipated that World War I would result in greater independence for India and felt that their support and cooperation during the war would be rewarded with the freedom they had been seeking. In 1919, a new Government of India Act offered Indians a measure of self rule. The Act introduced a national parliament with two houses for India. About five million of the wealthiest Indians were given the right to vote, which was a small number compared to the Indian population. Within the provincial governments, ministers of education, health and public works could now be headed by Indians. The British, however, still controlled the central government and were slow to enact reforms, angering many Indians.

The British, fearful of Indian revolutionary activity, passed several oppressive acts in an attempt to curb any Indian independence movements. In March of 1919, the Rowlatt Acts effectively authorized the government to imprison for up to two years, without trial, any person suspected of terrorism and gave the imperial authorities power to deal with revolutionary activities. Protests arose throughout India over the Rowlatt Acts. On April 13, 1919, thousands of Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus gathered in the public garden, Jallianwala Bagh, in Amritsar where a demonstration was being held. British Brigadier General Reginald Dyer and his troops

surrounded the park and without warning opened fire on the crowd, killing several hundred unarmed men, women and children, and wounding more than a thousand.<sup>21</sup> Dyer had his troops continue the murderous barrage until all their artillery was exhausted. The massacre, known as the Amritsar Massacre, stirred nationalist feelings across India, marking the emergence of a nation-wide movement against British rule.

The Amritsar Massacre incensed the Indian population, especially Indian politicians, some of whom became highly influential leaders of the Indian nationalist movement, including “Mahatma” Gandhi. Mohandas Gandhi, who was trained as a lawyer in Great Britain, had gained an international reputation after spending years in South Africa fighting for civil rights. Upon returning to India in 1915, his consciousness of national identity as an Indian intensified. Gandhi appealed to India’s masses unlike any politician before him, and by 1917 he had been proclaimed as the champion of India’s peasants. While Gandhi mobilized the masses using Hindu symbols, he also gained the support of Muslims by supporting a pan-Islamic khalifat movement to preserve the institution of the caliph after World War I. In 1920, Gandhi became the undisputed leader of the Indian National Congress, which by then had become a mass national party. The Indian nationalist movement gradually grew stronger and sought more independence from Britain. In 1920, the INC decided to follow Gandhi’s technique of *satyagraha*, a nonviolent method of noncooperation and civil disobedience. Gandhi was a strong proponent of nonviolence. According to Gandhi, “non-violence presupposes ability to strike. It is a conscious, deliberate restraint put upon one’s desire for vengeance...non-violence is a weapon of the strong.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Stanley Wolpert, *ibid.*, 299

<sup>22</sup> Mohandas Gandhi, *Collected Works*, cited in *Sources of Indian Tradition: Volume Two: Modern India and Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 255

During this time, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, a Muslim member of the INC, left the Congress. Born in 1875 in the city Karachi, a predominately Muslim area, Jinnah received an English education and became a lawyer. Upon returning to India, Jinnah began to take an interest in political matters and joined the Congress. Jinnah's upright character and charisma made him a well known figure within the INC. Jinnah was also a member of the Muslim League, and for a time essentially served as an ambassador between both groups.<sup>23</sup> Motivated by World War I and the Amritsar Massacre, Jinnah agreed with the INC's desire for Indian independence, but he also wanted to secure the interests of Muslims within India. Jinnah disagreed with Gandhi's methods of civil disobedience and believed, instead, that India could be granted greater independence through negotiations with the British. Jinnah also believed that Gandhi had unrealistic aims for the Indian independence movement. Unlike Gandhi, Jinnah did not believe that independence from Great Britain would automatically solve the issues between Hindus and Muslims. According to Jinnah, Hindus and Muslims could not "at any time be expected to transform themselves into one nation merely by means of subjecting them to a democratic constitution and holding them forcibly together by unnatural and artificial methods of British parliamentary statute."<sup>24</sup> Jinnah's opposition to Gandhi's methods prevented him from serving as a mediator between Hindus and Muslims.

### **The Road to Independence and the British Transfer of Power**

As a result of Gandhi's noncooperation movement spreading throughout India, the British attempted to reform the colonial government. In 1927, the British appointed a seven member

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<sup>23</sup> Stephen Hay, ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition: Volume Two: Modern India and Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 225

<sup>24</sup> Mohammad Ali Jinnah, *Recent Speeches and Writings*, cited in *Sources of Indian Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 229

Indian Statutory Commission to review the organization of government in India, yet no Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Parsi was asked to serve as a member, raising political tensions even more. In 1928, the INC held a meeting to draft a constitution that would be acceptable to all Indians. The meeting was headed by prominent INC member, Motilal Nehru. Nehru proposed a “Commonwealth of India” plan with all powers derived from the people and would share the freedoms enjoyed by other dominions of the British Empire, called the “Nehru Report.”

Muslims, however, did not support the Nehru Report due to the lack of sufficient Muslim representation in the proposed Commonwealth. In seeking to remedy their differences, the Congress and the League only moved further apart, and the possibility of Hindu-Muslim unity ended. Jawaharlal Nehru, the son of Motilal Nehru, was the official secretary during the creation of the Nehru Report, and also became essential in India’s fight for home rule. By 1929, Gandhi wanted the nationalist movement to be bolstered by the youth of India and therefore supported the election of Jawaharlal Nehru as leader of the INC. Jawaharlal’s charisma, intelligence, and charm made him the hero of India’s youth and the trusted spokesman of the older generations as he became the youngest president of the INC.

In an attempt to compromise with Indian nationalists, the British drafted the Government of India Act of 1935. The Government of India Act was to create a “Federation of India,” granting more autonomy to several provinces. The Act allowed an elected Indian assembly to have a say in everything in India except in regards to defense and foreign affairs. It also allowed the eleven provincial assemblies to effectively have full control over local affairs. In the 1937 provincial elections, INC candidates won an impressive majority, while the Muslim League did not win the majority in any province. This loss prompted Jinnah to revive the “dormant” Muslim

League. Jinnah toured India in an attempt to attract the mass support he needed to win control of Muslim dominated provinces.

The results of the elections essentially created a “Hindu Raj,” in which the Hindu majority ruled over the Muslim minority.<sup>25</sup> Muslim dissatisfaction grew and intensified the desire for the creation of a new nation for the Muslim population. Jinnah began to build up the League on the platform that the INC did not care about the interests of Muslims. Jawaharlal Nehru, on the other hand, continued to claim there was no Muslim problem, and that the Congress represented all of India. In 1938, Jinnah met with Gandhi and Nehru, but these talks broke down after the INC would not recognize the Muslim League as the sole party for India’s Muslims. Observing the factionalism between the Congress and the League, the British were concerned with a possibly difficult transfer of power to Indians.

In September 1939, World War II began when Britain and France declared war on Germany. The British expected India to participate in the war, but the Indian National Congress chose to declare neutrality. The Congress demanded immediate concessions from Great Britain toward a democratic government in return for cooperation in the war effort. Britain refused, and in August 1942, Gandhi launched the Quit India Movement, refusing to cooperate in any way with the government until independence was granted. The Quit India Movement called for determined but passive resistance and rallied mass protests demanding what Gandhi called “an orderly British withdrawal” from India. Almost immediately after this declaration, thousands of INC members were arrested, some for the duration of the war. The Muslim League, on the other hand, declared its support for the British. Jinnah even condemned the Quit India Movement as an open rebellion.

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<sup>25</sup> Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 324

With the Congress weakened, Jinnah and the Muslim League took this as an opportunity to spread the message of Muslim separatism. Jinnah firmly believed that the two faiths could not coexist within India. In his 1940 presidential speech delivered at the annual Muslim League meeting in Lahore, Jinnah clearly stated his views, stating:

It is a dream that the Hindus and Muslims can ever evolve a common nationality...the Hindus and Muslims belong to two different religious philosophies, social customs, literatures. They neither intermarry nor interdine together and, indeed, they belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions.<sup>26</sup>

During that same meeting, Jinnah proposed the Lahore Resolution to divide the subcontinent into India and Pakistan once the country was granted independence. During World War II, the Muslim League became a powerful force in Indian politics.

Gandhi and Jinnah decided to meet in May 1944 to discuss the Hindu-Muslim stalemate. These talks were unable, however, to resolve their differing points of view. Jinnah insisted that an agreement on the creation of Pakistan was necessary to independence, but Gandhi refused to discuss Pakistan until India was granted self-rule. Congress-League differences persisted until the British declared that “two independent Dominions” were to be established in the subcontinent, India and Pakistan. On August 14, 1947 Jawaharlal Nehru was declared as India’s first independent Prime Minister. On that same day, Pakistan was founded as a dominion in the Commonwealth of Nations, with Jinnah as the nation’s first Governor-General.

While the partition was celebrated, it was also accompanied by a host of problems. A boundary commission was created to form the new borders for the two nations, but was headed by someone who had never been to India. As a result, millions of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs found themselves “trapped in a nation fundamentally hostile to their faith,” forcing them to

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<sup>26</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 230



abandon their homes and flee with the possessions they could gather.<sup>27</sup> Approximately ten million people changed lands in the summer of 1947, though for some, the transition was met with violence causing the death of over one million people. Violence also erupted over the princely state Kashmir, since both India and Pakistan claimed to have possession over it. The partition, while considered the realization of the freedom Indians had fought for, was plagued by territory disputes and the difficult relocation of millions who had become displaced refugees.

### **Early Life of Indira Gandhi**

Indira Nehru Gandhi was born in the midst of a society fragmented by competing visions of India. The Nehru family was deeply connected to India and its politics. Indira's grandfather Motilal Nehru was a brilliant lawyer in the city of Allahabad, capital of the United Provinces. Motilal prospered in this city and soon became one of the wealthiest and most prominent citizens in town. Motilal and his wife, Swarup Rani Nehru, had three children, including Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira's father. The Nehru household was a mixture of Indian and Western culture. Motilal's family had been closely connected to the British since the mid 1800s; his brother even worked under the British as Chief Minister in Jaipur State. He moved his family to a lavish English style mansion in 1900 called Anand Bhawan. He wore expensive suits, was nonreligious, ate Western foods, including meat, and insisted that only English be spoken at his table.<sup>28</sup> His wife, on the other hand, was very traditional and a devout Hindu. She always wore a sari, bathed in the Ganges, was a strict vegetarian, ate seated on the floor, and understood but did not speak English. According to biographer Katherine Frank, though the family lived in what seemed like

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<sup>27</sup> Stanley Wolpert, *ibid.*, 348

<sup>28</sup> Katherine Frank, *Indira: The Life of Indira Gandhi* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 7

two parallel worlds, they found a way to coexist. In keeping with Motilal's British values, Jawaharlal was educated in England for seven years beginning in 1905.

Although Motilal was very much anglicized, he held to traditional Indian customs and values when it came to marriage. Even before Jawaharlal returned to India in 1912, he was informed by his father that he would marry Kamala Kaul, a girl from a conservative Kashmiri family in Delhi. Jawaharlal was not happy about this prospect, for he was fearful of marrying a total stranger. Jawaharlal voiced his opinions about Hindu marriages to his mother, writing once that "in my opinion, unless there is a degree of mutual understanding, marriage should not take place. I think it is unjust and cruel that a life should be wasted merely in producing children."<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, Jawaharlal and Kamala were married on February 8, 1916. Their relationship took years to develop, but they eventually created a marriage of equals, had mutual respect for each other, and shared similar values and dreams.

On November 19, 1917, Jawaharlal and Kamala's daughter was born. She would be named Indira after Motilal's mother Indrani. Motilal's wife made the announcement to the eagerly waiting family that the child was born; discreetly letting everyone know it was a girl, causing what Frank called a "wave of deflation and disappointment" within the family.<sup>30</sup> Jawaharlal and Motilal, however, were among the few family members not disappointed by the birth of a daughter. Jawaharlal later wrote to his daughter on her thirteenth birthday that in the very month in which she was born, the Russian Revolution began. While Jawaharlal was not a superstitious man, he relished this coincidence of history. To Jawaharlal, she was born into a world of "storm and trouble," and would grow up in the midst of another revolution.<sup>31</sup> After

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<sup>29</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 9

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 14

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

several people expressed their traditional disappointment over the birth of a girl, Motilal declared that she had the potential of being “better than a thousand sons.”<sup>32</sup>

For the most part, Indira went unnoticed in the household mansion that housed nearly one hundred people, both family and servants. Indira, however, was never excluded from the political activity that soon enveloped the household. It is largely because of this highly politicized upbringing that Indira would later become such a skillful leader. In the year before Indira’s birth, Jawaharlal met Mohandas Gandhi at the 1916 Lucknow meeting of the Indian National Congress. This meeting had a profound impact upon Jawaharlal, as Gandhi helped to radicalize his mild nationalism. After the Amritsar Massacre in 1919, Motilal embraced Gandhi’s plan of *satyagraha*, and as Indira later wrote, the massacre became “a turning point...Hesitation and doubt were swept aside... This is when the family came much closer to Mahatma Gandhi and our whole way of life changed.”<sup>33</sup> From this point onward, Gandhi had immense influence over the Nehru family.

In September 1920, Indira travelled with her parents and grandfather to her first Congress meeting. In this special session, Gandhi launched the non-cooperation movement and called for *swaraj*, or self rule, for India. Once the family returned to Allahabad, the family abided by Gandhi’s declaration by having a bonfire of their English apparel and imported cloth on the veranda of their home. Years later, Indira recalled this event as her first memory, sharing that she could “still feel the excitement of the day and see the large terrace covered with piles of clothes.”<sup>34</sup> Indira showed an early sign of her political character when she had to decide between her doll and her beliefs. Soon after the bonfire, Indira refused a French dress given to her by a

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<sup>32</sup> Cited in Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi: A Personal and Political Biography* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), 26

<sup>33</sup> Cited in Frank, *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 17

<sup>34</sup> Indira Gandhi, edited by Emmanuel Pouchpadass, *My Truth* (New Delhi: Vision Books, 1982), 12

relative, but was criticized by her aunt because her doll was a foreign product. Indira was incredibly attached to this doll, and “for days on end” she was torn between “love of the doll and... duty towards [her] country.”<sup>35</sup> Eventually she made her decision and lit the doll on fire.

The bonfire not only inflamed their foreign things but also ignited the Nehru family’s involvement in nationalist politics. Motilal resigned his seat on the Provincial Council, gave up his law practice, withdrew his youngest daughter from school, got rid of horses and carriages, sold all but one automobile, allowed only Indian food in the household, and closed the wine cellar. For Indira, a simple lifestyle was normal to her, she later recalled that her grandfather believed in a strict upbringing, saying she “had a Spartan type of life,” she did not remember their life of luxury.<sup>36</sup> Motilal and Jawaharlal now devoted all of their time to political activity. Jawaharlal later admitted in his autobiography, “I became wholly absorbed and wrapt [sic] in the movement... I gave up all my other associations and contacts, old friends, books, even newspapers... In spite of the strength of family bonds, I almost forgot my family, my wife, my daughter... I lived in offices and committee meetings and crowds.”<sup>37</sup> Jawaharlal was also forcibly distanced from his family upon his and Motilal’s arrest in December 1921. Motilal had organized a *hartal*, or an act of civil disobedience, against the royal visit of the Prince of Wales in which the royal procession was greeted by empty streets and shuttered shops. Motilal was charged with being a Congress volunteer, an illegal activity since the British had outlawed the Indian National Congress. Throughout the trial, Motilal sat with Indira on his lap. Though it is not known for sure, many believe that he sat with her as a symbol in the courtroom; she was the personification of innocence.

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<sup>35</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 15

<sup>36</sup> Gandhi, *My Truth*, 12

<sup>37</sup> Cited in Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 20

Though Indira sometimes insisted that she was surrounded by love throughout her childhood, she admitted in one interview that she felt she did not see enough of her family. Periods of incarceration became the norm for the Nehru family. Jawaharlal was released in March 1922, only to be imprisoned again in May. Indira later revealed that “prison was a matter of pride” for the family, but it was “very disturbing to the family.”<sup>38</sup> Indira also witnessed the hostility displayed by many women in the family toward her mother Kamala. Jawaharlal’s mother and sister resented Kamala as they all competed for the attention of Jawaharlal. Kamala was the target of insults and antagonism, such as not being invited to see an English film because her English was poor.<sup>39</sup> But Jawaharlal remained unaware of the volatile relations between the women. Indira spent much of her early childhood with her mother, but she also spent much of her time, similar to other children, in a fantasy world of play. Indira once described that her favorite game was to “collect as many servants as [she] could, stand on a table and deliver a speech--repeating disjointed phrases that [she] had picked up from grownup talk,” almost foreshadowing future events.<sup>40</sup>

Indira’s academic career was often erratic. Motilal sent her to school in 1924, enrolling her at St. Cecilia’s run by three British spinsters.<sup>41</sup> Indira’s time at St. Cecilia’s was mired by her shyness, and she was embarrassed that she was the only one wearing *khadi*, or handspun clothing. Her time ended at St. Cecilia’s when her father was made aware of her attendance at the school. Jawaharlal was away when she was enrolled by Motilal and had not been consulted on her schooling. Although St. Cecilia’s was private, not a government run school, Jawaharlal saw the entirely British staff as enough of a reason to argue that it violated the Congress boycott

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<sup>38</sup> Gandhi, *My Truth*, 16

<sup>39</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 27

<sup>40</sup> Gandhi, *My Truth*, 14

<sup>41</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 29

at the time of all things foreign. Indira was therefore withdrawn from the school and was taught by Indian tutors at home. While this may have accorded with their political beliefs, it was not ideal for Indira's education. The teacher that taught her Hindi was not regularly present, and while her mother helped her with English, Jawaharlal could only teach her when he was around, which was not often enough

Kamala had suffered from many ailments for years. By 1926, Kamala had become so severely ill that doctors encouraged the Nehru family to go to Switzerland to consult specialists in Geneva. Once they arrived, Jawaharlal enrolled Indira in L'École Internationale, a multilingual school especially for children of those involved in the League of Nations. The school was not politicized or overtly religious, and unlike British run schools in India, it was not hostile to Nehru's nationalism. But Indira's school required a long walk, followed by a tram ride, and then a bus ride, all four times a day. At first, Indira was accompanied by her father, but eventually the eight-year-old traversed Geneva by herself. It was in Geneva that Indira developed an independent spirit. Indira also got a chance to expand her world view with visits to Paris, London and Berlin, and attending several different schools.

By the time the family planned to return to India in 1927, Indira was leaving her childhood behind just as the political struggle was becoming more intense in India. The family reached India on December 25, 1927, in time for the annual Congress meeting in Madras. It was at this meeting that Indira watched her father declare the goal of the Indian people to be completely independent from Great Britain.<sup>42</sup> Unlike Motilal and Gandhi, Jawaharlal wanted to sever all ties with the British. At this time, Gandhi and Motilal were reluctant to cut off all ties to Britain, and instead they wanted to achieve *swaraj* through dominion status within the Empire.

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<sup>42</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 50

Jawaharlal's time in Europe had radicalized his political vision, and his position exemplified the dissention within the ranks of the INC, as well as within the Nehru family.

Upon returning to Allahabad, Indira needed to return to school. Despite Jawaharlal's contempt for all things British, he allowed Indira to attend St. Mary's Convent, since he knew that the best education was a Western one. It also could not be denied that many of the nationalist leaders were the products of British educational institutions. Unfortunately, however, Indira instantly felt alienated at St. Mary's. As the only one dressed in *khadi*, Indira's clothes immediately identified her family's politics. Life at home in Allahabad had also become filled with tension as Motilal and Jawaharlal's diverging politics often caused the two to openly argue, creating an anxious atmosphere throughout the household. Jawaharlal stayed in Allahabad for the summer, and wrote to Indira a volume called *Letters from a Father to His Daughter*.<sup>43</sup> The letters were Jawaharlal's way of "correcting" her British education. The letters encouraged Indira to look beyond the political turmoil of the time and to appreciate the lives they had. In 1929, Jawaharlal took over his father's role as Congress president. In his presidential address, Nehru declared that "independence for [the Congress] means complete freedom from British dominion and British imperialism."<sup>44</sup> One of his most important acts was the adoption of the *Purna Swaraj*, a resolution drafted by Nehru declaring complete independence. Indira happened to be present when Jawaharlal was given the final typed copy of the resolution, at which time he asked Indira to read it aloud. Once she finished reading the whole text, Nehru said, "Well, now that you have read it, you are committed to it."<sup>45</sup> Indira had become the first person in India to pledge herself to *Purna Swaraj*.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 55

<sup>44</sup> Cited in Ibid., 59

<sup>45</sup> Cited in Ibid., 60

With the adoption of the *Purna Swaraj*, the Nehru family, as well as the rest of India became intensely focused on freedom for India. The nationalist struggle now was not exclusively for men, but women and children alike clamored for a role in the country's nationalist movement. Even Kamala rose from her bed to promote the boycotting of foreign cloth, liquor stores, government run schools and courts. Indira also wanted to participate, she said she "wanted to join the Congress Party and be a regular soldier of India," but was told she was too young.<sup>46</sup> Kamala, however, found a way for Indira and other children to play a part in the nationalist struggle by creating the *Vanar Sena*, or Monkey Brigade, in March of 1930. Kamala had been walking through a poor part of the city when several children shouted, "Kamala Nehru *ki jai*," or "victory to Kamala Nehru."<sup>47</sup> An old woman nearby said that the children were like the *Vanar Sena* in the Ramayana, an Indian epic, where the monkey god's army of monkeys built a bridge between India and Lanka to save Sita, the wife of Lord Rama.

Reflective of Indira's future political stance, she reluctantly accepted the charge as leader of the *Vanar Sena*. Indira and Bishambar Nath Pande, one of the Congress secretaries, drew up a program, visited several schools in Allahabad, and recruited nearly one thousand children. That spring, thirteen-year-old Indira led a procession of 15,000 children during a demonstration in Allahabad. Indira was very quiet, and therefore used Pande as a sort of human loudspeaker to help her speak to a crowd of over 50,000 exhorting them to help the *satyagraha* camps. Duties of the *Vanar Sena* varied, and at first were confined to preparing food, sewing flags, and distributing pamphlets. It was soon realized though that the children could be used in an intelligence gathering capacity. The children would hang around police stations and could

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<sup>46</sup> Gandhi, *My Truth*, 20

<sup>47</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 62



overhear arrest orders or where the next police raid would take place. As the leader of the Vanar Sena, Indira was now becoming famous in her own right.

## Chapter 2

### INDIRA'S POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT AND INDIA'S CHANGING POLITICAL CLIMATE

By the early 1930s, the Nehru family, including Indira, was now well known public figures throughout India. As Frank describes in her biography, while touring cities in India, they were often visited by “groups of laborers, tea-garden workers and others,” and were pursued by “one great crowd [after] another” becoming embroiled in many “engagements, addresses, meetings, receptions.”<sup>48</sup> In the months following the formation of the Vanar Sena, Indira, her parents, and Gandhi continued to participate in acts of civil disobedience. An 1882 Salt Act gave the British a monopoly on the collection and manufacture of salt by prohibiting Indians to collect or sell salt. Therefore in March of 1930, Gandhi decided to march to the coastal town of Dandi on the Arabian Sea to defy British policy by making salt from seawater. Throughout his journey Gandhi addressed large crowds, many of whom joined him in his march. Once he reached Dandi, Gandhi, the thousands who joined him, as well as others in coastal cities, began to make salt. In April 1930, however, the government sought to put an end to the tide of civil disobedience with a country-wide crackdown. The Congress was declared illegal and many members were arrested, including Nehru, Motilal, and Gandhi.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 73

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 64

With her father in prison, Indira continued to work with the Vanar Sena, as well as spending much of her time with her mother. However, on New Year's Eve of 1930, the telephone rang warning Kamala that she would be arrested in the morning.<sup>50</sup> At 5 a.m. that morning, Kamala was arrested, leaving Indira alone save with the servants. But Kamala did not spend long in prison since she, as well as Nehru and Gandhi, were released on January 26, 1931. During this time, in a move that Nehru considered to be a "total and unwarranted surrender," Gandhi agreed to call off civil disobedience in exchange for working toward self government by stages, the release of political prisoners, and allowing villagers to make salt for domestic consumption.<sup>51</sup>

The Nehru's returned home to find that Motilal was extremely ill and it was clear he would not last long. Motilal died on February 6, 1931, leaving Indira in a state of grief, since this was the first death Indira had experienced.<sup>52</sup> Although it is not customary for Hindu women to participate in or attend funeral rites, all the Nehru women, including Indira, accompanied the men as Motilal's Congress flag-draped body made its way through the streets of Allahabad. Mourners crowded the streets, and followed the procession all the way to the Ganges for his cremation.

Shortly after the loss of Motilal, the Nehru family travelled to Ceylon on holiday. The Nehru family soon returned to Allahabad via southern India and the Princely States of Travancore, Cochin, Malabar, Mysore, and Hyderabad. This was the first time Indira had observed the harshness of the caste system, the Nehru's had many Harijan servants who lived and ate with them. In the South, Indira saw caste prejudice everywhere they went, reporting that whole streets were barred to Harijans, or untouchables, with signs reading "Brahmins only."

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 68

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 70

Indira was raised to ignore caste, which contributed to her future political views when she would attempt to focus on social reform while in office. While travelling back to Allahabad, Indira also observed her mother's dedication to feminism when Kamala made a speech in Hyderabad. Jawaharlal called her "a champion of women's rights."<sup>53</sup> Indira never understood her mother's feminism because in her family she never personally experienced the disadvantages of being a girl, nor did she see any oppression of women around her. Indira, therefore, never perceived her gender as an issue when she became more involved in politics. Years later, in a press conference immediately after her election as Congress Party President, she said "I do not regard myself as a woman. I am a person with a job."<sup>54</sup>

Upon returning to Allahabad, Indira became a quiet, moody adolescent. Her depression was partially because her aunt had called her "ugly and stupid," which was devastating for someone who was already shy and insecure.<sup>55</sup> She also had no one to turn to, her parents were absorbed in politics, Motilal was gone, she didn't have many friends, and her cousins were much younger than her. Her plight was exacerbated when she was sent off to the Pupils' Own School in Poona. Indira was miserable at first, she was the oldest and tallest student, and had the most famous parents. Indira's mood changed, however, when her younger cousins came to the school in 1932. Indira mothered her cousins; the youngest was barely two years-old. Indira had a history of caring for things that could not care for themselves, like children and animals. This quality was reflected in her future political life, because "the poor, the sick, the downtrodden and oppressed—the majority of the population of India—looked to her and believed she could and

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<sup>53</sup> Ana Jeronimus and Nia Kelly, "Indira Gandhi," *New Moon* Vol. 11, no. 5 (30 June 1995)

<sup>54</sup> Indira Gandhi, *Selected Thoughts of Indira Gandhi : A Book of Quotes*, ed. S.K. Dhawan, (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1985), XIX

<sup>55</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 74

would help them.”<sup>56</sup> While attending this school in Poona, Indira had an opportunity to get closer to Mahatma Gandhi.

Since the early 1930s, the British had made efforts to draft a new Constitution involving self-rule for the native Indians. The British invited leaders of different parties in the Round Table Conferences in 1930 and 1931. Gandhi did not attend in 1930, but did represent the Congress Party in the Second Round-Table Conference in September 1931 to December 1931. The concept of separate electorates for the untouchables was raised by Dr. Ambedkar.<sup>57</sup> Similar provisions were already available for other minorities, including Muslims, Christians, Anglo-Indians and Sikhs. The Conference ended in December with the British government agreeing with Ambedkar's contention, and began to produce a Communal Award for minority representation. Soon after the conference, Gandhi once again began civil disobedience, and he along with Nehru, were arrested in January 1932. While imprisoned, Indira and her cousins visited Gandhi at Yeravada Prison on weekends. On September 13, 1932, Gandhi proclaimed he was embarking on ‘a fast unto death’ in protest against the announcement that separate electorates would be provided for Harijans, which went against Gandhi’s commitment to the abolition of untouchability.

Though this was not Gandhi’s first public fast, it still had an enormous impact. Nehru, in jail himself, expressed his distress to Indira, writing “I am shaken up completely and I know not what to do. News has come, terrible news that Bapu has determined to starve himself to death.”<sup>58</sup> British authorities were also surprised and did not want Gandhi to die while imprisoned by them. They even tried to allow him to go to his ashram to fast, but he refused to be released from jail.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 76

<sup>57</sup> D.N. “Gandhi, Ambedkar and Separate Electorates Issue,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, No. 21 (May 25, 1991), p. 1329

<sup>58</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 77

On the fifth day of his fast, an agreement was made in which Harijans would give up their claim for separate electorates, but would be guaranteed a number of reserved seats from the Hindu allocation. Gandhi theatrically ended his fast in front of an audience of 200 at Yeravada Prison. Indira was the one who gave Gandhi the orange juice that was his first form of nourishment.<sup>59</sup> Gandhi's fast made a great impression on Indira; she learned the power of passive resistance. Even while imprisoned, Gandhi held enormous political and moral authority. Indira observed the power possessed by someone who was essentially legally and physically powerless. Indira learned that this sort of passive resistance could be more powerful than taking action. Indira reformulated this method by refusing to speak rather than to eat, which later evolved into what Frank describes as a "legendary genius for silence."<sup>60</sup>

While Indira continued her stay at Pupils' Own School, the rest of her family had to contend with several issues. In January 1932, the government took possession of the family home Swaraj Bhawan, also Kamala's health was suffering, and she spent most of the year receiving medical treatment in Calcutta. Nehru had been imprisoned since the beginning of 1932 in Allahabad, but was then moved even further away at Dehra Dun. Letters became Indira's only connection to her parents for some time. The next year, Indira was to be enrolled in a school at Santiniketan, about one hundred miles northwest of Calcutta. Before starting school, Indira went to Kashmir for four weeks with the Pandits. Indira was not raised with a strong religious presence. As an adult, Indira became "Pan-Indian," adopting the saris, food, and languages of the diverse regions of India. According to Frank, the beautiful landscape of Kashmir became almost a place of worship for Indira. Kashmir became Indira's idea of paradise, and she returned to Kashmir throughout her life in times of joy, stress, danger, defeat, and grief.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 78

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 79

To be enrolled at the school in Santiniketan, Indira had taken an exam. She scored well in English and French but barely passed the other subjects. In a frank letter to the school, Nehru wrote about Indira's difficult childhood thus far. He wrote,

From her earliest childhood Indira has had to put up with national political troubles and domestic upheavals caused by them. Her education has suffered because of these and there has been no continuity in it. For long periods there has been no peace or quiet in her home atmosphere owing to her parents' and other relatives' preoccupation with public affairs, and often because of their absence in prison.<sup>61</sup>

Nehru was acutely aware of his daughters' struggles, but still encouraged a rigorous education, hoping this school would prepare her for a European university. Unknown to Nehru, this would be Indira's favorite school. Although the Nehru family was not particularly concerned with the arts, at this school Indira had the opportunity to participate in school dance performances, learn about Indian and European music, theatre, painting, sculpture, and other crafts. It was at this school Indira became obsessed with color, especially when it came to clothing. From this point onward, Indira chose the color of her clothing, usually a sari, based on her state of mind, where she was, the season, or what was going on in the world.<sup>62</sup>

Soon after Indira arrived at Santiniketan, Kamala began to experience bouts of severe illness that caused Indira to have to leave school for long stretches of time. It was only when Kamala had to stay at a hospital in Bhowali that Indira's future husband, Feroze Gandhi, really became a part of her life. Feroze Gandhi had been a fixture at Anand Bhawan in Allahabad for some time, as one of the many young men in the Congress Party. Feroze was especially attached to Kamala, and had even proposed to Indira once before, a month before her sixteenth birthday. This proposal was immediately refused by Indira and Kamala, both agreeing that she was too young.

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<sup>61</sup> Cited in Ibid., 86

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 90

Feroze Gandhi, unrelated to Mahatma, was the youngest child of Jehangir and Rattimai Gandhi. Feroze was also a Parsi. Parsis are descended from Persian Zoroastrians who immigrated to India to avoid religious persecution by the Muslims.<sup>63</sup> Parsis are followers of the Iranian prophet Zoroaster, who founded the religion that contains both monotheistic and dualistic features. Feroze however, was raised in Allahabad by his aunt, who may have been his birth mother, since there has been no birth certificate found for Feroze Gandhi. Feroze had remained apolitical until he attended Ewing Christian College, where he first witnessed a Nehru-led demonstration and became particularly devoted to Kamala. For Indira, Feroze was a vibrant presence in a world of disease and death at the sanatorium in Bhowali. Feroze was handsome, hopeful, helpful and just as dedicated to Kamala as Indira was. Kamala noticed how close the two were growing, and warned her husband that a marriage to Feroze would be the “mistake of [Indira’s] life.”<sup>64</sup> Kamala knew Feroze well, and was aware that while he was a good man, he had undesirable qualities, like his affection for women, and did not want her daughter to become involved with him.

By February 1936, Kamala’s health continued to deteriorate, but she requested to be moved to Lausanne, Switzerland. Indira stayed close to Kamala, as did Feroze. Nehru meanwhile made arrangements to travel to Lausanne, making stops in London and Paris. In London, Nehru had learned that he had been elected the new President of the Congress Party. When Nehru finally arrived in Switzerland, Kamala convinced him to return to India to attend the annual Congress meeting. As her illness worsened, Kamala became increasingly detached from Indira and Nehru, barely responding to them. Nehru was scheduled to leave on February 28, however, her doctors advised him to cancel his flight. On that same day, Kamala died at 5 a.m. with Indira,

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<sup>63</sup> Mistry Dinshaw. “Parsis.” *Encyclopedia of India*. Ed. Stanley Wolpert. Vol. 3. (Detroit: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2006), 281

<sup>64</sup> Cited in Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 111



Nehru, and Feroze by her side.<sup>65</sup> Now Indira, who had been so happy a short time ago, was in a state of depression.

Soon after her mother's death, Indira left for school first in Switzerland, then spent a holiday in Italy, and then in England. During this time, much of Europe was on the brink of war. Indira listened to Hitler on the radio, writing to her father that he "sounded very threatening," and learned that Nazi troops were marching to the Rhineland and the frontier.<sup>66</sup> In Italy, Indira reported that even in remote areas photographs and sayings of Mussolini were printed on village walls. Nehru wanted Indira to be a part of the political events of the time, writing, "none of us in this present age, can have an easy time or freedom from storm or trouble. But some of us fall a greater share...and it is your lot, because of your family...to have to bear this heavy burden."<sup>67</sup> Indira did become preoccupied with world events, and was increasingly worried about her father and her country.

### **Indira's Political Activism and the Final Stages of Indian Independence**

In October 1937, Indira began attending Somerville College at Oxford. Indira was certainly the most famous student and everyone was curious about "the Nehru girl." Indira, however, remained quiet and stayed to herself while in school. Indira was aware of her stature at the College as a political presence, though she was not a leader. Indira was a reluctant leader; she never actively pursued the power that would be given to her. Indira's shyness was evident at a gathering of the India League in London. Indira was asked to speak, but she "froze with nervousness and when she finally opened her mouth to speak and uttered an unintelligible sound,

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<sup>65</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 113

<sup>66</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 115

<sup>67</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 119

someone in the audience yelled, ‘she doesn’t speak she squeaks.’<sup>68</sup> While Indira was apprehensive about assuming leadership, she was heavily involved in many political activities. Indira gathered volunteers for certain events, boycotted Japanese goods at Oxford when Japan attacked China, organized a benefit performance to raise money for medical aid in China, and even auctioned one of her bracelets to raise money.<sup>69</sup>

As Europe moved even closer to all out war with the Nazi invasion of Poland in September 1939, Indira’s political beliefs began to develop further. In November 1939, the Soviet Union, which had signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany, invaded Finland and won a fiercely fought winter war in March 1940. In India, Nehru wrote an article for the *National Herald* that sympathized with Finland’s plight. Indira however, completely disagreed with her father’s views. She blamed the Russo-German pact and the war with Finland on eight years of British foreign policy. Indira had a pro-Soviet view because the USSR still rejected both Nazism and imperialism and she believed their demands against Finland were justified. She also reminded her father that right-wing Finnish forces had suppressed a revolution after World War I, slaughtering 15,000 communists. She wrote to Nehru, “all this talk of poor Finland makes me sick. Just because a country is small in size, do the crimes of its Government lessen also and does its repression & totalitarianism likewise become softer & more bearable?”<sup>70</sup> Her opinions demonstrate her future political stance, which was considerably more to the left of her father.

Throughout the 1930s, Indira had been suffering from severe illness that left her staying in several sanatoriums, cut off from her father and Feroze. By New Years Day 1941, Indira was well enough to travel and flew to Bristol where Feroze was waiting for her. The two had been engaged for nearly four years at this point, and Indira was ready to be married. The two boarded

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 129

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Cited in Ibid., 154

a ship for India on March 10, 1941. The ship made a stop in Durban, South Africa, where Indira found her political voice. Durban had a large Indian community that gave Indira an enthusiastic welcome and arranged a formal reception in her honor. Before attending the reception, Indira and Feroze were appalled to see the living conditions in the segregated black ghettos, and the rampant racism throughout the area. While Indira had told everyone that she would not speak at the reception, she now insisted on speaking. Indira began to speak with passion about white South Africa's oppression of the black population, which she compared to Hitler's persecution of the Jews. In her speech, she predicted that "it may not be today, it may not be ten or twenty years, but it is they [black Africans] who will rule this country."<sup>71</sup> She went on to condemn the Indian community for their indifference to the plight of the black majority. After this speech, Indira found her inner strength and did not hesitate if she had something to say.

Once Indira and Feroze reached India, the whole country became engrossed in their engagement. Indira first had to convince her father, her family, and Gandhi, most of whom opposed a marriage between the two. To the Nehru family, Feroze was not good enough for Indira; he did not complete his education, and had no money. Indira, though, made it clear that she intended to marry Feroze no matter what. Reluctantly, Nehru consented, as did Gandhi and the rest of her family. News of their engagement swept throughout India, even eclipsing headlines like the bombing at Pearl Harbor, the Japanese advancement into Southeast Asia, the British being driven out of Malaya, and the fact that India was wide open to invasion. Their engagement brought controversy for several reasons. Indira and Feroze were not submitting to a traditional arranged marriage and they were marrying outside of their faiths. For years, people had looked toward Nehru and Kamala as the perfect example of an Indian married couple. Indira, as a public figure, would be setting an unwelcome precedent. On March 26, 1942, Indira and

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<sup>71</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 164

Feroze were married in front of friends, family neighbors, and most of the Congress Party members.

Upon returning from their honeymoon in Kashmir in July 1942, Indira and Feroze attended the All-India Congress Committee meeting in Bombay to discuss Gandhi's "Quit India" resolution. All those who were present overwhelmingly agreed with Gandhi's stance. The very next day, Nehru and the entire Congress Working Committee were arrested. Following the arrests, strikes and demonstrations engulfed India, telegraph and telephone wires were cut, buildings were torched, and railways, roads and bridges were blown up. The unrest throughout India was considered to be the most serious threat to British rule since the Sepoy Rebellion. An arrest warrant was issued for Feroze on August 10, and so he went into hiding. In September, Indira learned she was to be arrested after participating in a nationalist flag-raising ceremony at Ewing Christian College. Indira arranged a public meeting anyway and planned to make a speech. Right before she went on to speak in front of a crowd of 3,000 people, a truckload of police arrived. They were armed, and when a sergeant raised his weapon near Indira, Feroze, who had attended in disguise, surged forward, causing the crowd to also come to their aid.<sup>72</sup> Indira, Feroze, and a number of others were ultimately arrested and brought to Naini Jail. She later wrote, "the ride to the jail was a rather extraordinary one, for the police in my van were apparently so moved by my talking to them that they apologized, put their turbans at my feet, and wept their sorrow because of what their job compelled them to do!"<sup>73</sup> This prison sentence was a rite of passage for Indira. Everyone she knew had served a jail term, and now it was her turn.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 183

<sup>73</sup> Cited in Sara Schupack, *Leading Women: Indira Gandhi* (Tarrytown: Marshall Cavendish, 2012), 32

Prison was unlike anything Indira had experienced before. Indira had to endure the cramped, overcrowded barracks where six women per room had to sleep on the stone floor. Indira hated the lack of privacy and the constant noise of the barracks. After six weeks, however, Indira, her aunt, and her cousin were upgraded to A-class prisoners, in which they were given better food and were allowed to sleep in the prison yard to escape the heat. Indira was finally released on May 13, 1943, after 243 days of imprisonment. After her release from prison, Indira became pregnant with her first child. On August 20, 1944 Rajiva Ratna Birjess Nehru Gandhi was born.

While the birth of their son was a celebrated occasion, cracks in Indira and Feroze's marriage were apparent as early as 1943. Feroze had never completed his education and therefore was not financially stable, something Nehru had worried about when learning of Indira and Feroze's engagement. Feroze had secured a job in the Congress Party's legal aid committee, but was paid through Nehru. They also did not have their own home, but stayed in the Nehru family home. Indira was uncomfortable with being supported by her father, which caused friction between her and Feroze. By 1944, shortly after the birth of Rajiv, Feroze began to feel more and more like a peripheral member of the family. Slowly, though, their situation began to improve.

On September 2, 1946, the first step in the transfer of power was taken when the new Interim Government of India was sworn in, led by Nehru. This government gave him all the powers of a prime minister of a dominion, although his position was called "vice president of the Executive Council."<sup>74</sup> That summer Indira discovered she was pregnant again and hoped that with independence on the horizon, she could lead a private, domestic life with Feroze. Feroze had even gotten a real job as director of the *National Herald*, the Lucknow-based newspaper that

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<sup>74</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 200

Nehru had founded in 1937. Indira and Feroze then rented a bungalow in Lucknow, which they transformed into a beautiful home for their growing family.

Unfortunately, Indira and Feroze's blissful existence did not endure for long. Soon after Feroze became the director of the paper, it began to run up a large overdraft, and it was discovered that he had pocketed 200,000 rupees. Feroze was inexperienced and was ill-fitted for his position. Another issue was Indira's absence. Only a month after moving into their bungalow, Indira returned to Delhi to stay with Nehru at his government apartment. Indira went to set up house, but also wanted to distance herself from Feroze after she had become aware that he was engaging in extramarital affairs. Indira mostly overlooked his trysts with different women; however Feroze had fallen in love with the daughter of a Lucknow politician named Ali Zaheer. The affair had become so serious that Feroze told the Zaheer woman that he wanted to divorce Indira and marry her. She also loved him and wrote to her father of Feroze's plan. Ali Zaheer informed Nehru, who confronted Feroze about the situation. Feroze told him he was in love with another woman and wanted a divorce. Nehru asked Indira what she wanted to do, and she made it clear that she did not want a divorce. While Feroze reluctantly ended the affair, their marriage never recovered.

After the affair, Indira began to spend more time away from Lucknow and more time in Delhi with her father. Indira explained that she "felt it was [her] duty to help [her father]....and there was no one else but [her]." <sup>75</sup> Indira liked to escape her marital problems with Feroze, but it only encouraged more affairs. Feroze and Indira were briefly united in Delhi when their second child was born. Sanjay Gandhi was born on December 14, 1946, and Feroze left for Lucknow soon after.

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<sup>75</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 203

By spring 1947, India was getting closer and closer to independence. In May 1947, V.P. Menon, the Reform Commissioner in charge of dividing India created the 'Menon Plan.' Power would now be transferred to two central governments, India and Pakistan. The plan was approved by India leaders on June 3, and the next day it was announced that India and Pakistan were to become independent states on August 15, 1947. At 11:59 p.m. on August 14, 1947, Nehru stood before the Constituent Assembly in Delhi and said, "Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom."<sup>76</sup> Indira sat in the audience looking on as her father made this speech, which she later recalled to be a 'numbing' experience, saying "freedom was just so big a thing that it could not register."<sup>77</sup>

### **Indira and Indian Independence**

India had become free, but the country was in a state of chaos. The announcement of the boundary lines dividing India and Pakistan had serious consequences. The boundaries caused what could be considered the greatest migration of populations in history. People packed up their belongings and left their homes, and many would not arrive safely at their destinations. Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, who had previously lived largely harmoniously, now turned on each other. Villages were massacred, women were raped, and many were killed. Indira travelled to Nehru's York Road house to find that refugees were being sheltered by the household. More arrived daily, and Indira talked to groups of them each day to check up on the care they were receiving. Soon Indira was travelling from camp to camp throughout Delhi to help with the relief work. Gandhi, discouraged that his message of nonviolence was shattered after independence, asked

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<sup>76</sup> Cited in Ibid., 211

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

Indira to help convince Muslims in India to stay in India rather than migrate to Pakistan.<sup>78</sup>

Indira's dedication to social reform would be something she would hold on to while in power.

Though often criticized for her proposed reforms, Indira was nevertheless dedicated to helping those who could not help themselves. Fellow relief worker Subhadra Datta reported the traits that Indira would also possess while in power, saying, "She was fearless, decisive, and a good organizer...she was not emotional, but she was empathetic and tough."<sup>79</sup>

Once Nehru was named Prime Minister, Indira had the new responsibility of managing a large number of staff and servants at his new home, Teen Murti. Indira also realized her father would rely on her even more after Gandhi was assassinated. Refugees from Pakistan directed their anger toward Gandhi, blaming him for "pampering" the Muslims, and on January 30, 1948, Gandhi was shot and killed by a Hindu zealot.<sup>80</sup> Once again reflecting later sentiments, Indira was a reluctant participant when she became hostess over her father's household. She later described that she was "resisted every inch of the way about becoming a hostess."<sup>81</sup>

When India's first general election took place in October 1951, Indira was being urged to join Parliament, but she claimed her children were yet too young for her to leave the household. Instead, Indira worked to gain support for her father, virtually running his campaign. Feroze, meanwhile, was often left out and was not even invited to certain formal gatherings. When Soviet Premier Nikolai Bulganin and the then First Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev, addressed a public meeting, Feroze was denied entry while Nehru and Indira were on the platform.<sup>82</sup> While Indira's life was mostly consumed by her father, she did find time

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<sup>78</sup> Inder, Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi: A Personal and Political Biography* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), 59

<sup>79</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 214

<sup>80</sup> Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi*, 59

<sup>81</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 223

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 232



to engage in social welfare and cultural work. She established Bal Bhawan, a center for destitute children in Delhi, became vice-chairman of the Social Welfare Board, president of the Indian Council for Child Welfare, and vice-president of the International Council for Child Welfare.

Indira's political involvement reached a new peak when she became a member of the Congress Working Committee (CWC), the highest policy-making body of the Congress Party. Indira did not seek membership, but her inclusion came about at the insistence of Congress President U.N. Dhebar and Lal Bahadur Shastri. Many Congress Party members viewed Indira as a means to get to the Prime Minister and a potentially useful tool in the future. Some Congress Party members wished to establish Indira as a 'shadow' political figure, someone with Nehru's stature and position but no strong political ties. Although apprehensive of this new power status, Indira never considered herself to be merely a reflection of her father. By 1957, Indira was elected to the Congress Central Election Committee and joined the Congress Parliamentary Board a year later. Indira was offered further responsibility when she was first approached to become Congress President in 1959. As usual, Indira was extremely reluctant, saying, "I couldn't manage it...I was absolutely certain that I wouldn't be able to handle it."<sup>83</sup> Union Home Minister G.B. Pant, however, told Indira, "it's not a question of your decision. We have decided and you have to do it. This is your duty."<sup>84</sup> On February 2, 1959 Indira was officially elected President of the Indian National Congress.

Since India was now independent, Indira's role as Congress President gave her more power than her predecessors, including her father. Indira had never been an ardent feminist since she observed the women around her participate in the struggle for Indian independence as

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<sup>83</sup> Cited in Ibid., 249

<sup>84</sup> Cited in Ibid.

equally as the men. Indira, however, did choose to quote from a popular Hindi song in her presidential inauguration speech:

We are the women of India  
Don't imagine us as flower-maidens  
We are the sparks in the fire.<sup>85</sup>

Indira's use of this poem shows that while she was aware of the gender roles in India, she did not consider it to be a hindrance for herself. Years later, Indira was asked by an interviewer if she believed her political rise would have been easier if she was a male, but she replied, "I think there would probably have been more difficulties...I think the political world would have been much more sensitive to the situation and wary of it."<sup>86</sup>

Indira had been brought up by one of the most politically involved families in India, and yet many did not believe Indira had strong political viewpoints. The Congress Party leadership thought Indira would be malleable, but Indira later showed them that she did have a political mind. Even Nehru viewed his daughter as an adjunct to himself, not a politically independent being. Nehru was also cautious of the possible consequences of her rise to power. He did not want to create a "dynastic arrangement," since that would be "undemocratic and an undesirable thing."<sup>87</sup>

Quickly after becoming President, signs of Indira's political character began to shine through. Throughout her political career she appeared to be leftist, but months after her election she aligned herself with right-wing groups, specifically in Kerala. Kerala, situated in southwest India, had a large Communist Party which came to rule over the state by 1959. Indira however, accused this government of being agents of the Chinese, and fear a Communist government in Kerala would result in violence and anarchy. Therefore Indira had her father dismiss the

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<sup>85</sup> Cited in Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Cited in Ibid., 250

<sup>87</sup> Cited in Ibid.,

democratically elected Communist government in Kerala. This was the first time in independent India's history that a state government had been dissolved, which set a dangerous precedent. Sometime later, Indira's critics would say that this incident foreshadowed Indira's future 'ruthlessness' and authoritarian tendencies.

Shortly after the situation in Kerala, Indira did not want to serve another term as Congress President. In a letter to her father she wrote in the middle of the night, she wrote that she felt she had a "burden," but now the debt had been paid off, and she wanted to "be free and find [her] own direction."<sup>88</sup> While not being accusatory, Indira was telling her father that all the choices she had made had not been her own, but from her birth, her family and historical events had determined her fate.

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<sup>88</sup>Cited in Ibid., 254

### Chapter 3

#### **“I WANT ANOTHER LIFE”: INDIRA’S LAST RESISTANCE TO LEADERSHIP**

While Indira yearned for a life away from politics, she could not seem to leave it behind. Nehru was getting older, and needed Indira, as did Feroze, whose own political career was on the rise. Indira later revealed that she fully intended to “commit herself totally” to Feroze’s political career, but this sentiment ended with Feroze’s sudden death.<sup>89</sup> Indira was presiding over a women’s conference in Delhi when Feroze suffered his second and fatal heart attack on September 8, 1960, four days short of his forty-eighth birthday. Feroze’s death was extremely difficult for Indira, as she would later describe, “my whole mental and physical life changed suddenly...it was as though someone cut me in two.”<sup>90</sup> After her period of mourning, Indira soon became active in politics again. She was reelected to the Congress Working Committee and became a member of the Central Election Committee. Indira also accompanied her father to visit the United States in November 1961.

Upon arriving in the United States, Nehru met the newly elected John F. Kennedy, but Nehru remained quiet and distant throughout the visit. Kennedy later described it as “the worst head-of-state visit I have had,” and talking to Nehru was like trying “to grab something, only to have it turn out to be just fog.”<sup>91</sup> Nehru was distrustful of Kennedy’s charisma and doubted his political vision. Indira was also unimpressed by Jackie Kennedy. In a seven-part taped interview

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<sup>89</sup> Cited in Katherine Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 257

<sup>90</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 258

<sup>91</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 262

conducted in early 1964, Jackie Kennedy revealed her feelings toward Indira when she called Indira a “prune, bitter, kind of pushy, horrible woman.”<sup>92</sup> The trip to the United States was reflective of Nehru’s lack of stamina. Nehru was getting older and feeling depleted, he began to rely on Indira more and more.

Indira still dreamt of escaping politics and settling in London. She wrote to her friend Dorothy Norman, “my need for privacy and anonymity has been growing steadily,” she felt she deserved this saying, “I can claim to have done my duty to my country and family all these long years. I don’t for an instant regret it, because whatever I am today has been shaped by these years. But now I want another life.”<sup>93</sup> It was not long, however, before some began to talk of political succession after Nehru, and Indira’s name was often mentioned. Talk of succession became even more crucial when Nehru suffered a stroke at the annual Congress session on January 8, 1964. Rumors swirled that Indira would enter the Cabinet or even become Deputy Prime Minister, but Indira refused. Indira did, however, become her father’s closest confidant, and was compared to Woodrow Wilson’s wife, who had somewhat become the head of the United States government during his presidency. When this comparison was brought to her attention by journalist Inder Malhotra, she thought it was “absurd,” though it was clear to him that she did not mind being perceived as the “power behind the throne.”<sup>94</sup> Nehru’s condition worsened and he fell into a coma and died on May 27, 1964.

Hours after his death, family and friends crowded the house to pay their respects. Nehru’s body was brought to the foyer of the house to allow the public to pay their last respects throughout the night. The next day, his body was placed upon a gun carriage that slowly wound through the streets of New and Old Delhi with crowds of mourners looking on. In the immediate

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<sup>92</sup> Janny Scott, “Jackie Kennedy’s Sting for One and All,” *The Hindu*, 15 September 2011

<sup>93</sup> Cited in Katherine Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 267

<sup>94</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 272

aftermath of Nehru's death, Lal Bahadur Shastri was the obvious choice to take over as Prime Minister. Shastri was highly respected and had a long ministerial and party career behind him. There was, however, another contender for the job, Morarji Desai. The then seventy-year-old was a senior party leader and seasoned administrator. Until two years before Nehru's death, Desai was thought to be his natural successor, and no one believed that more than him.

While Desai believed he should hold the position of Prime Minister, opposition had built up toward him because of his inflexibility and intolerance. When Shastri was unanimously elected as Prime Minister, Desai, embittered, was in no position to protest. At this time, Indira was not yet considered in the succession race. Shastri did, however, wish to include Indira in India's government. While many in the Indian government thought Indira was best suited as the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Indira preferred to be assigned to the lighter responsibility of Minister of Information and Broadcasting. According to Malhotra, "Indira perfected to a fine art the technique of accumulating more and more power in her hands while emphatically declaring that she had no power and that she wanted to be rid of whatever little power she did have."<sup>95</sup>

It was not long, though, before Indira began to assume responsibilities beyond her post, whether Shastri wanted her to or not. Shastri had made a concerted effort to keep Indira at bay. Shastri wanted to protect his own interests and, while respecting Nehru's legacy, did not want to have Indira become a rival center of power. Tension between Shastri and Indira began to increase when a crisis broke out in Southern India in early 1965. Under the Indian constitution, Hindi was to become the official language of India. Even Nehru had to deal with backlash from many non-Hindi speaking people, but he assured them that Hindi would never be forced on unwilling people. Some in Shastri's cabinet were thought to be Hindi zealots and demanded that

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<sup>95</sup> Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi: A Personal and Political Biography*, 82

Nehru's assurances be added to the constitution. When Shastri refused, violent clashes began to erupt in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. Both Shastri and the leader of Tamil Nadu did nothing. Meanwhile, Indira flew in and immediately began to remedy the situation. This was not the only time Shastri felt as if Indira had overextended her power. In August 1965, reports of large-scale paramilitary infiltrations by Pakistan in Kashmir caused Indira to fly into Kashmir to encourage the security forces fighting the infiltrators and addressed public meetings to boost morale. Indira was soon said to be the "only man in a cabinet of old women."<sup>96</sup>

Indira's political ambition is sometimes attributed to her asserting what she believed to be her hereditary rights. Although Indira still longed for a private life, her pride would not allow her to be cast out from government. Indira and Shastri's strained relationship came to an end when Shastri suddenly passed away of a heart attack hours after signing a peace treaty in Tashkent in the Soviet Union on January 11, 1966. Shastri had travelled to Tashkent to resolve the Indo-Pak War that had begun in August. After Pakistani forces had invaded Kashmir, Indian forces defended what they believed to be their borders. While there was no formal declaration of war, fighting had persisted for seventeen days until a cease-fire had been secured by the United Nations Security Council on Sept. 22, 1965. On January 10, 1965 Russia called for an Indo-Pak summit to officially end any hostilities where the treaty was signed by Shastri and Pakistani President Muhammad Ayub Khan.

In less than twenty months India was once again confronted with a second succession. Indira was now one step closer to her seemingly inevitable position as India's leader. Indira was quickly considered to be the ideal candidate for Prime Minister. The Congress Party was concerned with the next General Election the following year, the first election without Nehru. According to Malhotra, this is perhaps one of the reasons why the Congress Party rallied behind

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 84

Indira, because she alone had some of her father's charisma and mass appeal.<sup>97</sup> Indira looked beyond divisions of caste, religion, and factions, and was therefore popular among Muslims, Harijans and other minorities. Indira was also a strong candidate because many in the Indian government concluded that she would be easy to control.

### **Indira's Destiny Fulfilled: Indira Becomes Prime Minister**

Once again faced with a succession race, Desai ardently believed that he should become Prime Minister, and was very vocal about his desire. Indira, however, maintained a low profile in "dignified silence" as described by Malhotra.<sup>98</sup> Desai still faced the same opposition since many considered him to be extremely rigid, as Frank describes him, "his actions were dictated solely by his own inflexible principles and political convictions."<sup>99</sup> Indira therefore garnered support because of her political flexibility, and many believed that Indira would be a figurehead similar to Sucheta Kripalani, the woman Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. Member of Parliament K. Kamaraj convinced his followers that Indira would do their bidding, that she would be "pliable, weak...a lump of clay they could mould and remold according to need."<sup>100</sup>

Journalist Sudipta Kaviraj later wrote that "the greatest qualification of Indira Gandhi at the time of her accession was...the fact that she was not too strongly associated with any policy line to give offence to any of the groups which dominated the polycentric structure of the Congress party after Nehru's death."<sup>101</sup> On January 19, 1966, the meeting to choose the next Prime Minister took place. Huge crowds gathered outside the building, waiting for news. Then

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 87

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 290

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, "Indira Gandhi and Indian Politics," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 21, No. 38/39 (Sep. 20-27, 1986), p. 1697



the party chief, Satya Narain Sinha, emerged. The crowd is said to have asked “What is it? Boy or girl?” and Sinha responded “It’s a girl,” causing the crowd to cheer with joy.<sup>102</sup> Indira had won with 355 votes to Desai’s 169. In typical Indira fashion, upon learning she had won, she humbly called herself a ““*desh sevika*,” or servant of the nation.”<sup>103</sup> When asked by a journalist about the significance of her election as the country’s leader, following in her father’s footsteps, she replied, “Perhaps it ensures some kind of continuity—continuity of policy, and also perhaps continuity of personality.”<sup>104</sup>

The election of a woman as Prime Minister of India caught the attention of the world stage. In America, Indira appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine under the heading: “Troubled India in a Woman’s Hands.”<sup>105</sup> English journalist John Grigg wrote in the *Guardian*, “Probably no woman in history has assumed a heavier burden of responsibility and certainly no country of India’s importance has ever before entrusted so much power to a woman.”<sup>106</sup> Indira’s election paralleled a growing feminist movement in the West, yet Indira never considered herself to be a feminist. Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, former Prime Minister of Malaysia, later observed that “the population [of India] is made up of people of different creeds, colors, way of life and castes, but because of her strong character and the natural leadership quality, a woman though she was, she managed to exercise control over them.”<sup>107</sup> While the outside world saw Indira as a harbinger of the women’s movement, India did not see it as such. The Bombay *Economic and Political*

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<sup>102</sup> Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi*, 88

<sup>103</sup> Sara Schupack, *Leading Women: Indira Gandhi* (Tarrytown: Marshall Cavendish, 2012), 43

<sup>104</sup> Nayantara Sahgal, “Nehru’s Quiet Daughter,” *The Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 5, Special Issue (1982), p. 165

<sup>105</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 293

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> G. Parthasarathi, and H.Y. Sharada Prasad, *Indira Gandhi: Statesmen, Scholars, Scientists, and Friends Remember*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1985), 6

*Weekly* remarked that a “woman ruler is...a social handicap,” to many in India there needed to be male power behind the throne.<sup>108</sup>

Indira’s term as Prime Minister was immediately met with extreme difficulties even an experienced leader would struggle with. India was still in its formative stages of becoming a stable independent nation. This was made worse by the failure of the rains in 1965 and 1966, which was devastating for a country that relies on agriculture as the national economy. Famines became widespread, as did economic hardship causing mass discontent throughout India. Foreign relations had also suffered for several reasons. Indian-US relations had become strained due to the use of American arms by Pakistan in its war with India in 1965 and by a difference in opinion over the Vietnam War. Indo-British relations came to a new low over an incorrect report of the origins of the India-Pakistan War. Most surprisingly though, was that the Soviet Union, once India’s most staunch supporter against Pakistan, began to improve relations with the latter. Indira also had to contend with a growing divide within the Congress Party. Many had felt alienated when the decision for Prime Minister was being made, and they had now grown resentful toward Indira. Indira had also given considerable power to a select few, angering many, even those who had supported the decision to make her Prime Minister.<sup>109</sup>

In the initial months of Indira becoming Prime Minister, she appeared to be weak, and unable to make assertive decisions. Prior to becoming Prime Minister, her public speaking had been limited to campaigning, and so she was a weak parliamentary performer, often becoming silent and unable to think on her feet. This was noticed by others in the Indian government, and socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia gave her the nickname “*goongi gudiya*,” or the “dumb

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<sup>108</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 294

<sup>109</sup> Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi*, 91

doll.”<sup>110</sup> Indira, nonetheless, would soon learn how to survive and eventually thrive in her new role as Prime Minister. While Indira had not adhered to specific factions, she had built up a leftist image as Congress President, but had all but abandoned this stance as Prime Minister. Indira more so relied on pragmatism when making decisions, basing her choices on what she believed made sense instead of adhering to a particular policy.

With India still struggling to feed its people, Indira decided to go to the United States on what she called a ‘goodwill visit.’ According to Malhotra, before her trip, Indira candidly told him that her “main mission [was] to get both food and foreign exchange without appearing to be asking for them.”<sup>111</sup> On the surface, Indira’s trip to the U.S. seemed to be a success, but in reality it was a disaster. President Lyndon B. Johnson welcomed India’s “proud, able, gracious lady,” at a party in Indira’s honor where both leaders ate and drank and got along well.<sup>112</sup> Soon both parties began to discuss business, in which Indira promptly agreed to a substantial devaluation of the rupee, as well as allowing the U.S. to set up an Indo-American Educational Foundation. When this was originally suggested some years before, Shastri had rejected it on the grounds that he was uncomfortable with allowing America undue influence on higher education and research in India. She also softened India’s stance against American involvement in Vietnam, which many disagreed with. Indira, though, was in dire need of American aid and was promised over three million tons of food and 900 million dollars in aid.

Reactions to Indira’s visit to Washington were harsh and criticism was widespread throughout the Indian government. Indira was called a “sell-out” over her change in stance over Vietnam, the devaluation of the rupee, and the Indo-American Educational Foundation was

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<sup>110</sup> Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi*, 93

<sup>111</sup> Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi*, 95

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 96

denounced by all political parties. Indira lashed back at her opponents, especially when she was accused of deviating from her father's policies. Vehemently denying this she said,

If it is necessary to deviate from past policies, I would not hesitate to do so. I must pursue policies which are in the best interests of the country as a whole. If you do not like these policies, you have every right to remove me and have your own leader...The Congress is big, but India is bigger.<sup>113</sup>

Indira was reflecting that because of her family's importance in India, knew she would be supported by her countrymen. Although Indira attempted to defend her actions, she had come to realize that mistakes had been made, which proved disastrous in India. The devaluation of the rupee had been finalized, yet American aid was slow and food shipments were erratic.

In the aftermath, Indira wanted to ensure her political survival and would do so by adapting to any policy best suited to the situation. Indira had previously abandoned her left-leaning policies, but revived her mildly radical image when she had the government release a statement "deploring" American bombings of Hanoi and Haiphong in Vietnam. She also visited the Soviet Union where she signed a joint statement with Premier Alexei Kosygin condemning the United States "imperialist aggression" in Vietnam.<sup>114</sup> As Indira continued to condemn the United States, President Johnson delayed food shipments to India as a response to her criticisms. Indira, however, became even more outspoken against the U.S. and announced the cancellation of the proposed Indo-American Educational Foundation.

Some believed Indira's policies to be insincere, and thought she was just attempting to get back in the good graces of her fellow politicians. One Member of Parliament accused her of "behaving like a capitalist in Washington and a socialist in Moscow."<sup>115</sup> Malhotra seemingly agreed with this sentiment writing, "everything Indira did was dictated by a keen instinct for self-

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 98

<sup>114</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 299

<sup>115</sup> Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi*, 101

preservation and that every position she took whether radical or rightist, was always flexible.”<sup>116</sup> Indira, though, emerged from these events stronger than ever. By 1967, Indira was assured of her position among the people, which to her, allowed her to bypass the party organization, its rules, and its norms.

### **Indira’s Government: Congress Factionalism Comes to a Boiling Point**

Indira used her connection with the people throughout the 1967 election campaign. Indira drew enormous crowds throughout India. She claimed to give a voice to the “the dispossessed and downtrodden,” yet as Frank explains, her political style was also imbued with her aristocratic heritage as the “scion of the Nehru family.”<sup>117</sup> Not all were impressed by Indira, nevertheless, she continued to campaign even in the face of hostility. In Orissa, Indira refused to interrupt an election speech even after she had been struck by a stone. Her nose was broken, but she continued speaking, using a handkerchief to stop the bleeding.<sup>118</sup> In another rousing speech, Indira was hailed as “Mother Indira” by the people. The affection Indira received, however, was not reflective in the election results. The Congress Party had a loss of twenty-one percent in seats, making their majority in Parliament extremely narrow. The Party also lost power in several major Northern Indian states, causing a dramatic setback for the Congress. What Indira had in her relationship with the people, she lacked in having a strong issue-oriented, ideological stance.

Even with the Congress Party’s major losses, Indira’s chances as Prime Minister were strengthened. It was thought that Indira would be the most acceptable candidate to lead the non-Congress state governments. Even with her lack of experience, many in the Indian government still believed that Indira could successfully lead the country as long as they were there to help.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 302

<sup>118</sup> Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi*, 104

Indira was unanimously voted as Prime Minister, but had to concede to accepting the appointment of Desai as her Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister. Desai's animosity toward Indira increased, and he encouraged his supporters to undermine Indira's policies as much as possible. Indira also had to contend with the increase in radicalism within the government. A radical group known as the "Young Turks" wanted the Indian government to focus on the old objectives and social programs the Congress Party had once stood for. These radical groups had all but paralyzed Indira's government and put an immense strain on the Congress Party. Contention also came out of the rise of P.N. Haksar as Indira's Principal Private Secretary. Haksar quickly became the dominant policy maker and had a major influence over Indira. These factors attributed to the widening of factions in the Congress Party.

By 1968, many in the Congress wished to see Indira removed from her post. Congress President S. Nijalingappa feared that a forced resignation would "break the party and the whole country would be in chaos."<sup>119</sup> By the next year, however, it was clear that the Congress could not be salvaged and a split was imminent. On November 1, 1969, Nijalingappa called for Indira's expulsion from the Congress, charging her with having created a "personality cult" that threatened the democratic working of Congress.<sup>120</sup> After intense lobbying, 297 of the 429 Congress Party members sided with Indira. Each side claimed to be the real Congress Party, but Indira's supporters became known as the Congress (R) or Requisitionist, and Desai and the INC became known as the Congress (O) for Organization.

Though Indira lost her majority in both houses of Parliament as a result of the split, she gained supporters in the Communist Party of India, as well as several other regional parties and

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<sup>119</sup> Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi*, 112

<sup>120</sup> Cited in Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 316

independents. Indira had emerged from the split a “confident, assertive and dominant leader.”<sup>121</sup> Indira’s motives for centralizing the government around her can be credited to her feelings that it was her familial responsibility to take care of India and its people. Having a leadership role in India had be so deeply ingrained within her since childhood, therefore Indira felt that India could not survive without her.

Indira’s government after the split was vulnerable, and she was advised by Haksar to call a mid-term election in 1971 in order to get popular endorsement of her policies. Even through the Congress split, Indira’s popularity with the people never wavered. Shortly after the announcement of the parliamentary elections, a *Newsweek* reporter asked Indira what the main issues in the election were, to which she replied “I am the issue.”<sup>122</sup> While her opponents campaigned on the slogan “Indira *Hatao*,” (Remove Indira), Indira retooled their slogan to “*Garibi Hatao*,” (Remove Poverty).<sup>123</sup> This slogan had a considerable impact; Indira was now looked upon by many as India’s savior. Indira’s election campaign was more energetic than it had ever been before. Indira often stood in an open car for hours addressing the crowds invoking radical rhetoric to rouse the masses, but at the same time, reassured the higher classes that she would be mindful of their interests as well. As a result, Indira and her supporters triumphed in the parliamentary elections. While Indira had prevailed over internal struggles, an external crisis had been brewing for quite some time.

### **Indira’s Finest Hour and Subsequent Fall from Grace**

Since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, Pakistan had been a geographical nightmare. More than a thousand miles of Indian territory separated the eastern, and more

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<sup>121</sup> Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi*, 124

<sup>122</sup> Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi*, 128

<sup>123</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 325

populated region, from the west, where political power resided. The dominating Punjabi elite of West Pakistan also did not hide its disdain for the distant Bengalis of East Pakistan. It was clear that the only uniting factor of Pakistan was the Muslim religion. Tensions between the two regions therefore grew and a movement for greater autonomy for East Pakistan began. Leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, often called Mujib, made demands to West Pakistan that all but called for independence except for a loose political confederation.

After having been under military rule for thirteen years, a general election was held in Pakistan in December 1970. Mujib and his party, the Awami League, swept the polls, making his supremacy in the east absolute. Mujib had won enough seats to entitle him to assume office as President of Pakistan. But this was immediately resisted by military leader General Yahya Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, leader of Pakistan's People's Party and Pakistan's Foreign Minister. In response, the Awami League launched a massive civil disobedience movement in East Pakistan. Yahya then ordered a brutal crackdown on East Pakistan, in which university teachers, writers, poets and other intellectuals were slaughtered in cold blood. Mujib was arrested and imprisoned in West Pakistan; soon thereafter the entire East Bengali population was in revolt.

Among the Indian people, there was a wave of sympathy for the Bangladesh people who were being massacred by the Pakistani Army. As Pakistani atrocities continued, more and more Indians began making pleas to intervene. Indira, though, was cautious to get involved because she did not want to violate international law, or discredit the Bangladesh struggle as a "conspiracy by Hindu India."<sup>124</sup> Indira did not let the situation overwhelm her, even when she knew war with Pakistan was fast approaching. Instead, Indira first focused on helping the

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<sup>124</sup>Cited in Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi*, 133



terrified refugees pouring in from East Pakistan. Indira also appealed to the world community to “stop Pakistan’s brutal repression.”<sup>125</sup>

Indira tried to make West Pakistan’s treatment of the Bengalis a human rights issue, hoping that international pressure would create a peaceful settlement. Indira went so far as to embark on a twenty-one day tour of Europe and America in an attempt to galvanize world opinion.<sup>126</sup> On July 7, 1971, Henry Kissinger, President Nixon’s national security advisor, arrived in Delhi as part of a tour in Asia. Kissinger made it clear that if India went to war over Bangladesh, the United States would not help India. At this time, the efforts to get support from the Western world failed, Indira still hoped to prevent open hostilities between India and Pakistan.

Indira’s reluctance to confront West Pakistan ended on December 3, 1971 when General Yahya Khan bombed several Indian air bases, essentially starting the war. By the sixth of December, Indira announced the recognition of an independent Bangladesh and that the *Mukti Bahini*, the Bangladeshi guerilla forces, would be fighting alongside Indian forces. The combined forces of Indo-Bangladesh armies quickly defeated the Pakistani Army. By December 16, 1971, the Pakistani Army surrendered with over 93,000 officers and men laying down their arms. That afternoon, Indira excitedly addressed the anxious Members of Parliament, telling them, “Dacca is now the free capital of a free country.”<sup>127</sup> Indira was now at the peak of her power and glory.

The liberation of the Bangladesh people won Indira an immense amount of admiration. According to Malhotra, many Indians hailed her as *Durga*, the eight-armed, tiger riding, invincible goddess in the Hindu pantheon, while others worshipped her as an incarnation of

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 134

<sup>126</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 335

<sup>127</sup> Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi*, 140

*Shakti* or female energy.<sup>128</sup> Indira's heroism did not last long, and Indira soon experienced a dismal decline in the eyes of the people. One of the biggest issues Indira had to contend with was the failure of the rains, which was made worse because the once full granaries were now emptied to feed the millions of Bangladeshi refugees that had poured into India. The war had also strained the government's finances causing economic discontent. The economic crisis was also exacerbated by the widespread corruption in Indira's government. Since the Congress split, many expected Indira's party to be honest, yet the corruption actually became even more apparent. Indira was also increasingly establishing supremacy and getting rid of anyone who could rival her power.

After having reached the pinnacle of her fame and popularity, several factors contributed to her subsequent downfall. Sanjay Gandhi, now in his twenties, took advantage of his mother's position and had secured 7.5 million rupees in a car business venture.<sup>129</sup> After years of trying, the car failed to materialize by 1973. Many were troubled by Sanjay's attempts to create a business, and Indira was criticized for it. Indira's reputation was also damaged when she had her choice of Chief Justice of the Supreme Court appointed just as the Supreme Court was looking into Indira and Parliament's growing power. During this time, former freedom fighter Jayaprakash Narayan, or JP, had gotten fed up with Indira's government and decided to reenter politics. With the exception of the Communist Party, opposition forces rallied to JP to end Indira's government. In a letter to Dorothy Norman, Indira addressed JP's crusade telling her, his "theme is that I am the world's greatest dictator."<sup>130</sup> JP's reach ranged from the far right to far left organizations, all with the objective to overthrow Indira's government.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 141

<sup>129</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 352

<sup>130</sup> Cited in Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 359

By 1974, Indira could no longer ignore JP and agreed to meet. Although the meeting was supposed to be reconciliation between the two, the meeting became a heated confrontation. Indira accused Narayan of being backed by the United States through the CIA. He retorted that she was attempting to establish a Soviet-backed dictatorship. On March 6, 1975 Narayan led a five-mile long march through Delhi to Parliament and openly called for Indira's resignation. Shortly after, Desai embarked on a 'fast unto death,' in protest of Indira delaying state assembly elections in Gujarat. Indira had no choice but to schedule elections for early June. Indira, though, had an even bigger problem. Indira had been charged with electoral malpractice in the 1971 general elections and that March she faced the Allahabad High Court.

June 12, 1975 proved to be a fateful day for Indira. That afternoon, Indira learned that her Congress had been defeated in the Gujarat state assembly elections by the Janata Front, a five party coalition, including JP Narayan and Morarji Desai. She also received the news that the Allahabad High Court had found her guilty of electoral malpractices. This verdict invalidated Indira's election as a Member of Parliament, which barred her from holding office for six years. The High Court ruled that the Prime Minister should be unseated and the Congress Party should make "alternative arrangements."<sup>131</sup> For Indira and others still, her leadership was essential to government and her party's slogan "Indira was India and India Indira" attested to that.<sup>132</sup> According to Frank, Indira had "personalized politics to such a degree that it was virtually impossible to imagine another member of Congress...leading the country."<sup>133</sup>

While the High Court's ruling was a devastating blow to Indira, she ultimately decided to appeal the Supreme Court's ruling. The Supreme Court also allowed Indira to continue serving as Prime Minister but could not vote in Parliament, making her somewhat powerless. JP and

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<sup>131</sup> Cited in Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 372

<sup>132</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 372

<sup>133</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 372

Desai nevertheless continued to try to get Indira thrown out of government. Unbeknownst to them, their actions of threatening her government and preparing to stage a coup are exactly what prompted Indira to suspend Parliament and impose a state of emergency. Indira saw that India was engulfed in chaos. On June 25, 1975, Indira speaking with the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Siddhartha Shankar Ray, said that “drastic action is needed” and worried that “democracy will come to a grinding halt.”<sup>134</sup> After extensive research, Ray told Indira that under Article 352 of the Indian constitution the government could impose a state of emergency in the face of “external aggression or by armed rebellion,” in which “armed rebellion” was interpreted as an internal disturbance.

Armed with this information, Indira made up her mind to enact this emergency. Indira told Ray that she did not want to discuss the Emergency with her Cabinet, but go directly to the President. Indira, aware of the possible backlash she would receive, emphasized the urgency and necessity of the Emergency when they approached the President with the order, justifying why the Cabinet could not be notified in time. After some consideration, the President approved the Emergency. On the evening of June 25, the ‘Emergency Order Proclamation’ was written and sent to the President to sign. In the early hours of June 26, 1975 eight Cabinet members and five ministers of state entered Indira’s office, each were given a copy of the Emergency Proclamation Order along with a list of prominent opposition leaders who had been arrested. The cabinet members, while shocked, ratified the Emergency within half an hour. Indira had now created her own “self-described” democracy.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Cited in Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 374

<sup>135</sup> Sara Schupack, *Leading Women: Indira Gandhi*, Benchmark, 58

## **Chapter 4**

### **INDIRA'S FINAL EPISODE: THE EMERGENCY, REMOVAL, REVIVAL, AND HER DEATH**

Indira had been raised in an environment that had made her simultaneously powerful and powerless. Indira's family had been so vital to Indian development, and because of this she was often neglected by her parents and others in her family, making her extremely insecure. With the death of her father, and the sudden death of Shastri, Indira was given power she had never experienced before. Perhaps out of a sense of duty or some kind of need for psychological fulfillment play, Indira reluctantly accepted to her place upon the Indian 'throne.' And with the declaration of the Emergency in 1975, it was clear that she did not want to let go of the power she had been given.

In the years leading up to the Emergency, India had been in a state of chaos. India had suffered through another agricultural crisis in 1972 which led to an economic crisis. Widespread discontent and agitation led to protests by community leaders, students, and peasants. Strikes also threatened to paralyze India's vast railway network. The political climate also contributed to Indira's Emergency. The government was weakened by corruption that was rampant in Indira's government and by the opposition, mainly represented by JP, who continuously made efforts to undermine the government. JP even encouraged the police and the army to disregard orders from the government. Perhaps most importantly, Indira feared imprisonment after being convicted of

electoral fraud by the Allahabad High Court. All of these factors led Indira to believe that drastic measures needed to be taken, and therefore the Emergency was declared.

On the morning of June 26, 1975, Indira addressed her countrymen on All India Radio, telling the people that, “The President has proclaimed an Emergency. This is nothing to panic about.”<sup>136</sup> She went on to explain that a “deep and widespread conspiracy” had been brewing for some time that, if not blocked, would have “resulted in a grave threat to public order and damage to the economy beyond repair.”<sup>137</sup> She also explained that arrests had been made, which included Narayan and Desai, as a precautionary measure. She also defended censoring the press because it had been guilty of “irresponsible writing” and therefore they needed to “restore a climate of trust.”<sup>138</sup> Indira contradictorily argued that in order to preserve democracy, she needed to suspend democratic institutions and procedures. According to author Nayantara Sahgal, Indira “fell between [two systems of ruling], debasing democratic values and destroying the system while avowing her dedication to it...With tens of thousands of citizens jailed without charges or trial and her critics silenced, she could repeat calmly and with conviction, ‘I am a democrat.’”<sup>139</sup>

Soon after the Emergency Proclamation was issued, most opposition leaders, and anyone else Indira considered a threat, were either in jail or under house arrest; and dissidents within her own Congress Party were helpless in voicing their concerns. Despite the uneasiness of those in the Indian government, the early months of the Emergency suggested that it was a success. There were no more strikes, no protest marches, prices fell, and beggars had even disappeared from the streets. It seemed peace had been restored to India. Less than a month after the Emergency was announced, Parliament was convened. The Emergency was endorsed by both houses, 336 to 39

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<sup>136</sup> Katherine Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 381

<sup>137</sup> W.H. Morris-Jones, “Whose Emergency —India’s or Indira’s?” *The World Today*, Vol. 31, No. 11 (Nov., 1975), p. 453

<sup>138</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 381

<sup>139</sup> Nayantara Sahgal, “Nehru’s Quiet Daughter,” *The Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 5, Special Issue (1982), p. 160

votes in the Lok Sabha and 136 to 33 votes in the Rajya Sabha. Any form of dissent was restricted by a resolution suspending anything except for “urgent and important government business” to be discussed.<sup>140</sup>

During this Parliament session, Indira and her government enacted several controversial changes that suggested that the Emergency was not in defense of democracy but rather a naked grab for political power. Indira used this Parliament session to pass amendments like the thirty-ninth amendment, which invalidated the High Court’s verdict against Indira. Other amendments prevented judicial review of election results and granted the Prime Minister immunity from civil and criminal charges committed before or during his or her term in office. In what is considered the most controversial amendment to the constitution, the forty-second amendment gave parliament the power to amend the basic structure of the constitution. Parliament now had the power to restructure any feature of government. Other provisions allowed the prohibition of anything deemed ‘anti-national’ activities, and granted the ability to send in armed forces without consulting state government.

Censorship was at an all time high during the Emergency. The government banned anything they found to be ‘of objectionable manner’ and gave guidelines to ensure that only ‘positive’ information be emphasized. While some major newspaper owners succumbed to the new guidelines, others ceased publication rather than submit to censorship. With most of the press now serving as a propaganda machine, any internal issue was eclipsed by the so called “progressive gains.”<sup>141</sup> Indira tried to gain the support of the Indian intelligentsia, especially since her father was greatly esteemed among them. Indira had also gained the respect of many intellectuals, scientists, artists, authors, and poets for her left-leaning policies, as they considered

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<sup>140</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 386

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 386

her opponents too conservative. Their admiration for Indira came to an abrupt end, however, with the announcement of the Emergency. Indira's camp tried to get signed statements by professors, film directors, and other eminent intellectuals, but to no avail.

### **The Emergency and Sanjay Gandhi's Growing Power**

The Emergency was also declared in order to enact several economic reforms. Indira created a twenty-point program that was meant to be an "assault on poverty."<sup>142</sup> The program ultimately proved to be superficial because state governments lacked the administrative organization to implement reform. The reforms that were successful included an enhanced enforcement of laws regarding tax evasion and smuggling, which helped to stabilize prices and end shortages of essential commodities. The program that got the most attention was Sanjay's five-point plan. Sanjay's program focused on adult literacy, the abolition of bride dowry, the ending of the caste system, beautifying the environment, and a radical family planning program. Since the declaration of the Emergency, Sanjay had become increasingly involved in politics, and used his mother's position to his advantage.

Sanjay's actions came to an unexpected climax, however, on August 6, 1975 when he gave a revealing tape-recorded interview for the Indian magazine *Surge*. Sanjay revealed that he was hostile to many of his mother's policies, and disliked many of her allies. Sanjay went on to discuss his contempt for nationalization, instead preferring to support the interests of big business and multinational corporations. Causing the biggest stir was Sanjay openly remarking that the Communist Party of India (CPI) consisted of the most "corrupt people anywhere," knowing that it was the CPI that had given Indira the most support during the early months of the

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 390



Emergency.<sup>143</sup> Interviewer Uma Vasudev immediately gave out the interview to *Reuters* and several other news agencies. The following day, the story had become front page news across Indian newspapers, as well as ninety American newspapers and the British press.<sup>144</sup> Upon hearing the news, Indira contacted her Principal Secretary, P.N. Dhar. Dhar and Indira decided the best course of action was to have the interview withdrawn from *Surge* and other papers and Sanjay would publish a clarification of his statements regarding his opinions of the CPI. Sanjay's brazen remarks showed how little control Indira had over him.

The backlash Indira received from Sanjay's interview was immediate as Indira was barraged by the CPI who demanded an explanation. By August 28, the interview had been withdrawn from all Indian media, and was stopped from being published by the original interviewer at *Surge* magazine. The following day, Indian papers published Sanjay's 'clarified' responses about the CPI in which he detracted what he called "a sweeping statement" about the entire party's wealth and corruption. He also acknowledged that there are "far more wealthy people and...more corruption" in other parties, and while he did not agree with the Communists, "the CPI [had] supported and worked wholeheartedly for progressive politics."<sup>145</sup> Sanjay's statement was merely a formality; it was clear that he did not agree with his mother's political views, but favored a more pro-capitalist, and pragmatic political philosophy.

Sanjay continued to build up a power base, having several members of Congress pushed out, controlling others, and was even rumored to be part of a murder plot. In late 1975, B.K. Nehru visited Delhi as Indian High Commissioner and was shocked to find how much power Sanjay had acquired. Nehru wanted to talk to Indira about it, but was warned by P.N. Haksar that Indira was "absolutely blind as far as the boy was concerned; she regarded him as perfect, he

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<sup>143</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 393

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 393

<sup>145</sup> Cited in Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 395

could do no wrong.”<sup>146</sup> Haksar cautioned Nehru that any mention of suspicion toward Sanjay would result in his banishment. Indira’s allowance of Sanjay’s antics is attributed to the fact that Indira led a lonely life. She did not have many close friends, and the Emergency had even contributed to a loss in friends, like long time friend Dorothy Norman. Indira was not as close to her elder son Rajiv, and she did not consider those in her inner circle as personal friends. Therefore Indira was left with Sanjay, who took advantage of his elevated position with his mother. It became overwhelmingly clear that Sanjay was being prepped to be his mother’s heir. Indira’s opposition now declared that the Emergency was not to revamp democracy but to create a dynasty.

In February 1976, the general elections were postponed and the Emergency was extended. Many were wary of continuing the Emergency, Dhar even tried to convince Indira that prolonging the Emergency may do more harm than good. Indira’s opinion remained fixed, however, especially since Sanjay wanted the Emergency to continue indefinitely. Fearful of being jailed, dissent was minimal when the general election was delayed. According to Amnesty International, more than 110,000 people had been arrested and jailed without trial during the first year of the Emergency.<sup>147</sup> Some were jailed in relatively pleasant surroundings, while others had to contend with horrible conditions. Prisons were overcrowded and political prisoners were housed with hardened criminals. It is reported that twenty-two Emergency prisoners died in jail. Victims of the Emergency not only extended to political opponents but to the poor as well, whom Indira had purported the Emergency was intended to help. It was the homeless, beggars, menial laborers, and peasant farmers who suffered the most from the Emergency, specifically due to Sanjay’s five-point plan of slum clearance and sterilization program.

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<sup>146</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 397

<sup>147</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 401

Sanjay and the vice-chairman of the Development Authority, Jagmohan, were instrumental in implementing the program of slum clearance and beautification. Sanjay and Jagmohan examined Old Delhi, which was riddled with tenements and shacks. At Sanjay's order, tens of thousands of people were told that they were going to be relocated to vacant land twenty miles away, in the outskirts of the city. On April 13, 1976, demolition teams entered the city, bulldozing homes and businesses. After six days of demolition, an uprising broke out. Soon women and men formed a mob that quickly escalated when police began to use tear gas to disperse the crowd. When people continued to riot, police reportedly opened fire. Conflicting reports cite that between six and 150 people were killed, with hundreds injured.<sup>148</sup>

The sterilization program created by Sanjay was an attempt to halt India's overgrowing population. With the advancement of medical care, nutrition, and improved hygiene, death rates in India had plummeted. The Indian population rate increased by twelve million people a year. Other contraceptives had been ineffective in stemming the population thus far; therefore, sterilization seemed to be the safest and cheapest method of controlling population. In Indian culture, however, fertility was essential to one's sense of self-worth, and children were considered a source of income and as caretakers for parents when they reached old age. According to Malhotra, "to most unlettered Indian males there is no difference between sterilization and castration."<sup>149</sup> Knowing that sterilization would be resisted, no political party would adopt the policy; but Sanjay realized with the declaration of the Emergency, family planning could be the central issue that represented a 'New India.'

In April 1976, the government introduced the National Population Policy. It began as a program giving and withholding incentives, depending on those who followed or did not follow

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 403

<sup>149</sup> Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi*, 181

the programs' stipulations. Families were to limit their family size to three children; incentives to do so included subsidized housing and free medical care. Those who did not undergo sterilizations after the birth of their third child would not receive such benefits. When these provisions did not produce dramatic results, Sanjay turned to harsher methods to try to amend the situation. Sanjay sent out an army of family planning 'motivators', who were assigned to give rewards to those who submitted to sterilization. Sanjay also created a quota system for government employees, requiring them to produce a certain number of people to be sterilized in order to be paid. The quota system was soon expanded to include the police, doctors, nurses, and teachers. For those without government jobs, sterilization was 'encouraged' by making sterilization certificates a sort of passport necessary to navigate daily life for people in all walks of life. While some Indians were 'motivated' or bribed, others still were being forcibly sterilized. The Emergency had allowed for the arrest of thousands of homeless for 'vagrancy', where they were taken to sterilization camps and underwent compulsory vasectomies.

For her part, Indira ignored what she believed to be false allegations about forced sterilizations. Indira had even stated that, "we do not believe in coercion: we think that there should be persuasion... this must be done on a massive educational scale."<sup>150</sup> She had people look into the reports, and was falsely reassured that they were unsubstantiated rumors. It was not until a forcibly sterilized schoolteacher arrived at P.N. Dhar's office that Indira finally reacted. Indira revealed that she had been suspicious of the family planning program, but lacked evidence after Sanjay's people insisted that the reports were false. Indira sent a message to all state chief ministers that "anyone engaged in harassment while propagating family planning will be

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<sup>150</sup> Indira Gandhi and Rami Chhabra, "Population Policy in India: Two Comments," *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Mar., 1981), p. 169

punished.”<sup>151</sup> Indira’s message had come too late for many. In the first five months of the Emergency, 3.7 million Indians had been sterilized, and by the end, nearly 23 million people were sterilized. The family planning program was not only harmful to its victims, but it also undermined Indira’s credibility with those who she had claimed to be committed to helping, like the poor, Muslims, Harijans, and other oppressed peoples.

### **The Emergency Ends and Indira Rises Again**

In November 1976, Sanjay convinced Indira to postpone the general elections once again. This postponement, to Sanjay’s chagrin, only lasted until January 1977 when Indira announced general elections would be held in two months. Indira announced that “every election is an act of faith. It is an opportunity to cleanse public life of confusion. So let us go to the polls with the resolve to reaffirm the power of the people.”<sup>152</sup> According to author Sudipta Kaviraj, “her ascendancy was so great that the opposition could not even defeat her until she invited them to do it” with the elections.<sup>153</sup> Indira then ordered the release of the most well-known political prisoners and suspended censorship guidelines. Her Cabinet, Chief Ministers, and even the President were surprised by her decision. Some believed that Indira was assured by intelligence reports that she would win if she called elections now. Others believed that Indira was growing weary of the image the Emergency was giving her. Even with Indira’s irrational belief that India could not survive without her leadership, she still believed in democracy.

Shortly after announcing the general elections, Indira zealously campaigned in twenty-two states, speaking at hundreds of public meetings. Those who came to these meetings were

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<sup>151</sup> Cited in Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 407

<sup>152</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 410

<sup>153</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, “Indira Gandhi and Indian Politics,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 21, No. 38/39 (Sep. 20-27, 1986), p. 1697

smaller in number, and at times hostile, in comparison to crowds before the Emergency. Soon after the call for elections, several of those in Indira's Congress defected. Jagjivan Ram, the powerful Harijan Minister of Irrigation and Agriculture founded a new party, the Congress for Democracy, and joined the Janata Party. No defection came as more of a surprise to Indira that her aunt, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, coming out of political retirement and dramatically bestowing her support on the Janata Party. In a public statement, Pandit said that Indira and her Emergency had "smothered and destroyed" democratic institutions, and the "erosion of our cherished values must be stopped and we must go back to the ideals to which we are pledged."<sup>154</sup>

On March 16, 1977, India's sixth general election was held. After the results had been tallied, Indira and her Congress were decimated by the Janata Party, the Communist Party of India, and other regional parties. The Indian people were ecstatic over the results of the election, people lined the streets celebrating that Indira Gandhi's reign had finally ended. In the early morning hours after the election results had been revealed, Indira instructed the President to officially end the Emergency. Indira then resigned. For the first time, Indira was left without a job, an income, and a home. Indira was now presented with several options for her future. Her resignation could now allow her to live in London just as she had wanted to before becoming Prime Minister. She could have also escaped to Kashmir, one of her favorite places in the world. In the aftermath of her fall from grace, Indira opted to stay in India, specifically New Delhi, to be in the hub of things. A family friend vacated his bungalow for Indira and the rest of the family to stay.

One week after the general elections, Morarji Desai was sworn in as the fourth, and first non-Congress member, Prime Minister of India. At age eighty-one Desai had finally reached his goal of becoming Prime Minister. Desai quickly moved into Indira's old bungalow, even though

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<sup>154</sup> Cited in Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 412

it was not the official home of the Prime Minister. He also limited security forces allotted to Indira as a former Prime Minister, blaming her desire for protection on “her vanity.”<sup>155</sup> Indira was now devoid of any income and resources. Several industrialists, however, supported Indira with the hopes that they would be rewarded if she ever regained power.

The Janata Party had run on the promise that they would repair the damage done by Indira and the Emergency. The new government began by repealing a number of amendments and ordinances that had previously been enforced. While the Janata Party did attempt to make more significant changes, factionalism prevented the new government from functioning the way it had hoped. The only issue they could agree upon was their desire to bring Indira and Sanjay to justice. As Frank describes it, “instead of tackling what to do about India, Janata focused on what to do about Indira.”<sup>156</sup> The Janata’s attempt to hold Indira accountable more often became viewed as a campaign of “hatred and harassment” by the people.<sup>157</sup>

In May 1977, Home Minister Charan Singh went so far as to make a statement in Parliament alleging that Indira had planned to kill opposition leaders while they were jailed during the Emergency. Indira, who had remained quiet for months after her resignation, responded that this statement was “shocking and preposterous” especially since he and another Minister had been released at the “first intimation of ill-health.”<sup>158</sup> Indira then went on to say that instead of pursuing its “smear campaign and character assassination,” the Janata Party should have been paying attention to more pressing problems of the people, like “increasing

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<sup>155</sup> Cited in Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 416

<sup>156</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 417

<sup>157</sup> Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi*, 203

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

lawlessness” and “spiraling prices.”<sup>159</sup> Singh’s statements and Indira’s response now opened a window of opportunity for Indira to return to the public’s good graces.

Indira’s next move was to travel to a remote village in Bihar where Harijans had been relentlessly attacked. Even though the trek was difficult, Indira at one point even rode on an elephant, she saw to it that the Harijans be helped. Upon arrival, she saw she was warmly welcomed, reassured that perhaps she could regain the support and affection of the people. In response to Indira’s activism, the Janata Party called for Indira’s arrest. On October 3, 1977, the police arrived at the home she had been staying in to arrest her. When she was brought to the police van, she was surrounded by the shouting slogans of her supporters. The following day she was released by the magistrate, since there had been no charges filed against her. Her arrest by the Janata Party resulted in a loss of their credibility, but Indira was now poised for a return to power.

On November 7, 1978 Indira formally reentered politics by becoming a Member of Parliament. By this time the Janata Party had been destroying itself with severe factionalism among its top leaders. When elections were called in January 1980, the Janata Party was in disarray, and now those who had cheered over Indira’s defeat now clamored for her leadership. On January 6, 1980, Indira was chosen as India’s leader once again. When a journalist asked Indira how it felt to be back as India’s leader again, she replied “I have always been India’s leader.”<sup>160</sup> Indira’s return to power had been almost seamless, the people seemed to have completely forgotten about the Emergency and any issues they had with her.

Soon after her election, however, many were once again wary of her plans for Sanjay’s future. It was clear that he was prepared to become her successor. Her plans were abruptly halted

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Cited in Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 441



though by Sanjay's sudden death. On the morning of June 23, 1980, Sanjay had tried to perform aerobatic stunts in his airplane, when it suddenly plunged back toward the ground, where he and his copilot died on impact. Sanjay's death was a devastating blow for Indira. Her grief, however, never overwhelmed her. As Malhotra describes her, crushing "grief could not be allowed to come in the way of public duty."<sup>161</sup> Sanjay's death also elevated Rajiv's position. He was being pressured to enter politics by those in Indira's camp, and although he had no interest in politics, his sense of duty outweighed his reluctance. On May 5, 1981, Rajiv announced that he would stand in a June election for Amethi, Sanjay's constituency. While critics pointed out that he had no political base and no knowledge of politics, the Indian masses welcomed Rajiv's involvement in government. One of Indira's biographers later wrote, "'Indian history...is an unbroken saga of rule by hereditary monarchs. Family connection is also of the utmost importance in every Indian's life...tradition enjoins that a man...follow the vocation of his forefathers'... Indira was merely following a well established pattern."<sup>162</sup>

### **Indira Enters Her Final Battle**

In the early 1980s, Indira had to contend with several conflicts throughout India. In Assam in the northeast, Muslim Bengali immigrants who had settled in Assam during the 1971 were now nearly outnumbering the Assamese in their own state. The Hindu Assamese began to ask the government to deport Bengalis back to Bangladesh. The situation began to grow volatile, and paramilitary forces were sent in. In the Punjab, tension had been building since the Congress lost all of the seats in the Lok Sabha to the Sikh Akali Dal party. Even before that, many were critical of how the Punjab was divided during Partition. In 1977, the Akali Dal party demanded

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<sup>161</sup> Inder Malhotra, *Indira Gandhi*, 223

<sup>162</sup> Cited in Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 453

sole possession of the state capital of Chandigarh. When the party defeated the Congress in the elections, Sanjay sent in loyalists to find a new *sant*, or Sikh holy man to divide the Sikhs and break up the party. They found a demagogue named Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a fundamentalist who wanted to ‘purify’ Sikhism and return it to its orthodox state. Although he was meant to be a puppet figure, he began to show signs of ambition and autonomy. By 1980 he declared his independence and refused to be a tool of the Congress.

Bhindranwale, now independent, became much more radical, even calling for a sovereign Sikh state. Lala Jagat Narain, the owner of a Punjabi chain of newspapers who denounced Bhindranwale, was found shot dead on September 9, 1981. His assassination was undeniably at the hands of Bhindranwale, and he was arrested on September 20. Protests against his arrest elevated the charismatic leader, and he emerged from jail as a “national hero.”<sup>163</sup> After his release, violence escalated, especially against the Hindu population. By the time Indira had come to fully realize the situation, it was too late. Bhindranwale and his army of followers moved into the complex of buildings that comprise the holiest Sikh shrine, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, as their base of operations. Over the course of the next two years, sewers outside the Golden Temple began to fill with bodies, the victims of Bhindranwale’s gang. On April 23, 1983, A.S. Atwal, the Sikh Police Chief of Amritsar, was shot dead after leaving the temple. He was one of several prominent Sikhs killed because they did not support the separatist movement.

After Atwal’s assassination, many in the government pleaded with Indira to do something about the unrest in the Punjab. Indira’s concerns for the conflict in the Punjab were outweighed by her need to advance Rajiv’s political career. She wanted to solve the issue in Punjab, but to have Rajiv receive credit. Instead of heeding sound advice to negotiate, Indira allowed Bhindranwale to continue his reign of terror. On October 5, 1983 Bhindranwale’s men stopped

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<sup>163</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 455

the Amritsar-Delhi bus and forced six Hindu passengers to get off. They were lined up and shot.<sup>164</sup> Two weeks later, the Calcutta-Kashmir train was derailed, and nineteen people were killed and 129 injured. By spring 1984, plans were being made for a military invasion of the Golden Temple in Amritsar. This plan was drawn up by Rajiv and his team, but Indira hoped it would never have to be implemented.

By April 1984, Bhindranwale and his army had killed eighty people and injured 107, mostly prominent Hindus and pro-Congress Sikhs. Negotiations had been attempted several times, but amounted to nothing. The Punjab was essentially the “breadbasket” of India, since it was the main source of grain supplies. If the problem in Amritsar was not resolved, and grain supplies were halted, the rest of India would suffer greatly. On May 30, 1984, Indian troops began to surround Amritsar. On the morning of June 2, Indira made a speech telling the people, via radio and television, that the situation in the Punjab was “uppermost in all our minds. The whole country is concerned.”<sup>165</sup> Unbeknownst to the people, “Operation Blue Star” was about to be underway. On the morning of June 3, all foreign journalists were expelled from Punjab, rail, bus and air movement were halted, telephone lines were cut, and the border with Pakistan was sealed. An invasion seemed imminent to everyone, Bhindranwale even told journalists, “If the authorities enter this temple, we will teach them such a lesson that the throne of Indira will crumble. We will slice them into small pieces... Let them come.”<sup>166</sup>

In the evening of June 5, 1984, Indian army officers called for all civilians to leave the Golden Temple, and for the armed extremists to surrender. That night, after civilians had come out, Indian troops forcibly entered the temple. After the skirmish, more than half of the ninety Indian troops were killed or injured before they reached the Akali leaders, but Bhindranwale was

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 473

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 480

<sup>166</sup> Cited in Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 481

not among them. The following morning, soldiers continued to search for Bhindranwale. The troops were specifically instructed to use minimum force, to inflict as little damage as possible, and not to violate the holiest shrine, the Harmandir Sahib, the sanctum sanctorum where the Sikh holy book had been read for the past 200 years. Bhindranwale and his men barricaded themselves in another part of the temple, Akal Takht, also a holy shrine. At the outset, Indian soldiers were decimated by the well defended positions of Bhindranwale's men. Tanks and artillery were then used in an attempt to gain entry, greatly damaging the shrine. Bhindranwale and his men had died, but the desecration of the temple deeply grieved Sikhs.

The cost of Bhindranwale's death was high. Operation Blue Star was a disaster. Of the 1,000 troops sent into the Golden Temple, it is estimated that between 300 and 700 were killed, as well as half of the Special Forces commandos.<sup>167</sup> The death toll of civilians was also numbered into the thousands. On June 9, at Indira's request, Indian President Zail Singh visited the temple. As he and his security team walked through, a burst of gunfire rang out. The bullet hit Singh's security guard in the shoulder, barely missing the President. The fallout from the events at the Golden Temple intensified anger, and the assassination attempt of Singh was only a foreshadowing of what was to come.

Following Operation Blue Star, Indira was fearful of assassination. She even discussed funeral arrangements with Rajiv and Sonia. Others in the Indian government were also concerned for her safety. The Defense Minister wanted Indira to change her security from police to military, but she refused saying she was the leader of a democracy, not a military government.<sup>168</sup> The head of the Intelligence Bureau also called for the removal of all Sikh security from her home, but Indira immediately vetoed this. She did not want to appear partial,

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<sup>167</sup> Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 483

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 484

and insisted she would remain secular. By the autumn of 1984, Indira's popularity was at an all time low. Indira, however, remained calm and steadfast. In a document that was not revealed until after her death, Indira wrote,

If I die a violent death as some fear and a few are plotting, I know violence will be in the thought and the action of the assassin, not in my dying – for no hate is dark enough to overshadow the extent of my love for my people and my country; no force is strong enough to divert me from my purpose and my endeavor to take this country forward.<sup>169</sup>

Indira, feeling that her death was imminent, still firmly felt that she could help fix India's problems. She had never wanted this life, and she felt she was thrust into this position, but taking on her family's legacy had been more worthwhile than personal fulfillment.

Even in the wake of the Golden Temple debacle, Indira continued to campaign in anticipation of the next elections. On October 30, 1984, Indira made a speech in the capital of Orissa as part of her election tour. Indira's speech was rousing as usual, but shifted tone when she announced to the crowd:

I am here today, I may not be here tomorrow...Nobody knows how many attempts have been made to shoot me...I do not care whether I live or die. I have lived a long life and I am proud that I spent the whole of my life in the service of my people. I am only proud of this and of nothing else. I shall continue to serve until my last breath and when I die, I can say, that every drop of my blood will invigorate India and strengthen it.<sup>170</sup>

The Governor of Orissa told Indira he was surprised at her remarks toward a violent death in her speech, to which Indira replied that unlike her grandfather and mother, she wanted to “die on her two feet.”<sup>171</sup>

On the morning of October 31, 1984, Indira was to conduct an interview with Peter Ustinov, who was making a documentary of Indira for the BBC. At about 9:10 a.m., she began walking from her home to her Akbar Road office. Waiting to escort her was her bodyguard, Beant Singh, a Sikh from the Punjab, who had been her bodyguard since her reelection in 1980.

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<sup>169</sup> Cited in Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 487

<sup>170</sup> Cited Ibid., 490

<sup>171</sup> Cited in Ibid., 491

With him was a young constable, another Sikh, Satwant Singh. As Indira approached them, Beant pulled out his revolver and pointed it at Indira. Indira asked him, “What are you doing?” just as Beant fired his gun, the bullet striking Indira in the abdomen. Beant then fired four more shots, followed by a spray of bullets by Satwant after Beant shouted for him to shoot. Those who had been walking with her were stunned, and remained frozen for a short time. Indira’s personal servant, Nathu Ram ran back to the home to get the physician on duty. Meanwhile Beant and Satwant dropped their weapons, and were shortly apprehended by police from the nearby guardroom

Soon after being shot, a car was called to bring Indira to the hospital. Just as they were about to depart, Sonia Gandhi came running out their home calling out “Mummy! Oh my God Mummy!” and jumped in the car with them. Sonia had become the daughter Indira never had; they had become extremely close over the years. The car reached the All-India Institute of Medical Science at 9:23 a.m. No one had warned the hospital of Indira’s arrival, panicking the young doctors on staff, but one young doctor called in the Institute’s senior cardiologists, and soon the hospital’s top doctors were working on Indira. Great efforts were made to revive Indira, but at 2:23 in the afternoon, Indira Gandhi was pronounced dead.

### **Conclusion: Indira Gandhi, India’s Fated Leader**

Indira Gandhi and her family had been at the center of Indian affairs since before her birth. Her grandfather, Motilal Nehru, had been a prominent member of the Indian community. Motilal also had close ties with Britain, but this relationship eventually turned into one of contempt because of Great Britain’s reluctance toward completely releasing India from their sphere of influence. Motilal, along with his son Jawaharlal Nehru, combined their efforts with

figures and organizations like Mohandas Gandhi and the Indian National Congress to bring about change in India. At Gandhi's insistence, the younger Nehru was declared president of the INC in 1929. Jawaharlal spent the next thirteen years relentlessly pursuing independence from India. All the while a young Indira, born in November 1917, was at the forefront of an intense fight for control of the country.

Indira's father was not the only one invested in India's future. Indira observed others in her family fully commit themselves to an independent India, including her mother Kamala. Indira was born in a time where women were becoming active in politics, which was another factor that contributed to her rise in government. Indira's mother, as well as other female family members, participated in demonstrations and other acts of civil disobedience. Indira commenting on how many Indian women had risen to positions of power said, "what is remarkable about India is...once [women] had [risen to power], they have been accepted without question by the public."<sup>172</sup>

While Indira was raised to respect Indian traditional values, Jawaharlal did not enforce such customs, including the Hindu religion, the caste system, or specific political factions. This was also a factor to her political future because many in the Indian government considered her qualities as beneficial when choosing a leader. Indira had closely interacted with Harijans in her childhood home, and was almost unaware of how they were considered throughout India. Indira later commented on her commitment to unity among the Indian people when she said, her government "respects all religions and stands for the equality of all citizens of India, regardless of their religion or their caste...A person is less than human when he deprives somebody of his citizens rights only because of his religion...And I feel the same way about racialism or any

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<sup>172</sup> Indira Gandhi, *My Truth*, ed., Emmanuel Puchpadass, (New Delhi: Vision Books), 1982, 187

discrimination based on race, color or sex for that matter.”<sup>173</sup> Indira had been raised in a politically charged household, and so never developed her political character independently. Indira, therefore, at times followed the policies laid by her father, and at other times she took a stand for her own beliefs.

Indira had been groomed for power all her life, but neither she nor her father realized this. The circumstances of her childhood and young adulthood made her rise to power almost inevitable. Indira had reluctantly accepted more and more power until she apparently believed in her own indispensability. In 1975, Indira enacted an Emergency allowing herself almost absolute power. After some extreme internal problems, including unrest in the Punjab, Indira lost what had been so precious to her, the faith of her people. Indira had always been supported by the people, the poor, Hindus, Muslims, and Harijans alike. After events, like the desecration of a Sikh holy shrine, Indira had lost her massive following. The people’s anger toward Indira culminated when Indira was killed by her own bodyguard on October 31, 1984. Like his mother before him, her son Rajiv was immediately given power. Indira was still in the operating room when Rajiv was being asked to become the next Prime Minister of India, and at 6:30 p.m. that evening, Rajiv was sworn in. That night, sometime after eleven, Rajiv addressed the nation on All India Radio, saying:

Indira Gandhi has been assassinated. She was mother not only to me but to the whole nation. She served the Indian people to the last drop of her blood. This is a moment of profound grief... We can and must face this tragic ordeal with fortitude, courage, and wisdom. Indira Gandhi is no more but her soul lives. India lives. India is immortal. The spirit of India is immortal.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 91

<sup>174</sup> Cited in Frank, *The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi*, 497



The following day, Indira's body was moved to Teen Murti where an endless stream of mourners came to pay their respects to their fallen leader. Thirteen days after Indira's ashes had been gathered, Rajiv flew with them to Kashmir and scattered her ashes over the Himalayas.

Though at times a controversial figure, Indira's impact on India's history is undeniable. Indira led her country even through severe challenges helping India transform into a respected member of the world community. Her love of country and sense of duty drove her every move. After her death, Indira was remembered by many as a dedicated leader. Margaret Thatcher, British Prime Minister, remembered her "indomitable courage and resolution in adversity" and praised her for building on the "foundations of modern India laid by her father."<sup>175</sup> Former President Ronald Reagan credited Indira with spending "her life in search of a better life for the people of India" and her accomplishments were "a great legacy to her nation and the world."<sup>176</sup> Perhaps the most appropriate description of Indira came from Francois Mitterand, President of the Republic of France, when he described Indira as having the rare quality of "[knowing] how to listen and make herself heard with as much conviction as with tact, without ever relinquishing her natural modesty."<sup>177</sup> Indira possessed both the strength and humility to be a remarkable leader. As a child of the nationalist struggle, Indira was forever bound to her country, and was destined to lead India.

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<sup>175</sup> G. Parthasarathi and H. Y. Sharada Prasad. *Indira Gandhi: Statesmen, Scholars, Scientists, and Friends Remember.* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House 1985), 430

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 371

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 300

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