

India's Uncertain Future

He had charm, sense of humour, and gift of friendship. Rajiv Gandhi's untimely and tragic death is a great loss to his family and friends. It is not, however, a defining event in contemporary Indian history. His talents had already been tested. He had played out, unsuccessfully, in Indian politics. Had he escaped the lethal bouquet in Tamil Nadu, Gandhi would most likely have led the Indian National Congress to power. But there is no reason to believe that his second stint as Prime Minister would have been an improvement on his first.

He had been a family man more interested in aeroplanes, jazz, and the Beatles than in politics. In 1980, when his younger brother died in a plane crash, Rajiv's destiny changed. Sanjay had been Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's heir apparent, a role he had relished. The Iron Lady would not let her dynasty pass. Rajiv became the General Secretary of the Indian National Congress, the party which led the struggle for India's independence under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi (no relation), Rajiv's great grandfather Moti Lal, and grandfather Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister (1947-1964). In 1981, he was elected to parliament and appointed Minister for Science and Technology. In October 1948, after his mother was assassinated by two of her armed guards, Rajiv became Prime Minister and, to every one's surprise, an avid politician. The challenges facing him were enormous; so were the opportunities.

Divided by a dizzying variety of castes, languages, class and faiths, India is hard to govern in the best of times. His mother had left a dubious legacy. Under her, the Congress party, the most effective guarantor of democracy and national cohesion, was packed with sycophants, and riddled by factionalism and corruption. Use of strong-arm methods and party patronage led to what Indian scholar Rajni Kothari aptly described as "criminalisation of politics." Under strain, the party split; many older, well-reputed leaders defected. Mrs. Gandhi's bloated international ambitions for India yielded a costly and capital-intensive drive to build a military-industrial complex, wrecked her promise of gharibi hatao (remove poverty), and caused relations with neighbours to worsen. Above all, it was under Mrs. Gandhi that India's ethnically distinct outer states - Punjab, Assam, and Kashmir - began to be decisively alienated from the federation. Her decision, in June 1984, to send the army to eject dissidents from the Golden Temple, the Sikh people's holiest shrine, cost her life and India a festering wound.

India understood Rajiv's predicament. His youth, disarming manners and clean image assured his mass appeal. India's establishment, including its powerful bureaucracy, defence forces and influential capitalist class, had viewed the congress party and the Nehru family's leadership as the insurance of India's stability: it supported Rajiv. His promises to liberalise the economy, promote technological growth, ensure distributive justice, and free the Congress party from the clutches of the "feudal oligarchy" appealed widely. In the 1984 general elections, the Congress was returned with 413 of 545 parliamentary seats, a majority even his illustrious grandfather had not enjoyed. Rajiv Gandhi's opportunities appeared unlimited.

He used his advantages well at first. His economic liberalisation, though much too tentative, spurred the rate of growth. Agreements were reached with the Sikh moderates his mother had imprisoned, and dissident students ending four and six years, respectively, of strife in Punjab and Assam. An accord was also concluded with the rebels who for decades had demanded autonomy for the remote northeastern territories of Nagaland and Mizoram; and attempts were made to end friction between the Congress and the ruling National Conference in Kashmir. But soon the legacy of Mrs. Gandhi, the

venality of party bosses, the dead weight of the bureaucracy, and India's unrealistic international ambitions proved stronger than Rajiv Gandhi's instincts and intelligence.

His willingness to compromise with opponents encountered resistance from party stalwarts; his public denunciations of corruption aroused their anxieties. Senior bureaucrats, heirs to the British vice-regal tradition of centralised power in India, disliked his attempts to deregulate and liberalise the economy, and distrusted the influence of his technocrat friends and advisors. These masters of infighting and bureaucratic sabotage went to work on all that was new in Gandhi's politics.

Gradually, they pulled him back to the old ways. As he encountered criticism and opposition from people close to him - younger men like his cousin Arun Nehru, and V.P. Singh who defeated him in the next parliamentary elections - he became distrustful, quarrelsome, and increasingly dependant on the yes-men and old guard who had ruined his mother's reign. The party executive's decision to invite his Italian wife Sonia Gandhi to assume their leadership reveals the personalisation of power and bankruptcy of leaders which characterised the Indian National Congress under Indira and Rajiv Gandhi.

Rajiv Gandhi shared his mother's international ambitions for India, and continued her costly programme of military spending, and of building India's capability to produce sophisticated arms. This multi-billion dollar, capital-intensive programme contributed to widening India's poverty gap; yielded it a top heavy defence establishment, and accentuated its arrogance towards neighbours. Ironically, the defence extravaganza contributed to his worst political crisis, and parliamentary defeat. Accusation of \$1.5 billion worth of weapons from the Swedish manufacturer A.B. Bofors remain unproven; but they decisively sullied Rajiv's image as Mr. Clean.

As troubles mounted at home, Rajiv took on neighbours. He intervened militarily, and unsuccessfully, to end the civil war in Sri Lanka. India's relations with Pakistan worsened as the cycle of rebellion and repression started anew in the disputed, Indian occupied Jammu and Kashmir. He imposed a protracted and punishing economic sanction even against Nepal when the landlocked kingdom purchased arms from China. No one was really surprised when, in 1989, the Indian electorate voted the Congress out of power.

Today, India stands roughly where Gandhi had left it. The economy stagnates with increases in agricultural and industrial output (2.2%; 5.4% annually) below Indonesia and Pakistan and leaves half of its 850 million people below the poverty line (i.e. income level needed to sustain a healthy adult). India's external debt has mounted to \$40 billion, making it the third largest debtor in the Third World, and its exports, as percentage of GDP, is among the lowest in Asia.

The rebellion in Punjab, India's breadbasket, continues to take a daily toll of lives. Insurgency has spread in Assam. Above all, the Indian army is engaged in a hopelessly protracted counter-insurgency war in the disputed valley of Kashmir where human rights violations have augmented to India's discredit, and from where a devastating war could start between India and Pakistan. Nearly a third of India's armed forces are deployed today against dissidents at home.

Possibly, the most fateful recent development has been the rise in the power of Hindu fundamentalist parties. They have divided the country sharply along religious lines, and created conditions of virtual civil war with their attempts to revive historic animosities, and demands for curtailing minority rights and converting Muslim mosques into Hindu temples. When the elections are finalised in June the largest of these, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is expected to occupy as much as a 20-25% of the parliamentary seats. If the secular parties remain divided, the BJP will surely exercise power out of proportion to its number. Its agenda is to rid India of its secular commitment, and

destroy Mahatma Gandhi's and Jawaharlal Nehru's finest legacy upon which rests the unity and solidarity of the Indian Union.

India's multiple crises have led some observers to predict the worst: a widened civil war and eventual disintegration. These counsels of despair are premature. Many sources of India's stability remain: continuity of culture and history; and a large, politically conscious national bourgeoisie whose interests lie in India's integrity and progress. Its weakness lies in an excess of nationalism, not in its lack of dedication to Indian unity.

India also has the oldest and most powerful capitalist class in the Third World which, like its American counterpart, has been historically allied to federal governments, and centrist politicians. Its giant bureaucracy continues to be both a source of stability and stagnation. Similarly, its military establishment, while unduly burdening its economy, would not want matters to get worse. Rather, the danger is that if the politicians continue to falter, the army would step in, as it did in Pakistan earlier.

This latest tragedy may serve as a needed jolt to India's politicians. Those in the centre of Indian politics, including former Prime Minister V.P. Singh, and the current Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar are frustrated defectors from the Congress party. Rajiv Gandhi's departure may encourage them to coalesce with their former colleagues. Consolidation of liberal, secular, and democratic forces is the only alternative India has to compromise with an eventual surrender to militarism and emergent fascism.

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