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2: Indira Gandhi Mother to India

Indira Nehru Gandhi considered it her destiny to lead India. Although no relation to the legendary Mohandas "Mahatma" Gandhi, who led the movement for India's independence from Great Britain, Indira grew up with politics in her blood. Her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, was the Mahatma's right-hand man in the independence movement and served as India's first prime minister from 1947 until 1964.

Indira Gandhi acquired her last name--a fairly common one in India--through her marriage to journalist Feroze Gandhi, and she rose to power on her father's coattails. Once in office, however, she proved a formidable leader in her own right.

Indira Gandhi was a woman of many contradictions: sometimes warm and self-effacing, sometimes chilly and aloof--a lonely woman adored by the masses. Although schooled in the Mahatma's philosophy of nonviolence, she sometimes resorted to force. For nearly two decades, she unified a poor, chaotic, and religiously divided nation that included 746 million people by 1984--the most populous democracy in the world.

Roughly 83 percent of Indians follow Hinduism, a religion probably best known for grouping people into social classes called castes. A Hindu is born into a caste that determines his or her social status and often occupation as well. Other religions in India include Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism, which blends the teachings of Hinduism and Islam. Although Buddhism began in India about 500 years before Christ and spread throughout Asia, today only about 1 percent of Indians are Buddhists.

At the time of Indira Gandhi's birth in 1917, the British ruled India. Britain's involvement in the country dated back to the seventeenth century when a prominent British firm, the East

India Company, established several fortified trading posts in India. In 1858, the British government took over India from the East India Company.

Under British rule, native Indians had fewer rights and privileges than their rulers. Considering this unfair, many Indians demanded a greater role in government. Under the leadership of Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, an advisory body known as the Indian National Congress became the voice of an independence movement seeking to free India from British colonial rule.

Born on November 19, 1917, in Allahabad, a large city in central India, Indira Priyadarshini Nehru was the only child of Kamala and Jawaharlal Nehru. As members of the elite Brahman caste of Hindus, the Nehrus were a wealthy and influential family. Indira grew up on a palatial estate built by her grandfather Motilal Nehru, which was called the "House of Joy." But, because Indira was often left behind with the servants while her parents, grandfather, aunts, and cousins spent time in prison for their opposition to British rule, Indira's childhood was more lonely than joyful. She cherished the long letters her father wrote to her from prison.

When Indira was three years old, the Nehrus built a fire in their courtyard and destroyed their foreign-made belongings in a blaze of nationalistic pride. The family refused to buy or wear imported goods and they abandoned their extravagant way of life to embrace the spartan simplicity of the independence movement. Young Indira even burned her favorite foreign-made doll. "I felt as if I was murdering someone," she later recalled.

At the age of 12, Indira formed her own children's political group, the Monkey Brigade. The children ran errands, spied on the British police, and performed other tasks to help their parents in the Indian National Congress.

In 1934, Indira attended a special university called Santiniketan, where she studied Indian arts and nature. But, after only a year and a half, she left for Switzerland with her mother, who was sick with tuberculosis. Despite the medical care she received there, Kamala died in 1936.

Indira credited her mother with teaching her to speak Hindi like a native (Jawaharlal, in contrast, spoke Hindi with an English accent) and passing on her "Indianness," even though she was ridiculed by the more sophisticated, Westernized women in the Nehru extended family. "I saw her being hurt and I was determined not to be hurt," Indira remembered.

After her mother's death, Indira went to England where she studied modern history at Somerville College in Oxford. In 1941, she returned to India, accompanied by a family friend named Feroze Gandhi, who had been courting her in England. They married on March 26, 1942.

That September, Indira Gandhi was arrested while speaking at a public meeting. After celebrating her 25th birthday in prison with an aunt and cousin, who were also political prisoners, she was released in May 1943. In August 1944, she gave birth to her first child, Rajiv. A second son, Sanjay, followed in December 1946.

The struggle for independence, meanwhile, had heated up. In early 1946, Great Britain had offered to grant India its independence as soon as the people agreed on a form of government. Although the largely Hindu Indian National Congress was still at the forefront

of the independence movement, followers of Islam, known as Muslims, began pushing for a nation of their own to be called Pakistan, which means "Land of the Pure."

Despite Mohandas Gandhi's pleas for unity, the region was partitioned into two separate countries. The northeast and northwest sections, populated predominantly by Muslims, became West and East Pakistan--a single nation that was separated by more than 1,000 miles. (East Pakistan would later split and become the independent country of Bangladesh.) The much larger India, mostly Hindu, sprawled between the two sections of Pakistan. The Indian National Congress became the Congress Party, India's foremost political machine.

On August 15, 1947, India became an independent country with a parliamentary system of government. Parliament meets at the capital, New Delhi, in northern India. It consists of two houses, Lok Sabha--the House of the People, elected directly by the voters--and Rajya Sabha--the Council of States, elected by the 25 state legislatures. The leader of the political party with the most seats in Parliament becomes prime minister and chooses a cabinet. A president serves as the country's head of state, but the prime minister actually leads the government.

Jawaharlal Nehru became India's first prime minister. Seeing that her father needed help, Indira Gandhi moved back into his house in New Delhi with her two sons to serve as his official host as well as unofficial adviser. Feroze, the managing director of a newspaper, stayed in Lucknow. Their marriage suffered as a result.

"When I went into public life and became successful, he [Feroze] liked it and he didn't like it," Indira Gandhi recalled. "Other people--friends, relatives--were the worst. They would say, 'How does it feel, being so-and-so's husband?' He would get upset, and it would take me weeks to win him over." Feroze Gandhi later entered politics as well, serving as a member of parliament from 1952 until his death in 1960.

As "the nation's daughter," Indira Gandhi accompanied her father everywhere, helping him give parties and dinners. She disliked the crowds and the lack of privacy, but she endured them because India always came first, ahead of her own needs. Although she knew everyone in political circles, she had no official government position and no one took her seriously.

Then, in 1955, Gandhi acquired some power of her own as a member of a Congress Party working committee. Four years later, she became president of the Congress Party. Displaying a toughness surprising for someone so long overshadowed by her father, Gandhi weeded out ineffectual party members, negotiated agreements among rival factions, and helped defeat a Communist state government. But, after just a year, she left her post to devote all her energies to caring for her ailing father, who was now in his seventies.

One night in January 1964, Nehru suffered a stroke and collapsed in his daughter's arms. For the next four months, Gandhi nursed him and helped him run the country from his sickbed. Nehru believed too strongly in his democratic ideals to request that his daughter be named his successor. When he died that May, Lal Bahadur Shastri became India's second prime minister. Shastri appointed Gandhi minister of information and broadcasting. Less than two years later, Shastri died suddenly of a heart attack, leaving Congress Party leaders unable to agree on a successor.

Thinking that Nehru's obedient daughter would be easy to control, party bosses chose her as their leader. Behind her back, they called her a "dumb doll." On January 19, 1966, at the age of 48, Indira Gandhi became India's first female prime minister. Few people predicted that she would develop into a shrewd politician.

At first, Gandhi seemed unclear about what to do. But when the economy sank into a recession, and agricultural shortages threatened millions of Indians with starvation, she imported grain from America.

As a woman in politics, the prime minister felt that she had to work twice as hard as a man in the same position. And, as Nehru's daughter, she worked even harder to be seen as a leader in her own right. Still, Gandhi also won the adoration of many simply by virtue of being Nehru's daughter.

The prime minister projected a charisma in public that seemed out of keeping with her shyness. In a nation as vast and diverse as India, the top leader had enormous symbolic importance. Gandhi traveled the country widely to see the people. She clearly empathized with the masses, particularly the poor and the powerless. When she visited a group of women victimized by higher caste men, she sat on the ground and listened to their stories. Women had equal rights under the law, but centuries of religious tradition kept them subordinate to men.

After winning the 1967 elections, Indira Gandhi nationalized the commercial banks and launched a Green Revolution to make India agriculturally self-sufficient through the increased use of fertilizers, irrigation, and other more efficient farming practices. She reasserted--sometimes forcefully--the dominance of the central government over the states. She also defended herself against a call for her resignation by members of the conservative opposition within her own party.

The Congress Party had divided into two factions. The older members rallied around conservative Morarji Desai, while the younger, more radical members supported Gandhi. She won a resounding victory in the March 1971 elections.

Indira Gandhi had little time to celebrate. India became involved in a civil war between the two sections of Pakistan. Later that year, on December 3, 1971, West Pakistan bombed eight Indian airfields, hoping to prevent Indian interference in the Pakistani dispute. The tactic backfired, and Gandhi dispatched troops to East Pakistan to help it win independence from the western section of the country. Within two weeks, the Indian troops triumphed. East Pakistan became the independent nation of Bangladesh, and India was now recognized as the predominant power in the region.

During Gandhi's tenure, India tested its first atomic bomb. The country also launched a satellite into space and built up its armed forces with Soviet weaponry. In 1973, the London Sunday Times hailed Indira Gandhi as "The Most Powerful Woman in the World." That same year, she launched Project Tiger, an effort to save the animal and preserve its habitat. "The tiger's future is our future," she said. Her program also provided new sources of water, which benefited people as well as tigers.

But India's problems remained daunting. After declaring "Abolish Poverty" as her campaign pledge in 1971, the prime minister had failed to make good on her promise, causing her political opponents to accuse her of empty sloganeering. The costs of the Pakistani war sent the economy into another downward spin. Riots erupted. The ruling Congress Party was badly divided, and many considered it corrupt. Gandhi cut herself off

from good advice and installed puppet leaders in many of the regions. India's population, meanwhile, continued to swell.

Then in 1975, a court in Allahabad convicted Gandhi of breaking election laws during her 1971 campaign and canceled her election to Parliament. She was guilty of using government vehicles and employees during the campaign. The conviction was a sharp political blow. Opponents now clamored for her resignation.

Seeing herself as indispensable to India's welfare, the prime minister refused to step down. Instead, on June 26, 1975, Gandhi sent dozens of opposition leaders to prison. About 100,000 other opponents and protesters soon followed them to jail. Declaring a state of emergency, she suspended civil liberties, such as the right to protest or strike as well as freedom of the press. Wages were frozen. Critics accused the prime minister of turning her back on democracy and becoming a dictator. Gandhi, however, insisted that she was simply protecting the rights of the majority. "In India, democracy has given too much license to people," she claimed. "Sometimes a bitter medicine has to be administered to a patient to cure him."

Gandhi's son Sanjay became her chief adviser. Surrounding himself with a group of young toughs, Sanjay initiated a population-control program that promoted sterilization. Rumors of forced sterilizations provoked often violent public protests against the program. To clean up the cities, he moved people living in the worst slums and destroyed their homes without providing other places for them to go.

Gandhi scheduled new elections for March 1977, hoping a victory would vindicate her actions. As her campaign theme, she proclaimed, "Only a strong central government can build a stronger India." The Janata Party, a coalition of several opposition parties, countered with a banner that read, "End Dictatorship. Dethrone the Queen."

On March 20, 1977, the people of India voted Gandhi out of office. Her old nemesis, conservative Morarji Desai, emerged from prison to become prime minister. Indira Gandhi was arrested on a charge of corruption and released; then she was arrested and released again.

Throughout the turmoil, she continued to enjoy widespread popular support, showing that, for all her faults, she was still a widely revered public figure. Thousands of Indians protested Gandhi's arrests. The political coalition against her crumbled as members fought among themselves and failed to address any of India's pressing problems. Gandhi formed her own break-away party, the Congress (I) Party, and campaigned vigorously for reelection.

When the nation voted in January 1980, Gandhi once again scored an impressive victory. Having given up her office freely after the previous election, she returned with her reputation largely intact. Now a national heroine, known to millions as "Mother" or "Madam" or even just "She," crowds everywhere shouted "Long live Indira!"

Then, on June 23, 1980, Sanjay died in a plane crash. An avid pilot, he had been flying too low while performing a stunt. The grief-stricken prime minister began grooming her elder son, Rajiv, to succeed her.

In 1983, violence flared between Hindus and Muslims in response to a government decision allowing Muslim immigrants from Pakistan to vote in state elections. At least 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed in the worst fighting between the two groups

since 1947. Gandhi spoke out against the centuries-old religious rivalries dividing the nation.

Compounding the tensions were demands for more power by the followers of Sikhism, a religion that combined aspects of Hinduism and Islam. In the northwest state of Punjab, Sikh terrorists turned the Golden Temple, their most sacred shrine, into a fortress in the hopes of starting their own nation. Gandhi dispatched troops to squelch the rebellion. On June 6, 1984, Indian soldiers stormed the stronghold, killing nearly 1,000 people and damaging the temple.

On the morning of October 31, 1984, two of Gandhi's own bodyguards, both Sikhs whom she trusted, shot her in revenge for ordering the attack on the Golden Temple. The 66-year-old prime minister died later that day. In her will, Gandhi had made clear her love for India, writing, "No hate is dark enough to overshadow the extent of my love for my people and my country."

Indira Gandhi remains, by far, the best-known woman in Indian politics. Although she undoubtedly had her weaknesses, she increased agricultural production, enhanced India's role as a world power, and developed a remarkable relationship with her people. For millions of Indians, India was Indira, and Indira was India.

Following Gandhi's death, her son, Rajiv, was elected party leader and became prime minister. He headed India until the Congress Party was swept from power in the November 1989 elections. Rajiv Gandhi was killed in May 1991 while campaigning for reelection, the victim of a terrorist bomb. His assassin, a young woman who had concealed the bomb in her clothing, as well as at least 15 bystanders also died in the blast.

The name Gandhi still holds tremendous sway in India. As the nation continues to struggle with social and political unrest, many Indians are looking to Rajiv's widow, Sonia Gandhi, for leadership. She was elected president of India's Congress Party in March 1998, but the opposing Janata Party won more seats in the election and formed the next government.

INDIA

Capital: New Delhi

Area: 1,237,062 square miles

Population: 966,780,000

Languages: English, Hindi, Telugu, Bengali

Religion: 80% Hindu, 14% Muslim, 2% Christian, 2% Sikh

Voting Age: All citizens age 18 and over

Currency: Rupee

Gross Domestic Product Per Person: \$1,500

Literacy rate: 52%

Life Expectancy: 61 female, 60 male

MAP: INDIA

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): The public personality of Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi (1917-1984) was as large and complex as the country she governed.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Indira (standing) photographed with her parents Jawaharlal (left) and Kamala Nehru in 1931. By this time, the entire Nehru family was involved in India's independence movement.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): The exquisite Taj Mahal in Agra, India

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Indira Gandhi was at her father's side during many state occasions, including this visit to Moscow in June 1955. Nikita Khrushchev, then secretary general of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, stands to the right of Indira; Soviet premier Nikolai Bulganin (wearing a hat) is on the right.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Prime Minister Indira Gandhi distributed rice during a drought. Feeding all the citizens of India, the most populous democracy in the world, was one of many challenges Gandhi faced.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Indira Gandhi's longtime political opponent Morarji Desai led India from 1977-79.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Rajiv Gandhi (1944-1991) was a pilot for Indian Airlines until elected to fill his brother's seat in Parliament, left vacant by Sanjay's death in 1980. During his four years as prime minister, Rajiv attempted to curb corruption and revive the Congress Party.

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