

CONTRIBUTION OF THE INDIRA GANDHI & GANDHI FAMILY IN INDIAN HISTORY

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INTRODUCTION

Indira Gandhi (1917-1984) was the only child of Kamla and Jawaharlal Nehru. She spent part of her childhood in Allahabad, where the Nehrus had their family residence, and part in Switzerland, where her mother Kamla convalesced from her periodic illnesses. She received her college education at Somerville College, Oxford. A famous photograph from her childhood shows her sitting by the bedside of Mahatma Gandhi, as he recovered from one of his fasts; and though she was



not actively involved in the freedom struggle, she came to know the entire Indian political leadership. After India's attainment of independence, and the ascendancy of Jawaharlal Nehru, now a widower, to the office of the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi managed the official residence of her father, and accompanied him on his numerous foreign trips. She had been married in 1942 to Feroze Gandhi, who rose to some eminence as a parliamentarian and politician of integrity but found himself disliked by his more famous father-in-law, but Feroze died in 1960 before he could consolidate his own political forces.

In 1964, the year of her father's death, Indira Gandhi was for the first time elected to Parliament, and she was Minister of Information and Broadcasting in the government of Lal Bahadur Shastri, who died unexpectedly of a heart attack less than two years after assuming office. The numerous contenders for the position of the Prime Ministership, unable to agree among themselves, picked Indira Gandhi as a compromise candidate, and each thought that she would be easily manipulable. But Indira Gandhi showed extraordinary political skills and tenacity and elbowed the Congress dons -- Kamaraj, Morarji Desai, and others -- out of power. She held the office of the Prime Minister from 1966 to 1977. She was riding the crest of popularity after India's triumph in the war of 1971 against Pakistan, and the explosion of a nuclear device in 1974 helped to enhance her reputation among middle-class Indians as a tough and shrewd political leader. However, by 1973, Delhi and north India were rocked by demonstrations angry at high inflation, the poor state of the economy, rampant corruption, and the poor standards of living. In June 1975, the High Court of Allahabad found her guilty

of using illegal practices during the last election campaign, and ordered her to vacate her seat. There were demands for her resignation.

PRESIDENT OF THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

The first serious challenge to Congress hegemony came in 1967 when a united opposition, under the banner of Samyukt Vidhayak Dal, won control over several states in the Hindi belt. Indira Gandhi, the daughter of Nehru, and Congress president, was then challenged by the majority of the party leadership. The conflict led to a split, and Indira launched a separate INC. Initially this party was known as Congress (R), but it soon came to be generally known as the New Congress. The official party became known as Indian National Congress (Organisation) led by Kamaraj. It was informally called the *Old Congress*. As Indira Priyadarshini had control over the state machinery, her faction was recognized as the "real" INC by the Election Commission of India, although her organization was the break-away group.

The split can in some ways be seen as a left-wing/right-wing division. Indira Gandhi wanted to use a populist agenda in order to mobilise popular support for the party. She raised slogans such as *Garibi Hatao* (Remove Poverty), and wanted to develop closer ties with the Soviet Union. The regional party elites, who formed the INC(O), stood for a more conservative agenda, and distrusted Soviet help. INC(O) later merged into the Janata Party.

Gradually, Indira Gandhi grew more and more authoritarian. Following allegations of widespread rigging in the general elections, a court overturned Indira Gandhi's victory in the Parliamentary constituency. Facing growing opposition she proclaimed a state of National Emergency in 1975, curtailed the powers of the courts, and unleashed a police state.

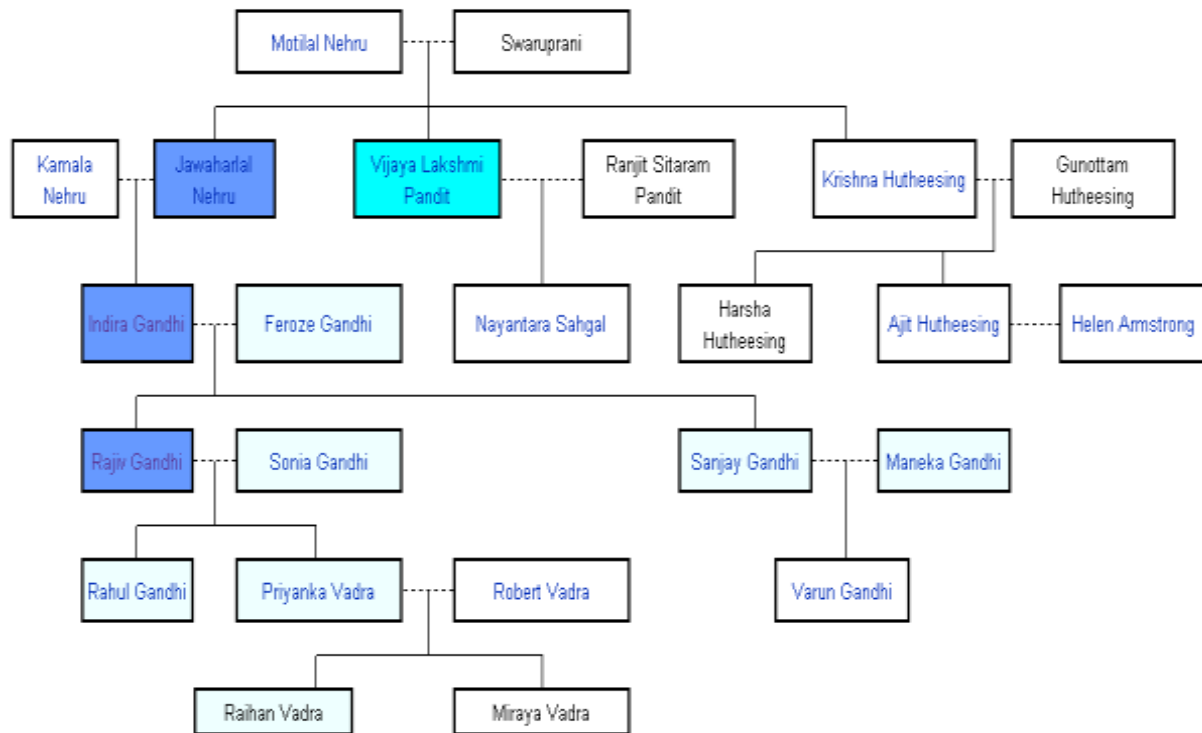
After she lifted the emergency in 1977, more Congress factions were formed, the one remaining loyal to Indira Gandhi being popularly known as Congress(I) with an 'I' for Indira. The Congress (I) was routed in the general elections by the Janata Party, but the coalition government fell apart in two years. The Congress party returned to power in the ensuing 1980 elections. In 1984 Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards, in revenge for Operation Blue Star. In the following days more than six thousand Sikhs were killed in the 1984 riots, mainly in Delhi, by activists and leaders of the Congress Party. On the other hand three thousand to eight thousand Hindus were slaughtered in the Punjab from 1984 to 1991 by militants seeking a separate homeland.

About the riots, the new PM and Indira's son, Rajiv Gandhi remarked, "When a big tree falls, the earth is bound to shake."

During 1959 and 1960, Gandhi ran for and was elected the President of the Indian National Congress. Her term of office was uneventful. She also acted as her father's chief of staff.

Nehru was known as a vocal opponent of nepotism, and she did not contest a seat in the 1962 elections.

INCOMPLETE FAMILY TREE



ORIGINS

The Nehru family is of Kashmiri Brahmin descent. The name "Nehru" is derived from the Hindi "nehar", meaning canal.

The family's political fortunes were founded by Motilal Nehru (1861-1931), who was a prominent lawyer and early activist in the Indian independence movement. Motilal was succeeded as President of the Congress by his son, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), in 1929. Jawaharlal then became one of the most prominent Indian nationalist leaders, in close alliance with the movement's spiritual leader, Mahatma Gandhi.

RISE TO POWER 1947-1991

In 1947, India became independent and Jawaharlal Nehru became Prime Minister, holding this post until his death in 1964. Nehru's sister, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit (1900-1990), was also prominent in Congress politics. She became a diplomat, serving as ambassador to the USSR, High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, and later as President of the United Nations General Assembly in 1953.

Nehru encouraged his only child, Indira Gandhi (1917-84) to be active in Congress politics. During her Prime Ministership her younger son, Sanjay Gandhi (1946-80), wielded enormous political influence without holding any accountable government office. His alleged abuse of power was one of the reasons for the government's 1977 defeat. Sanjay died in a plane crash in 1980.

After she ordered an invasion of the Sikh religion's holiest shrine, the Golden Temple, on 6 June 1984 to flush out Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his supporters, she was assassinated by two of her bodyguards on 31 October 1984; the remaining bodyguards killed one of the assassins and captured the other. She was succeeded by her elder son, Rajiv Gandhi (1944- 91), an airline pilot, who was initially reluctant to enter politics, but was persuaded by the Congress that no-one else could lead it.

SANJAY'S LEGACY

Sanjay Gandhi's widow Maneka and their son Varun were excluded from power in the Congress after Sanjay's death, and are now members of the BJP. Maneka fell out with her mother-in-law Indira, following Sanjay's death, and was even thrown out of her home. She joined the opposition Janata Dal and became a Union Minister in the VP Singh Government which followed Rajiv Gandhi's electoral defeat in 1989. She continued to contest from Pilibhit, Uttar Pradesh, with a defeat in 1991 and victory in 1996. She left the Janata Dal, and during the 1998 and 1999 elections, contested as an Independent supported by the BJP. She supported the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance Government at the Centre and became a Minister of Social Justice and Empowerment. During the 2004 General Elections, she formally joined the BJP along with her son, Varun Gandhi. Maneka won her seat again, but Varun did not meet the age requirement to contest, and spent his time campaigning. In October 2006 Varun Gandhi was tipped to contest the by-elections to the Lok Sabha parliamentary Constituency of Vidisha (the vacancy was necessitated by the resignation of the incumbent, Mr. Shivraj Singh Chauhan who was elected as the Madhya Pradesh chief minister). Varun Gandhi could not succeed in getting nomination from the BJP national executive and instead the party nominated Mr. Rampal Singh a minister in the Madhya Pradesh.

THE RISE OF SONIA GANDHI

After Rajiv Gandhi's death, the Congress was led by P. V. Narasimha Rao, who became Prime Minister. After his defeat in India's 1996 General Elections, the power in the Congress party shifted to Sitaram Kesri, an aging loyalist of Indira Gandhi. During this period, Sonia kept herself and her children out of the public limelight, not wanting them to face the fate of her husband and mother-in-law.

The party loyalists always wanted a member of the Nehru- Feroz Gandhi family to lead the party, as its fortunes slipped in elections around the nation. Despite her reluctance, Sonia Gandhi was eventually persuaded to become active in the Congress Party, and she quickly became its center of power, forcing Kesri's resignation and allowing her uncontested assent to the party's Presidency in 1998.

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