

Making Meaning Out of a Lifetime: The Life and Times of Indira Gandhi

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“This is what the painter does, and the poet, the speculative philosopher, the natural scientist, each in his own way. Into this image of the world and its formation, he places the centre of gravity of his emotional life, in order to attain the peace and serenity that he cannot find within the narrow confines of swirling personal experience.”

Albert Einstein (doi: http://101sharequotes.com/quote/albert_einstein-variant-translation-one-of-the-384382).

Abstract This chapter focuses on the life and times of Indira Gandhi, a phenomenal political leader, and the first and only woman prime minister of India. It dwells upon her early life as a child of a family that has come to be known as India’s first family and how her early life was embroiled in India’s historical freedom struggle. Her relationship of closeness coupled with separation and distance, from time to time, with her father, and with her ailing mother, and the experiences she had within the extended networks of her family set the tone for her individuation and metamorphosis into adulthood. Being at the helm of public life at all stages of the lifespan, she exhibited unique strength, stubborn resolve, and an often contested “method to the political madness” around her. Resistance was a continuing underlying theme in her life on the personal as well as on the public front. Through her life leading up to her political career, this chapter demonstrates how resistance is built up through a life course. An additional dynamics arises on account of the fact that Indira Gandhi shares Mahatma Gandhi’s family name. In her life and career, although she deeply admired Gandhi, her political strategies gradually developed very differently from the *Satyagraha* (Insistence on truth, Gandhi’s ideology for the freedom struggle in India) which was Gandhi’s method of political struggle.

Keywords Indira Gandhi · Biography · Indian political history

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Introduction

When a life story is approached, it becomes possible to discern the ways in which social situation, personal history and individual resolve can weave together a life. When the person concerned is well known as an exceptional leader, the details become even more dramatic. Indira Gandhi is known worldwide as a national leader of independent India. In her life, as in her death, she came face to face with some of the most difficult situations as a political leader. Some of her decisions ultimately led to her assassination. On 31st October 1984, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her personal bodyguards for a confrontational decision she had taken for military action against a Sikh group after failed negotiations. She was well known as an expert in diplomatic matters, having served as a personal assistant, as well as a hostess for her father, the first prime minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru. Her dramatic life circumstances, her life in the limelight as well as her violent death, all symbolize persistent resistance that evolved into persevering domination of others. In her cabinet as prime minister, she is supposed to have, at one point, been known to be the “only man”,¹ a label that symbolized not only her ruthless and unprecedented centralization of control but also the compliance that she was able to generate among her cabinet ministers. Indira Gandhi’s image is symbolic for strength and determination, or the ultimate resistance that was under constant threat of being and was ultimately destroyed.

Indira Gandhi was born into a milieu of political resistance, in a family that was completely immersed in India’s freedom struggle. In a way it can be said she was born to be “made” a leader. Her being the only child of an only child (Nehru) of his parents, the future was “certain”. Patriarchy was the norm in north India, and at the same time women were coming out of their homes in good numbers to join the freedom struggle. Little Indira too was initiated into the struggle.

Such was the extent of resistance of Indira’s family that they gave up affluence for a life of austerity and made huge personal sacrifices for their engagement with the national cause. Resistance, Indira admitted was an acquired taste, acquired in childhood under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi. Although no relation, Mahatma Gandhi was a close friend of her family and his philosophy was their driving force. Mahatma Gandhi believed in austerity, democracy, non-violence and truth. The Nehrus were affluent, classy, well-educated, widely travelled and very anglicized. Such was the power of Mahatma Gandhi’s ideals that the Nehrus gave up their family house for the activities of the political party and invested their personal wealth in India’s resistance to the British rule. Little Indira thus came to be a child of the revolution. She with the guidance of her mother formed Children’s Collectives (*Bal Sangh*) and Monkey Brigades (*Vanar Sena*) that carried out social work activities laced with a good deal of activism. This was her first independent foray into politics.

¹Doi: <http://archive.deccanherald.com/Deccanherald/jun212005/national1937402005620.asp>.

Political Domination and Democracy

It is well accepted that India's democracy is both peculiar and precarious. As a society that is deeply committed to tradition, India's sustained democracy is a conundrum. Does it reflect genuine equality and equity? How has India managed to stay a military coup, for instance? These are all questions that have been the topics of serious national debate and discussion (Wilkinson, 2015). There has been only one event that stands out as a black mark on Indian democracy, the period of political emergency declared by Indira Gandhi (1975–1977). Unlike other leaders, and even her father, Indira Gandhi handled opposition by removing it and during this period, even incarceration of any opponent to her leadership.

Recently, the Indian media has been abuzz with abysmal reflections on “The Emergency”, on its 40th anniversary. As a political leader, Indira Gandhi was most controversial for her unprecedented decision of imposing “a state of emergency” in the country. Fearful of losing power at the hands of the opposition, after a judgment of the Allahabad High Court that implicated her for misuse of government machinery for her election campaign, Indira Gandhi unilaterally had a state of emergency declared across the nation by the President. This meant that people lost their autonomy in everyday life: freedom of expression/free speech, trade, personal safety, political “opposition”, and among other things, decision-making regarding personal fertility. These were all curtailed. The “sterilization drive” run in those days by the prime minister's younger son (and designated political heir), wherein people were forcefully picked up and sterilized so as to control the burgeoning population, was the nastiest of the excesses of the Emergency. There was in those days, a complete lack of objective law and order. Political opponents were jailed, and anybody speaking against the Emergency was confronted.

While such was the overall picture of the national capital and the country at large during this period, what was happening in New Delhi's elite circles was altogether a different story. Political journalist Singh (2013) describes how social life during the days of the Emergency was restricted to the drawing rooms of the social elite. The city became unsafe to venture out, and it became easy to form coterie and exchange “like-minded” views on the political scenario; private parties filled up people's evenings among the elite. Her book is aptly titled *Durbar* that can be loosely translated as “a congregation of like-minded sycophants” (Singh, 2013). In addition to Gandhi's excesses, her older son and his wife were often a part of these *Durbars*. Their presence apparently ensured that no one directly discussed the Emergency in a negative light. All forms of dissent were silenced. The agenda most often would be of pleasing the first family either by not discussing the topic altogether or expressing positive views on the Emergency.

The “Person” and the Leader

Indira Priyadarshini² Gandhi (1917–1984) was the only child of independent India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. She grew up in a highly politically engaged family during India’s freedom struggle. During her growing years as a child of the Nehru clan, she was mostly lonely as her father was often away directing political events or in prison for his freedom-related activities, and her mother was confined to bed with tuberculosis. In her early years, she had limited contact with her father, mostly through letters. Despite her ill health, her mother was politically instrumental in organizing awareness campaigns and social activities for India’s freedom struggle often involving little Indira, giving her the first taste of politics. Influenced by eminent personalities such as Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, Indira grew up to be an independent, free-thinking and bold person. She served many years as her father’s personal assistant in his days as prime minister, managing his political and personal life. When she did get married, to Feroze Gandhi with whom she had two sons, she was often torn between her need to be with her family—her husband and two sons, and her duties towards her father. Indira spent her time in a kind of ambivalence, something that only steered her towards the political direction. Frank (2001), her biographer, describes how Indira Gandhi often expressed her desire to be out of politics after she got married and had children, but her commitment towards her father Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India’s first prime Minister, never left her alone.

Though she is known to have enjoyed her work, worries of distances building up between her and her husband, and between the children and their father, often tormented her. She was, however, never able to break away from her father, psychologically trapped between the two persuasive images of her father, as a family man and as a leader: One, “the father figure”, was lonely after the passing away of his wife and having an only child in Indira, and “the Prime Minister” whose portfolio needed her sustenance, since after all, she had been nurtured by him for a political career. She continued to move apart from her husband Feroze Gandhi and having sent her children to boarding school, she devoted all her time and energies to her father’s affairs. After she lost her husband and later on her father, she retained her political space in order to keep a house and a base for her children. The historic family house she grew up in, Anand Bhawan, in Allahabad, had already been gifted by the family to the cause of the freedom struggle and was made into the headquarters of the Indian National Congress, and subsequently housed a planetarium for the purpose of inculcating the love of scientific temper among people. In 1970, Indira Gandhi gifted it to the Government of India.

²Her middle name was given to her by the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore.

Her Father's Daughter

Despite that fact that Indira was a child of India's struggle for freedom, in many ways, she remained her father's daughter throughout her life. "Letters from a Father to his Daughter", is a renowned book Nehru wrote for 10-year-old Indira, while he was in jail in the course of the freedom struggle. The letters reflect a great keenness on Nehru's part to educate Indira on science, history and civilization, and his active instruction for nurturing in his daughter a national feeling. The letters present liberated modern views and shun superstition while encouraging an understanding of culture, and an appreciation of science. In later life too, Indira and Nehru communicated very often and very effectively through letters. According to Frank (2001), the letters brought the father and daughter close to each other, creating an intimacy between them that was difficult to sustain in real life, with few opportunities to replicate this closeness in person. Indira and Nehru also disagreed on many fronts, especially political ones. But Indira always let Nehru's influence over her prevail. However, in her letters, the words and ideas flowed much more freely.

The closeness between the father and the daughter was strengthened in the wake of Indira's mother's failing health. Indira had to devote a large part of her early years in travelling with her mother to foreign sanatoria for the treatment for tuberculosis. Indira herself was of weak disposition and had to also undergo similar treatment at a later point of time. Her fragile disposition, weak health and a sallow look invited criticism and disapproval from her extended family members. Her mother also enjoyed little regard from the extended family because of her very Indian and less Western background, so different from the rest of the Nehrus. Later on, of course the Nehrus had embraced the indigenous in favour of anything remotely foreign, following Gandhi's emphasis on *Swaraj* or self-rule, under which the foreign ways were to be discarded. Her mother's low status in the family and quiet assertion in the public sphere presented for Indira much to learn from. Indira never forgave her paternal aunt for her unkindness to her mother.

Indira Gandhi, Some Glimpses of the Person

While making an attempt to understand Indira Gandhi, one is confounded by the several descriptions of her intense determination as a growing child. In some ways, the conflicting images of a rather fragile disposition as a companion of her ailing mother described above stands in stark contrast to her image as unforgiving person with an elephantine memory for any grudge. Her temperament was mercurial. As a child, she was a tomboy and signed her name as "Indu-boy". She is known to have been quite "political", even in her play as a child. Frank (2001) describes how Indira did not approve of one of her grandmother's female relatives who lived in their house and managed to playfully oust her when she needed her grandmother's attentions. She was attached to her doll—that may have served as a transitional

object as described by Winnicott (1971). Her play was mostly solitary, and she was left lonely on many occasions with family members in and out of jail. Any distress or feelings of suppression that may have been brought about by her childhood experiences found release when she went to Rabindranath Tagore's Shantiniketan.³ There she experienced learning amidst nature, with music and art for company. These positive experiences did not sustain her at Oxford where she continually failed the Latin language exam and eventually dropped out.

Indira Gandhi always seemed to have been in control of her life, a strength that characterized her image and sustained through her personal and public life, enduring much criticism, political success and failure, and her ultimate death.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi

Indira Gandhi was known to have had many biases and a neurotic disposition which made her a complex leader. Beyond a few trusted people, paranoia, neuroticism, contrariness, susceptibility to the "supernatural" and an interest in the occult characterized her personality as a senior leader. Among those who she trusted were her younger son Sanjay, her yoga instructor Dharendra Brahmachari, and a few in her office.

As ingrained in her upbringing in the Nehru family, she was on the side of nurture not nature, science not religion, yet she was privately religious and publicly secular (Guha, 2003). Sahgal (2012), her cousin and well-known author, describes her as a publically suave, popular, yet reticent person—someone who reaches out to the masses yet remains uninvolved in their lives. In descriptions of her childhood experiences, particularly how she grew up with apparent frailties both in person and in her environment, one finds certain duress.

As a leader and as a human being, she was time and again in the eye of a storm, but never seemed to lose her vision. Her strength in the face of personal tragedy as when she lost her younger son in a freak accident and the political gravity of the Emergency was enduring. She handled pressure extremely well almost seeming to enjoy the burdens that came with it.

Her decisions were bold. Some called her style of operating selfish-motive driven, ego-driven, power-crazed, or even plain ignorant. Ram Manohar Lohia, an eminent activist for India's Independence movement, once called her a *Gungi Gudiya* or dumb doll.⁴ She proved to be the reverse once she assumed power. It was thought generally that the senior leadership of the Congress party that she was a part of promoted her in order to gain an edge with the public and implement their own

³The University town near Kolkata in Bengal that was established by Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore.

⁴doi: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Ram-Manohar-Lohia-The-Quota-Marshall/articleshow/5756713.cms>.

agenda through her. This was also not to be. She was so individualistic that she broke away from the original Congress party and started her own Congress (I), where I may stand for India or Indira, it was never clarified. In fact, a popular slogan of her times, promoted by her sycophants, was “India is Indira, Indira is India!”

She was heavily criticized for carrying out the Operation Blue Star in Punjab that eventually scripted her assassination on 31st October, 1984. She ordered the army to enter the Sikh religious shrine at Amritsar—The Golden Temple—to combat militants in hiding out there. In July 1982, Sikh extremist groups occupied the Golden Temple. In June 1984, Indira Gandhi ordered an attack on the Sikh holiest site, Golden Temple, to remove the Sikh separatists. There was much bloodshed. Many innocent people died. And the operation set the stage for Hindu–Sikh riots that followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi by two of her Sikh bodyguards. Her last speech made in the state of Orissa had references to how each drop of her blood that is shed would be in the service of the country. It was an intuitive remark made possibly in the light of an astute political assessment of the troubled times.

A Woman in a Man’s World

Indira Gandhi was politically steering a male dominated country. The Time magazine (1966) titled its cover “Troubled India in a Woman’s Hands”. References to her included “Iron Lady”, “emergency monster”, “*Ma Durga*” (after the 1971 war when Indian intervention helped Bangladesh get its independence from Pakistan), “Empress of India”, and “Woman of the Millennium”. The slogan “Indira *hatao*, *indri bachao*” literally translated as “Remove Indira, save your penis” with reference to the sterilization drive virtually portrayed her as a “castration goddess”! Her cabinet of ministers addressed her as “Sir”! She was the only Indian prime minister to have been imprisoned. There were several comparisons made with others, most prominently with Margaret Thatcher on the world stage, including comparisons of their hairstyles as well. Indira Gandhi was seen to be an extremely well-dressed person, choosing traditional hand-woven saris from different states of India’s handloom industry. She was well travelled, and despite the austerity that the Nehrus and Indira herself had embraced, she enjoyed and appreciated the good things in life.

Pluralistic in approach, she had open regard for world cultures and the cultural diversity in India. She was successful in creating improved relations with other countries. Her focus was on reducing poverty and hunger—“*Garibi hatao*” or “Eradicate poverty” being her tag line. She went on to nationalize banks, initiating the use of nuclear power, improving science and technology, successfully establishing India as a food exporter, launched the first satellite into space in 1971, and led India to become one of the fastest growing economies.

The Leader Herself

Kakar (2013) describes how major emotional conflicts could be a source of creativity and genius. Analysing the life of Rabindranath Tagore, he uses the constructs of “transitional” space (Winnicott), “self-effectance”, one’s work as “self-object” (Kohut) and the “mirroring” appreciation of the public to explain how genius comes about in a lifetime. Indira Gandhi lived and experienced all of these in abundance and intensity.

Through the story of her life, initially as a lonely child with few attachments, initiated early into austerity through the freedom movement amidst an affluent background, her life was punctuated by intense ambivalence. She was encouraged to be individualistic, determined, aware of the political happenings in the country and to imbibe the qualities of a good leader. Perhaps as an outcome of these tensions in her life, her later political decisions were often extremely self-driven. She was at the helm of things, directly reaching out to the country’s electorate. The adulation she received from the Indian public was tremendous. She became a famous face globally while travelling with her father, assisting him in his work. And the current political scenario is such that while her party and family members are being asked to apologize for The Emergency 40 years after it happened, thousands of people from villages and other cities line up every day to see her memorial in New Delhi.

Conclusion

Psycho-biographies provide insight into the meaningful nature of life events or life trajectory of a person. When the person is at the centre of national, political and public life, these life events acquire credits from the larger cultural meaning structures, of which the individual is a part. Comparisons are inevitable at the global level as well, especially in the case of national leaders. Psycho-biographies offer lessons for life and the world that are historically significant and create an agenda for analysis of not only the person’s life, but of turning points for society at large. Analysis is at once at both levels: personal and macro-structural. It may include the historical, political, artistic, or social—as the case maybe. The study of the life course can be especially enlightening about the nature of “resistance” as a quality that builds up and is lived over the course of a lifetime.

The life of Indira Gandhi is reflective of tensions of a psycho-analytic nature, especially with reference to the early father–daughter relationship of distance yet mutual influence and the later father–daughter relationship of Indira’s adult life, where the father was in quite a few ways overly dependent on her at home and in public life. Her inability to break free from the father even while wanting to be with her husband is uniquely Freudian, somewhat of a father complex. In the dialogical self-perspective (Hermans, 2001), the many personae Indira Gandhi assumes, at different points in her life trajectory, are encompassing of the many extensions of

the self she finds in her father, mother, the groups to which she belongs (the Nehru family Indian National Congress, and so on), influential figures to whom she was close like Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, and later (in her waning relationship) with her husband and her role as a mother. The particular tussle she faces between her commitment towards father and guilt of ignoring the husband highlights conflict in the domain of the other-in-self, where she finds she cannot do complete justice to either of the two, the father and the husband. And in the bargain, she is not fair to herself and the children. This self-other tension translates into her public life as a politician, where she finds she can trust very few individuals, so much so, that she ends up being completely controlled by her younger son, who is seen taking many rash political decisions despite her disagreement. As a result, she took unilateral decisions (like The Emergency) and ended up being lonely in her life as India's leader. It can be said that the loneliness of her childhood is resonated in her lonesome life as India's prime minister. Indira Gandhi was bold enough to almost always "defy the order", to be the one to persevere, to resist what she thought was not right and to march ahead on her chosen and somewhat "destined" path. She had a price to pay—the price being her life. History is witness to the fact that the life and times of people dedicated to resisting the social order and living for change have their own ups and downs, twists and turns, many-a-time even cruel twists of fate, but have always offered huge lessons to humanity at large. In the life story of Indira Gandhi, we find a multiplicity of such learning.

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