

# प्रियदर्शिना इंदिरा गांधी



डॉ. उमाकांत वानखेडे

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02

## Indira Gandhi: India's Greatest Women's Political Leadership

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### Introduction:

Indira Gandhi's ascendance to power was a milestone in the history of leadership in India, as well as in the world. She was not only the first but the only woman Prime Minister of the country; she has also been acclaimed as one of the most powerful personalities in the international platform. Indira Gandhi's political career and her behavioral attitude towards various political situations were influenced by several factors since her childhood days, which, in effect, help in analyzing her major characteristics. Since she belonged to one of India's most respectable families of the contemporary period, she was fortunate to have become acquainted with stalwarts of India's freedom movement. Likewise, her evolution from a 'dumb doll' to one of the most critical debaters during Parliamentary discussions surprised her colleagues and enemies. It could also be pointed out that the indifferent attitudes of party bosses towards Nehru's daughter may have induced her to become a formidable and powerful leader of Indian politics. These veteran figures were unable to estimate the latent potential of their apparently docile and innocuous woman, who would one day utilize these party bosses as her stepping stone for a higher purpose, to emerge as a most powerful leader.

### Indira Gandhi: India's Greatest Women's Political Leadership:

#### ➤ As an active social worker:

A commendable facet of Mrs. Gandhi's personality was her dedication to the service of her countrymen. During the outbreak of the Sino-Indian War of 1962, she made an arduous trip to the North East Frontier Area (NEFA) and Tezpur of the state of Assam, the actual and borderline sites of contest, to provide the moral support for the soldiers, comfort the wounded, energise them and make them feel how indispensable they were for the security of the country.

Likewise, Mrs. Gandhi used to inspect violent and turbulence prone states personally so as to establish direct contact with victims and help them find effective solutions. In 1961, during a virulent Hindu-Muslim riot in Jabalpur, she organised relief operations and helped in pacifying the mob.<sup>40</sup> In 1965, when south India was suffering from language riots, she immediately flew to Madras to restore peace, once again, against the wishes of the party high command and the dictates of Premier Shastri. In her opinion, "I think my going made a definite difference in calming people". Given the intense political turmoil, she felt that it was her responsibility to look into the matter, not merely as the Minister of Information and Broadcasting, but as the "one of the leaders of the country".

Mrs. Gandhi's behavior in these contexts is an indicator of her thinking. It presents a portrait of herself as an indispensable leader not merely of her party, but of her country. She was gradually expanding the domain of her authority from a simple Congress cadre to the leader of the masses.

#### ➤ Personality of Mrs. Gandhi:

Mrs. Gandhi was the second woman to have assumed the post of political leadership since the post Second World War, following Mrs. Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka. As the third Prime Minister of India (not to mention Guljarilal



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Nanda's acting Premiership after the sudden death of Lal Bahadur Shastri, the second in the row after Jawaharlal Nehru), her political record displays a unique attribute, for she was such a kind of political figure in the post independent Indian political scenario, who was criticized and venerated simultaneously for her conduct and performances. She used to attract masses at large, even more than her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister. Most international political figures of the contemporary period had personal relations with her, a practice she had inherited while serving as her father's hostess and personal assistant in various foreign tours during his premiership. She succeeded to the helm of power at a crucial point when India was undergoing multifarious tribulations both at home and abroad.

If one looks into the personality factor of Indira Gandhi, it will be interesting to note that her profile displayed a curious synthesis of reticence and assertiveness; ambitious and diffidence; tenderness and selfishness, where the accomplishment of her objectives became a prime concern. The way she grew up as one of the active participants in India's struggle for freedom, her treatment of the ailing people, her social work were reflections of her kindness and open-hearted nature. On the other hand, the Emergency period bears testimony of her ruthlessness, when she ordered imprisonment of her rivals and challengers, and she was apparently, personally responsible for preparing the list of the people to be arrested.

On December 28, 2010, the ruling Congress government led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh released a book entitled, *The Congress and the Making of the Indian Nation* to commemorate 125 years of the Congress Party. Here, it admitted that the Emergency was the darkest chapter in the party's history, and considered, "Unlimited state and party power was concentrated in the hands of the Prime

Minister." It also accepted the excesses committed by Mrs. Gandhi's son, Sanjay Gandhi and admitted that "He also promoted slum clearance, anti-dowry measures and promotion of literacy but in an arbitrary manner and much to the annoyance of the public opinion...." The book is a compilation of essays contributed by eminent historians, political analysts and academicians. Another significant characteristic of the personality of Mrs. Gandhi was her tendency of prioratising herself as the only leader of the country, with all desired capacities to lead from the front. It has been explained above how much she regarded herself as the indispensable leader under Shastri's Premiership and rushed to turbulent areas to forestall crisis situations. Likewise, during the period of succession, she wrote a letter to his younger son, Rajiv by quoting few lines from Robert Frost, "To be king is within the situation/ and within me". These lines reflect her ambitious quality of wielding power and assuming leadership.

Another incident would further exemplify her intention to continue as the Prime Minister, much against the Court verdict. When asked by one of her biographers, Dom Moraes, about the reason for her continuation in power, she uttered, "I wanted to resign, but people would not let me go, because there was a financial crisis and I was the only one who could handle it...What would have happened if there had been nobody to lead? It was my duty to the country to stay, though I did not want to". Claiming herself to be the indispensable leader of the country, Mrs. Gandhi, felt that she alone was the suitable figure to save the nation from the 'extra-constitutional forces'. Such a quality is an indicator of Mrs. Gandhi's enormous self-confidence.

Mrs. Gandhi had tremendous physical strength and stamina. She used to travel several thousand miles in short span of time for election her election campaigns. Once she was hurled by a stone during an election campaign that



broke her nose, but that could not dissuade her from accomplishing her task with her broken nose (she joked for being looking like white masked bandaged version of Batman). Since her childhood she suffered from poor health and recuperated from tuberculosis while studying in England, which she had proudly succumbed to be emerged as India's most dominant politician. Such a power of physical endurance would also be observed in the cases of Margaret Thatcher and Golda Meir. One of the dominant characteristics of Mrs. Gandhi was her ruthlessness towards her opponents, and intolerance towards criticisms mounted against her. Time and again, she had demonstrated her aggressiveness and ruthlessness towards her dissidents, whether against Pakistan during the Bangladesh problem in 1971, or her action against the Communists of Kerala in 1959 when she was the President of her Party, or her retaliatory measures against her opposition forces during the time of Emergency. Her non-accommodative stance towards criticisms also led her to crush her dissidents and rivals. Critics have pointed out that she was more comfortable working with people with less than equal quality and stature, than those who are superior to her. To the proponents of realism, leaders prefer bilateral relations and with those having lesser importance, by which the latter could easily be dominated by the former. The same thing could be applicable to the case of Mrs. Gandhi.

So far as her relationship with the general public is concerned, Mrs. Gandhi used to keep an open house for one hour every morning to allow the citizens to meet her, and had a great capacity to listen to their grievances, a rare policy pursued by politicians and national heads. She was fearless and afraid of none. She still kept her Sikh bodyguards, even after the Khalistan issue (it will be discussed in Chapter 5), for which she had to pay her price when they assassinated her in October 1984. On the other side of the spectrum, Mrs. Gandhi had no time

to listen to analysis of policies from her Ministers and civil servants. She explained, "I am always direct...I never spend my time in preliminaries...Not that I don't believe in them, but I think that first I should get the job done, then sit and talk". She wanted to go straight into issues, rather than spend time in their flowery analysis, in order to address the problem faster.

Mrs. Gandhi's tenure was also marked by the formation of several new states of Punjab, Haryana and Chandigarh by readjusting the Punjab province in 1966, the creation of Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura and two Union Territories of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh through the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act of 1971. Moreover, she was also responsible for the demarcation of the 1600 km border area between India and Burma in August 1974 and thus settled the territorial dispute between the two countries and solidified India's national security. At the same time the merger of Sikkim with the Indian Union in 1975 added another feather in her performance cap. Mrs. Gandhi was not the carrier of her father's policy programmes, instead she had maintained her individual style of functioning time and again. Her promotion of Hindi as the national language through the Official Languages (Amendment) Bill of 1967 was a direct retreat from her father's footsteps, who always wanted English along with Hindi as official languages.

#### Conclusion:

At a conference of lawyers held in New Delhi Mrs. Gandhi made a sudden plea for reviewing the existing political system of government and inquired whether it would be possible to switch to a Presidential system of government. Such a debate reflects the extent of power and authority of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. This statement matches with Mrs. Gandhi's personality, who was greeted by the Economist as the "Empress of India", after her victory in the 1971 general election. No other Premier of India has received with such honour.



She was also declared as the "most admired person in the world" in the same year by the special Gallup Poll not only in America, but also in France for two consecutive years of 1967 and 1968. The Premiership of Indira Gandhi is still regarded as the period when India became a regional dominant, and a period when the citizens witnessed a wide continuum of extreme politico-socio-economic policy programmes, ranging from people friendly socialist initiatives, to the arbitrary and coercive use of state power in the name of Emergency. Her personality included a wide range of identities and images, from the 'dumb doll', to the 'Empress of India'. After India's success on the issue of Bangladesh she was revered by the Indian populace as the goddess 'Durga', the Hindu deity and the symbol of strength and female power. It was same mass who wanted her resignation after her initiation of coercive and repressive methods to curb anti-government activities. The political career of Mrs. Gandhi, therefore, encompasses a wide range of actions and activities, for which she was portrayed sometimes as populist, sometimes as dictator. No other Indian Premier has been characterised in such a manner. It is often argued that whether any of her male counterpart (Prime Ministers of India till date are all men) would have initiated the kind of policies taken up by Mrs. Gandhi, or have resorted to authoritarian measures in the name of Emergency. The fact is to follow her footsteps one requires tremendous determination, courage, power and disposition and has to be the authoritative and the alpha and omega of all governmental decisions. Very few people, men or women possess such qualities.

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