
Nehru's Quiet Daughter

When Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of Emergency in India in 1975, the recently retired U.S. envoy to New Delhi, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, noted sardonically that her suspension of constitutional government had at least made the United States the world's largest democracy. The United States slipped back to No. 2 in 1977 when 200 million Indians answered Mrs. Gandhi's call for an election by voting her out of office. Returned to power three years later, Indira Gandhi may now hold the key to the future of Indian democracy. Here Nayantara Sahgal, the Prime Minister's first cousin, traces the development of Indira Gandhi's personal and political character, and the ties that link the two.

by Nayantara Sahgal

On January 19, 1966, the parliamentary party of the Indian National Congress Party elected Indira Gandhi Prime Minister of India.

No one knew quite what to expect. The 48-year-old daughter of former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Mrs. Gandhi was a familiar figure, but she had never sought political leadership. She was to most observers an unknown quantity. The *New York Times*, noting that her selection had come at the hands of party kingmakers, observed enigmatically, and prophetically, that "those who chose her are likely to find that they picked a master and not a servant."

The uncertainties created by the death of Nehru, in May 1964, were a factor in the choice of Mrs. Gandhi. Nehru, the nation's first Prime Minister (1947-64) and leader of India's

struggle for independence from Britain, had so dominated national politics that his party, anxious to ensure a smooth succession, chose as its next leader the least controversial figure in their midst, Lal Bahadur Shastri, whom Nehru had appointed his special adviser several months before his death. They thus avoided an open contest and the possibility of damaging political divisions.

The unexpected death of Shastri on January 12, 1966, reopened the question of national leadership, as it happened, in a period of economic difficulties. The strongest candidate to succeed Shastri, Morarji Desai, had not been close to Nehru, though he had served in his Cabinet. Ideologically a conservative, Desai was strong-willed, stern, inflexible—not at all what the Congress Party was seeking at the time.

They turned instead to Indira Gandhi.

A reserved woman, Mrs. Gandhi had been largely an onlooker, albeit one close to the center of power, during her father's lifetime. She had served as his official companion and hostess. She had also been appointed in 1955 to the Congress Working Committee (the party executive) and in 1959 had served as the party's president, a post traditionally given to veteran political leaders.

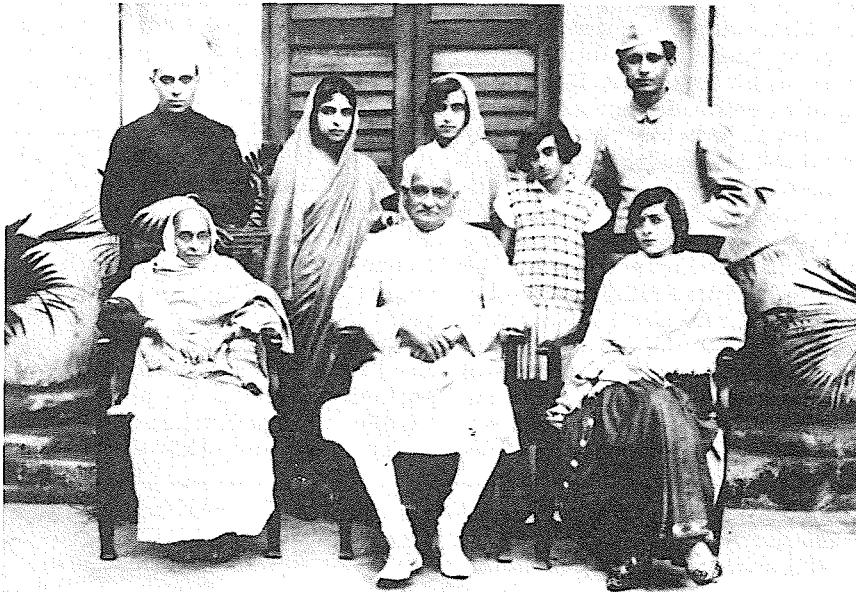
Both the party presidency and her appointment to the Working Committee had been bestowed on "Nehru's daughter." She had not had to work her way up through the vast organization of the Indian National Congress Party, or show outstanding talent, in order to be singled out. And

she had shown no desire to shine as a political or public personality.

Her predominant public image was one of extreme reserve. The country knew her as her father's companion and the mother of two boys. She and her husband, a Member of Parliament, were unofficially separated, though they were briefly reconciled before his death in 1960.

If her father was grooming her for the Prime Ministership, there was little evidence of it in his actions or in his own pronounced aversion to undemocratic procedure. He had, for example, been quoted by the *Times of India* in 1959 as saying, "It is not a good thing for my daughter to come in as Congress President when I am Prime Minister."

Above all, her own personality



Press Information Bureau, New Delhi.

The Nehru family in Allahabad in 1927. Front row: Motilal (center), Kamala (right); Back row: Jawaharlal (left), Indira (second from right).

seemed to exclude any ambition. She recalled her role as her father's hostess: "My father asked me to come and to set up the house for him. There was nobody else to do it. So I set up the house, but I resisted every inch of the way about becoming a hostess. I was simply terrified of the so-called social duties."

In the Background

When Indira Gandhi was elected Prime Minister of India, she had what mattered greatly to the Congress Party leaders who masterminded her rise—a reticence that made her apparently content to stay in the background of events. She had never been embroiled in political rivalries, and her subdued public manner seemed to insure respect for the principle of collective leadership. She looked manageable. For her part, Mrs. Gandhi knew she needed the party bosses, who did not favor her so much as oppose Desai. She tactfully refrained from canvassing for votes or formally declaring her candidacy. She said she would abide by the wishes of the party. Her reticence was noted and approved.

Mrs. Gandhi was so far from being immersed in Indian politics that she was chosen Prime Minister even before she had been elected to a seat in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of Parliament. The party, solicitous of their new leader's reluctance to engage in a heated political contest, prepared a safe, inconspicuous con-

stituency in Rae Bareilly, in northern India, that was guaranteed not to tax the fledgling campaigner.

Nine years later, this same Indira Gandhi would threaten democratic institutions by jailing about 100,000 citizens, imposing censorship, and riding roughshod over constitutional rights. Ironically, the reserve, detachment, and self-absorption that made her such an attractive candidate in 1966 figured prominently in the near-collapse of Indian democracy in 1975.

A Question Mark

Despite her election as Prime Minister by the Congress parliamentary party in 1966, Mrs. Gandhi remained for the country at large a question mark. Her first year in office was not impressive. She performed poorly in debates in Parliament. Often hesitant to act, she occasionally moved hastily—as in her 57.5 percent devaluation of the rupee—leaving popular opinion far behind her.

Yet her public remarks began to reveal her belief in herself as special to the Indian scene, by virtue of her background, judgment, and, above all, family heritage. Her childhood frequently figured in her speeches, suggesting that since her tender years she had borne a heavy burden in the struggle for freedom: "Having lived in the midst of crisis from my earliest childhood, I am not overawed by present difficulties."

The Indian public knew her father

Nayantara Sahgal, 55, a former Wilson Center Fellow, was born in Allahabad, India, and was educated at Wellesley College (B.A., 1947). A journalist and novelist, she is the author of six novels, including A Situation in New Delhi (1977) and the forthcoming Rich Like Us. She has also written two autobiographical studies, Prison and Chocolate Cake (1954) and From Fear Set Free (1962), as well as numerous political commentaries. This essay is adapted from Indira Gandhi: Her Road to Power (copyright © 1978, 1982 by Nayantara Sahgal).

intimately. His life, intellectual development, and even private anguish were part and parcel of the events and literature of the nationalist movement. He was in all his strength and weakness a thoroughly familiar figure. Mrs. Gandhi was not. The heavy, brooding self-portrait she now revealed by stages seemed curiously at odds with what was generally known about the spirit of her family home, Anand Bhawan.

A Brilliant Family

The extended family revolved around her paternal grandfather Motilal Nehru, a successful lawyer and politician. A natural leader, his personal magnetism and professional prestige made his home the meeting place of brilliant, vital, and dedicated people. His zest for life carried the family with élan through an almost revolutionary change in lifestyle, beginning in 1919 when he and his son Jawaharlal met Mahatma Gandhi, leader of the nonviolent struggle against British rule that led to Indian independence in 1947.

Incontestably a man of "family," in the great tradition of shelter and nurture, with the personality and instincts of a patriarch, Motilal reserved his most inviolable love for his only son. Jawaharlal, with his wife and daughter, were thus the focus of an entire clan's attention and concern in a way that princes and heirs apparent are.

Father and son entered with passion and humor into the freedom crusade. To some extent all members of Anand Bhawan, even visitors to it, were touched by the aspirations, the glow, and the romance of the national movement.

In Mrs. Gandhi's recollections, however, another picture emerges: somber, tense, aggrieved. Not sur-

prisingly, as an only child, she used the circumstances around her to exaggerate and dramatize her own importance in a busy, politically committed household. Her games, she told interviewers, had consisted of fiery political speeches to her dolls and servants and triumphant encounters with the British police. Whatever speeches she had made recently, Mrs. Gandhi once said, she had been making since she was 12 years old.

Home and childhood were associated for her with the demonstrations, searches, arrests, and police violence that were a part of civil disobedience. "So from September 1929 a part of the house was turned into a hospital. In the beginning doctors came only at dead of night and the women of the house, including myself, aged twelve, were the nurses."

Imprisonment

Her first and only imprisonment, resulting from the Congress Party's refusal to support England in World War II, lasted from September 11, 1942, to May 13, 1943, in Naini Central Jail, Allahabad. She told an interviewer in 1969, "I was regarded as so dangerous that I wasn't even given normal prison facilities"—a recollection not supported by the evidence. Mrs. Gandhi, aged nearly 25, shared a barrack with her aunt, Mrs. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, her cousin, Chandralekha Pandit, aged 18, and a number of women friends and acquaintances—all of whom were subject to the same rules and regulations. Mrs. Pandit writes in her preface to the prison diary she kept: "The treatment given to me and to those who shared the barrack with me was, according to the prison standards, very lenient—the reader must not imagine that others were

equally well treated."

Jawaharlal Nehru, a man bowed by many burdens as the years of the fight for freedom took their toll, remained curiously unbowed in spirit. In a conscious effort to share himself and to communicate with his child, particularly during his long absences in prison, he wrote his *Letters from a Father to His Daughter* and *Glimpses of World History*. These pages reveal an approach to life composed of buoyancy, optimism, and good-humored tolerance of life's foibles and even its trials.

Indira saw life in more solemn perspective, cast in an austere mold, as if lightness were a weakness, a trap to be avoided. The written word could not take the place of flesh-and-blood human beings. Absent parents, though absent for well-understood and admired reasons, left a void that was never quite filled, though few parents could have given of themselves to an only child as Indira's did. Because of her mother's invalidism, her father had sole re-

sponsibility for major and minor decisions concerning her. He wrote to his sister in Allahabad from Geneva on May 6, 1926, recounting his search for a proper school for his daughter and his twice daily accompaniment of her to and from school. He added in a postscript: "I enclose two recent snapshots of Indu. Compare them to the snapshots taken in India in February and you will notice how she is growing."

The Cherished Child Withdraws

The parent-child relationship always has its unanalyzed loves and hostilities, but, given the keen awareness Nehru had of his daughter, this relationship might have become a close mutual bond. That it did not partake of real human response and sharing—though it did of attachment—may have been because, though she spent most of her adult life in her father's house, there was a point beyond which Indira could not go in simple give-and-take.

The intellectual and emotional labor her father expended on her did not bring the cherished child to flower. Her delicate health, a problem throughout her childhood, continued into womanhood. Not disposed to study, and with no special aptitude, she was never driven to the kind of discipline that might have been expected of a sturdier child. She could not keep up with her studies at Oxford and did not get a degree, while her earlier schooling had been uneven because of her parents' jail terms and her mother's ill health.

Indu, center of the larger family's loving concern, seldom lowered her guard. Her unresponsiveness troubled her father during her adolescence. She was 15 when he wrote to his sister, Mrs. Pandit, from Dehra Dun District Jail: "During the last four-



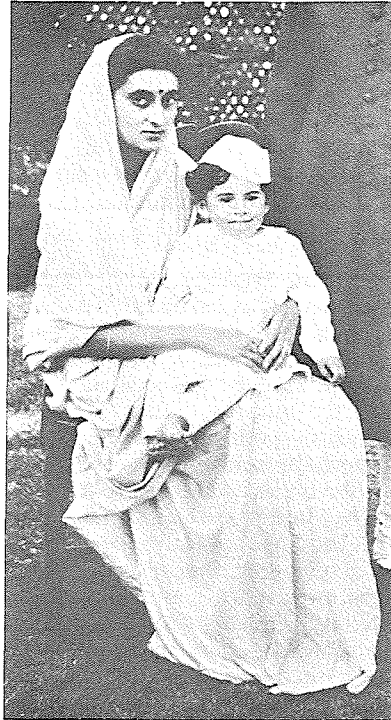
Courtesy of Nehru Memorial Museum & Library.

Indira as a nine-year-old student at the International School in Geneva.

teen months or more I have written to Indu regularly and have hardly missed a fortnight. It has been a very one-sided correspondence as my letters have evoked practically no response. After a couple of months of silence on her part, a hasty letter would come with many apologies and excuses, and with no reference at all to my letters or the questions I had asked in them. I gather that Kamala is treated in much the same way. It is not casual; it is persistent. And in spite of numerous efforts, it continues. I know that Indu is fond of me and of Kamala. Yet she ignores us and others completely. Why is this so? Indu, I feel, is extraordinarily imaginative and self-centered or subjective. Indeed, I would say that, quite unconsciously, she has grown remarkably selfish. She lives in a world of dreams and vagaries and floats about on imaginary clouds, full probably of all manner of brave fancies. Now this is natural in a girl of her subjective nature and especially at her age. But there can be too much of it and I am afraid there is too much of it in her case."

The difficulty of getting through to Indu was painfully clear when she made her decision to marry. Feroze Gandhi was a native of Allahabad, where his family owned a general store. As a student active in the national movement, he was no stranger to the Nehru household. In fact, he was something of a protégé of Indira's parents.

Nehru's reaction to Indira's decision, made while she was still in her teens, to marry Feroze arose chiefly from his regret that she had too early closed her mind and feelings to the wide world of opportunity around her. His suggestion that she should think the matter over at home before making a final decision resulted in a



*From Indira Gandhi by G. D. Khosla.
Thomson Press (India) Ltd., 1974.*

Indira and her first-born son, Rajiv.

scarring experience for him. Indira, at Oxford at the time, wanted to remain in England with Feroze for her vacation and told her father she would not speak to him unless he agreed. He did not take her seriously, but she kept her promise.

A fortnight's silence on the sea voyage to Bombay continued unbroken on the train journey to Allahabad. On their arrival home, Nehru was too shaken to endure the ordeal further. He asked his secretary to book Indira's passage back to England. Her marriage took place in March 1942, in Allahabad. Indira was 24 years old. Although her

father's advice, and later Mahatma Gandhi's, to think again about her choice, had not prevailed, the marriage had their blessing. The relationship, however, inevitably foundered in the role she later chose—being at her father's side at the nation's political center.

Into Her Father's Shoes

As Prime Minister, Mrs. Gandhi viewed herself as her father's natural successor. Asked by a journalist the significance of her election as the country's leader, she replied, "Perhaps it ensures some kind of continuity—continuity of policy, and also perhaps continuity of personality." She believed she had taken over from her father as the rallying point for all Indians. Yet Nehru had been a man of his party, shaped and molded by his service to it and profoundly conscious of his debt to it. Mrs. Gandhi already saw herself as something more. Asked if she represented the Left, there was more than a touch of impatience in her reply, "I am a representative of all India, which includes all shades of opinion."

In her capacity as leader, Mrs. Gandhi simply did not feel accountable to her party, and she regularly became estranged from those in it who exercised independent judgment. In 1964, she felt that the Congress Party was drifting rightward, already betraying her father's socialistic principles. Her own decision to enter the leadership fray may have been prompted by this.

In 1969, when she was ignored in what would normally be a routine exercise to choose a successor to President Zakir Husain, she signaled her disdain for opponents in her party by by-passing normal parliamentary procedures to nationalize 14 Indian banks by decree. She im-

posed her will on the presidential selection process when she refused to back her party's candidate, and as a result of this, split her party into two irreconcilable factions. To make up for lost support, she allied herself with the small Moscow-oriented Communist Party of India, using the rhetoric of class warfare to fuel popular support for her self-proclaimed war against vested interests.

The parliamentary elections of 1971 gave Mrs. Gandhi a decisive mandate surprising for its uniform majorities for the Prime Minister's hand-picked unknown candidates. Suggestions of voting irregularities were dismissed as the accusations of cranks. Mrs. Gandhi took little notice of corruption charges against two key colleagues, Bansi Lal, chief minister of Haryana, and L. N. Mishra, Union minister for railways.

Opposition Arises

The next several years were difficult for India. Poor harvests in 1972 led to inflation, famine, and unemployment on a huge scale. Opposition to the Gandhi policies coalesced around Jayaprakash Narayan. A disciple of Mahatma Gandhi and one-time colleague of Nehru, Narayan had suddenly retired from politics in 1952 to pursue his ideal of socialist reform through the *Bhoodan* (land gift movement). Narayan's return to politics to lead the opposition to the Gandhi government galvanized millions of Indians.

Through it all, Mrs. Gandhi maintained a monarchical remoteness, treating the gathering tide of protest as a plot to remove her, rather than as the expression of genuine popular distress.

The idea of a single person as the focus of admiration and adulation was not new to Indians, a people

more willing than most to follow a leader. But modern India's leadership had been built and based on professional excellence or personal example, not on the emblems or heavy-handed exercise of power. Mrs. Gandhi's leadership resembled that of a reigning medieval monarch surrounded by all the panoply of a royal court—its flattery, its intrigue, and the swift retribution that visits offenders.

Above the Storm

The pedestal she occupied, high above the Congress Party, seemed at first to serve her well. It created the necessary regal distance between her and the politicians and the crowd so that, though the muddy tide of corruption and confusion lapped at her feet, it could not overwhelm her. She could appear to remain unsullied.

This became harder to do after 1972 as a storm broke in Parliament over the nonappearance of the native Indian automobiles that Maruti Ltd., her son Sanjay's corporation, had been licensed to produce; Sanjay failed to account both for the delay and for his personal financial gains from government contracts. There was critical comment in the press and in marketplaces and coffee houses.

On June 12, 1975, the Allahabad high court indicted Indira Gandhi on two corruption charges in the conduct of the 1971 elections. The court declared her election invalid and barred her from holding political office for six years. The verdict was not unexpected. Yet it made a sensation. The national newspapers exhibited a rare unanimity in their support of the high court verdict that required the Prime Minister, in effect, to step down from her office and let her party choose a new leader.

The enormity of the high court's blow to Mrs. Gandhi must be understood in terms of her assessment of herself as indispensable to the Indian scene. That anyone should regard her as a politician, subject to normal political processes, was a gross impertinence. "Had this [crisis brought on by the court ruling] been a question about me as an individual I would have been unconcerned," she said in a November 10, 1975, broadcast. "But it involved the Prime Minister of India."

She had come to believe she *was* India. At the party's annual session in December, the national anthem was followed by a new song "Indira Hindustan Ban Gai" ("Indira has become India"). By that time, Mrs. Gandhi had passed through the looking glass into the full-blown exotica of make-believe.

Resisting the Court

Rather than resign, Mrs. Gandhi resisted. On June 26, she proclaimed an internal Emergency which virtually stopped constitutional government in its tracks. Executive ordinances, later converted into law, enlarged the government's powers to arrest and imprison without trial. Meetings of more than five persons without permission were forbidden. Officially backed "spontaneous" demonstrations in support of Mrs. Gandhi appeared everywhere.

The double standard of law already in evidence was now practiced quite openly. Posters of Mrs. Gandhi appeared in the streets, bazaars, and thoroughfares proclaiming her the savior of law and order. Shopkeepers were required to display her picture prominently and to post alongside it a pledge supporting the Twenty-Point Program, a set of economic priorities announced on July 1, 1975.

The government propaganda department claimed the police had obtained clues to secret hordes of arms and ammunition with the "discovery" of "weapons" in the offices of the RSS, a Hindu revivalist organization associated with the conservative Jan Sangh Party. Film documentaries alternated shots of Jayaprakash Narayan and other opposition leaders with rows of skulls being "discovered" by the police. In a standard speech made, with minor variations, over the next 12 months to interviewers and different audiences, Mrs. Gandhi claimed there had been a "plot" against established authority. The charge was never substantiated, and no one accused of conspiracy was brought to trial.

Pinnacle of Power

The Emergency was designed to guarantee the Prime Minister the pinnacle of power—a position above the multitude, unaccountable and unchallengeable. Three amendments to the Constitution and an act of Parliament provided the underpinnings. The 38th Amendment put the declaration of Emergency beyond the scrutiny of the courts. The 39th Amendment removed election disputes relating to the Prime Minister, President, Vice-President, and Speaker from court jurisdiction. This overturned the Allahabad high court judgment retroactively and ensured a Supreme Court judgment in Mrs. Gandhi's favor.

The proposed 40th Amendment conferred complete immunity on the Prime Minister, President, Vice-President, and Speaker, for past or future criminal offenses. A new law banned the publication of "objectionable matter," making criticism of these officials a penal offense.

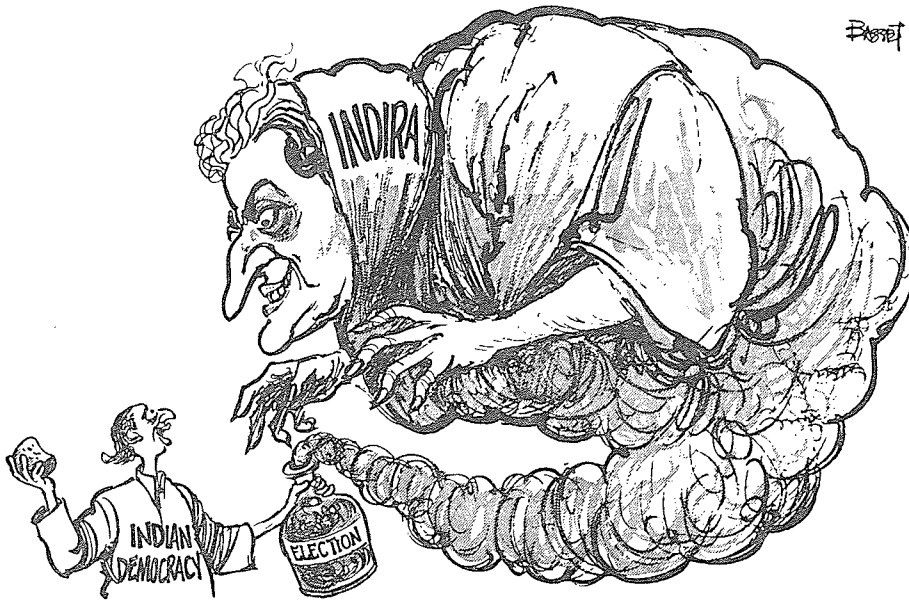
India's leader was a woman whose childhood, education, and family tradition had provided her with unusual opportunities for training in democratic ideals, yet who had never been temperamentally comfortable with this inheritance. The stages of her career as Prime Minister made it plain she was not a democrat by belief or instinct. She firmly believed in her own indispensability. Concessions, compromise, and discussion signified weakness to her, and opposition jarred and angered her.

"I am a democrat"

Democracy was not Mrs. Gandhi's style, but it remained an insistent craving. In a world where leadership had to be one of two kinds, coercive or persuasive, she could not resolve her dilemma and fell between the two, debasing democratic values and destroying the system while avowing her dedication to it. The confusion gave her pronouncements during the Emergency a ring of imbalance. With tens of thousands of citizens jailed without charges or trial and her critics silenced, she could repeat calmly and with conviction, "I am a democrat." The repetition carried that element of yearning we often have for what we ourselves are not and cannot be.

Elections, twice postponed during the Emergency, were finally called in March 1977, and swept her and her party from power—to all appearances ending ignominiously her political career, and her son Sanjay's chances of succeeding her. Their astonishing comeback and Mrs. Gandhi's return to office as Prime Minister in January 1980 resulted from a failure of the ruling party—this time the Janata Party—to cope with the difficulties of the day.

A coalition of widely disparate



Cartoon by Basset, The Pittsburgh Press, January 12, 1980.
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groups, ranging from the Socialist Party to a right-wing splinter of the Congress Party to the nationalist Hindu Jan Sangh Party, the Janata Party was united only by a shared opposition to Mrs. Gandhi. Its leaders allowed their factional quarrels to interfere fatally with their obligation: to bring to justice those responsible for the Emergency. As they fought among themselves, they ironically opened the door to Mrs. Gandhi's return by arresting her in October 1977 without sufficient evidence for conviction.

When Mrs. Gandhi was released, she charged that she was being persecuted. In January 1978, she gathered her loyalists from the Congress Party into the new Congress-Indira Party, and in November she won a by-election victory that re-

turned her to Parliament. The collapse of the Janata coalition in July 1979, the absence of national leadership, and a deteriorating economy paved the way for Mrs. Gandhi's return to power in January 1980.

The triumph, however, was cut short by the death of Sanjay in an airplane crash the following June. A Prime Minister's personal tragedy does not usually become a political dilemma, but Mrs. Gandhi's political career had been shaped by family considerations, and her increasing reliance on Sanjay had made it clear that she believed in family rule. Sanjay's death left her in a political and psychological vacuum of her own making.

Mrs. Gandhi could at this stage have abandoned dynastic notions and trappings, using her own now

undiluted authority to end dissensions in the Congress-Indira Party and restore it to the kind of organization that would admit new political blood. She appeared, however, to take it for granted that her elder son, Rajiv, an Indian Airlines pilot, should now enter politics. In June 1981, Rajiv was elected Member of Parliament from Amethi, Sanjay's old constituency, and he took his place at his mother's side. All this laid bare the extremity of her isolation and her estrangement from normal parliamentary government.

Already, there are unmistakable signs of her authoritarian style. Not long after the 1980 election, the Minister for Information and Broadcasting, rejecting the autonomy pledged by the Janata government, announced that radio and television would continue under government control. In September 1980, Mrs. Gandhi armed her government, as she had done in 1971, with arbitrary power to arrest and detain anyone "acting in any manner prejudicial to the security of the State or to the maintenance of public order or maintenance of supplies and services essential to the community." Early in 1982, 25,000 Indians were

arrested—most only briefly—for participating in a general strike protesting preventive detention.

In November 1981, the *Illustrated Weekly*, an English-language news magazine, lamented the pervasive corruption of the Indian political system: "All the institutions which are supposed to keep a free society going have taken a severe drubbing." Yet, charges of corruption against an ally of Mrs. Gandhi, A. R. Antulay, chief minister of Maharashtra, were belittled by the Prime Minister, who said that the people of Maharashtra believed the charges were not genuine. In early 1982, however, Antulay resigned after being indicted for extortion.

Last January, the newly retired President of India, Sanjiva Reddy, speaking on the eve of the 32nd anniversary of India's Constitution, expressed his anxiety over public immorality. "What we find today," he said, "is the very antithesis of the noble spirit that animated the nation only a few decades ago."

The "noble spirit" has lived on in the dreams of Indira Gandhi. The irony is that her leadership of her country has twisted that spirit almost beyond recognition.
