

INDIRA GANDHI



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Indira Gandhi, one of the greatest leaders of our country, was the symbol of the pride of the nation. Having imbibed the spirit of the freedom movement led by Mahatma Gandhi, she identified herself with the masses and channelised their energies for the rebuilding of the nation. A strong and united India was her dream. Indeed, she was the link between the past characterized by the heroic struggles of the Indian people for freedom and the future full of hopes of a resurgent India.

Indira Gandhi, the only child of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Kamala Nehru, was born on 19 November 1917 in Anand Bhawan, Allahabad. She had her education at various places like St. Mary's Convent in Allahabad, L'Ecole Nouvelle in Switzerland, Pupil's Own School of Jahangir Vakil at Pune, *Visva Bharati* in Santiniketan and Somerville College, Oxford. While studying at Santiniketan, she was deeply influenced by the magnetic personality, philosophy, educational ideas and universalism of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore.

Inspired by her illustrious father, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi, Indira Gandhi was actively involved in the struggle for freedom since her early childhood. She had founded the *Bal Charkha Sangh* and led the *Vanar Sena* (Monkey Brigade) at the behest of the Congress. The Brigade, consisting of school children, was involved in making flags, cooking food and serving water during Congress meetings and carrying messages, particularly to those Congress leaders who were in the forefront of the Freedom Struggle. Besides, she had participated in various other movements led by the Congress.

Indira Gandhi was a multi-faceted personality. She was an outstanding parliamentarian, an able administrator, a true leader of the masses, a patriot to the core, a visionary and a devout nationalist. A person of varied interests, she had a formidable reputation in

various fields she was associated with: be it diplomacy, planning, defence, external affairs, international relations, arts and culture.

Indira Gandhi's distinguished political career spanned over two decades. She was elected unopposed to the Rajya Sabha in 1964. She was a member of the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Lok Sabhas. While holding the position of Minister of Information and Broadcasting from 1964 to 1966, Indira Gandhi left an indelible imprint on the functioning of the Ministry. She suggested new ideas and streamlined the information dissemination machinery in the Ministry. She gave priority to the development of television and relaxed film censorship rules.

Indira Gandhi was sworn in as the first woman Prime Minister of India in January 1966 and continued till March 1977. Later on, in 1980 she became the Prime Minister again and continued in that capacity till her death in 1984. During her first premiership, Punjab was reorganized into two separate States—Haryana and Punjab in 1966. To ensure the largest measure of autonomy for regional groups, Himachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura were also granted Statehood during her time. Later, Mizoram was also separated from Assam and NEFA was renamed as Arunachal Pradesh. In the first six years of her Prime Ministership, half a dozen new States were created.

To Indira, poverty was to be fought tooth and nail for the development of the country. In order to give a thrust to development and to improve the conditions of the poor, especially the peasants and the small-scale entrepreneurs, she was instrumental in nationalizing the public sector banks. Later, easy loan facilities were provided to the weaker sections by these banks. While India was reeling under severe drought, she launched a major programme for solving the food problem. This era actually marked the beginning of the Green Revolution in India and made India self-sufficient in food. Her pledge to remove poverty (*Garibi Hatao*), brought comprehensive and long-term poverty eradication measures into the planning process of the Indian economy.

Indira Gandhi encouraged the planners and economists to adopt new economic policies and programmes. At her initiative, the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85) was reformulated and its policies sought to encourage investment and production by relaxing some of the rigidities of the Indian economic system. She declared the new 20-point economic programme through which vigorous efforts were made to alleviate poverty and to improve upon the conditions of landless labourers, small and marginal farmers, artisans, slum-dwellers and other weaker sections. In fact, the Programme ushered in a new era of development.

In her quest to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor, she took the initiative to end the privileges being enjoyed by the former rulers of native States. She had rightly perceived that such privileges were incongruous in a democratic society.

Indira Gandhi's qualities of statesmanship were well reflected during the Bangladesh crisis and the subsequent India-Pakistan war in December 1971. Her perception of international affairs and diplomatic excellence earned India spectacular triumph in the War. Victory in the War and the resultant creation of an independent Bangladesh and the settlement of the refugee problem won her great admiration in India and abroad.

A staunch votary of the policy of peaceful co-existence and non-alignment, Indira Gandhi was instrumental in signing the historic 20-year treaty of peace, friendship and cooperation with the erstwhile USSR in August 1971. She also ensured that a treaty of friendship with Bangladesh was signed soon after its emergence as a new country. Later on, the Simla* Agreement was signed on 2 July 1972, between India and Pakistan through which the two countries pledged to eschew the use of force against each other and to settle their disputes through bilateral talks.

A visionary as she was, Indira played a significant role in vigorously promoting science and technology in the country. She was of the view that the promotion of science and technology can enable India to be a global

*Now known as Shimla.

power. Under her leadership, India successfully conducted the underground nuclear test at Pokhran, with an aim at the peaceful use of the nuclear energy. The launching of the first space satellite, *Aryabhatta*, followed by a host of other satellites are among her other remarkable scientific achievements.

Indira Gandhi was an outstanding world leader who believed in the right of mankind to live in a free world. She abhorred war and vociferously advocated peace and harmony at various international fora. The teachings and example of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who was one of the great advocates for world peace, deeply influenced her vision. During her visits abroad and meetings with various world leaders, she put forth the concerns of the third world countries, including India.

Indira Gandhi's concern for the progress of the developing countries was voiced by her forcefully at various international forums. At the Seventh Non-Aligned Summit held in New Delhi in March 1983, she said that the Non-Aligned Movement was history's greatest peace movement. She was of the view that human beings should not be viewed in geostrategic zones on maps but as people struggling against the existing inequalities of centuries to get justice and equality for their advancement. Later, when she was nominated the Chairman of the Non-Aligned Meet, and took over the stewardship from President Fidel Castro of Cuba in 1983, she reasserted that "freedom is indivisible, that peace is indivisible, that economic prosperity is indivisible. And these are the fundamentals on which our policy is based, both inside the country and outside".

For her commendable contribution to the nation, she was conferred with the '*Bharat Ratna*', the highest civilian award of the nation in 1972. She was credited with the 'Isabella D'Este Award' for outstanding work in the field of Diplomacy, 'Mexican Academy Award' for liberation of Bangladesh, Mothers' Award, U.S.A. and Yale University Howland Memorial Prize. She was also the recipient of countless citations and awards for her contribution to the cause of mankind. She was posthumously awarded the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding.

The journey of this charismatic personality came to an abrupt end when she was assassinated by two of her security guards on 31 October 1984. Paying tributes to the departed Leader, the then President of India, Giani Zail Singh, said: "Our beloved Smt. Indira Gandhi is no longer with us. I have lost my dear friend, we have all lost one of the greatest leaders our country has ever produced, and the world has lost a harbinger of peace who was undoubtedly the greatest woman leader mankind has ever produced."

The then Prime Minister, Shri Rajiv Gandhi, observed: "...She battled relentlessly against poverty. Hers was the foremost voice for international peace in our tense and troubled world. Most important of all, she infused us with self-confidence and a sense of purpose. She gave us back our pride.... You will know how dear to her heart was the dream of a united, prosperous and peaceful India—an India in which all Indians, irrespective of their religion, linguistic or political diversities would live as a family, in an atmosphere free from mutual rivalries and prejudices."

While paying rich tributes to Smt. Indira Gandhi in the Lok Sabha on 17 January 1985, the then Speaker Shri Bal Ram Jakhar, said, "This House mourns the loss of one of the greatest Indians of the 20th century. Future generations, rising above the tumult of our times, will look with love and gratitude on the magnitude and splendour of Indira Gandhi's achievements. Her vision and tireless energy brought India into the era of self-reliance. She breathed new life into the concept of a united modern India. Today we walk upright with pride and confidence, pride in what India is and confidence in what we shall do for ourselves and the world. ....."