

# INDIA BACKGROUNDER

## SERVICE

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## SANJAY GANDHI—EVENTFUL CAREER IN A NUTSHELL

- Sanjay Gandhi was the most controversial figure in Indian politics in recent times. On the eve of his death in an air crash he was being tipped as the next Prime Minister. A few days before his demise he was appointed one of the General Secretaries of Congress(I), the first official position he held after his entry into politics.
- His brief political career was marked by his meteoric rise during the Emergency, then a period under Janata rule when he was down and out followed by his rehabilitation in a big way following the Congress(I) victory in the Lok Sabha and State elections in which he played a big part.
- His sudden death shocked his admirers and detractors alike. Rich tributes were paid to him in newspaper editorials—he was described as outspoken, honest, adventurous and impatient.
- Sanjay Gandhi's ideological stance was first revealed in an interview to a magazine in July 1975 in which he favoured free enterprise and suggested that nationalised industries must function in competition with the private sector. His five-point plan later constituted the basic ideology of the emergency alongwith Mrs Gandhi's 20-point programme.
- During Janata rule a number of cases were launched against Sanjay Gandhi. In the 'Kissa Kursi Ka' case he was even convicted but the conviction was later set aside by the Supreme Court. A special commission appointed to go into the affairs of his Maruti small car project passed severe strictures against him.

“The man who would be Prime Minister” read the headline in a Delhi newspaper reporting on the British Press reaction to the appointment of Sanjay Gandhi as one of the General Secretaries of Congress (I) in early June. That aptly summed up the thinking of his supporters and detractors alike;

while the former were hopeful the latter were fearful. The signs were that he would have gone on to occupy the highest executive office in the country had not death clipped his wings. For, Sanjay Gandhi, before his death, was India's most powerful person after the Prime Minister.

The legitimacy or otherwise of that power was food for endless debate. Nevertheless, its existence cannot be denied.

Few men in history would have experienced such phenomenal rise, fall and rehabilitation as did Sanjay Gandhi. He hit the headlines for the first time in 1970 when the opposition in Parliament charged that he was exploiting his position as the Prime Minister's son.

By 1976 Sanjay Gandhi had become the 'hero' of millions. Arrived the Janata Government and the heroism came tumbling down like a house of cards. The 1980 general elections reaffirmed the peoples' trust in Mrs Gandhi and with her, in Sanjay Gandhi. To mix metaphors, he was poised for higher altitude when the two-seater plane he was flying lost altitude and fell into the ravine of death.

#### Controversial figure

Sanjay Gandhi was perhaps the most controversial personality on the Indian political stage which had presented men and women of varying hues. Even before his 35th birthday, a time when young men with ambition would be preparing to launch themselves into the political quagmire in most countries, Sanjay Gandhi had attained more than those who had already spent 35 years in politics. Into his all-too-brief career he had cramped enough for a life-time, though what would have happened had he lived upto say 60 or 70 is only a matter of conjecture.

The shock that the news of his death brought was universal for both his critics and admirers. Few would deny that Sanjay Gandhi had the kind of zest for life and vitality that fired the imagination of millions of Indians.

Both his followers and critics were unanimous in admitting that Sanjay Gandhi was no ordinary po-

litician. In a personal tribute, Khushwant Singh, a long-time admirer of Indira Gandhi and Sanjay Gandhi said "No greater tragedy could have hit India, than the passing of this young man on whom millions of Indians pinned their hopes for a better future .....we dip our flags in salute to this intrepid young man.

"I had known Sanjay over the last many years and became very fond of him. Some of it was, no doubt, due to the farrago of calumny that had been let loose against him by wicked politicians and self-styled intellectuals of our city. It was like a father fighting back to defend his wrongly maligned son. But it was more due to his many qualities; a warm heart, a puckish sense of humour, fierce sense of loyalty towards those who stood by him—and above all, a demonic zeal to get things done without bureaucratic fuss and fanfare. He was a living example of practicing what he preached".

#### Honest and Blunt

According to Khushwant Singh, Sanjay Gandhi was an unusual politician. He was "outspoken, honest, blunt. His "no" meant "no" his "yes" meant "yes", it will be done", "not perhaps" or "I will see what I can do".

In a final note of sorrow Khushwant Singh says : "We bid farewell to our own departed leader with tears that will take an age to wipe off our eyes. He has laid the world away and poured out the red wine of youth and given up the years that were to be his"

The handsome tributes paid to Sanjay Gandhi both by his critics and admirers only go to prove the adage that death is a great leveller and all controversies end with death.

The independent daily, the Statesman, which had criticised Sanjay Gandhi on several occasions stated in an editorial "The fatal accident is always shocking; the shock of Mr Gandhi's death in an aircraft was all the greater because of the very special position he had come to occupy in India's political life

at a remarkably early age. This is not the time or the occasion to discuss whether he had acquired this position by his own merit, to what extent Mrs. Indira Gandhi's special interest and intervention contributed to her son's rise to power, to what extent he made use of her authority for his advancement without her knowledge or specific consent, to what extent he had earned his increasingly important position by his own energy and drive—these are questions which will continue not merely to excite partisan passion but also to engage the interests of serious analysts of an important phase in Indian politics..... All that need be noted at the moment is that, whatever the explanation, Sanjay Gandhi who had become a major force in Indian politics within a startlingly short time, seemed destined to rise higher .....his untimely death has ended an extraordinarily promising political career."

Patriot, an off-again on-again critic of his, had this to say : "He had without doubt an amazing single-mindedness of purpose and an undaunted spirit. Even when he was harrassed and hunted by his adversaries he was able to mobilise a large number of youth who adored him and followed him unquestioningly. He did not give any quarter to his opponents and expected none from them. His death will leave a lasting impact all round. The void created by this shocking tragedy will be extremely difficult to fill."

#### Very Adventurous

The Indian Express, which had a running battle with Indira Gandhi and her son, also acknowledged that Sanjay's was no mean achievement. "There was in the way death came to Sanjay Gandhi, as in the way he conducted himself in his all-too-short lease of life, a sense of adventure and derring-do. In everything he did, he was surrounded by controversy, alike in his brief encounter with entrepreneurship and, when that was behind him, in his involvement with politics which began with the emergency in mid-1975..... He repudiated the rules by which that (political) world had been run. He was eager for results and if, in securing them, the rules had to be bent, why then they must be bent."

Listing his achievements, the paper added. "He produced an impressive impact on slum clearance in Delhi and on the birth control movement in India. That in both, there were excesses was inevitable given the institutional limitations his experience would not allow him to understand. Yet this is paradoxically where he derived his strength from. He would not accept that because things had been done in a certain way they must always be done in that way. He was the prophet of change in a country which, more than any other, was resistant to change.

The mass-circulation Hindustan Times said "The the greatest blow that Sanjay Gandhi has dealt by his going away is to have put the future of his country in serious jeopardy... ..When leaders of the past die, we pay them tributes for what they did. When leaders of the future die we mourn them for posterity for the promise they held and which they left unfulfilled. Sanjay Gandhi present and future generations of India will mourn for you for no one within living memory has left so great a void in our lives as you have done and we cannot find anyone who can fill it ! Your death is like the death of a son is every Indian family."

In a black-border editorial, National Herald, run by Indira Gandhi's Congress (I) party, described Sanjay Gandhi as "a phenomenon, the sort of which the country had not witnessed since independence."

#### Honest and blunt

Accolades and comments on Sanjay Gandhi's death were not confined to the Indian Press alone. The Guardian, the leftist liberal London newspaper, was worried about "the peril of void". Mrs Gandhi stands for many policies—a centralisation of decision making, an impatience with the ancient verities of village life, socialist desire to move India into modern times—but in the end her party and her Government begin and end with her personal sway ..... one light plane crash has snapped the thread (of an indentifiable continuity) and left all the questions agonisingly open."

The Times, London, headlining its comments "The Death of a Dynasty", remarked solemnly that the "profound long time effect will be that India is not likely to have a continuation of dynastic rule. The more immediate effects will be considerable because Mr Gandhi was the leading member of a new generation of Indian politicians ..... non-ideological, business-minded and anxious for modernisation. They are not committed democrats. They are also now leaderless and it is not certain that they will be able to compete with long-established figures in Delhi.

The Financial Times said that Sanjay Gandhi was pointing the direction for decisions on the economy. "Encouraging the private sector, cutting back of red tape and opening up the economy is new territory for Mrs Gandhi. Her instincts before Sanjay exerted his influence were to adopt left-wing populist measures such as bank and coal nationalisation."

The Evening News of London had this to say; "Sanjay's death was a devastating blow to Mrs Gandhi. His death leaves Mrs Gandhi isolated in a world of turbulent Indian politics."

Sanjay Gandhi was born on December 14, 1946 the second son of Feroze and Indira Gandhi. After doing kindergarten in a private school at Delhi, he joined Welham in Dehra Dun before entering Doon school. Later he moved to St Columba's school in the capital from where he passed his matriculation.

#### Rolls Royce training

He then did a three-year apprenticeship at the Rolls Royce workshop in England. Returning to Delhi in 1967, Sanjay Gandhi set up a workshop for making an entirely indigenous car. In 1968 he submitted to the Ministry of Industrial Development a proposal for the manufacture of an Indian small car. The proposal stirred controversy in political circles.

In November 1970, two letters of intent for the manufacture of a small indigenous car were issued

by the Ministry, one to Sanjay Gandhi and the other to Madhan Mohan Rao of Karnataka. Sanjay named his new project Maruti. The Haryana Government leased out land for the scheme along the Delhi-Gurgaon Highway. As the project was coming up, the controversy over the grant of a licence for the manufacture of a car to the Prime Minister's son grew in heat and intensity.

Soon the controversy over the Maruti project was overtaken by the stormy political events which culminated in the declaration of the emergency in 1975.

#### Memorable interview

Sanjay Gandhi further attracted public attention on him through an outspoken and brash interview he gave to the New Delhi magazine, "Surge", in July 1975. Then only 29, Sanjay Gandhi's remarks, especially on elderly politicians, and on nationalisation and free enterprise, touched off a furor and the government was forced to suppress the interview.

"I think that nationalized industries should function only in competition with private sector. When they cannot function, they should be allowed to die a natural death". He believed that the system of free competition was instrumental in making the United States and Europe more prosperous than the rest of the world.

In the interview Sanjay Gandhi also took potshots at excessive taxation and said that "one way of removing the black market is to lessen the tax. It's forcing the people to cheat." About the Congress party he told the magazine: "Congress has a lot of leaders and not enough people who would go down to the grass roots to do some work."

When political pressure was brought to bear on the Government to suppress the interview, Sanjay Gandhi said: "I am not used to interviews, and did not know what meaning would be given to my words."

#### Five-point plan

By now it was inevitable for Sanjay Gandhi to join politics, and so he plunged headlong into matters of state. He joined the Governing Council of the Youth Congress and soon became its leading light. He transformed the party's youth wing into an energetic and dynamic organisation and gave it a five-point programme—(1) rejection of the dowry system, (2) limitation of family size to two children per couple, (3) each citizen to plant a tree, (4) each to teach an adult to read and write and (5) getting the doctors and lawyers to work for the rural poor.

Along with Mrs Gandhi's 20-Point Economic Programme, Sanjay Gandhi's five-point plan constituted the basic ideology of the emergency. But the critics of the emergency alleged that he exercised enormous extra-constitutional authority and had a big hand in the excesses.

#### His dark days

The March 1977 elections to Parliament were an epoch-making event in that not only was the ruling party at the Centre defeated but also the Prime Minister and her powerful son lost their seats. While Mrs. Gandhi lost to Raj Narain from Rae Bareilly constituency in Uttar Pradesh, Sanjay Gandhi came a cropper against Ravindra Pratap Singh in the adjacent constituency of Amethi. The Janata Party came to power at the Centre, the first non-Congress party to do so since independence, and soon a number of commissions were appointed to enquire into the alleged misdeeds of the previous regime.

Sanjay Gandhi was implicated in a number of cases, the most prominent of them being the 'Kissa Kursi Ka' case, the Maruti case, the polymix case, defraud of Government and refusing to testify before the Shah Commission enquiring into the alleged excesses by Mrs. Gandhi's Government.

On July 6, 1977, the New Delhi edition of the Statesman published on its front page a photostat

copy of a Swiss bank draft allegedly issued by Sanjay Gandhi. The next day he issued the following statement:

"I have seen the Statesman of July 6. It has published a photostat copy of the alleged Swiss bank draft. I make a statement that I do not have any bank account in any Swiss bank or any bank outside India. The alleged bank draft is a forgery or impersonation by someone for mischievous motives. A great fraud has been committed. No bank draft was issued at my instance. I did not give 25,000 francs to Maneka Gandhi on June 9 or any other date through the draft. The whole story is pure fabrication."

The Additional Sessions Judge, Mr. O.N. Vohra, on May 5, 1978 remanded Sanjay Gandhi to judicial custody for 30 days after his bail plea in the Kissa case was cancelled by the Supreme Court. Mr. Vohra ordered that he be granted "better class" under the prison regulations and be given suitable facilities in jail.

On February 27, 1979, the same judge convicted Sanjay Gandhi and V.C. Shukla, former Information Minister. In his 362-page judgement Justice Vohra said: "All the facts would lead to the inference of existence of a conspiracy between Mr. V.C. Shukla and Mr. Sanjay Gandhi and also to the inference of abatement by one in regard to the commission of offences mentioned in the charges". He held that for the reasons given in the judgement, the charges as framed against the two stood established "beyond reasonable doubt".

The two were sentenced to two years rigorous imprisonment (hard labour) and fined Rs. 10,000 (Sanjay) and Rs. 25,000 (Shukla).

About the motive of the crime, the judge observed that it was provided by the "manner in which the political functioning of the Government was ridiculed in the film.

The film 'Kissa Kursi Ka' is a political satire depicting politicians' thirst for power and the

lengths they go to achieve it. In fact, many believed that the film was a thinly-veiled depiction of Mrs. Gandhi's emergency rule.

On April 11, 1980, the Supreme Court acquitted Sanjay Gandhi and Shukla of all the charges in the case holding that the prosecution had failed to prove the existence of any criminal conspiracy between the two to destroy the film material by burning it during the emergency. By a unanimous judgement the three-judge bench of Mr. Justice S. Murtaza Fazal Ali, Mr. Justice P.S. Kailasam and Mr. Justice A.D. Koshal set aside the order of conviction and sentence passed against them by the trial court.

#### Indictment by Maruti panel

The affairs of the Maruti project were probed by a retired judge of the Supreme Court, Mr. A.C. Gupta. The Commission submitted its report in September 1978 in which it held, among other things, that the affairs of the company "have brought about a decline in the integrity of public life and sullied the purity of the administration."

The Commission said "persons in public life were in danger of having their political careers ruined" as legal and other requirements were brushed aside and accepted norms of behaviour were forgotten on many occasions when the interest of the Maruti company was involved.

About Sanjay Gandhi the Commission said :

1. He exercised only a derivative power. Its source was the authority of the Prime Minister...It was predetermined that all he wanted would be granted to him—and in most cases it was. ( ) He knew it was impossible to make an indigenous car and he never intended to do so. But others who were not so bold and resourceful and did not expect to get away with fraud, gave up leaving the field clear to him.

(3) He had an imported N S U. engine fitted to the Maruti prototype sent to the Vehicle Research and Development Establishment, Ahmednagar, for testing which was clearly a fraudulent act. (4) He

made a series of untrue statements to the Government to get permission to raise crores privately and made untrue and baseless promises to win and keep shareholders and dealers. Where promises failed threats worked.

(5) He himself presided over the extraordinary general body meeting of Maruti Ltd. which appointed him the Managing Director, and as such received large funds of money from the public limited company. (6) He did not have the technical or managerial qualifications to justify a salary of Rs. 40.0/- plus perks nor did he have any technical know-how or expertise to sell for which he was paid Rs. 3 lakhs by Maruti Technical Services.

(7) After the defeat of his mother in the March 1977 elections when all chances of Maruti car coming into the market had vanished, he started removing goods from the factory. By May (1977) the value of such goods had mounted to Rs. 17 lakhs, according to the Association of Maruti Car Dealers.

In the Polymix case, the former Delhi Municipal Corporation Commissioner, B.R. Tamta, was charged with contracting to buy polymix worth about Rs. 10 lakhs to purify Delhi's water supply in preference to alum giving "undue pecuniary advantage" to Maruti Technical Services Private Ltd.

In May 1979 two special courts were constituted by the Janata Government to try more than 20 cases against Mrs. Gandhi and Sanjay Gandhi. These have since been either dismissed or withdrawn for lack of evidence.

The manner in which Sanjay Gandhi faced the enquiry commissions and the role he played on the political arena after the fall of the Janata Government certainly brought him up as a leader of rare courage and stoicism. C.M. Stephen (former Opposition leader and presently Communication Minister) said in the Central Hall of Parliament on January 10, 1980 : "I salute my young brother Mr. Sanjay Gandhi for unflinchingly

facing prosecution and for firmly standing by his mother during the last two and half years".

#### Triumphant return

Sanjay Gandhi's attitude towards the many cases against him was vindicated when he won handsomely from the Amethi constituency in the January 1980 elections to the Lok Sabha. He had played a prominent role in the selection of Congress (I) candidates both for the Lok Sabha poll and for the elections to the nine State assemblies in May-June this year.

Following the thumping victory of the Congress (I) in both these elections there were demands that he be sent to head the U.P. Government. But Mrs. Gandhi turned down these demands and instead

appointed him on June 10 to his first post in the party organisation as one of the three general secretaries.

Thirteen days later, at 8.15 a.m. on Monday, June 23, Sanjay Gandhi was dead. He had taken off in a two-seater US-made Pitts aerobatic plane along with Capt. Subhash Saxena of the Delhi Flying Club for a one-hour spin, his favourite past-time. But the flight lasted hardly 15 minutes. While doing the fourth loop in the risky aerobatics called Stall Turn, he lost control of the plane and it crashed into the bushes just behind his residence at 12 Willingdon Crescent in New Delhi. Both Sanjay Gandhi and Saxena died on the spot.

Sanjay Gandhi lived a life of adventure and he died an adventurer.

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