

SPYING ON THE HEAVENS

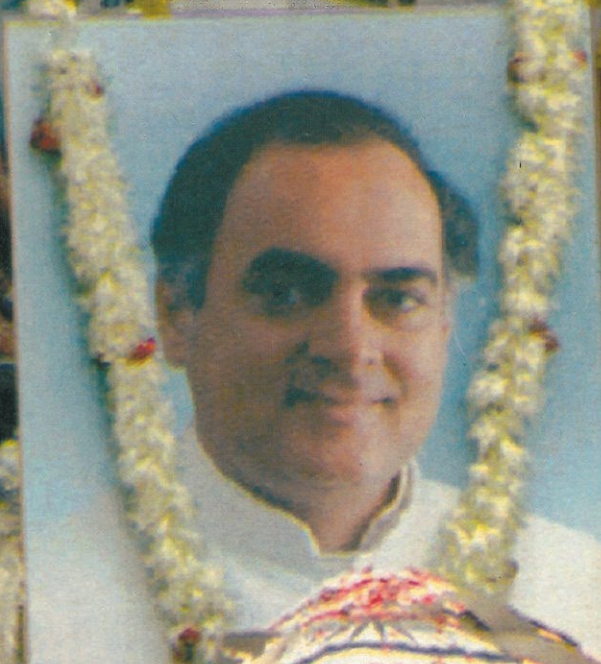
A New Age of Astronomy

Newsweek

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Bleeding India



**Funeral procession
for Rajiv Gandhi**



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DOUGLAS CURRAN—AFP

Lost vision: *Rajiv's coffin arrives in New Delhi, Rahul lights the pyre accompanied by Priyanka, a Hindu priest and Sonia*

Bleeding India

In the midst of the most violent general-election campaign in the country's history, a suicide bomber assassinates former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi

At the flower-strewn cremation platform beside New Delhi's Jamuna River, the murdered political leader's son performed his traditional duty. Hundreds of thousands of mourners, including a host of foreign dignitaries, had gathered to watch him ignite the pyre with a piece of burning sandalwood. India's best-known political leader was being put to rest, another victim of the nation's ethnic, religious and cultural blood feuds. Seven years ago the young man was Rajiv Gandhi, presiding at the funeral of his mother, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. This time the task fell to Rajiv's 20-year-old son, Rahul. In the merciless heat of a premonsoon afternoon, the spectators wept and prayed—not only

for Rajiv Gandhi, but for India itself.

The terrorist bombing that killed Rajiv Gandhi last week was the latest step in the country's long descent into raging factionalism. The attack came in the closing days of a national parliamentary campaign that seemed likely to return him to power. His supporters were hoping that he could bring together the scattered ranks of Indian moderates and stop the escalating violence of the country's extremists, but that was a desperate wish. Already the elections had set a record as the bloodiest in India's history, with at least 180 dead. The government had staggered the election schedule; different regions would vote on three different days, so that security police could be shifted from one anticipated trouble

spot to the next. The results were to be released only after all votes were in. One of the balloting dates was past when Rajiv died, but the process would have to be repeated in some of those districts because of violence and allegations of fraud and intimidation. After the assassination the national election commission postponed the final two days of voting for three weeks while police try to restore order.

In the ways that matter most, however, the job clearly exceeds the power of the police. For the first time India's principal political family has been left without an heir apparent. Rajiv's Congress party, which has governed the country for all but five of the country's 44 years of independence, is suddenly rudderless and adrift (ac-



MANUEL CENETA—AFP

An Explosive Political Landscape

Ever since independence in 1947, when clashes between Hindus and Muslims claimed at least 200,000 lives, India has suffered from tensions among its diverse religious and ethnic groups. A guide to the protagonists and the recent history of violence:

Divisive Forces

Sikhs: Sikh separatists favor autonomy or independence for the state of Punjab. Key demands: greater access to river waters, the release of political prisoners and the establishment of Chandigarh as the Punjabi capital.

Kashmiris: Separatists in the predominantly Muslim state of Jammu and Kashmir want independence or unification with Pakistan.

Fundamentalist Hindus: Encouraged by the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party, radical Hindus have repeatedly clashed with the country's Muslim minority.

Tamils: Refugees from Sri Lanka have been blamed for election violence in India.



A Decade of Conflict

1983: 3,000 die in clashes over voting rights during a state election in Assam.

1984: Indian troops storm the Golden Temple in Amritsar, killing more than 1,200.

1984: Indira Gandhi is assassinated by her own Sikh bodyguards; 3,000 Sikhs are slain in the aftermath.

1988: A record 1,567 people are killed in terrorist incidents in Punjab.

1989: More than 1,000 people die in Hindu-Muslim rioting in Bhagalpur, Bihar.

1990: Violence flares in Ayodhya over Hindu plans to raze a Muslim holy site.

1991: Rajiv Gandhi is assassinated.

companying story). And no other moderate party in India has nearly the same national stature. Instead, the field appears to have been left to the religious and ethnic groups whose influence derives from the forces that are tearing the country apart: discord, hatred and fear.

Shedding his bulletproof vest: In his final campaign, Rajiv Gandhi openly defied those forces. His five-year stint as prime minister, following his mother's death, was marred by ethnic violence and allegations of corruption, but he insisted that his biggest mistake had been to lose touch with the people. "One more chance for Congress, and I will change everything," he promised. As he toured the country in recent weeks he ignored the worries of his security staff and refused to wear his old bulletproof vest. At a stop in Bihar he confiscated his bodyguards' car keys to keep them from driving after him as he waded into a crowd of admirers. Everywhere he traveled, he kept up a grueling pace of shaking hands with supporters in the streets, exchanging embraces with them and accepting their gifts of flowers. "This time I am doing it my way," he declared.

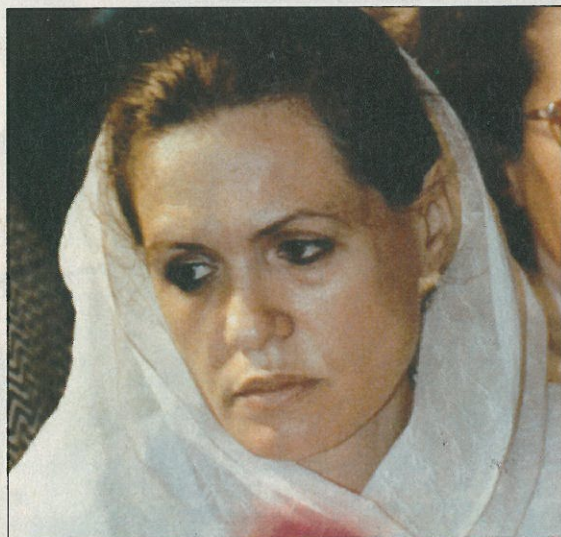
At the scene of his death, the small town of Sriperumbudur in the state of Tamil Nadu, no one even bothered to make a

security check of the dais where he was to speak. He arrived at Madras airport at 8:30 that evening, nearly 90 minutes behind schedule. Senior police officials urged him to cancel the 28-mile trip to Sriperumbudur because it was already so late. Besides, they warned, the area was known to have been infiltrated by supporters of a Sri Lankan guerrilla group, the Liberation Tigers

of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Gandhi earned their enmity in 1987 after he sent Indian troops to help the Sri Lankan government fight the insurgents. But Gandhi could not be dissuaded from making the trip.

He reached the rally a few minutes after 10 that night. The site was an open field of grass and bare earth, ringed by palm trees. Thousands of local residents had turned out to see him, cheerful and relaxed despite the searing weather. Gandhi stepped from his car and began walking toward a 25-foot red carpet that led to the marigold-festooned dais. A corral-like fence had been erected to keep the surging crowd back, but they cheerfully scrambled over it to drape Gandhi's neck with scarves and garlands. A woman dressed in orange and green pressed toward the candidate. When she reached him, she bent over as if to touch his feet, a traditional gesture of respect.

The rattle of firecrackers in the night air was broken by a deep concussion. "I thought it was just part of the celebration," says N. Jayanth, a local journalist who was walking a



SUNIL MALHOTRA—REUTER

An offer she couldn't accept: Sonia in mourning

few yards behind the candidate. It took him a moment to grasp what his eyes were seeing: a sudden burst of flame and smoke erupting in the crowd's midst; men and women seeming to spring into the air like a startled flock of birds; onlookers immobilized as in a photograph and then shoving and clawing and trying to flee. Jayanth and others stood in confusion, unable to find Gandhi. Where the explosion had been there was a small circle of sprawled bodies and severed limbs. Then someone noticed

that one of the victims was wearing Lotto running shoes. The shoes had become a trademark of Gandhi's during the long, arduous campaign. "Four of us lifted his body," says Jayanth. "There was no face at all. Just a hollow."

As soon as the authorities could be notified, investigators from every intelligence and law-enforcement agency in India raced to Sriperumbudur and began trying to make sense of what had happened. There was no crater in the ground to mark the

spot of the explosion, and the bomb spent its force in a radius of a few feet, suggesting that the device had been carefully designed for its purpose. The blast killed 18 people, but only two victims seemed to have absorbed the worst of the impact, according to Dr. P. Chandrashekharan, the director of the Tamil Nadu Forensic Sciences Department. One of them was Gandhi; the other was a dark-skinned woman whom no one seemed able to identify. Although she was decapitated in the explosion, her face was

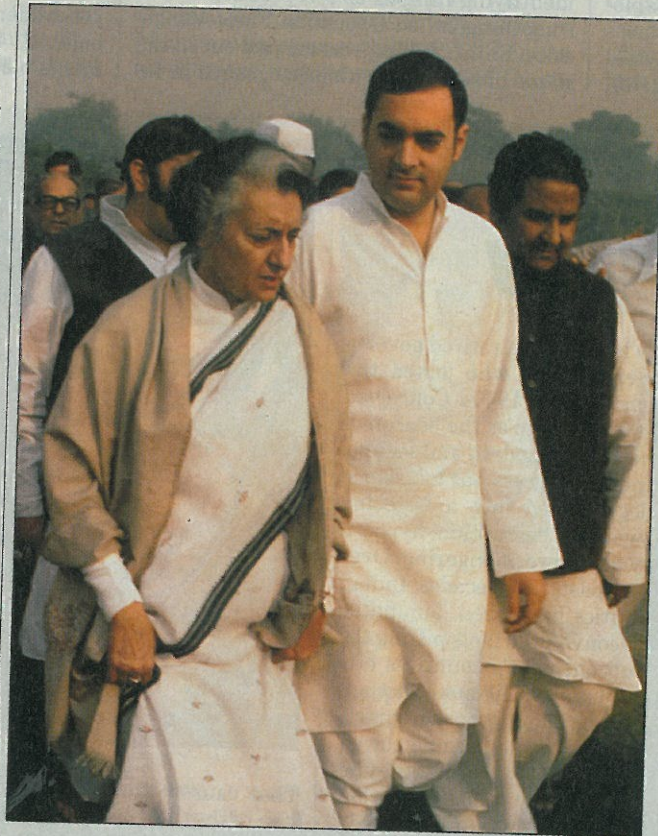
The Rajiv Gandhi I Knew

BY EDWARD BEHR

When Rajiv Gandhi became prime minister of India in 1984, one of his first acts was to reduce the import tax on cameras for news photographers. It was a trivial gesture, given the appalling problems the country faced in the wake of his mother's death. But for better or worse it was typical Rajiv: he was modern, he was gadget-minded, he knew how to manipulate the media.

He was also strangely innocent in politics. Rajiv often felt outside the main stream of Indian society. Where his grandfather Jawaharlal Nehru's intellectual brilliance and his mother Indira's gift for political infighting ensured—and to some extent justified—the survival of the Nehru dynasty, Rajiv was in many ways proof of the flaws in hereditary rule masquerading as parliamentary democracy.

The family knew the problem. Four years ago I was in the home of the late Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Nehru's younger sister. She was less famous than her relatives, but I had always found her particularly sharp, even at 87. She spoke of her great-nephew with affection tinged by condescension. "He doesn't like books, except on technical subjects, and lacks a political instinct," she sighed. The telephone rang. It was Rajiv. He was then beset by a corruption scandal and I as-



'Someone has to help Mummy': Mother and son, in 1980

sumed he wished to consult her. But he simply wanted news of "Auntie's" frail health. "He's such a sweet boy, really," Vijaya Lakshmi said as she hung up.

It was impossible to dislike Rajiv. He could overwhelm you with ingenuous charm. When his brother was killed in 1980, and he was thrust into the role of heir apparent, he declared disarmingly: "Someone has to help Mummy." He was boyishly hand-

some. He could inspire hope. Many of us who watched him take his oath of office in 1984 believed the great days of the dynasty might be at hand once more. There was a hint of John Kennedy-style charisma, a sense that Rajiv and his beautiful Italian-born wife, Sonia, could usher in a new Indian "Camelot."

Alienation: We were wrong. The dream soon dissipated. Both Nehru and Indira, in their time, had worked out an

unspoken but highly effective formula for ruling India, taking votes from the poor and money from the middle-class industrialists, using the trappings of democracy and a docile bureaucracy to mask their autocratic ways. The heir to the dynasty failed to perpetuate the system: he alienated the poor (his was identified as a "rich man's government"), the bureaucrats (by pushing them too hard), and the newspaper-reading middle class (which was incensed by stories of corruption).

In truth, he inherited the worst Nehru characteristics: arrogance, petulance and a natural predilection for operating through small groups of trusted henchmen. Jawaharlal Nehru, all his life, treated his closest colleagues with barely disguised disdain. Indira eventually surrounded herself with second-rate yes men, astrologers and dubious gurus. Rajiv's chosen companions were Western-educated "golden boy" types—hardly representative, alas, of modern India.

In the last 18 months, in opposition, Rajiv was changing. He became more reflective, more tolerant, aware of his shortcomings and determined to overcome them. Once again he raised hopes—desperately needed in his virtually ungovernable country. Now that hope is only a memory.

Behr, a contributing editor, is a former NEWSWEEK correspondent who served in the Indian Army and has been covering Indian politics for more than 25 years.

intact. Judging from the scattered remains of her body and from a newspaper photograph taken of her just before the bomb went off, the authorities concluded that she was about 35 years old and five feet tall. She wore a wig and glasses.

Tiny steel pellets: Near the woman's dead body investigators found a belt of the kind worn by people with back troubles. Fragments of the woman's clothing clung to it, along with bits of electrical wire and part of something that seemed to be a triggering device. Several of the metal stays from the rear part of the belt had been removed and apparently replaced with plastic explosive. Chandrashekharan says chemists identified the residue as a type of military explosive that is common enough in some places but previously unseen in India. Tiny steel pellets, less than a millimeter in diameter,

were found embedded in the bodies of all the victims. From all indications, the bomb was packed with the shrapnel, to increase its lethal punch.

The attack gave every appearance of having been a thoroughly professional operation, but no previously known terrorist group claimed responsibility. Of course, such boasting would have invited massive retribution. After Indira Gandhi was gunned down by her Sikh bodyguards, Hindu mobs took to the streets and killed more than 3,000 Sikhs, few of whom could have played any part in the assassination. Last week an anonymous caller phoned the Times of India's office in Bangalore, identifying himself as a representative of something called Operation Final Vengeance. Rajiv's killing was carried out in the name of separatist minority groups in In-

dia and Sri Lanka, the caller said. Police didn't appear to put much stock in the information.

Most public speculation focused on the LTTE. "It was a Tamil Tiger job," a top police official told NEWSWEEK flatly. The Tigers are among the most implacable and experienced ethnic militants in all of South Asia. They undoubtedly had the technical expertise and the dedication required for such a suicide attack. Two months ago in downtown Colombo a car bomb killed Sri Lanka's Defense Minister Ranjan Wijeratne. Few Sri Lankans seemed to believe the Tigers' denial of responsibility in that attack on a man widely viewed as their worst enemy. A newspaper photo of the as-yet-unidentified Sriperumbudur suicide bomber, taken coincidentally just moments before the blast, also showed her to

The Nehru-Gandhis: End of a Dynasty

*If [Congress] engages in un-
gainly skirmishes for power, it
will find one fine morning that
it is no more.*

—MAHATMA GANDHI, in 1948

Is the moment at hand? Probably not—not yet at least. But in the wake of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, there was ample evidence that the Congress party is, if not doomed, then very much in need of rescue. The killing set off a frantic scramble by Congress leaders to find a new leader for India's oldest and largest political party. Blinded by shock as much as by a lack of obvious candidates, they first flocked to Gandhi's Italian-born and politically inexperienced widow, Sonia Gandhi. When she quite understandably turned them down, Congress's inner circle was at a near-complete loss. For a fleeting moment they even contemplated making an offer to Rajiv's 20-year-old son Rahul Gandhi, an undergraduate at Harvard.

If the bizarre nomination circus seemed like a parody of democratic procedure, it did not surprise some of the Congress party's older hands. "It showed how bankrupt the par-

ty is," sighed a retired government official who joined the party in the 1940s. Conceived 106 years ago as the beacon of hope for a modern and secular India, Congress has long since degenerated into a festering swamp of corruption, hypocrisy and powermongering. Over the past two decades Indian politics have been dominated by convoluted plots pitting the Subcontinent's countless ethnic and religious factions against one another. In this climate, "People became cowed. Instead of saying what they believed, they said what they thought wanted to be heard," says Robert Bradnock, a political geographer at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

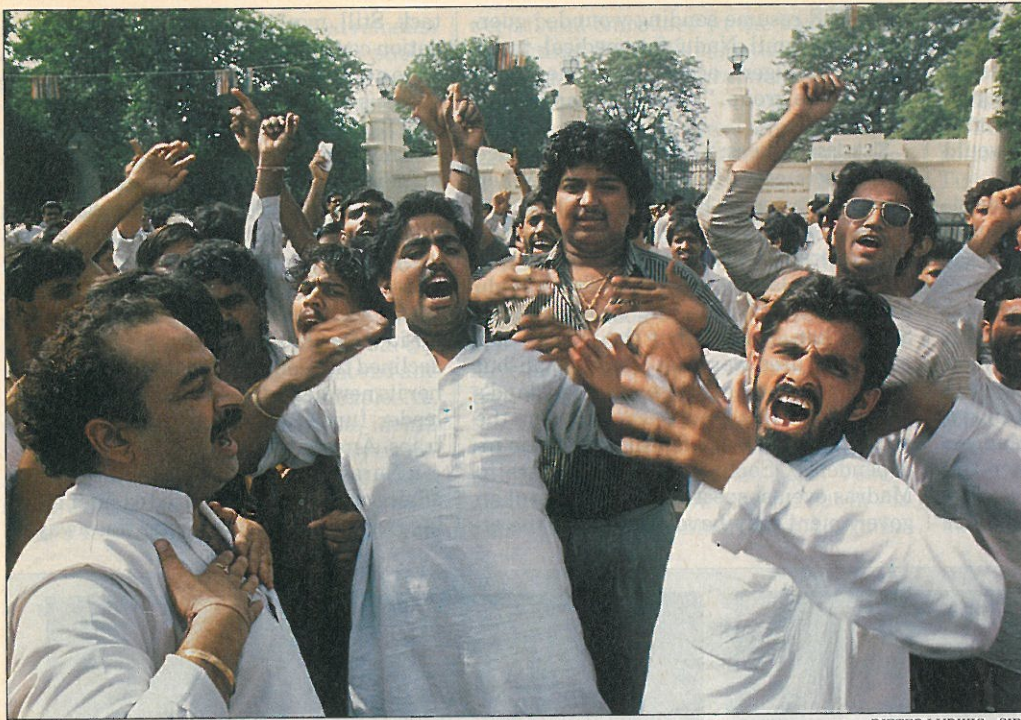
Shrewd and paranoid: How did it come to that? One main reason is that the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty never reshaped Congress into a bona fide democratic party after India gained independence from its colonial rulers in 1947. Although he himself was profoundly democratic, Jawaharlal Nehru "made no serious effort to build up an internal party and political management," says historian Bipan Chandra.



That caused the initial erosion of the Congress party's vision, but most historians believe the real slide came with Indira Gandhi's ascent to power in 1966. Shrewd and paranoid, Indira relentlessly maneuvered to concentrate power in her own hands and to neutralize her rivals. Protected by her extraordinary charisma, she went largely unchallenged as she, at various times, eliminated party elections, jailed opponents, muzzled the press, condoned forcible sterilization of the poor and roused Sikh extremist passions. "Indira Gandhi was the one who began and encouraged the politics of vio-

lence," says political columnist Venugopala Rao. In the end, she was brought down by violence, gunned down by her own Sikh bodyguards in 1984.

Her son Rajiv didn't fare much better. To be sure, he initially promised to halt the rotting of the Congress party. "Good Congress workers are handicapped, for on their backs ride the brokers of power and influence," he thundered in Bombay in 1985, when Congress turned 100. "Corruption is not only tolerated but even regarded as the hallmark of leadership." Unfortunately, it wasn't long before Rajiv himself partook of,



DIETER LUDWIG—SIPA

Bereavement and outrage: Supporters gathered outside the house where Rajiv lay in state

soft-spoken intellectual from Andhra Pradesh, his health is poor, but he might appeal to many factions as an interim choice.

■ Narain Dutt Tewari, 65, a former industry minister. A suave Brahman with a strong power base in the state of Uttar Pradesh, he was shunted because he seemed to threaten Rajiv.

■ Sharad Pawar, 51, chief minister in the western state of Maharashtra. He leads a relatively youthful faction of the party, but has little national following.

■ Arjun Singh, 63, former chief minister of Mahya Pradesh and a onetime party vice president. Once a confidant of Rajiv Gandhi, he was the one who first proposed Sonia for the party presidency. Many observers suspected that the move was calculated to demonstrate his party loyalty, upstage his rivals and gain Sonia's blessing for his own candidacy for the party's top job.

Because all of the potential successors lack Gandhi's stature, there was speculation that Congress might look outside, perhaps to an alliance with caretaker Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar of the socialist Janata Dal. "He's a leader without a party, and Congress is a party without a leader," says one political analyst, a former Congress member himself. "I think they should come together." But such a marriage would probably have to wait a

decent interval. Before Gandhi's death, Shekhar made some vehemently anti-Congress speeches, and an overly hasty reconciliation would seem hypocritical. But Congress has no time to waste. The party faces a stiff challenge, especially from the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party. Still, if Congress can come up with at least a respectable figurehead, it stands a good chance of regaining power.

Some party members continue to cast longing glances in the direction of the Nehru-Gandhi family. One group of six Congress elders asked Sonia to reconsider her refusal to head the party. Her children also were being sized up. Son Rahul, who attends Harvard University, is only 20 and so far shows no interest in poli-

tics. Asked whether the party would consider Rahul to succeed Rajiv, Congress spokesman Pranab Mukherjee refused to answer. A family friend responded to the idea with incredulity. "Have you gone crazy?" the friend demanded. Daughter Priyanka seems to have more political instincts, but she is only 19. Two relatives are active in politics—Rajiv's second cousin Arun Nehru, 47, and Maneka Gandhi, 34, the outspoken widow of Rajiv's younger brother, Sanjay—but both of them have drifted into the opposition fold.

Hunger for vengeance: Late last week the country's chief election commissioner, T. N. Seshan, rejected a request from Congress to move up the postponed elections again. Public sympathy for the party was high after Gandhi's death, but no one expected it to last very long. What will surely linger is the hunger for vengeance. When the first reports of the assassination spread across the country, Congress supporters poured into the streets, angrily chanting: "Blood for blood!" Stepped-up police patrols and strictly enforced curfews helped keep the violence to a minimum. Only a dozen or so people were killed in the first few days after the bombing. But the lack of a clearly identified group for mobs to punish also was a factor. And maybe—although the chance seems slim—India is finally growing tired of the endless cycle of bloodshed and retaliation.

Weariness can't save the country, in any case. The fundamentalist movements and ethnic nationalist organizations that are spreading across India are the resorts of people who have been left without any bet-

ter hope. To move the country forward again, a political leader will have to make a great leap of courage—and persuade the people to do likewise. They will have to begin building for all instead of tearing one another down. In his final weeks, Rajiv Gandhi seemed to have found such bravery, staking his life on the people's essential good will. Thousands embraced him, shook his hand and cheered him before an assassin caught up with him. Gandhi's last campaign was a desperate effort. But someone had to try.

SAM SEIBERT with MELINDA LIU and SUDIP MAZUMDAR in New Delhi and STEVE LE VINE in Sriperumbudur



Scarves, garlands and death: The suspected bomber (center)

have the dark complexion of someone from south India or Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, the LTTE's political office in London issued repeated denials of any responsibility in the assassination, adding a cryptic promise that proof of the group's innocence would soon appear.

In India, several credible sources insisted that the LTTE had every reason not to kill Gandhi. According to those sources, Gandhi met secretly with a Tigers representative in early March and allegedly offered a concession to the Tigers. The Indian government officially placed Tamil Nadu off-limits to the LTTE last June after the group staged a gangland-style hit against a rival Sri Lankan Tamil leader in Madras. Nevertheless, the sources say, after the meeting Gandhi persuaded Chandra Shekhar, the caretaker prime minister, to let

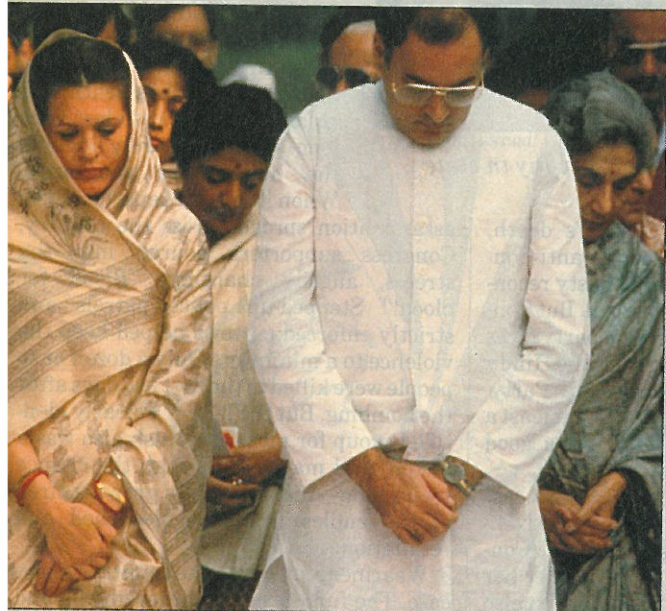
the LTTE resume sending wounded guerrillas to Tamil Nadu for medical treatment. The Tigers, according to one source close to the group, "were very happy with the meeting."

Sinhalese features: There was no shortage of suspects aside from the Tigers. When Shekhar ousted M. Karunanidhi, the chief minister of Tamil Nadu, last January, Indians generally believed that the order had come from Gandhi, and many Tamil Nadu natives were furious. One knowledgeable Sri Lankan insisted that the woman suspect's features were not Tamil at all but Sinhalese. The Sinhalese are the island's dominant ethnic group, against whom the minority Tamils are fighting for their independence. Some local investigators in Madras even suspect that the Sri Lankan government may have engineered the at-

tack. Still, most authorities in the investigation continued to blame the Tigers. "We have no clinching proof yet, but prima facie there is enough material to point to the LTTE as the suspect," said Subramaniam Swamy, India's law and justice minister.

India's politicians were scrambling at least as desperately as the investigators. Gandhi's death left an enormous vacuum, both within his party and in national politics—and the three weeks left before the voting resumes was hardly enough time to fill it. After Rajiv's widow, Sonia Gandhi, declined the Congress party's offer to make her its new head, the search for a new party leader turned to a roster of regional sa- traps. Among them:

■ Narasimha Rao, 70, Rajiv's external-affairs minister, who chaired cabinet meetings when the prime minister was away. A



PABLO BARTHOLOMEW—GAMMA-LIAISON



PICTORIAL PARADE

Family ties: Rajiv, Sonia, Rahul and Priyanka at a memorial service for Indira; Mahatma with Jawaharlal in 1946

or at least countenanced, some of the same highhanded methods he said he deplored. "He was his mother's son," says Bradnock. Like his mother, he sowed division within the Congress party to ensure that no one gained enough stature to challenge his rule.

Power vacuum: No wonder, then, that his death left Congress facing a vacuum. After two generations of willful failure to establish a second line of leadership, the party's first instinct was to turn to another Gandhi—any Gandhi. But there is none now ready to pick up the family's fallen banner. The party seems likely to be

forced to find a leader in some other quarter, and in the long run this may be best for Indian democracy. "What people in India have resented is the corruption of the democratic ideal," says Bradnock. "People in India aren't keen to change the ideal. They want to get closer to it."

Unfortunately, the conditions that prevail in India today seem hardly suited to a democratic renaissance. There is no national leader with the sort of broad-gauge appeal that could pull the country together. Many Indians, jaded and weary of the old dreams of a united secular

state, are embracing extremist movements based on religion or ethnicity—Sikh extremists, Assamese separatists, right-wing Hindu fundamentalists who staged mass assaults on a disputed holy site at Ayodhya last year. "These religious wars between Hindu fundamentalists and minority groups have all the potential for the classic kind of religious conflict that plagued Europe during the Reformation," warns Tariq Ali, author of "An Indian Dynasty: The Story of the Nehru-Gandhi Family." Still, for all their cynicism and sectarianism, India's voters remain sophisticated

about politics. It's hard to say what effect Rajiv Gandhi's assassination will have on national politics: will it loose a new wave of emotion, or will the shock actually dampen some of the fires already burning? In any case, this is a critical time for the Congress party which, even if it wins another majority next month, can never be quite the same. The family that anchored it has, at least for now, withdrawn from the political scene. Mahatma Gandhi's warning has never seemed more timely.

PASCAL PRIVAT with
SUDIP MAZUMDAR in New Delhi and
DANIEL PEDERSEN in London