

Minister in India and Hindu nationalist

SUSHMA SWARAJ

1952-2019

BY ELLEN BARRY

Sushma Swaraj, a longtime campaigner for Hindu nationalism who was the face of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy as India's external affairs minister for five years, died on Tuesday in a hospital in New Delhi. She was 67.

The hospital, the All India Institute of Medical Science, said in a statement that the cause was heart failure.

"A glorious chapter in Indian politics comes to an end," Mr. Modi wrote on Twitter. And in a letter of condolence, Sonia Gandhi, a longtime adversary of Ms. Swaraj's and a former leader of the opposition Indian National Congress party (and a daughter-in-law of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi), called her "a lady of extraordinary gifts."

Ms. Swaraj was the second woman in India's history to serve as external affairs minister, after Ms. Gandhi, who was assassinated in 1984.

She made her last political statement on the day she died, tweeting out her approval of the government's sudden move to strip the restive, largely Muslim region of Kashmir of its autonomous status. Hindu nationalists had urged that step for years.

"Thank you Prime Minister," she wrote. "Thank you very much. I was waiting to see this day in my lifetime."

Ms. Swaraj was one of the most well-liked ministers in Mr. Modi's government, largely because of her good-humored presence on social media. In 2017, as citizens petitioned her about visa difficulties, one person wrote on Twitter that he was stuck on Mars. She responded immediately: "Even if you are stuck on the Mars, Indian Embassy there will help you."



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Sushma Swaraj was the second woman to serve as India's external affairs minister.

Sushma Sharma was born on Feb. 14, 1952, in Ambala, a city in northern India that was then considered part of Punjab. She grew up in a household committed to right-wing politics.

Her father, Hardev Sharma, was a leader of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, an organization that maintains that India is fundamentally a Hindu nation.

Ms. Swaraj studied law at Punjab University, where she enlisted in her father's organization's student arm, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad.

She was profoundly affected by what was called the Emergency, a 19-month crackdown on political dissent that was begun in 1975 in the Indira Gandhi administration.

During the crackdown, Ms. Swaraj volunteered as a law student to defend George Fernandes, an opposition figure who was accused of providing dynamite sticks to blow up bridges and vital rail and road infrastructure.

Among the other law student volunteers was a young socialist named Swaraj Kaushal.

The two married in 1975, against their parents' wishes, and had a daughter, Bansuri Swaraj, who also became a lawyer.

Ms. Swaraj, who was known for her oratory and debating skills, was only 25 when she was first elected to the state Legislative Assembly in Haryana and named a cabinet minister in the state, making her the youngest person to achieve that status.

At the time, she had no objection to being called "communal," a term that had then been used negatively, to mean divisive or sectarian.

"Yes, we are communal," she told Parliament in 1996, "because we fight for the respect of the national flag. Yes, we are communal because we demand the abolition of Article 370," the constitu-



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"Yes, we are communal," she told Parliament in 1996, "because we fight for the respect of the national flag. Yes, we are communal because we demand the abolition of Article 370," the constitutional provision that granted the Kashmir region limited autonomy.

She added, "Our definition of secularism is that a Hindu should be a good Hindu, a Muslim should be a good Muslim, a Sikh should be a good Sikh, and a Christian should be a good Christian, and everyone should follow their religions while simultaneously respecting each other."

Last year, when Ms. Swaraj announced that she would not run for reelection because of her failing health, her husband publicly declared his gratitude.

"You are contesting elections since you were 25, and fighting elections for 41 years is quite a marathon," he wrote. "Madam — I am running behind you for the last 46 years. I am no longer a 19-year-old. Please, I am running out of breath. Thank you."