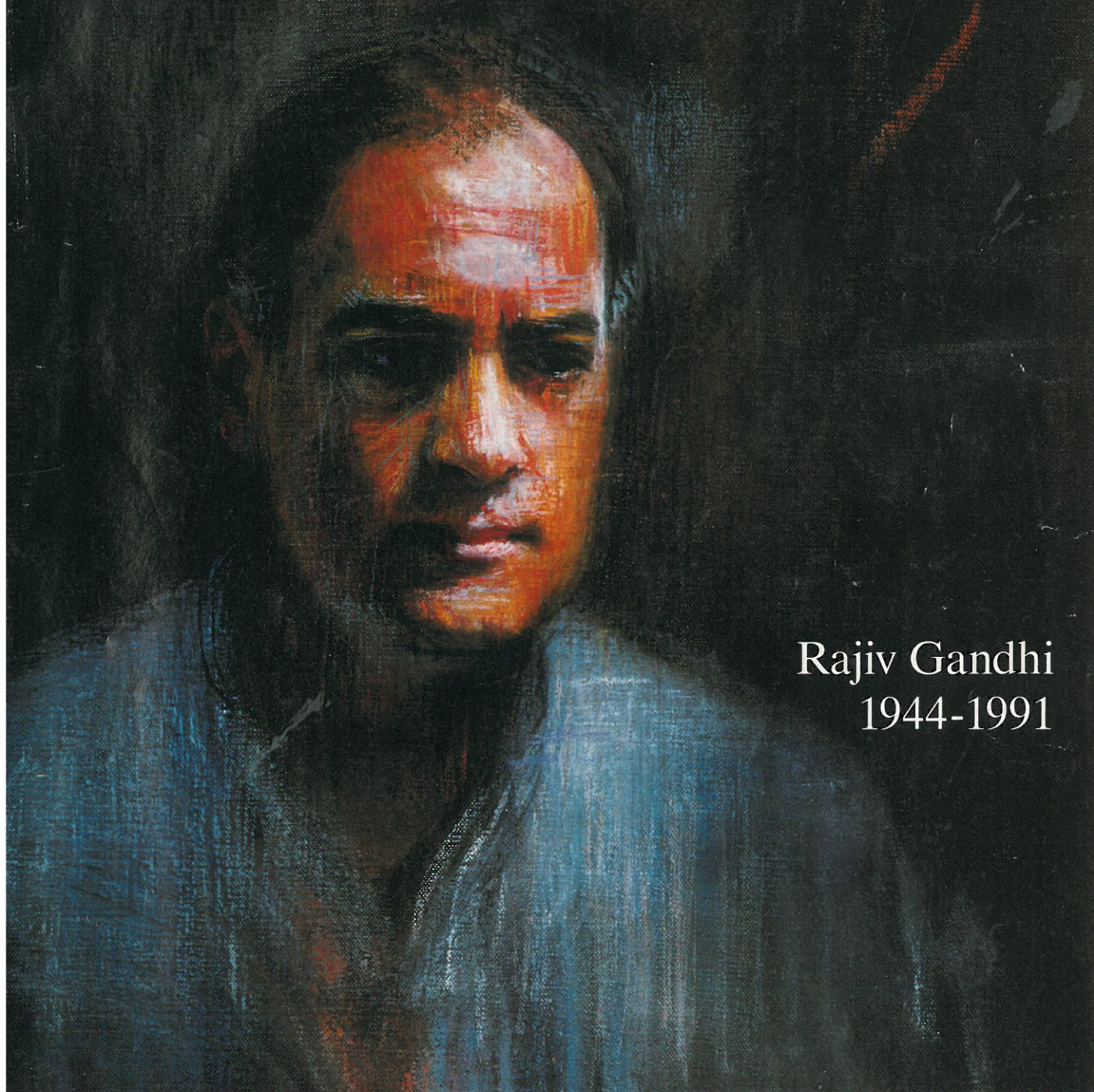


# TIME

INTERNATIONAL



Rajiv Gandhi  
1944-1991

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WEEKLY

TIME/JUNE 3, 1991

## COVER STORIES

# India in a State of Shock

**The brutal assassination of Rajiv Gandhi leaves the nation to ponder a future without a dynasty**

By JAMES WALSH

This is the art of darkness: a woman offers a garland, bows from the waist—and, suddenly, the once and future hope of India, a figure invested with the symbolic weight of generations, is obliterated in a deafening roar and ball of flame. A man whose eminent family had long since become identified with one-sixth of the human race, Rajiv Gandhi last week went the way of his mother Indira, falling victim to a climate of violence that has steadily overtaken the subcontinent. If Rajiv was heir to a miraculous name, he disap-

peared in a fiendish conjurer's trick: amid the theatrics of an electioneering stop, and in the puff of smoke from a bomb.

With one blow, the fortunes of 844 million people became hostage to a terrible uncertainty. On the comeback trail for months, the former Prime Minister had gone a long way toward regaining public faith in his ability to rescue India from a black hole of debt, drift and alienation. His death sickened the country with shame and impotent rage. It was horrifying enough that a bomb could have so obscenely ripped apart the latest and perhaps last standard-bearer of the Nehru-Gandhi line. But India, like most mourners, basically

wept for itself. Said Natwar Singh, a former Deputy Minister in Gandhi's Cabinet: "What has this country of Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi come to? We were an example to the world. Now we are a warning."

His countrymen did not love Rajiv in the universal way they adored his grandfather, Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India's long-serving first Prime Minister. Nor did they honor Rajiv with the widespread, if sometimes grudging, respect they paid Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, during her checkered leadership. But they regarded him as an essentially decent man, a reluctant politician struggling to live up to his inheritance of noblesse oblige.

Beyond that, he was virtually one of *Midnight's Children*, the generation that came into the world on the eve of hard-won independence from the British Empire in 1947. After Rajiv was born in Bombay in August 1944, Nehru, then a political prisoner, wrote that when "a new birth is intimately connected with us, it becomes a revival of ourselves, and our old hopes center round it." In an important way, the old hopes of India's founding fathers also exploded on May 22, 1991. The desperation of the hour was vividly illustrated when the Congress Party resorted to nominating Gandhi's Italian-born and determinedly apolitical widow Sonia to the party presi-

dency. Her polite refusal, returned flatly within a day of the offer, forced the party to look for the first nondescendant of Nehru to hold the reins of government since Lal Bahadur Shastri briefly succeeded the late patriarch in the gentler year of 1964.

Not that violence would strike Indians with surprise nowadays. On the contrary, the bloody ideologies of extremism and intercommunal vengeance have been threatening to eclipse all norms of democracy in the nation. Last week's first round of balloting in a staggered series of general elections was attended by an unprecedented wave of killings, intimidation, thuggery and vote rigging. And yet Gandhi's party had

Along New Delhi's Jamuna River, Rajiv's widow, right, and son, second left, circle the pyre

held out an at least plausible promise of reinstatement of Congress leader might help restore stability after 18 months of rudderless rule. His earlier experience in power had been chastening. Still, proven charges of bribe taking among intimates and of his own high-handedness began to hound Gandhi in 1987 and contributed to Congress's electoral defeat in 1989. In recent months, however, as Congress governments bickered and collapsed, a virus of cynicism and violence so infected public life as to raise the danger of a moribund political system. The Congress Party, with a more mature Rajiv at head, was bidding to reclaim the legitimacy it had lost and reverse the nation's decline.

Gandhi's campaign swing through Tamil Nadu, the keystone state of southern India, was an almost perfunctory exercise in safe territory, and the Congress seemed en route to recovering the national government. In the rural temple town of Sriperumbudur, 42 km southwest of Chennai, Gandhi stepped out of his touring car and breasted a crowd of well-wishers. The stop was on a hastily drafted itinerary covering six constituencies of the Lok Sabha or lower house of Parliament. Sriperumbudur, site of the first major rally, was elected with late-night festivities as a 10,000-student gathering swollen by villagers from neighboring hamlets prepared to welcome the *thalaivar* (leader). At a far corner of the large, haphazard rally ground was a speaker's platform flanked by VIP and press enclosures with a barricaded space for photographers in front.

Security was light: a scattering of automatic rifles, no metal detectors in evidence. Among the crowd was Raghavan, a state inspector general of police, who commented on how proud he was that Tamil Nadu had escaped much of the bloodshed that had accompanied campaigning elsewhere in the country. Gandhi himself had been stumping with little



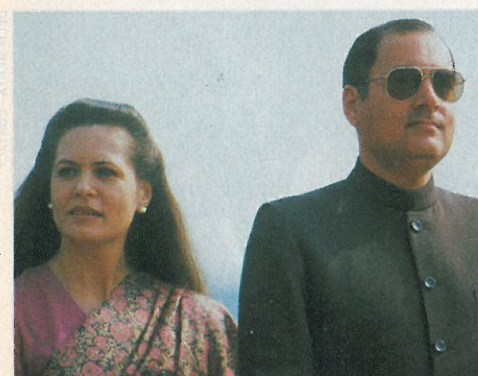
ROBERT NICKELSBERG FOR TIME

## A Nation's Dutiful Son

Rajiv Gandhi's path in the world was foreshadowed at its outset. When Indira went into labor with her firstborn, her aunt kept pestering the physician. "Doctor," said Krishna Nehru Hutheesing, "it has got to be a boy because my brother has no son." It was not an unusual sentiment, but its intensity suggested that a male heir to Jawaharlal Nehru was uncommonly important. Unlike his grandfather, Rajiv grew up to show no intellectual flair. He flunked out of university and took up aviation. But when politics finally called him, he undertook the challenge with a familiar sense of duty.



1950s Rajiv, second from right, sees the efforts of his grandfather and mother to shape India



1968 Sonia, First Lady-to-be, marries Rajiv following their university romance in England



1980 Sanjay, groomed to be Indira's heir, dies in a plane crash



1982 Rajiv reluctantly takes his brother's place, becoming a political understudy to Indira

tion, a marked contrast to his previous life. His mother's assassination at the hands of Sikh bodyguards in 1984, the event that catapulted the former airline pilot into the prime ministership, had shattered his family, especially Sonia, to his vulnerability. For years he wore a bullet-proof vest and surrounded himself with security so tight that his rivals mocked him.

It proved to be an important factor leading to his defeat in the November 1989 elections. V.P. Singh, a former Congress leader whose opposition bloc went on to win the government, argued at the time that Gandhi, kept out of the crush by a phalanx of commandos, "had lost touch with the people." It was a mistake—as Rajiv saw it—that he did not repeat. While wading through rough people in the northern state of Bihar on May 5, the man who had crossed swords at one time or another with rebellious chiefs, Kashmiris, Assamese and Sri Lankan guerrillas seemed unbothered by any threats to his life. Just before he got on another three-hour drive, he said, "I used to campaign like this when I was general secretary of the Congress in 1984, but when I was Prime Minister I was hounded by the system. There is still a threat, of course; it hasn't gone down. But there is no choice. Either you campaign or you look after your country."

So it was that he arrived in Sriperumbur. Two hours late, Gandhi barely paused before wading into an assembly that contained a sophisticated package of explosives. The device went off as a woman, dressed to be Tamil and in her late 20s, pushed her way forward to the greeting queue and handed him a sandalwood garland. When she bent forward deferentially, hoping to touch his feet, the blast went off, triggered by a manual detonator. It killed him instantly, ripping into his torso and

mutilating his face beyond recognition. It also killed the woman and at least 15 others surrounding him. The field of carnage was ghastly. A policewoman lay dead with both legs severed. Nearby was a slain photographer, his camera still slung around his neck. A crowd that only seconds earlier had been shouting "Long live Rajiv Gandhi!" suddenly yielded to a solitary cry of "Where is the leader? Where is he?" But the most distinguishable features left of him were his tall frame and running shoes.



An outpouring of dismay: mourners outside Teen Murti House

Amid the mangle of flesh and torn limbs was the garland offerer, apparently a suicidal assassin. Her back had taken the full force of the explosion, and her head had been sent flying four meters into the photographers' compound, where it was later discovered with face intact. As investigators reconstructed the crime, she had worn a kind of waist cinch associated with victims of back pain. But the girdle seems to have been packed with three to five sticks of cyclotrimethylenetrinitramine, a powerful plastic explosive commonly used for demolition work. P. Chandrashekar, the state director of forensic sci-

ences, said detectives had found the front section of the blue denim belt along with bits of wire.

Suspicious at once zeroed in on the Tamil Tigers, a combat-hardened band of guerrillas who have been fighting for a separate state in northeast Sri Lanka. Notoriously dedicated and vengeful, the Tigers have mastered terrorist bombing in a way still unknown among India's own numerous insurgents. They are believed to have blown up Ranjan Wijeratne, Sri Lanka's Deputy Defense Minister, and 18 others in March by detonating radio-controlled plastic explosives placed in a parked van on Wijeratne's route. Gandhi, whose mother's policies had done much to strengthen the Tigers, fell out with them dramatically in 1987 after he had co-authored a peace plan for the island republic.

After initially going along with the agreement, the Tigers melted into the countryside and fought Indian peacekeeping troops to a standstill in more than two grueling years of hit-and-run warfare with extensive casualties. Now under military pressure from Colombo, the Tigers' survival depends on their free access and mobility within Tamil Nadu, their lifeline of support for medicines, fuel and matériel. Had he become the Prime Minister—and all opinion polls said he would—Gandhi would almost certainly have cracked down on the Tigers' use of India for a haven.

In the immediate aftermath of Gandhi's assassination, however, many of his supporters on the streets were frustrated by the lack of clear-cut targets for their fury. As the news reached the capital that night, roving groups of young men converged on No. 10 Janpath, Gandhi's home in the heart of New Delhi. They were much like the crowd that had gone berserk after Indira's murder and slaughtered 2,500

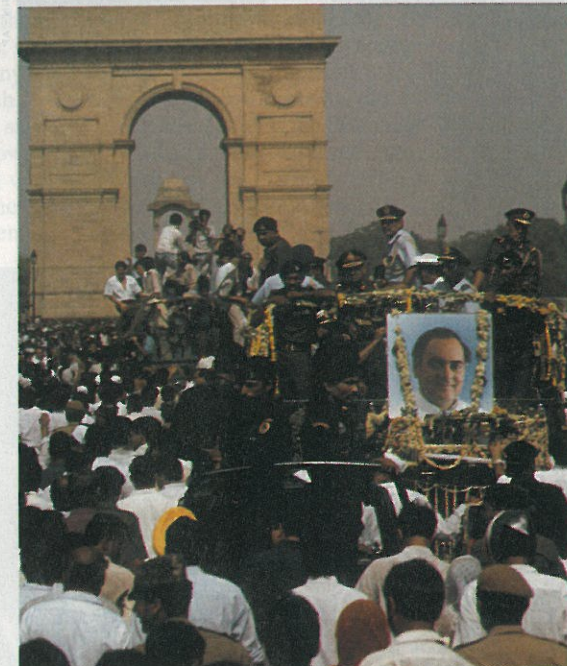
Sikhs in the capital territory. Some fixed blame on the Bharatiya Janata Party. That party, spearhead of a Hindu revivalist movement, is waging a strong electoral challenge to the Congress and other centrist parties.

The mob was so unruly that it pounced on a car bearing India's chief of state, President Ramaswamy Venkataraman, to pay his condolences at 10 Janpath. The assault of toughs pounding on the vehicle forced him to turn back. Later Sonia Gandhi, 44, and her daughter Priyanka, 19, quietly managed to escape and fly to Madras on an Indian air-force plane to claim Rajiv's body. Few people caught a glimpse of her then, but she displayed her grief when the aircraft returned the next morning. Dressed in white *salwar kameez*, a traditional Indian ensemble of loose trousers and blouse, the former First Lady placed her head on Priyanka's shoulder and wept as they waited for the casket to be carried out. By contrast, Priyanka was clear-eyed and composed, a study of Nehru-like dignity in an extreme moment.

The rest of India was in shock. By government order, shops and offices in the Delhi area remained closed for the day, and heavy security forces patrolled the streets. A crucial decision came when elections commissioner T.N. Seshan put off the second and third rounds of voting for a month. Election-related mayhem had taken 229 lives across the country before Gandhi's assassination; in its wake, 21 more people died in sporadic outbursts of wrath, and five people in Tamil Nadu committed suicide in fits of hysteria over his death. Caretaker Prime Minister Chandrashekar proclaimed a week of national mourning, and Gandhi's body was laid to rest in state in a closed coffin at Teen Murti House.

Gandhi had spent most of his boyhood

in Teen Murti (Three Statues), the spacious dwelling that had been the colonial army chief's residence under the British Raj, and which Nehru had taken over as the prime ministerial residence. Now the Nehru Memorial, it was the house in which Indira Gandhi had served her father as hostess during the early years of independence. It was an era in which Rajiv and his younger brother Sanjay saw most of the world's ma-



An essentially decent man: Rajiv en route to cremation

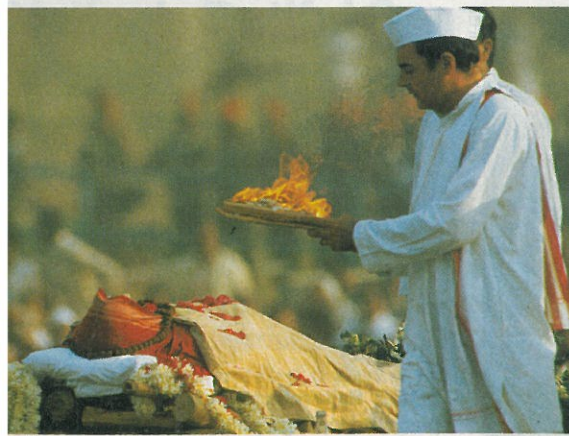
jeor political figures pass through: Presidents and kings, commissars in chief and emerging Third World statesmen.

That sort of heritage, a bridge to India's early dreams as a nation and even earlier struggle for freedom, will not be replaced easily. The Indian National Congress, with Nehru's father Motilal at its head before him, had been the sturdy vehicle that liberated India from white sa-

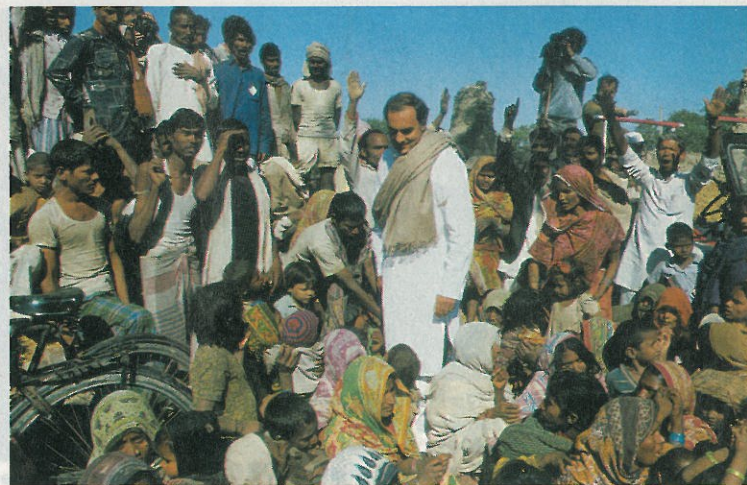
hibs and memsahibs, created a promising republic and shaped a sense of common purpose among a kaleidoscopic variety of religions, complexions, castes and tongues. But if the party had once relied on a faith in secularism and consensus building, in more recent years it had become the fief of a single family. Though devoted to her country, Indira was the one who, with the ready assistance of her

henchmen, cultivated the idea that India would come apart at the seams if a Gandhi did not clutch the threads. She had kept her sons sheltered from politics when they were young, and they came of age as political naifs. But in the 1970s, as she centralized power in the Congress and made over the party in her own image, the willful and spoiled Sanjay was groomed as her logical successor. Wielding power outside of office and the constitution, Sanjay and his Youth Congress loyalists undertook to bend the nation to their fancies, even compelling sterilizations in the dictatorial years of Indira's 1975-77 Emergency. Sanjay proceeded to kill himself as he had lived—recklessly, in the 1980 crash of an aerobatic plane he was flying. It was then that the self-effacing Rajiv, a pilot with domestic Indian Airlines, was recruited to be his mother's next in line.

"His assassination" the *Economic Times* of New Delhi editorialized last week, "leaves a political vacuum, both in the Congress (I) and in the country, and a question mark over the future of an open political system. More than at any other moment in the country's history, the future seems dark and bleak, with differences sought to be settled with bullets and bombs rather than ballots, with consensus breaking down, and the legitimacy of the system becoming the central issue." Beyond the Congress's plight in choosing



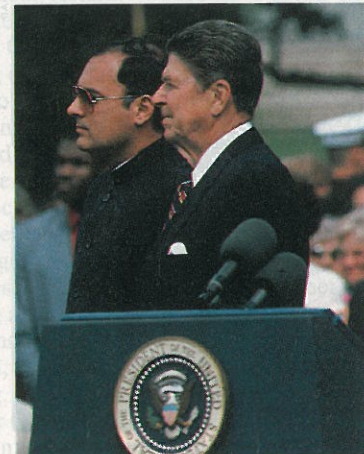
84 Indira's murder propels him into India's leadership



1984 A Rajiv wave sweeps parliamentary elections the next month



1985 The elected Prime Minister is sworn in amid widespread hopes for "Computerji"



1985 Rajiv steps out abroad, capturing the world's imagination



1989 Many new ideas on technology and management run up against the status quo

## The Next Generation

Can India's republican dynasty produce more leaders?

By WILLIAM STEWART

At a New Delhi garden party some years ago, the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi reminisced about her father, Jawaharlal Nehru. Mincing few words, she said, "People say he was like the banyan tree: nothing and nobody grew in his shadow. They are wrong. He was like the sun, and let everything and everybody grow—even the weeds, let us be honest." It was vintage Indira, who would have staunchly denied there was a Nehru dynasty, even as she came to symbolize it.

In a country where name and charisma often count more than any other qualification for winning public office, the loss of this generation of Gandhis leaves the Congress Party apparently orphaned for some time to come. Leadership has been the family's birthright in a land accustomed to maharajas and emperors: a republican ruling family seemed just as natural. It was consistent with India's history and helped legitimize the government of a country that until independence in 1947 had been as much a state of mind as a nation-state.

No wonder Congress elders turned immediately to Sonia Gandhi, 44, as party leader. But unlike Corazon Aquino in the Philippines or Violeta Chamorro in Nicaragua, Sonia is a widow with no desire for power. Though her personal relations with her mother-in-law were close, Sonia at first resisted all Congress Party attempts to bring her husband Rajiv into politics, much less succeed his mother as head of the family political dynasty. Shy and reserved, she also feared for her husband's life. It was Sonia who cradled Indira's head as she lay dying from assassins' bullets, and friends note that after the shooting in 1984, she was obsessed with her husband's security and that of her children. The dark glasses she wore during public appearances hid eyes that constantly searched the crowds for a possible gunman. Says one friend: "What she was most afraid of in the world was losing Rajiv."

Jealously guarding her family's privacy, Sonia has kept most people, especially politicians, at bay. Her aloofness, combined

with an attractive but unsmiling presence, has helped to make her both a formidable and somewhat unfathomable figure. Married into India's most powerful clan and despite her obvious dislike of politics, she assiduously tended Rajiv's constituency in Amethi, in Uttar Pradesh state. But although she knew many by name and went door to door, urging the people to vote for her husband, she displayed no particular aptitude for the family profession. The hope that she would serve as Congress's head was a forlorn one from the start.



Lonely survivors: Rahul, Sonia and Priyanka at the funeral last week

by the British for illegal independence activities. She soon became Indira's favorite daughter-in-law.

Now shocked and bereft, Sonia refuses to step into the limelight from behind the shadow of her husband. But what about the rest of the family? The nearest heirs are her children Rahul, 20, a Harvard undergraduate, and his sister Priyanka, 19, a home-economics student at the Catholic-run College of Jesus and Mary in New Delhi. Rahul, like his father at the same age, shows no interest in politics, preferring photography and target shooting. An indifferent student, he likes to work with his hands and is the quieter, more introverted of the two children.

Priyanka, however, shows flashes of her grandmother's fabled toughness. She has a natural flair for and lively interest in politics, often calling her father's staff to verify information she has discovered on her own. She used to accompany her mother to Amethi, distributing clothes and listening to the complaints of the populace. Slogans hailing her have become commonplace in the constituency. Her dignity and calm strength during the ordeal of her father's funeral impressed party workers, who say, "Give her time, and she is definitely Prime Minister material." But under the constitution, Priyanka cannot run for office until she is 25.

Beyond Rajiv's immediate family, there are other Gandhis and Nehrus interested in the mantle of leadership. Maneka Gandhi, 34, widow of Rajiv's younger brother Sanjay, is ambitious and politically astute, currently holding office as Minister of Environment. Articulate and dynamic, she quarreled with the family when Indira cut her out of the succession after Sanjay's death, and joined the opposition. Despite her abilities, she is not viewed as a likely candidate to inherit the Congress throne: party elders consider her too assertive for their tastes. The only other choice from the family is Arun Nehru, 47, a cousin of Rajiv's and a former Minister of Internal Security in Rajiv's Cabinet. But the two fell out in 1986, and Arun does not seem to have either the political support or popular appeal needed to make a successful bid for power, despite his famous name. It may be that the Nehru-Gandhi family has temporarily passed from the scene, but there is still magic in the name. And another generation, as yet silent, is waiting in the wings. —Reported by Anita Pratap/New Delhi

The outcome, whichever way voters turn, would be an ironic footnote to the history of an illustrious clan. It was no consolation to supporters of the family that the deaths of both mother and son may have originated in policies they devised for parochial gain. Indira had covertly helped promote the rise of Sikh extremism in Punjab in an effort to thwart a rival party in the

greatest liability—the fact that he was not by nature a politician—was also the virtue for which he will be most warmly remembered. Said Datta-Ray: "Those who talked to Rajiv Gandhi noted the absence of hubris that is so typical of our political leaders." Suman Dubey, Gandhi's press adviser and friend, said, "Rajiv Gandhi was to India what John Kennedy was to America.

His death ended a dream that all of us who wanted India to prosper believed in."

Many thoughtful Indians and foreign leaders of course are not ready to write off the world's largest democracy. President George Bush affirmed his faith in the country, as did many others in the West. Said a senior British diplomat: "Indian democracy has weathered such blows before and can do so again." Economist John Kenneth Galbraith, U.S. ambassador to New Delhi from the Kennedy Administration, called the system "imperfect but secure." Said he: "The idea that the people of India would surrender their sovereignty to any form of dictatorship is not true. And I would feel sorry for anyone who tried to impose it on them."

What may be the end of the line for the Nehrus and Gandhis could finally rid India of the cult of personality and centralized power. Not long after Indira was elevated to the Congress presidency in 1959, Nehru was the first to abhor the prospect of a dynasty. He told an American interviewer, "I am not capable of ruling from the grave. How terrible it would be if I, after all I have said

about the processes of democratic government, were to attempt to handpick a successor. The best I can do for India is to help our people as a whole generate new leadership as it may be needed." A full two generations later, the time to do that has come. —Reported by Edward W. Desmond and Anita Pratap/New Delhi and G.C. Shekhar/Sriperumbudur



A study in dignity: Priyanka consoling her mother

troubled northwest state. In his turn, Rajiv had gone along for a while with arming the Tamil Tigers and furnishing them with sanctuary and training camps in southern India as a way of putting pressure on Sri Lankan President Junius Jayewardene.

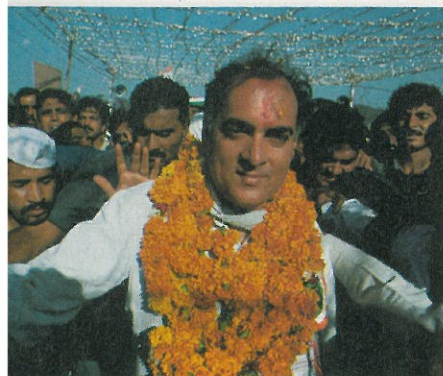
Nonetheless, Rajiv had abandoned that effort by mid-1987, and the image that survived him was mostly favorable. His

leader—finding some plausible figure among a tired corps of old pols or the anonymous ranks of their juniors—India bobs under a potentially crippling foreign debt and a crisis of faith in politics.

Rajiv had offered a semblance of hope at reform, modernization, deregulation—all the catchwords underpinning his frequently quoted aim of "bringing India to the 21st century"—might succeed where they had failed in his first year at leadership. Even while he was in office, that had remained open to question. "Computerji," as Gandhi became known, long ago found that he and his privileged circle of technology lovers were not equal to the task of budging old-line party pros and the bureaucracy-infested Industrial Raj. As Su-nanda Datta-Ray, editor of the *Statesman* of Calcutta, marked last week, "He faltered at first partly because he was a young man in a hurry, because he lacked the framework and the experience to match his vision."

In the end, the westernized Rajiv made his final journey to cremation in traditional Hindu fashion on the banks of the Jamuna River. Amid an array of foreign dignitaries and a crowd of about 100,000, Gandhi's 20-year-old son Rahul, returning from Harvard University in the U.S., conducted the ancient Hindu rite of lighting the wood funeral pyre.

It may be that the Congress Party will benefit from a large sympathy vote. But to do so, it will have to find a new leader of some stature quickly. The party cannot afford to project an image of inaction and disunity at a time when voters more than anything else are seeking some assurance of stability. Congress's desperate floundering may persuade Indians in large numbers to opt for the ultra-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party whose more cohesive leadership promises strength at the top—but potentially divisive policies as well.



1991 An outsider, he stumps for a comeback



1991 Fate as an innocent-looking woman in a rural temple town



1991 The final reckoning from a bomb blast that leaves a field of terrible carnage