A Family Affair
1982

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Mother and Son

Indian politics since Independence has been bedevilled by the relationships of father and daughter, mother and son, father and son, father-in-law and son-in-law, and husband and wife. It was thought that Jawaharlal Nehru, who served as the first Prime Minister of the newly independent India for seventeen years, until his death, in 1964, had ambivalent feelings about whether his only child, Indira Gandhi, should succeed him as Prime Minister. On the one hand, he seemed to have groomed her for the office: he permitted her to live with him in the Prime Minister's residence, to become his official hostess (he was a widower), to become his unofficial secretary and his confidante; although she was elected to no office and held no position in the government, he helped her assume an ever more important behind-the-scenes role in party politics, and finally, in 1959 and 1960, she served, in part thanks to him, as the president of the ruling Congress Party. On the other hand, Nehru seemed to have been alert to the danger of setting a precedent of family succession and so perhaps giving rise to a Nehru dynasty: he frequently warned his colleagues to be on guard against his own dictatorial tendencies; he labored to foster India's nascent democratic tradi-

tions; and he saw to it that, in the end, his successor was chosen by free and open methods.

Nehru was succeeded by Lal Bahadur Shastri, who was as plebeian and orthodox in outlook as Nehru had been patrician and Western. Shastri, however, was Prime Minister for less than two years; he died suddenly in 1966. There were several strong contenders for his office, but the Congress Party bosses were unable to agree on any one of them. Almost by default, they selected Mrs. Gandhi—and for the very same reason, it appeared, that Nehru had ruled her out: she was the patriarch's daughter. They expected that she would be mostly a figurehead, and that they would be able to govern in her name, but instead she made their behind-the-scenes power an issue, taking them by surprise. As a result, she was able to overthrow them in 1969, and capture control of the Congress Party. The Old Guard, unable to do anything else about it, pointedly began calling itself the Old Congress Party.

No sooner had Mrs. Gandhi become a leader in her own right, in 1969, than the father-and-daughter theme gave way to a mother-and-son theme. Mrs. Gandhi, at the time she assumed office, was a forty-nine-year-old widow (her husband had died in 1960) with two children, both sons. While her older son, Rajiv, had never openly shown much interest in politics, the doings of her younger son, Sanjay, perpetually haunted her career.

Sanjay was son of the best-known political family in the country. His home was almost always the Prime Minister's residence. (His grandfather and his mother, between them, have served as Prime Minister of India for all but four of the years that India has been independent, and Sanjay and Rajiv continued to live with their mother even after they married and had children.) He went to some of the most expensive private schools the country had to offer. He finished school but never attended

a university. From childhood, he had a passion for cars, and he received training as a car mechanic at what was probably the world's best car company—the Rolls-Royce factory in Britain. In 1970, when he was almost twenty-four, he was given one of the nation's most coveted industrial licenses by the Ministry of Industries of Mrs. Gandhi's government—a license to manufacture and sell cars. He claimed that his car would be a "people's car," small, inexpensive, and entirely of Indian manufacture—a sort of Indian version of the Volkswagen. He said that it would be within the means of ordinary people. (The cars then being produced in India contained many imported parts and were extremely expensive—beyond the reach even of many well-to-do Indians.) He named his intended car the Maruti, after the son of a Hindu wind god, and floated a public company called Maruti, Ltd. At the time, it was charged in the press and in Parliament that the granting of this license to the son of the Prime Minister, a young man with no business experience and with no known capital of his own, was blatant nepotism—especially since the socialist governments of Nehru and Mrs. Gandhi had previously denied such licenses to well-established companies.

Many critics of "the son" were people who had vociferously supported Mrs. Gandhi's becoming Prime Minister on the ground that she was Nehru's daughter and was therefore the person best equipped to carry on her father's tradition. The outcry against Sanjay's license continued for years, but Mrs. Gandhi was so firmly in control of the Congress Party that for much of that time she was able mostly to ignore it. But eventually Sanjay's Maruti—or, rather, the absence of it—became one of Mrs. Gandhi's major political problems.

As it happened, the early phase of the controversy over Sanjay's obtaining the license for the Maruti coincided with three years of drought, with an unbroken period of rising prices, and with widespread student and worker agitation. During this period, a small-time local politician named Raj Narain, who had

stood as a nuisance candidate for Parliament in Mrs. Gandhi's home constituency of Rae Bareli, started legal proceedings against her in the state of Uttar Pradesh for corrupt electoral practices after she defeated him in the 1971 elections. Early in June, 1975, Mrs. Gandhi was convicted on the charge in the Allahabad High Court, the state's highest judicial body, and the conviction gave further impetus to the agitation of students and workers, who began demanding her removal from office. On June 25th, she invoked an emergency constitutional provision concerning threats to national security, and sought, and obtained, from Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, who was then the President of India (and, by the terms of the constitution, little more than a figurehead), a proclamation of what has been known ever since as the Emergency. Immediately following the President's proclamation, she rounded up and locked up without charges or trial thousands of her political opponents—including some of her father's venerable colleagues, such as Jaya Prakash Narayan, the seventy-two-year-old spiritual father of India. She curbed the press and the judiciary, suspended the constitution, and established a dictatorship. Mrs. Gandhi defended the Emergency after the fact by saying that she was ushering in a new era—what she called "the new India." Among her rationales for the suspension of the constitution was the impotence of the courts, which, she said, permitted wrongdoers who could afford expert lawyers to escape justice altogether. She pushed through an omnibus Forty-second Amendment, designed to strengthen the excutive at the expense of the courts and Parliament. She also used the Emergency to launch what she called a Twenty-Point Programme for economic development, with the stated aim of improving the lot of the poor. (This was immediately dismissed as a matter more of slogans than of serious economic policy.) It was generally thought that she had been reluctant to resort to the authoritarian Emergency, because it was contrary to the liberal principles of

her father, and that Sanjay had persuaded her to do so. In any case, Sanjay became the Emergency's main beneficiary.

Propagandists of the Emergency began presenting Sanjay as a rising political leader; they compared him to the sun, the moon, and "the rising orbs," and hailed him as Messiah Sanjay. Although he held no political office and no position in the government, Mrs. Gandhi helped him assume an ever more important behind-the-scenes role in Congress Party politics, as a member of the executive committee of its youth wing. His mother was grooming him much as her father, consciously or otherwise, had groomed her, but at a greatly accelerated pace and despite the fact that Sanjay had clearly demonstrated a total lack of patience with the constitution and with democracy and was generally considered to be a spoiled, tyrannical child. In practice, he became almost as powerful as his mother. He quickly acquired his own set of *chamchas,* or spoons—in common Indian parlance, sycophants who would feed their leader as servants would feed a king, or as indulgent parents would feed their children. (Since most people in India eat with their fingers or go hungry, to be even someone else's spoon has a certain cachet.) He dictated orders in his mother's name to officials and politicians everywhere. He toured the various states as her chief emissary. (In time, he got himself a pilot's license and started piloting the planes he travelled in. On the road, he had gone in for speeding; in the air, he went in for daredevil stunts.) He inaugurated what he called a Four-Point Programme—of mass sterilization, slum clearance *cum* tree planting, abolition of dowries, and extension of literacy. Three of the points immediately met with popular protest: mass sterilization was seen as, among other things, an attack on the sanctity of the family, slum clearance as an attack on the sanctity of the home, and abolition of dowries as an attack on the sanctity of marriage. (Extending literacy had long been a government objective.) Moreover, the targets of these cam-