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**THE POLITICAL ECONOMIC CLIMATE OF
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The Political Economic Climate of Advancement in India since Freedom! : A Case Study of Smt. Indira Gandhi

Ranjit Kumar

Research Scholar, Sai Nath University, Ranchi, Jharkhand

Abstract – Popularly known as the Iron Lady of India, Indira Gandhi earned a formidable reputation across the globe as a 'statesman'. Her sheer sense of politics and exceptional skills catapulted her position in the Indian politics, so much so that she went on to become the first woman elected to head a democratic country. Till date, she is the only woman to hold the office. Born in a politically influential dynasty and growing in an intense political atmosphere, Indira Gandhi had learned the trick of the trade quite early in life. She possessed an authoritarian streak and became the central figure of the Indian National Congress party, post her father's death. She was known for her political ruthlessness and extraordinary centralization of power. It was during her premiership that India became the regional power in South Asia with considerable political, economic, and military clout. She also presided over a state of emergency and made considerable changes to the Indian Constitution. She used the army to resolve numerous internal disputes and encouraged a culture of sycophancy and nepotism, due to which she rubbed many Indians on the wrong side. Gandhi initialized the Operation Blue Star, which gave her a critical reputation and eventually scripted her assassination.

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INTRODUCTION

After Congress's popularity declined in the second half of the 1960s, Indira Gandhi recreated the Congress during the 1970s and the 1980s as a much more populist and personalistic organ. The old Congress Party, with its modest organizational base, was destroyed in this transformation, creating a significant institutional vacuum in the Indian polity (Kohli 1990). Indira Gandhi instead promised "alleviation of poverty" to India's poor masses, generating considerable popular support. She used this popularity to concentrate power in her person, further under-mining existing institutional constraints on the use of power. Indira Gandhi appointed loyal minions to significant political offices across the country, squeezed whomsoever challenged her, and when the opposition itself became strident - as it did in the mid-1970s - imposed a "national Emergency" for two years (1975-7), limiting democratic practices and bringing India's democracy to the brink (Brass 1991).

Indira Gandhi's personalistic and populist politics definitely weakened some of India's democratic institutions. The old Congress Party was transformed into a personal tool that went into a slow but steady decline following her death. The civil service was politicized. Centralization of power also weakened the federal system, evoking strong opposition in some regions that did not readily accept loss of autonomy. As in many other democracies, personalistic power

simultaneously created a viable political center but weakened institutional politics.

Indira Gandhi's assassination in the mid-1980s, and that of her son Rajiv Gandhi a few years thereafter, brought to an end the era of Congress's dominance via family rule. While democracy had taken by now a firm foothold in India - note that even the assassination of the highest leaders was "dealt with" by yet another round of elections to select alternative leaders - the quality of government that this democracy was capable of delivering remained rather uncertain. The critical issue was the absence of cohering institutions amidst a rapidly politicizing society. The third and current phase that began around 1990 has thus been characterized by a variety of national-level political experiments to find a substitute for the old Congress Party rule, especially by the emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

ENTRY INTO NATIONAL POLITICS

As a member of the politically influential Nehru family, Mrs. Indira Gandhi entered into politics in her adolescence. She obtained full membership of the Indian Congress in 1938, and became deeply engaged in the Indian freedom movement. She served as the Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting 1964-1966. At the sudden death of Prime Minister Lai Bahadur Shastri in Tashkent in 1966, she emerged as the undisputed leader of the

Indian Congress, and took oath as the third Prime Minister of India. She successfully led the country as Prime Minister for 15 years during the period 1966-1977 and 1980-1984. During her terms in office, she undertook several bold and far-reaching steps in both domestic and foreign policy spheres. This great personality was fatally wounded by shots from one of her bodyguards and she embraced death on 18 October 1984.

India was faced with critical challenges in its domestic and foreign policy contexts from the very beginning of the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Given her deep political acumen, farsightedness, humane values and ideological convictions, Mrs. Gandhi was able to undertake a realistic evaluation of the war and its long term implications. She took a firm and bold position in supporting the oppressed people of Bangladesh from the very beginning of the Liberation War. The declaration of independence made by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was heard over the radio even in Agartala, the capital of Tripura state in India, soon after the Pakistani military started the most brutal genocide on the innocent people of Bangladesh on the night of 25 March 1971. Several Indian and other international media broadcast Bangabandhu's declaration of independence, which was later published in the international as well as Indian newspapers with utmost importance on 27 March 1971. On the same day, Mrs. Indira Gandhi condemned the brutal attack by the Pakistani military and declared firm support for the Liberation War in a statement made at the Indian Parliament. She said, "Something new has happened in East Bengal - the people have spoken in one voice; they have chosen democracy. We have congratulated them on this, not because we intend to interfere in the domestic matters of another country, but because we have always taken a strong position for upholding these values, and propagating them boldly".

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF REFORM

As ever, it is not difficult to recognize the truth of some of these claims. But what this narrative of rise, decline and recovery cannot account for is the upturn in India's rate of economic growth post-1980. The fact is that per capita incomes in India grew on average at 3.8% in the 1980s, or at more or less the same rate as they grew in the 1990s. There are three main reasons why this was so. To begin with, as Atul Kohli has argued, the governments of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi (1980-89) began to tilt economic policy more clearly in the direction of big business.[^] The courting of foreign direct investment was still not a priority through the 1980s, although a few joint ventures were brokered in the autos sector. Nevertheless, the strongly anti-capital (especially, anti-foreign capital) rhetoric that Indira Gandhi had deployed in the 1970s was toned down. New initiatives were introduced that favored established Indian producers. In place of *gciribi hatao* (end poverty), the political platform on which Indira

Gandhi made her name in the early 1970s, the Congress governments of the 1980s retired those parts of the Monopolies and Trade Practices Act which made it hard for big business to expand in core sectors like chemicals and cement. Some efforts were also made to liberalize credit for large companies. Perhaps most importantly, both Indira and Rajiv Gandhi took steps to tame labor activism in the organized sector, and to encourage private sector investments with limited tax concessions.!

STATE OF EMERGENCY & LOSS AT 1977 ELECTIONS

After the 1971 elections, the opposition parties accused her of using unlawful methods and electoral fraud to win the elections. Due to this, a case was filed in the Allahabad High Court which found Gandhi guilty of using state machinery for election campaign. The court, on June 1975, declared the elections null and void and unseated Indira Gandhi from the Lok Sabha. Additionally, she was banned from contesting for the next six years. These were trying times for India. The country was still recuperating from its war against Pakistan, and faced drought and oil crises. To add to the woes, the strikes and political protests affected the economy and created disorder across the country. To curb the same, Gandhi advised President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed to declare a state of emergency.

- The period of emergency in India lasted for 21 months, from June 1975 until March 1977. It bestowed on Gandhi the power to rule by decree, thereby suspending elections and all civil liberties. The entire country, including the states, came under the rule of the Central government.
- During the emergency, all the publications were subjected to censorship by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. As such, no one could raise voice against the act of government.
- Gandhi extended the state of emergency twice, before the elections of March 1977. The Janta Party, led by Moraji Desai and Jai Prakash Narayan appealed to the people that it was the last chance to choose between democracy and dictatorship. The result of the election was not much of a surprise. The Congress party was defeated convincingly, winning just 153 seats. Both Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay Gandhi lost their seats.
- The Janta Party, led by Moraji Desai, ordered the arrest of Indira Gandhi and Sanjay Gandhi on charges of planning to kill the opposition leaders during emergency. The move, however, proved to be futile as none of the charges were proved. What's more, Indira Gandhi gained sympathy from the people.
- The Janta Party leaders had little in common except for their united hatred towards Indira Gandhi. As such, the government did not function well. The division in the Janta Party resulted into Desai's

stepping down and Charan Singh being appointed the new Prime Minister. However, this also did not work for long and the Parliament was dissolved in the winter session of 1979 and election was announced in 1980.

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