Indira Gandhi Biography

(1917–1984)

Indira Gandhi was India's third prime minister, serving from 1966 until 1984, when her life ended in assassination. She was the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister.

**Synopsis**

The lone child of [Jawaharlal Nehru](http://www.biography.com/people/jawaharlal-nehru-9421253), India’s first prime minister, Indira Gandhi ascended to the position after his death in the mid-1960s. Gandhi survived party in-fighting, emerging as a popular leader thanks in part to efforts to revitalize the farming industry. Ousted from power in 1977, Gandhi was reelected prime minister in 1980, and served in the role until her assassination in 1984.

**Early Life**

The only child of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India, Indira Gandhi was born on November 19, 1917. A stubborn and highly intelligent young woman, she attended schools in India, Switzerland and England, including Somerville College, Oxford.

With her father among the leaders of the Indian independence movement, Gandhi weathered his absences when he was imprisoned. Additionally, she endured the loss of her mother to tuberculosis in 1936. She found comfort with a family friend, Feroze Gandhi, but their relationship was a controversial one due to his Parsi heritage. Eventually the couple earned Nehru's approval, and they married in 1942.

After Nehru was named India's first prime minister in 1947, Gandhi became something of her father's hostess, learning to navigate complex relationships of diplomacy with some of the great leaders of the world.

**Political Rise**

Gandhi joined the Congress Party's working committee in 1955, and four years later she was elected the party's president. Following the death of her father in 1964, she was appointed to Rajya Sabha, the upper level of Indian parliament, and was named minister of information and broadcasting. When her father’s successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri, died abruptly in 1966, she ascended to the post of prime minister.

Seemingly on shaky ground following the Congress Party's narrow win in the 1967 election, Gandhi surprised her father’s old colleagues with her resilience. In 1969, after she acted unilaterally to nationalize the country's banks, Congress Party elders sought to oust her from her role. Instead, Gandhi rallied a new faction of the party with her populist stance, and cemented her hold on power with a decisive parliamentary victory in 1971.

**War and Domestic Successes**

That year, India was drawn into a bloody conflict between East and West Pakistan, with some 10 million Pakistanis seeking refuge in India. Following the surrender of Pakistani forces in December, Gandhi invited Pakistani President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to the city of Simla for a summit. The two leaders signed the Simla Agreement, agreeing to resolve territorial disputes in a peaceful fashion and paving the way for recognition of the independent nation of Bangladesh.

During this time, India was achieving tangible success through advancements of the Green Revolution. Addressing the chronic food shortages had that mainly affected the poor Sikh farmers of the Punjab region, Gandhi spurred growth through the introduction of high-yield seeds and irrigation, eventually producing a surplus of grains. Additionally, the prime minister led her country into the nuclear age with the detonation of an underground device in 1974.

**Authoritarian Leanings and Imprisonment**

Despite these advancements, Gandhi was criticized for authoritarian tendencies and government corruption under her rule. In 1975, the Allahabad High Court found her guilty of dishonest election practices, excessive election expenditure and of using government resources for party purposes. Instead of resigning, Gandhi declared a state of emergency and imprisoned thousands of her opponents.

Unable to permanently stave off challenges to her power, Gandhi stepped down with her defeat in the 1977 election. She was briefly jailed in 1978 on charges of corruption, but the following year she won election to the Lok Sabha, the lower level of parliament. In 1980, she returned to power as prime minister.

That same year, Gandhi's son Sanjay (b. 1946), who had been serving as her chief political adviser, died in a plane crash in New Delhi. The prime minister then began preparing her other son, Rajiv (b. 1944), for leadership.

**Assassination**

During the early 1980s, Gandhi faced increasing pressure from secessionist factions, particularly from Sikhs in Punjab. In 1984, she ordered the Indian army to confront Sikh separatists at their sacred Golden Temple in Amritsar, resulting in several hundred reported casualties, with others estimating the human toll to be significantly higher.

On October 31, 1984, Gandhi was shot and killed by two of her bodyguards, both Sikhs, in retribution for the attack at the Golden Temple. She was immediately succeeded by son Rajiv, who was left to quell deadly anti-Sikh riots, and her body was cremated three days later in a Hindu ritual.