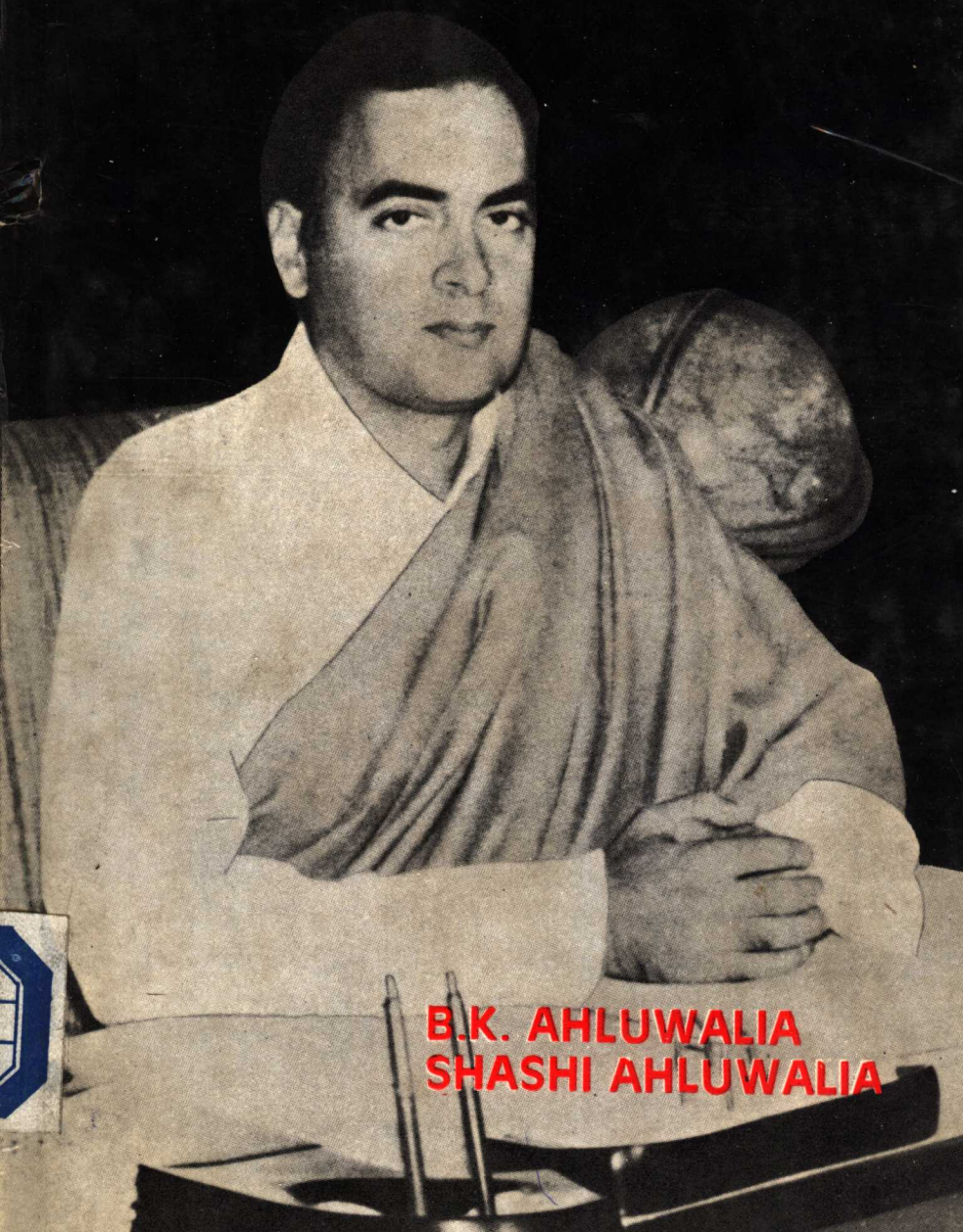


Rajiv Gandhi

A PROFILE IN COURAGE



B.K. AHLUWALIA
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RAJIV GANDHI,

(A Profile in Courage)

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Preface

When Rajiv was grounded three years back and brought into the political field, there was no indication that his apprenticeship would be so short. The hour came much earlier due to the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Rajiv Gandhi kept his private grief completely under control. His heart was bleeding for his dead mother but he dammed it, kept his composure and immediately stepped in to arrest the violence which erupted out in the capital and in other parts of the country. He stuck to the schedule already drawn up for election and proved that his dedication to democratic concepts was second to none.

What is it that makes Rajiv Gandhi the ideal leader in this troubled times ? He has youth on his side. He is known as Mr. Clean. He has imbibed values from his grandfather Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru and his mother Mrs. Indira Gandhi which carry the stamp of nationalism. He has the charisma which goes with the Nehru clan. He has a scientific temper, a bend for technological progress and the courage to push ahead with schemes which would remove poverty and backwardness from India. These are the qualities which make him a cut above the rest. He stands out like the beacon of hope.

X PREFACE

There is an axiom 'If youth knew; if age could'. Luckily Rajiv Gandhi has the vibrant of youth and the maturity of age. He is neither too young nor too old. India can be optimistic of its future under his leadership.

The authors bring out the personality of Rajiv Gandhi with their usual balanced perception. They have collected all available facts about a man who, till recently, shied away from publicity. By their efforts the authors provide a peep into the mind and temper of the man who now guides India's destiny.

The authors are grateful to Prof. K. Swaminathan and Sarva Shri V. Narayanswamy, J.P. Uniyal and R.K. Murthi who were good enough to offer them useful suggestions.

B-13/505, Lodi Colony
New Delhi-11003
December 9, 1984.

B.K. Ahluwalia
Shashi Ahluwalia

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The Smooth Succession

Wednesday, October 31, 1984, Time : 6.55 p.m. The swearing in ceremony of the sixth Prime Minister of India, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, was taking place. He signed the oath of office and secrecy at 6.57 p.m. With that, the smooth and instant transition of leadership took place. This smooth succession is a tribute to India's political stability and maturity. The President, Giani Zail Singh, had been informed in a hand-written letter signed by Mr. G. Karuppiiah Moopanar, the AICC (I) general secretary attached to the Congress (I) Parliamentary Board, that the CPB had decided to appoint the son of Mrs. Indira Gandhi as the new leader of the Congress (I) Parliamentary Party. The President of India accepted the choice of the CPB. (I).

Mr. Rajiv Gandhi's succession as Prime Minister is the smoothest so far in independent India's history. There was no question of taking party members' consensus, *a la* Kamraj style. No contenders were there either. Even if one goes by the official timing of Mrs. Gandhi's death, that is 2.30 p.m. on October 31, Rajiv had assumed the office four and a half hours later, without a ripple from an extremely nervous party.

In the past, when two incumbent Prime Ministers had died, for a while a senior cabinet minister (on both occasions the

then Union Home Minister Gulzari Lal Nanda) had held interim charge till the CPB elected a leader. On both occasions, in May 1964 and January 1966, there had been many contenders for the post. Morarji Desai, who ultimately became the Janata Prime Minister in 1977, had tried on both occasions. This time there were no known contenders. In 1982, the Congress Party had accepted Rajiv Gandhi as the number two man. So it would be fair to say that in calling him to be the Prime Minister, the President, Giani Zail Singh, acted wisely. Though most party MPs were totally oblivious of what took place on October 31, the fact that the unanimous resolution accepting the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi was passed by the Congress (I) Parliamentary Party on November 2, with 497 of the 505 members present shows that the President's decision was right.

About this smooth succession Ayub Syed has commented : "The smooth transfer of leadership within hours of her assassination is a great tribute to Indira Gandhi's total command over her party in her absence. That the party was psychologically prepared to accept Rajiv as her successor was never in doubt. In the past three years he had travelled extensively, met thousands of people and addressed vast crowds."

He was virtually the party chief. He had reduced the burden of his mother by taking the onerous task of putting the party in shape, modernising it, and keeping it well-oiled to face the battle of the hustings.

The real Rajiv was born the day his mother attained martyrdom. He was without a shadow. He was on his own. The millions who saw him on television with his thin, tight lips, moist eyes, his pointed Nehru nose, his determined forehead, were convinced of Indira Gandhi's right choice. At forty he looked exactly forty, and whenever he looked up he seemed to be telling his mother, "I will not let you down, come what may".

This was a new Rajiv Gandhi, the legatee of a glorious heritage, a true son of a rich soil. Seeing him on TV, standing near Indira Gandhi's body, viewers felt secure, assured. The country, they felt, was safe, its destiny in good hands.

In a few days he won the heart of India, and no doubt he will win its democratic soul also. With his election the nation heaved a sigh of relief. They also saw the faction-ridden ruling party exhibiting a rare show of discipline and loyalty on the issue of selecting their beloved leader's successor.

Kumkum Chadha has narrated events leading to this smooth succession. She writes: "While Mrs. Indira Gandhi lay on the operation table at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), in a swift, smooth transition India's youngest Prime Minister was sworn in. This marked the beginning of an era, it also put to rest all doubts about the unity of the Congress (I).

"The talk of a successor had started at the AIIMS itself around noon. Among those present there were Dr. P. C. Alexander, Arun Nehru, Shiv Shankar, Buta Singh, R. K. Dhawan, G. Parthasarathy, R. Venkataraman, Ghulam Nabi Azad and B. Shankaranand. It was one of the close confidants of Mr. Rajiv Gandhi who first suggested his name to Venkataraman and Parthasarathy. After a brief consultation, Venkataraman took a NO OBJECTION from those present. That was the first round.

"Narasimha Rao arrived at AIIMS around 2 p.m. The initial enquiries about Mrs. Gandhi being over he was told of the likely successor; Rao agreed immediately. Things became much easier. That was the second round. That left Pranab—the other claimant. He was to return with Rajiv from West Bengal.

"Rajiv Gandhi and Pranab Mukherjee arrived around 3.30 p.m. By then there was a consensus on Rajiv. Accordingly, he was informed of the decision. Rajiv agreed. Pranab nodded his head. That was the final round.

"The scene shifted from the AIIMS to 1, Akbar Road, where Cabinet Ministers, Chief Ministers and senior Partymen were waiting. A meeting of the Central Parliamentary Board was in progress. Many of those who were outside were made to believe that deliberations were on for a likely successor. Of the five members of CPB, only two—Rao and Pranab—were present at the meeting. Kamalapati Tripathi had not arrived from Varanasi. The other two to attend the CPB were Secretary CPB, G.K. Moopanar, and Sita Ram Kesari.

"After a 'half-an-hour closed door' meeting the four emerged. It was P.C. Alexander who told the waiting Chief Ministers and Cabinet that (a) the new Prime Minister would be sworn in the same evening and (b) the members of Mrs. Gandhi's Cabinet would be retained by the new Prime Minister. Mr. Rajiv Gandhi's name was not mentioned.

"According to one version, President Giani Zail Singh had too, while flying back to Delhi from his visit abroad, taken the decision to make Rajiv Gandhi the Prime Minister after he learnt about Mrs. Gandhi's death. This is confirmed by a journalist who was travelling with the President. He had heard the President conveying the decision to his Secretary, Bandopadhyaya.

"What smoothened the choice of Rajiv Gandhi was the absence of a candidate who could fill the void Mrs. Gandhi's death had caused. One of the important reasons for choosing Rajiv was the forthcoming elections. As things stand, none of the Congress (I) men have an all-India image. Nor are they vote-catchers of the stature of Mrs. Gandhi. Rajiv would not only be able to cash in on the Gandhi name but evoke public sympathy as no one else would be able to."

Mr. Kuldip Nayar has ably summed up the story of succession in his famous column 'Between the Lines'. Here are some excerpts :

"The discussion on who should succeed Mrs. Gandhi began at the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences itself. In the room where the Cabinet Ministers waited, knowing well that she was practically dead after being hit by 16 bullets, the question debated was who should step in, first as the officiating Prime Minister and then as the elected one.

"All those who could lay claim to the post were away from Delhi—Rajiv Gandhi and Pranab Mukherjee were in West Bengal, Narasimha Rao, who ranked No. 3 was in Hyderabad, and Defence Minister S.B. Chavan in Moscow. President Zail Singh himself was abroad.

"The practice that President Radhakrishnan had established after Nehru's death was that the Cabinet should take over until the ruling party elected a new leader. After the death of Lal Bahadur Shastri, the same practice had been followed. If that

precedent was to be followed, the officiating Prime Minister would have been Pranab. Some Cabinet Ministers pressed for that. But some others pointed out that he was member of the Upper House and younger to Narasimha Rao. One minister said that it would be better to choose Rao not only because he was a Lok Sabha member but also because he was from the South. The trend of discussion favoured Pranab by the time he, Narasimha Rao and Rajiv returned to Delhi to join the informal meeting. Rajiv left the matter to them.

"It was Vasant Sathe, Minister for Fertilizers in Mrs. Gandhi's Cabinet, who said that there was no need to have an officiating Prime Minister and they should straightaway choose Rajiv. He argued that when Nehru and Shastri died, there were several contestants for the post of the Prime Minister but now there was none and since the party was bound to elect Rajiv afterwards, why not have him in the post now ?

"Adept in constitutional matters, Sathe pointed out that there was nothing in the constitution to suggest that the President had to invite the elected leader of the party having a majority in the Lok Sabha to form the Government, nor was there mention of an officiating Prime Minister. He said that the relevant provision was Article 75 which merely said : "The Prime Minister shall be appointed by the President and the other Ministers shall be appointed by the President on the advice of the Prime Minister" Shiv Shankar, once Law Minister in Mrs. Gandhi's Cabinet, endorsed Sathe's thesis.

"Since all eyes were fixed on the next Lok Sabha election, the Ministers and the Congress (I) functionaries present knew that Rajiv Gandhi was their best bet. He would go down with voters better than anyone else. He would be able to harness the nation's sympathy in the wake of Mrs. Gandhi's assassination. He also represented the vote-catching family of Nehru, as Nehru's grandson and Mrs. Gandhi's son, the people would feel that if he was elected they would be assured the continuity for generations.

"R. Venkataraman, the Vice-President, lent his mature counsel during the discussion and put his weight in favour of Rajiv. There was no question of an acting Prime Minister first and a permanent one later. The discussion continued at

the Congress (I) party office at Akbar Road. But, by then, there was nothing left to be decided except the wording of the communication to the President. This was left to G.K. Moopanar, the party's general-secretary. The letter to the President said that the Congress Parliamentary Board had elected Rajiv as the leader and that the decision would be endorsed by the Congress (I) Parliamentary Party. (Pranab and Narasimha Rao were the only two parliamentary board members present when the decision was taken.)

"Moopanar sent the letter by a special messenger to the President, who had not yet arrived from abroad. The letter awaited him at Rashtrapati Bhavan as did Rajiv, Pranab, Narasimha Rao, Buta Singh and Lok Sabha Speaker Jakhar. The President returned to Rashtrapati Bhavan around 6 p.m. after visiting the medical institute. He was visibly disturbed because his motorcade had been stoned and the car of his secretary A.C. Bandopadhyay had been hit.

"The President knew about Rajiv's election because both Arun Nehru and R.K. Dhawan, Mrs. Gandhi's personal assistant, had met him at the airport. The constitutional position was explained to him by Sathe at Rashtrapati Bhavan and as men near to the President say, he had no choice except to swear in Rajiv after receiving the communication from the Congress (I). And within 45 minutes he did so, administering the oath not only to Rajiv but also to Pranab, Narasimha Rao, Shiv Shankar and Buta Singh.

"Rajiv never faced any challenge within his party because there was none on whom the stalwarts would have agreed. He was a key which fitted into various locks. That is the position even today. Most Congress (I) MPs realise that the only chance they have to survive is to ride on his bandwagon as they had on Mrs. Gandhi's. On their own, they have very little to offer, hardly anyone has his or her own base.

"Rajiv's succession reminds me of what happened when Nehru died. Though he had been ailing, the end came much sooner than expected. In fact, the general impression was that he was recovering. Everybody was caught unprepared, the contenders as well as the king-makers. Kamraj, then Congress President, hurried back to Delhi in a chartered plane. Atulya

Ghosh came from Calcutta and Morarji Desai from a Delhi suburb.

'Nehru's body was still at Teen Murti Bhavan when discussion on the succession began. Some leaders went into a huddle, not far from where the body lay. The scene at the medical institute, where Mrs. Gandhi died, was no different. However, this time there was no contestant.

"Rajiv Gandhi did make a good impression as he took the oath of office his face drawn but his voice firm, putting aside his personal grief. His maiden speech was dignified and came from the heart without the politician's rhetoric.

"And almost his first order to the Chief Ministers, who had come to Delhi on hearing that Mrs. Gandhi was shot, to return to the States to maintain law and order showed that he had a proper sense of priorities."

The smooth and peaceful succession of Mr. Rajiv Gandhi as the Prime Minister is demonstration of India's quick resilience to brace challenges and of the firmness with which democracy had struck roots in the country. Those who participated in the process brought memorable credit to their deep commitment to supreme national interest.

It may be pointed out that even while millions of Indian people saw in this development a ray of hope for India's stability, security and peace, the leaders of the Opposition were back to their old game by condemning it as unconstitutional. For more than a decade they had been denigrating Mrs. Gandhi by using constitutional verbiage. This time they did not have even *locus standi* to challenge the appointment of Mr. Rajiv Gandhi as the Prime Minister, for they were neither contenders for that office, nor did they belong to the ruling party. That, however, did not deter Mr. Charan Singh from leading a delegation to the President to lodge a protest. Apparently, they were banking upon possible political squabbles in the Congress Party over the choice of Prime Minister and hoped to make political capital out of them. This opportunity was denied to them. They were equally aghast at the rolling tide of support which swept the country in favour of Mr. Rajiv Gandhi. To hide their political frustration and to kick up some political dust, they once again, as usual, camouflaged their attack on this

development, which is likely to go down in history as one of Indian democracy's finest hours, with constitutional fulminations.

The most befitting answer was given to them by the ruling party itself in less than two days when it not only elected Mr. Rajiv Gandhi as the leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party, but also unanimously endorsed his appointment as the Prime Minister of India.

The smooth and instant transition of leadership to Rajiv Gandhi after the assassination of Indira Gandhi came in for high praise from diverse quarters, ranging from prestigious political pundits in the United States to the Left Front Co-ordination Committee in West Bengal. The uneventful assumption of Prime Ministership by Rajiv Gandhi was viewed as an indication of India's political maturity and the underlying stability of the nation's polity.

Not, however, by our Opposition parties. Led by Chaudhury Charan Singh of Dalit Mazdoor Kisan Party, they have chosen to take umbrage at the fact that Rajiv Gandhi was sworn in by President Zai' Singh on the recommendation of the Congress-I Parliamentary Board. The point they make is that the President went against established convention in acceding to the recommendation of the CPB, without waiting for the full Congress-I Parliamentary Party to endorse Rajiv Gandhi as its leader.

Charan Singh led a delegation to Rashtrapati Bhavan, demanding that the President "immediately convene a meeting of Opposition leaders to restore the lost sense of confidence amongst the people." We are free to admit that we have observed no signs of a lack of confidence among the people.

Not to be outdone, the national executive of the Bharatiya Janata Party adopted a resolution claiming that in choosing Rajiv Gandhi the ruling party disregarded propriety as well as precedent.

But perhaps the most vociferous protest came from the four Magis of the Janata Party—George Fernandes, Syed Shahabuddin, Bapu Kaldade and Sarojini Mahishi—who found in the President's action a "serious violation of parliamentary norms and democratic traditions."

The wind has, of course, been knocked out of the Opposition's sails by the unanimous election of Rajiv Gandhi as leader of the CPP. But that will probably not stop the carping by the Opposition which is plainly attempting to bring to life a brouhaha over a non-existent controversy.

What is the convention that the Opposition is referring to? On two earlier occasions, after the death of Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri the President had made temporary arrangements by swearing in the seniormost Minister as interim Prime Minister. But what the Opposition parables of propriety, who now wrangle for an ass's shadow, do not seem to realise is that there were other contenders in the field and a majority decision by the CPP was unavoidable.

In the present case, the entire Cabinet, including members of the CPB called on the President and urged him to appoint Rajiv Gandhi to head the government, in order to end a state of political uncertainty. If the President had followed precedent, his choice would have been either Union Finance Minister, Pranab Mukherjee, or Home Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao. Both these Ministers were in the delegation that urged the President on behalf of the CPB to make Rajiv Gandhi the Prime Minister.

That apart, it does not take any noumenal attributes to realise that Rajiv Gandhi was indeed number two in the country and the party after Indira Gandhi. The Opposition's nugatory objection to his elevation constitutes an exercise in hair-splitting inanity. Any delay or uncertainty in choosing a successor could well have resulted in a painful shiver passing through the entire nation.

It is no business of the Opposition who the Congress (I) selects as its leader, as long as the individual enjoys majority support. And in any case, Rajiv Gandhi, during the short period he has been in politics, has displayed qualities of leadership and an innate ability to grasp details of complex issues. He has also brought to the fore a fresh approach in developing grassroot contacts and assessing the weaknesses of the party machine. Perhaps more importantly, Rajiv Gandhi tends to be coolly clinical and is apparently averse to the politically baroque.