Indira’s ghost still haunts India

Her final years shaped the system Modi now rules, writes James Hannah

Autumn of the Matriarch: Indira Gandhi’s Final Term in Office

Diego Maiorano
Hurst, £25.00

The flipside of Narendra Modi’s victory in the 2014 Indian election was the dramatic rejection of the Congress party. In part, the apparently dynastic nature of Congress was contrasted with the aspirational story of Modi’s rise. Yet on another level, Modi holds a lot in common with an earlier Gandhi scion — Indira Gandhi. Both are centralizing and divisive, populists and dominant in their political arenas. In Gandhi’s final term in office, trends emerged that have fed into Modi’s rise and shaped India’s development.

Indira Gandhi was prime minister of India for two periods. The first, from 1967 to 1977, culminated in the only deviation from democratic rule in India’s independent history with the two years of ‘Emergency Rule’ from 1975. The second, beginning with Gandhi’s comeback in 1980, was brought to an end in 1984 by her assassination. This second period in office forms the focus of a new book by Diego Maiorano. It provides an important insight into the later implications for India of Gandhi’s time in power. Rather than a biography, this is an academic study of the election of 1980 and its re-orientation of the Congress party base towards the urban middle class and big business; the subsequent impact on the Congress during the period up to the assassination; and the shifts in political mobilization that emerged.

The paradoxical picture is that of a centralizing autocrat, uncompromising and polarizing in her approach to all opponents — real or perceived — who nonetheless left behind a political environment in which the range of political actors had broadened. By bringing poverty into mainstream political debate, the degree of mass participation was deepened. This shift came hand in hand with negative trends Maiorano identifies — increased corruption, politicization of the civil service and dynastic politics.

During the barnstorming electoral campaign of 1971, Gandhi adopted a populist platform on poverty alleviation aimed squarely at the rural poor. She swept to power under the slogan ‘Garibi Hatao’ meaning ‘remove poverty’. This victory consolidated her grip on a party she had already split once, in a leadership contest in 1969, and provided a ringing endorsement of her economic policy, which had included a nationalization of banks in 1969, and a redirection of funds towards agriculture. As the sole party of government since independence in 1947, Congress had become symbiotically linked to all institutions of the state in India, a national framework of control that Maiorano terms ‘informal federalism’.

This embedded system of patronage had been based upon regional leaders delivering votes to the centre via their position in the social hierarchy, linked in part to land ownership and caste structures. Maiorano describes this as a consociational ‘structure of dominance’ that Gandhi set about destroying and rebuilding.

Above all else her approach demanded a gangster-like loyalty as the prerequisite for connections to power. This served not only to weaken Indian democracy by restricting promotion to loyalists within Congress but to enfeeble the institutions of state. By reforming party-funding laws, and doubling down on the state-led economic model, Gandhi institutionalized the flow of ‘black money’ throughout the political system. Retaining the right to distribute the spoils, Gandhi took individual control of the Congress party network.

As the responsiveness of government faltered, the political environment splintered, with competing groups arising outside of the respective Indira Gandhi and Congress party tents. By centralizing power to such an extent, she fanned the flames driving the emergence of new political actors.

What then is Maiorano telling us? Many of the trends that emerged during Mrs Gandhi’s final term in office had been present beforehand, and an analysis of this kind runs the risk of blurring her personal responsibility with deeper cultural realities. He describes the emergence of Hindu nationalism, partly ploughing the furrow created by Gandhi’s national populist campaigns. Maiorano identifies this shift by the Indira-dominated Congress party in 1980, to a focus on the urban middle class and big business, as an issue of legacy, but in many respects this was a decision any leader would have had to make — when a model fails, and new sources of financial power grow up, parties reconsider their options.

Of the three trends identified by the author, two — Hindu nationalism and the focus on middle-class and business interest — were key to Congress defeat in 2014. Those elections therefore pose a drastic challenge to Indira’s successors. Modi’s victory was driven by a campaign that focused on Congress corruption and the failure to generate high growth rates. The middle-class and business constituency may now have abandoned the Congress party for the foreseeable future. A significant shift, beyond defunct dynasticism, will be required as a result.

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