

Indira Priyadarshini Gandhi, 1917–84

With the dastardly assassination of 31 October 1984, the environmental movement lost one of its most powerful-ever allies and joined the world in mourning a lady of great spirit. For not only did Mrs Gandhi love wild things and all Nature, but she had a deep appreciation of their vital importance for Mankind and steadfastly preserved a strong conservationist attitude regardless of political expediency.* It is in large measure as a result of such leading guardianship by the late Prime Minister of all India that, for instance, the Hangul or Kashmir Deer continues to survive† and the Silent Valley with its tropical rain-forest has seemingly been saved for posterity††. Was it, perhaps, in touching tribute to this dedicated concern that 'The naval band played a solemn tune "Flowers of the Forest" till the last vehicle in the mournful procession crossed the gates of the Teen Murti Bhavan** bearing Mrs Gandhi's ashes to be scattered over her beloved Himalayas by her surviving son and successor Rajiv; and was that lovely Scottish air chosen by him? Far more important, is this a happy indication that she had also passed on to him her lifelong concern for Nature and preserving the natural environment?

The genius of leadership commonly involves a deep identification of oneself with the overriding need of the times. Indira Gandhi identified herself with the urgent need for uplift of the vast masses of India, and they in turn accepted her as a personification of Mother India.

Born into the intensely political family of the Nehrus, Indira had her first taste of the freedom struggle when she was only 12 years old, taking the initiative to organize the Vanarasena (Monkey Brigade) from among friends of her own age-group, to carry important messages on behalf of leading members of the Congress Party. From then onwards she remained in close touch with national developments, though married in 1942 to a civil servant, Feroze Gandhi. After India achieved independence in August 1947 and her father became Prime Minister, she acted as hostess in his household, which was frequented by top world leaders, observing and absorbing the unfolding international political scene and learning much in this process. Subsequently she served as President of the Indian National Congress for a term.

After Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's death in 1964, she accepted the modest portfolio of Minister of Information and Broadcasting under Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri. When Lal Bahadur Shastri passed away suddenly in 1965, she was chosen by the Congress Party to assume the mantle of Prime Minister. She continued to hold this responsibility until her death, except for a period of about three years from 1977, coming back triumphantly with a landslide victory in the General Elections in 1980.

←† Requested outline (for translation into Chinese) of keynote address to opening session of the Symposium part of Agro-China '84, delivered in Guangzhou, China, on 19 November 1984 as indicated on page 376 of this issue.

←* Described on pp. 313–7 of this issue by Drs Baldwin & Sacks.

Throughout her career, in whatever capacity she served—whether as Prime Minister of India or more recently as Chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement or of the Commonwealth—Indira Gandhi struggled for economic and social justice and steadfastly pursued the twin objectives of World Peace and International Cooperation for the economic betterment of Mankind, of whom more than one-seventh lives on the Indian Sub-continent. She believed in freedom as a prerequisite for economic growth, and rejoiced in the fact that India, although a deeply religious country professing every major faith under the Sun, has sought to preserve the right of each citizen to choose what to believe in. It is important to remember this, while recalling that Indira Gandhi has fallen a victim to exactly those very forces that obviously do not wish India to continue on this sensible path—a path to which there is no alternative if the country is to survive as a Modern Nation State.

Life goes on in the face of death, and it is surely urgent to repair the damage done and to convert the horror, anguish, and lasting sorrow, felt by the people of India into constructive channels. India, after all, is the world's second most populous country and its largest democracy by far; so those of us who share democratic values must ardently wish the leadership of Indira Gandhi's succession only the best of good fortune and success in their endeavour to steer the ship of State through the currently troubled waters and safely into harbour once again. And so it should be with the environment, the cause of which our deeply-lamented friend espoused with such concerned vigour, but about which it is up to us all to do everything we can in every possible way.

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&

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* See, for example, her cable which was read out on 5 June 1977 in Reykjavik, Iceland, at the opening of our Second International Conference on Environmental Future, which started: 'Deeply regret unable attend Conference good wishes for success. It is wrongly propagated that there is a conflict between progress and protection of the environment. Progress cannot be equated with immediate profit but with developmental activities which raise standard of living, relieve drudgery, bring beauty into daily life. Progress and healthy survival are dependent on our ability to conserve the environment and preserve the balance of nature...'—Indira Gandhi; also her paper 'A Politician's Views on Why We are Not Saving Our World', which we hope to publish in due course.

† See, for example, Dr G.M. Oza's 'Conservation Status of the Kashmir Deer or Hangul', *Environmental Conservation*, 10(1), p. 66, 1983, with facsimile of the special postage stamp of it launched by Mrs Gandhi on 1 October 1982.

†† See, for example, the contributions by Professor P.S. Ramakrishnan and Dr J.S. Singh *et al.* published in the latest two issues of *Environmental Conservation*.

** *The Hindu*, 12 November 1984, page 1.