

Indira Gandhi

Prime Minister (1917-1984)

Indira Nehru Gandhi was born on November 19, 1917 and was the only child of Jawaharlal and Kamala Nehru. Being influenced and inspired by her parents, Indira Gandhi rose to power in India and eventually became prime minister. She dedicated her life to progress in her country despite the overwhelming problems and challenges she encountered.

In 1938, Indira joined the Indian National Congress Party, something she always longed to do. Soon afterward, in 1942, she married journalist Feroze Gandhi and eventually had two sons with him. Shortly after the couple was married, they were sent to prison on charges of subversion by the British. Her first and only imprisonment lasted from September 11, 1942 until May 13, 1943 at the Naini Central Jail in Allahabad.

Fortunately, India won its independence from Britain in 1947. In that same year, Indira's father Jawaharlal Nehru became prime minister. Because her mother had died in 1936, Indira acted as hostess and confidante and traveled with Nehru to meet famous political figures. Later, in 1959, Gandhi became the fourth woman elected president of the Indian National Congress. Five years later in 1964, the then Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri appointed Indira Gandhi as minister of information and broadcasting. This position was the fourth highest ranking position in the Cabinet. Many Indians were illiterate. Therefore, radio and television played a major part in informing them. As minister, Indira encouraged the making of inexpensive radios and started a family planning program.

After Shastri's death in 1966, Indira Gandhi was appointed prime minister and served until India held the next election. She won that election, and in 1967, became the first woman ever elected to lead a

democracy. A brilliant political strategist and thinker, Indira also possessed an extraordinary desire for political power. As a woman occupying the highest position of government in a still very patriarchal society, Indira was expected to be a passive leader, but her actions would prove her otherwise.

As Prime Minister, Indira carefully used every tool available at her disposal to consolidate her power and authority. By using her powers of appointment she created "notoriously weak" cabinets, creating her own governing Congress (R) party following the November 1969 split within the governing Indian National Congress.

Re-elected in 1971, with the slogan "Abolish poverty," she proceeded to boost her government's fortunes through a successful war against neighboring Pakistan in East Bengal, where India's intervention enabled local separatists to crown their nine-month war of independence with the creation of

the independent republic of Bangladesh.

Indira's success did cause some backlash, however. In 1975, Indira was found guilty of violating election laws. Later, the conviction was overturned by the Supreme Court of India. Also, to control population growth, Indira implemented a voluntary sterilization program. As a result, adversaries criticized her and her administration in general. To secure her power and because of escalating riots, on June 26, 1975, Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency, which limited the personal freedom of Indians. She also ordered the arrests of the main opposition leaders. In her opinion, she declared an emergency for the good of India. In 1977, she was voted out of office but regained her position as prime minister in 1980.

Unfortunately on October 31, 1984, Indira Gandhi's Sikh bodyguards assassinated her. They did so to avenge the storming of the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Indira had ordered the storming in June because of terrorist activity.

As prime minister, Indira Gandhi tried to improve the lives of Indians. Her main accomplishments were improving relations with the Soviet Union and victory in the 1971 war with Pakistan. Also in 1971, India sent its first satellite into space. By the end of her time as prime minister, Indira Gandhi had helped India develop one of the fastest growing economies in the world.

Some thoughts from Indira Gandhi:

“You can't shake hands with a clenched fist.”

“You must be still in the midst of activity, and be vibrantly alive in repose.”

To learn more about Indira Gandhi, check out:

Indira Gandhi by Dom Moraes

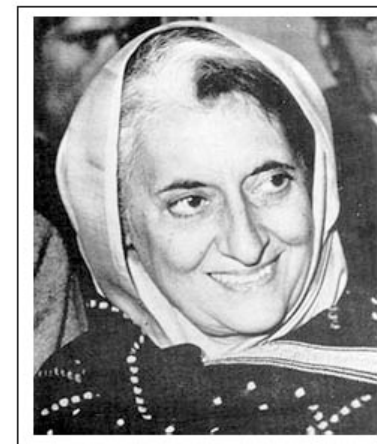
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Whole Woman's Health of Austin
8401 N. IH 35, Ste. 200 * Austin, TX 78753
(512) 250-1005
www.wholewomanshealth.com