

NEW NATIONS EMERGE

Biography

Among the challenges facing India in the 1960s were conflict with Pakistan and relations with China and the Soviet Union. Into this arena stepped Indira Gandhi, India's third prime minister. ♦ As you read, think about how Gandhi's background allowed her to take on such a great role. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.

Indira Gandhi (1917–1984)

Indira Gandhi was born on November 19, 1917. She was the only child of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India. Early in her life, Gandhi's strength was forged by her family's participation in the independence struggle. When she was 12, she organized Indian children to run errands for India's freedom fighters.

Indira went to school sporadically. Although she attended school in Switzerland and India briefly, mostly she studied at home. Later, she enrolled at Oxford University in England. She married Feroze Gandhi,¹ a friend from her student days there.

When her father became prime minister in 1947, Gandhi acted as his aide. "I was part of the processions and meetings and everything that took place," she later said.

Her father died in 1964, the same year she was elected to Parliament. At the same time, the new prime minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, named her India's Minister of Information and Broadcasting. When Shastri died in 1966, powerful members of the Congress Party chose Gandhi to succeed Shastri as prime minister until the next elections were held. They believed she would be easy to manipulate because, at first, she was easily influenced and willing to compromise. However, she displayed great political skill and won the election for prime minister in 1967.



Indira Gandhi,
1972

Gandhi instituted many reforms, improved relations with China and the Soviet Union, and supported the secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan.

In the 1970s, after Gandhi was reelected in a landslide victory, a political opponent charged her with electoral law violations. When she was found guilty of the charges, Gandhi refused to resign. Eventually, the Supreme Court of India overturned her conviction. When the next elections were held in 1977, however, Gandhi was voted out of office. Gandhi won a new seat in Parliament in 1978. In 1980, she was reelected as prime minister in another landslide.

In the 1980s, Sikh² extremists in the Punjab province turned to violence to win independence. In 1984, Gandhi used the army to put down the rebellion. Hundreds of Sikhs were killed at a holy Sikh shrine in Amritsar. Later, in revenge, Gandhi was assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards.

Gandhi's authoritarian style and desire for personal power weakened the development of democracy in India. Gandhi was also a skillful politician, though, who was popular with the people and worked to improve the lives of Indians. By the time of her death, India's economy had become one of the fastest growing in the world.

¹ No relation to Mohandas Gandhi.

² Members of an Indian religious minority

Questions to Think About

1. What did Indira Gandhi do for her father when he became India's first prime minister?
2. How did Gandhi respond when she was convicted of violating electoral laws?
3. **Making Inferences** What would you say were some of Indira Gandhi's key qualities? Why?