

“An examination of Indira Gandhi’s second term of office offers an urgent history lesson – we need to study it to understand the present”

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Mukulika Banerjee discusses Diego Maiorano’s new book, which looks in detail at Indira Gandhi’s last years as Prime Minister. She highlights the synergies between Mrs Gandhi and current PM Narendra Modi, and writes that this study of the years 1980-1984 offers important insights into key traits which characterise Indian politics today.

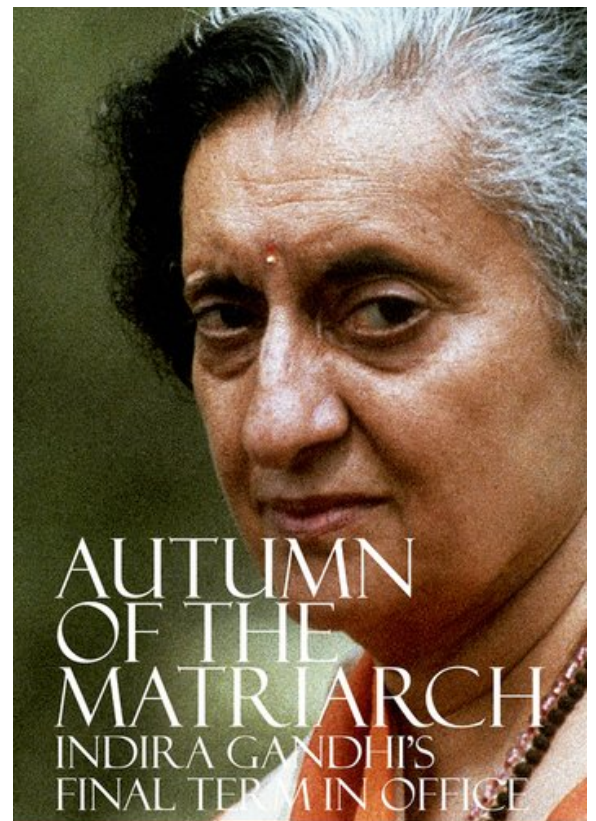


Autumn of the Matriarch: Indira Gandhi’s Final Term in Office. Diego Maiorano. Hurst & Company, London. 2015.

A leader, split between cynicism and naivety. This is how Diego Maiorano portrays Indira Gandhi, India’s only woman Prime Minister in his new book *Autumn of the Matriarch: Indira Gandhi’s Final Term in Office*. At the launch function in the stately setting of the Senate Room in University of London’s Senate House in Bloomsbury on 20 April, the author outlined the evidence for his observations. Professor James Manor, a respected observer of Indian politics, offered opening remarks before the author took questions from the floor.

The timing of the publication of this book could not have been more opportune. With a single party majority government led by a charismatic and strong leader once again in power, the lessons of Indira Gandhi’s last term in the early 1980s need to be recalled. Like Prime Minister Modi, she presided over a majority government and divided opinion considerably. She too was loved by millions and fancied herself as the embodiment of the country itself: ‘India is Indira and Indira is India’ as the slogan of the time went. It is no surprise then that comparisons have been drawn between the current BJP premier and Indira Gandhi, a leader of the Congress Party, rather than premiers from his own party. The affinity of essence between these two figures that has been detected by many and an examination of Indira Gandhi’s second term of office 1980-1984 offers an urgent history lesson; we need to study it in order to understand the present.

Maiorano’s balanced analysis backed by meticulous research draws our attention to the fact that many of the traits that have come to constitute the hallmarks of contemporary Indian politics were born out of Indira’s policies. This is her most important legacy. The institutionalisation of corruption in political funding, and the blight in an otherwise robust electoral system, can be traced back to 1970 when corporate donations to political parties were banned by Mrs Gandhi in an earlier tenure as PM. It is telling that in 1983, the Congress won four state elections at the staggering cost of \$100 million USD, most of which could not be accounted for. This figure resonates with the \$7 billion USD that the current Prime Minister’s campaign is said to have cost in 2014. The regionalisation of Indian politics and the critical role that regional parties have played in the formation of successive national governments in recent years go back to



DIEGO MAIORANO

her cutting down to size any aspiring political force in the states. Her burying of the [Mandal Commission report](#) and its subsequent retrieval by V P Singh unleashed caste-based identity politics that dominated the 1990s. Her personal chemistry with Ronald Reagan, a lurch to the right and sowing the seeds of liberalisation during her second term led to greater power of state governments and has led to the all powerful figure of a state Chief Minister. The free reign she allowed her son Sanjay Gandhi during her second term brought in and institutionalised the criminalisation of Indian politics; the figures of criminality now stand at shamefully high levels among MPs in the Indian parliament and in the other two tiers of democratic representation.

Many of these changes, Maiorano reminds us, were made possible by the sheer force of her personality. Her intolerance of dissent and ability to manipulate people and processes led to institutions being personalised and weakened; not even the biggest institutions were spared – the Supreme Court, the civil service, the Constitution, even the President's office – were all manipulated skilfully and peopled with those whom she could control. All countervailing forces to her own executive power were cut down. With the Congress Party itself, her complete dominance set the trail for dynastic politics not just within her family whereby her son, his widow and grandson have dominated the Party's leadership, but also created similar structures across other political parties. The role of kinship to generate trust and consolidate power is an Indian political phenomenon only in the wake of Indira Gandhi. As a result, the spaces within the Congress for newer groups to find a voice or new leaders to emerge diminished considerably, giving rise to a trend of sycophancy and the collapse of the party's organisational structure. The current diminished status of the Congress with a paltry 44 seats in Parliament is a direct consequence of this legacy.

Another, though less negative impact of her leadership and populism, Mairano conceded was to put poverty and the poor at the centre of the political discourse. Her famous populist slogan, still remembered all over India, of *Garibi Hatao!* (Remove Poverty) highlighted the need for poverty reduction as never before. While this never really became the heart of public policy, Mairano argues it had the unintended consequence of democratising a sleepy electorate. Ironically, it was the reinvigorated politics of these new forces that Indira continually struggled to contain throughout her political career and brought out the worst traits of her character.

This unflinching portrayal of Indira Gandhi by a young scholar is a significant piece of work in Indian politics. For a first book, it is remarkably confident in tone and style. It benefits from being based on his doctoral research that was conducted with great rigour: that the author has had thousands of conversations with people close and distant to Indira Gandhi is evident, as are the hours he has spent in the archives, poring over newspapers. We need more such analytical biographies of figures on the Indian political landscape. Even those who are dismissed as mere 'regional leaders' often commanded the fates of regions bigger than most European nations and their stories are therefore worth documenting in detail. Their lives contain a unique cocktail of political ideology and personality traits that have determined not just their own political careers but the many trajectories of Indian democracy.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the India at LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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