

Rani Singh, *Sonia Gandhi: An Extraordinary Life, An Indian Destiny*
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DELHI'S DYNASTS

Ranked as one of the worst countries in the world to be a woman, India could be one of the best places to be a female politician. There have been powerful state Chief Ministers—Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh, Mamata in West Bengal, Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu—and the vociferous leader of the opposition in parliament is the BJP's Sushma Swaraj. Though they might all eye the premiership, the paramount figure in their midst has demurred the post. The life and career of Mrs Sonia Gandhi take identity politics to another level. The 'Italian housewife' elevated to power by dint of being Rajiv Gandhi's widow—and sole survivor of the family's post-Indira generation—has succeeded in turning her position as longest-serving president of the Congress Party into that of informal head of state. In 2010, as Rani Singh notes in the first internationally pitched biography, Beijing's diplomatic service ranked her as equivalent to President Hu in protocol, senior to Premier Wen.

Singh is a London-based journalist, for many years a BBC presenter. Her book lacks the stylistic flair of Manjulika Dubey, the Delhi spin-mistress responsible for ghosting Sonia's own memoir—duly titled *Rajiv*—and has none of the insider factional detail that enlivens *Sonia: A Biography* (2009) by the Kolkata *Telegraph's* Rasheed Kidwai. Singh apparently failed to extract anything from her subject when they met, and instead relies heavily on quotes from sympathetic Indian columnists and the insights of Sonia's interior designer, while the BBC's Mark Tully supplies the political analysis. Novelistic chapters on the violent demises of Sonia's brother-in-law, mother-in-law and husband alternate with plodding accounts of electoral battles and foreign speeches, interspersed with ample detail on Madam's fashion sense,

maternal devotion and culinary skills. Singh's book can best be read as a primer on dynastic form.

Sonia's political skills are not negligible, but it is widely accepted that she owes her current position of power over 1.2 billion Indians to the Congress Party's morbid dependence on a single family. The process reached an apogee of sorts in January this year when Sonia rewarded her son Rahul for his disastrous performance in 2012's key Uttar Pradesh state elections—Congress came fourth—by elevating him to the party's vice-presidency; according to reports, he is being mooted as a prime-ministerial candidate for the 2014 general election. Even Singh tacitly admits that the hegemony of the dynasty is a function of the ideological bankruptcy of Congress: 'the problem is that over the years in many crucial areas the party has atrophied, relying in part on the magic Nehru–Gandhis to ensure victory', she writes. Although Congress-led governments have been in office for nearly a decade now—since the demise of the BJP coalition in 2004—the party has struggled to score over 28 per cent of the vote.

The 'magic' is not just a function of insatiable media interest, whether slavish or sensationalized. India's First Family combines the longevity of royalty—five generations, if we start from the plutocrat Motilal Nehru (1861–1931), who wrote in 1928 of passing the 'crown' of the Congress Party presidency to his son Jawaharlal—with the telegenic glamour and vulnerability to assassination of the Kennedys. As with royalty, first names are the norm. The central pillar of its ideology remains the much-mythologized legacy of Nehru's leadership in the Independence struggle and the first decades of the nascent Indian state. This is crucially entwined with a narrative of duty and renunciation, of selfless sacrifice for the nation. By extension, it combines upper-caste, aristocratic authority with dedication to the poor and down-trodden, and a heartfelt sympathy for *aam aadmi*, the common man. Finally, it involves the naturalization of 'family values', embodied in familial relationships with which all can identify. Sonia's role in shaping and perpetuating the dynasty over the next generation therefore needs to be understood as not only ideological and political, but also sentimental, strategic and deeply gendered.

Born in 1946, in a village near Vicenza, Edvige Antonia Albina Maino was given the nickname Sonia by her father, a Fascist who had fought with Mussolini's forces in Russia and who ran a small construction company after the War. Sonia was educated by nuns—one of them would remark to a *Frontline* interviewer in 1998: 'She was always a little manipulative. She should do well in politics'—but left the convent at fourteen for a Berlitz language school, a stepping-stone to a secretarial post with an international company. At nineteen she went to polish up her English at a language school in Cambridge, 'popular with those from abroad as cleaner and

safer than London', Singh explains. Rajiv Gandhi, twenty-one, was in the process of flunking an engineering degree at Trinity, and spotted her at a local restaurant. They got engaged the following year, 1966, soon after the Congress leadership had appointed his mother Indira as Prime Minister. (Rajiv's father, Feroze Gandhi—of course, no relation to the Mahatma—had died in 1960.)

The wedding took place in 1968, in the garden of Indira's Lutyens residence; Sonia wore a pale pink sari that Nehru had hand-spun in prison for Indira's marriage to Feroze in 1942. The newlyweds settled in to the Prime Minister's household, along with Rajiv's younger brother Sanjay and his wife Maneka. Rajiv happily pursued his career as an Indian Airlines pilot, when not socializing with the Delhi *babalog*. A son, Rahul, was born in 1970 and a daughter, Priyanka, two years later. Singh is somewhat hazy about the Emergency—just as Sonia would be, explaining in a 2004 interview that Indira was 'never quite at ease' with the 1975–77 clampdown that saw tens of thousands imprisoned, though 'circumstances compelled her' to it. Singh concedes that Sanjay's male-sterilization campaign was 'over-zealous' and that his slum-clearance plan 'misfired'. Sonia and Rajiv were 'uncomfortably caught up in unfolding events, as their home was the centre of the action'.

After Indira was sent packing by the Indian electorate in 1977, Rajiv was 'harassed' by the income-tax authorities—'accusations of alleged corruption are endemic to any political landscape', Singh laments; Sonia's role as a director of one of Sanjay's front companies escapes comment. Sonia was busy getting in with Indira: 'My upbringing is such that I feel my husband is superior, and his mother even more superior', she told interviewers. After Sanjay's plane crash in 1980—his last stunt is described in graphic detail—Sonia sidelined Maneka, making sure Indira didn't take her on as a private secretary. Instead, Maneka's tumultuous political career would take her to the BJP. 'It is easy to paint the picture as saint versus sinner, calm angelic homemaker versus noisy, attention-seeking young activist, but things were not so black and white', Singh concludes. Like her mother-in-law before her, Sonia now played First Lady to a widowed Prime Minister who came to depend on her for personal support, domestic management and sartorial advice. In Sonia's prim account: 'Indira's anguish following the loss of her son was compounded by Sanjay's widow's decision to leave the house.'

Sonia is portrayed as trying to dissuade Rajiv from quitting Indian Airlines to go into politics, after his brother's death, and no doubt this is true; but under pressure from the broader family (Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Arun Nehru), she relented soon enough: 'I would bow to those forces which were now beyond me to fight and I would go with him wherever they took him.' The perfect politician's wife, she rescinded her Italian citizenship,

abandoned her Western wardrobe for saris and salwar kurtas, and walked demurely behind Rajiv when they visited his Uttar Pradesh constituency, the family fiefdom of Amethi, where she became a patron to the women and children and learned to say '*patiji ko vote dijiye*'—'vote for my husband'. In 1983 Indira appointed Rajiv General Secretary of the All India Congress Committee, the party's national delegate body. Singh does not trouble the reader with the details of Indira's 1980–84 government: 'While multiple insurgencies and an atmosphere of unrest and instability afflicted parts of India, back in Delhi, Sonia had a family to raise.' The Sikh nationalist movement in the Punjab is lightly touched on; as for the occupation of Amritsar's Golden Temple complex, 'the separatists had to be quashed. Indira needed to act quickly; she had only one option . . .'

Arun Nehru has told Indira's biographer, Katherine Frank, about the extent to which he and Rajiv were implicated in the military assault that reduced the Golden Temple complex to a charnel house: Indira had made them privy to Operation Blue Star before the Home Minister and Punjabi Chief Minister had word of it. When Indira's Sikh bodyguards turned their guns on her a few months later, Sonia was the only family member in the house. Singh replays the well-known story: 'Sonia ran down the path in her dressing gown, barefoot, burst into tears, and shouted, "Mummy! Oh my God, Mummy!"' On the drive to the hospital she cradled Indira's head in her lap, blood drenching her housecoat. In the operation of the dynastic myth, the link of blood between mother and daughter-in-law would perhaps count for more than the marriage to the pilot. Countering Congress critics of her non-native status fifteen years later, Sonia would cry: 'The greatest daughter of this country, Indira-ji, breathed her last in my arms—each drop of blood in my being cries out that this is my land.' Still, some people's blood was evidently worth more than others. Rajiv was sworn in as Prime Minister on the afternoon his mother died, but the pogrom against the Sikhs—at least 2,700 butchered, tens of thousands driven from their burning homes—was allowed to rage for three days, with Congress leaders and goons playing a role in the highly orchestrated carnage. Rajiv's response: 'When a mighty tree falls, the earth is bound to shake.' Three decades later, those who attacked the Golden Temple complex or led the Sikh-killing still enjoy impunity.

For Singh, Rajiv was 'like an ocean of pensive strength'; his 'clean image' represented 'change, hope, energy, modernity'; his new team—corporate managers, a former co-pilot, school and university chums—'shared his vision'. Like Sonia, Rajiv 'abhorred' communalism, defined by Singh as the exploitation of religious feeling for electoral advantage. The myth persists, despite Rajiv's role in first overturning a 1985 Supreme Court ruling in favour of a poor Muslim divorcee, in a calculated move to placate the

mullahs, and then responding to the outrage this inspired by capitulating to *Hindutva* forces and unlocking the gates to the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, setting off the chain of events that would lead to the mosque's destruction in 1992. The Bofors scandal that broke in 1987—Rajiv's government accused of pocketing an \$11.7m bribe to sweeten an arms contract—is dismissed as a mere smear campaign by Singh, empathizing with Sonia's dismay at the 'abuse and vilification' that caused Rajiv 'so much pain'. The fact that the go-between for the deal had been an Italian friend of the family, introduced through Sonia, is not deemed worthy of investigation by her biographer. The Bofors scandal exploded as Indian troops were pouring onto the Jaffna peninsula, in a pact between Rajiv's administration and the Jayewardene government in Sri Lanka that saw Delhi take on the task of crushing the Tamil Tigers. It could be said that both Indira and Rajiv met tragic ends, in the sense that these were consequences of chains of events that they themselves had instigated. Singh devotes a prologue and a central chapter to a gruesome reconstruction of the Tamil suicide-bomber's assassination of Rajiv.

In fact Sonia's autonomous political biography begins in 1991, with her widowhood. The following years are conventionally portrayed as a period of seclusion after her husband's death, but Sonia was by no means inactive. She was an efficient chair of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, established a month after the assassination with handsome funding from India's biggest companies, Reliance and Tata, and a \$20m grant from the new Congress government under Narasimha Rao, featuring in Finance Minister Manmohan Singh's first budget; it was only withdrawn after clamorous protests. The RGF under Sonia emerged as a sounding board and organizing centre for Congress opposition to Rao, although she remained on excellent terms with his hardline neoliberal Finance Minister, a former IMF and World Bank factotum responsible for the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s; many of those who gathered round the RGF went on to become her core supporters. According to Rasheed Kidwai, Sonia was unhappy with talk of a post-dynastic Congress Party under Rao. In a well-publicized 1995 speech in Amethi, she lashed out at him for slow progress on the investigation into her husband's death. Her glossy photo-memoir, *Rajiv*, had come out the year before. (An earlier contribution to the dynastic literature bearing Sonia's name was a re-edition of the much-published letters between Jawaharlal and Indira: 'Sonia's appetite for books was exceptional for an Indian politician', Singh notes.)

Electoral defeat for Rao in 1996 unleashed a ferocious inner-party struggle; Sitaram Kesri, a critic of the Brahmin leadership—and former supporter of Subhas Chandra Bose—won the first election in decades to the presidency of the Congress Party. At this point Sonia's 'sense of duty' propelled her to intervene—'I felt I was being cowardly, to just sit and watch

things deteriorate in the Congress for which my mother-in-law and the whole family lived and died', she would explain in a later TV interview. The Sonia faction was mobilized. In March 1998, after a stormy meeting of the Congress Working Committee at which Kesri refused to resign, party officials simply changed the nameplate on his office to 'Sonia Gandhi'.

Sonia's maiden campaign as Congress leader came as a shock: the party lost in most of the constituencies she visited. She came under withering fire from the BJP government for her awkward Hindi and foreign accent; as leader of the opposition she cut a poor figure against the ebullient Vajpayee. But Sonia showed herself the equal of such Congress critics as Sharad Pawar, who suggested there might be legitimate concerns about her leadership—'ordinary Indians expected their Prime Minister to have a track record in public life'. Pawar and his colleagues were forced out of the party after Sonia put her resignation on the line. For the 1999 election, she reportedly studied videos of Indira's speeches, adopted her mannerisms and dyed her hair darker—to little avail. She made a respectable speech in Parliament after the 2002 anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat, deploring the violence, but followed it with a state-election campaign there that seemed bent on appeasing Hindu chauvinism: an ex-RSS leader was appointed campaign manager and Sonia herself visited one temple after another, while snubbing the widow of a local Muslim Congressman who had been slaughtered, along with the people he was protecting. Narendra Modi's BJP won the state in a landslide.

To the surprise of the opinion pollsters, however, Congress under Sonia's leadership succeeded in turning around the 2004 election. Though the difference in ballots was marginal, her team had put together a pact with the left parties which gave the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance a majority in parliament—and helped keep the caste-based and regional forces in check. Polls had found that Sonia alone would be no match for the incumbent Vajpayee, but came up with better chances for a Sonia + Rahul + Priyanka trinity. As a result, most of the Congress leadership was confined to Delhi, while Sonia and her children dominated the media coverage, accompanied by a sprinkling of Bollywood celebrities and a huge security detail—twenty to thirty SUVs, armed guards, walkie-talkies, etc. After desultory studies at Harvard and Cambridge, the 34-year-old Rahul had taken up a lucrative post at the infamous Monitor Group in London—the 'global consultancy' that ghosted Saif Gaddafi's doctoral thesis at the LSE—followed by a stint at a dubious tech-outsourcing firm in Mumbai. A battery of experts was brought in to groom him as a friend of the common man, and he was duly returned as MP for the family seat of Amethi.

Sonia's decision to appoint Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister in 2004, rather than take the post herself, was almost universally hailed as an act of truly Gandhian self-sacrifice; according to Dileep Padgaonkar of the

Times of India, it was on a par with the Buddha's renunciation of worldly things. It was just as widely admired as a cool political calculation. The move disarmed the BJP, which had anticipated leading a nationwide campaign against the shame of India being led by a foreigner, and won over support from smaller parties—such as the Janata Dal splinter led by Bihar's Lalu Prasad Yadav—which might not have backed the UPA otherwise. Yet Sonia not only retained her apex position within the party but extended her power over the premiership: an amendment to the Congress Parliamentary Party constitution stated that the party president, herself, would have the power to appoint and to sack the Prime Minister. Manmohan Singh had no electoral base—he was an appointee to the Rajya Sabha, the Westminster-style upper house—and was thus entirely dependent on Sonia's patronage. An RGF loyalist, Pulak Chatterjee, was planted in his office as a principal aide. The new Prime Minister was duly deferential as he greeted the press for the first time: 'I know my limitations but, with Madam's guidance and the support of the country, I am sure we are going to make the future happen.' To add to the general sense of satisfaction, the first UPA government would also be the beneficiary of the global trade expansion of the mid-2000s: foreign capital was sucked into an investment-led boom; with growth rates pushing up towards double digits, there was talk of India as the most promising of the BRICS, perhaps even capable of overtaking China.

Singh has only a brief chapter on the record of her heroine's party in office since 2004. There is much praise for the National Advisory Council, set up under Sonia's chairmanship, giving her the formal rank of a Union Minister. Although she reportedly says very little at these meetings, as Singh candidly notes, the NAC 'has given her the image of a do-good legislator who spends her time with social activists and charity workers':

Placing herself at the helm of the NAC gave Sonia some distance from the government, while allowing her to speak on matters that the government does not address comprehensively, such as the right of every poor person to secure food . . . It was a canny political move, for it covers those buying into a free-market new Indian economy and others sympathetic to the renowned social activists on the NAC—capitalistic economists holding hands with bleeding-heart liberals.

Which is the predominant tendency? On the economy, Singh's government pursued an aggressive privatization policy, systematically under-pricing public assets: farmers were forcibly cleared from land for Special Economic Zones; private partnerships won preferential terms for infrastructure contracts; the 2G spectrum was auctioned at a \$39bn shortfall, and coal for a potential loss several times that—each deal, signed off by Manmohan Singh, taking long-standing Congress corruption to astronomic

new heights. Wealth in financial equity and real estate has soared, the benefits accruing to a small segment of the population, while the economy has shed unskilled labour. Elite consumption and the inflow of global capital have driven imports faster than exports, resulting in a current-account deficit now higher than in the 90s. Between \$500bn and \$1,400bn is estimated to be illicitly stashed abroad. Against this, an annual \$8.9bn has been allocated to the government's flagship anti-poverty programme, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which offers 100 days of unskilled manual work—filling potholes, clearing irrigation channels, etc—to anyone who wants it, at the statutory minimum wage of around \$2 a day.

Under the second UPA government a further round of liberalizing measures has been implemented, at the urging of Western powers, though the economy is now faltering. A landmark bill has lifted restrictions on foreign investment in the food-retail sector, offering an opening to Walmart and other multinationals at the expense of millions of small Indian traders, without any guarantee of improvement in the infrastructure of food production and distribution which leaves so many malnourished. Accompanying this, an unprecedented financialization of the public-distribution system for subsidized food and fuel—itself traditionally looted on a massive scale—is underway. The existing networks are being dismantled; instead of getting the goods themselves—paraffin, gram flour, lentils—nearly 300 million peasants will receive small cash transfers, via the corrupt and debt-burdened banking system. Some 600,000 villages are served by a mere 40,000 local bank branches, with the consequence that many 'beneficiaries' have to travel for half a day to access their new accounts, only to be told in many cases that the money has not yet arrived. The Ambani family, which dominates the petroleum-refining sector, may turn out to be the biggest winner.

In addition to their concern for the poor, the UPA has claimed to uphold the cause of women's empowerment and of secularism, against the supposed 'fascist threat' of the BJP. Sonia and the NAC have pushed hard for quotas to ensure that women fill one-third of Lok Sabha and state-assembly seats, with renewed calls to pass the Women's Reservation Bill coming after an appalling gang rape—widely reported, unlike the majority of such attacks in which the perpetrators have caste privilege on their side—that led to nationwide feminist protests. But the major obstacle to women's self-determination in India is the hold of conservative religious bodies over family law—marriage, divorce, inheritance, domestic violence—set in place by Nehru and only consolidated under Rajiv and Sonia. Meanwhile the UPA is now caught in the crosshairs of global recession and domestic rebellion, against oppression and dirty dealing at home. Congress's response to the *adivasi* insurgency has been draconian, while the anti-corruption movement led by Hazare in the

summer of 2011, when Sonia was reportedly hospitalized in the US, left the Congress leadership dumbfounded.

There is a widespread perception that Sonia is to the left of the hard-core neoliberal coterie around her Prime Minister—Chidambaram, Ahluwalia, Raghuram Rajan and co. She has to concern herself with the party's electability, as the technocratic wing of Congress does not; many of her interventions, often taking the form of open letters to the government, stress the need to consider the effects of policies on the poor. Yet Manmohan Singh's position is ultimately dependent on her. Sonia had lulled the left into believing she was against opening up India's energy sector, but then kept mum as Rahul became unusually animated in parliament. The Indo-US Nuclear Agreement, which formally subordinated key aspects of India's foreign policy to Washington's diktat, only passed in 2008 by open bribery of lawmakers when not only the opposition but the CPM, under Prakash Karat, balked at such a venal surrender of sovereignty. In protest, the BJP emptied sackfuls of rupee notes on the Chamber floor, to show how Sonia and her Prime Minister were buying their majority. Another laurel in Sonia's 'socialist' credentials is her sedulous promotion of her son, firmly in the neoliberal camp. Rani Singh devotes a tremulous final chapter to the 'fair-skinned, photogenic' 'man of the people', with his 'handpicked team of educated, motivated young people', many of whom are 'tech-savvy'. Rahul apparently 'combines Rajiv's idealism with Sanjay's drive'. While Sonia has 'inherited the mantle of the matriarch, and wears it well', Rahul represents the 'politics of hope' and is 'taking the younger demographic by storm'.

Such is the logic of dynasticism. The DNA of the Kashmiri pandits may have been diluted to the point of extinction by Gujarati-Parsi and Italo-Catholic genes, but support for the principle of succession seems undiminished among Congress and a supine Indian intelligentsia. Rahul's appointment by his mother to the Number Two position in the party was widely hailed in the name of stability and securing the future; any dissent at the imposition of the right-wing brat barely rose above a murmur. And those who worry that Rahul may fail to deliver the fruits of office turn first to his sister Priyanka, considered 'a natural' for the job. Singh merely recycles the received wisdom in these circles. Dynasticism helps to unite the country, by naturalizing power as a form of family continuity that the voting poor can understand. 'Our pride is Mother India, Our guide is Mother Sonia', Congress publicity proclaims—as if it were not the first duty of a national intelligentsia worth its salt to combat such mystification. Dynasticism is a universal phenomenon, why criticize its appearance in India alone? Because, sanctioned for so many generations at the apex, the rot has spread the farthest here: Congress hegemony has helped to normalize dynasticism throughout the political

system. In the current Lok Sabha, three in ten MPs have a family link to their seat, rising to four in ten for Congress; the younger the MP, the higher the chance that the seat was inherited—*every* Congress MP under the age of 35 is 'hereditary'. Dynasticism is deeply rooted in Indian culture: 'South Asians believe knowledge and experience increases from one generation to the next and, if possible, should not be squandered', Singh explains. But this is just another apologia for the pernicious grip of caste.

Sonia Gandhi's reactionary-Catholic upbringing and lack of formal education have been no handicap; perhaps even the contrary—she has proved a perfectly adequate operator of the system. She has cultivated the Nehruvian legacy, putting out more volumes of the letters and turning Indira's house into a heritage museum. She has made a cult of her self-sacrifice for the nation—Rahul revealed that, the night before the announcement of his promotion to the Congress vice-presidency, Sonia came to him crying, 'because she understands that the power so many people seek is actually a poison'. She has not ceased to proclaim that 'the hand of Congress is with the poor', even as inequality increases. 'Sonia seems to draw her strength from looking into the faces of the destitute', Singh writes, a point illustrated none too subtly by her book jacket, which shows Sonia beaming down at some benighted woman. Above all, she has helped put the party back into office.

The price has been the withering of any democratic accountability within the Congress Party. Even Indira and Rajiv would meet with a ten-member board to deal with major appointments, but Sonia has totally dispensed with this to nominate all leaders of the state units herself. The Congress Working Committee can have up to twelve elected members and eleven nominated by the president. Its first contest in twenty years was in 1992, and no election has been held since 1998, when Sonia took over. The overwhelming majority of CWC members are not Lok Sabha representatives: most of Sonia's principal advisers and Congress Cabinet ministers are from the Rajya Sabha. A lack of internal party accountability is thus amplified across the political system. Gandhi and her progeny essentially serve as an ideological front for a political patronage machine. Inflated into a fascist threat, the BJP now plays the role the British once occupied in rallying support. Congress's identity and appeal is now negative: it is not explicitly equated with any geography, religion or caste. On the flip side, the BJP, the only viable electoral alternative across the Union, makes it a point of principle that none of its top brass is on a dynastic ticket. If popularity polls are any indication, then the main beneficiary of the Nehru Raj under Rahul could be Narendra Modi.