

Opinion

Why Indira Gandhi Remains India's Most Influential and Most Debated Prime Minister

By: **Jawhar Sircar** November 19, 2025

Let us recall the achievements of Indira Gandhi, whose birth anniversary we celebrate today. She has undoubtedly been one of India's most powerful rulers ever – with a baggage of controversy as well.

She took over as the Prime Minister of India on 24 January 1966, following the unexpected death of Lal Bahadur Shastri. The senior leaders in the Congress assumed that, as she was a frail woman and quite inexperienced, they would continue to rule with her as an ornamental PM.

Right from day one, she started asserting herself and created her own small group of senior, middle, and talented junior ministers, like Pranab Mukherjee. They began differing from the orthodox line of the old guard so much that she, the Prime Minister, was expelled from Congress in 1969.

She was unfazed in such a big crisis and got her followers together to constitute a "New" Congress Party, that openly challenged the old and financially better off old guard who held on to the 'original' Congress, with all the offices, infrastructure, funds, and supporters, as the Congress (O) – O for 'Organisation'.

Indira then retaliated against the moneybags that supported her opponents and announced the nationalisation of 14 commercial banks in India on July 19, 1969. This was a historic and bold step that she followed up by nationalising other private banks, and she was determined to use public funds in favour of the masses. It ensured that farmers, small and tiny enterprises, as well as the rural populace, had easier access to banking services and credit facilities. It was her first step towards taking the Indian economy along a socialist pattern.

In the 1971 Lok Sabha elections, Indira toured all over India, sending out **strong messages** for change and betterment of the masses. She coined the very popular slogan "Garibi Hatao, Desh Bachao" (Remove Poverty, Save the Country). The masses were bowled over by the image of feminine grit and power that she conveyed. Her New Congress group achieved a landslide victory by defeating a coalition of conservative parties.

In 1971, she brought in the 26th Amendment to the Indian Constitution 1971, which struck down Articles 291 and 362 of the Constitution and eliminated the Privy Purse cash reward that erstwhile princes and nawabs were given – ensuring social justice and signalling a more egalitarian society.

Even before she could settle in, West Pakistan unleashed a genocide in East Pakistan – which led to a massive number of one crore Bengali refugees crossing the border for asylum in India. This was a massive human problem, and Indians were terribly agitated at the manner in which the Pakistani army went about slaughtering the Bengali population of East Pakistan. To garner world opinion on India's side, she went abroad and met all important world leaders and signed a historic Indo Soviet Pact to pass on a message to Nixon-Kissinger, who were dangerously biased in support of the Pak army in its genocide.

Finally, after gaining a strong majority in parliament and with the support of many world leaders, she started to extend direct and indirect assistance to the provisional government of Bangladesh, formed in East Pakistan. On 3rd December, Pakistan recklessly invaded India. Indira led the battle on both the western and eastern fronts, as she was prepared. The Indian army entered East Pakistan and joined forces with the Mukti Bahini in liberating that country and declaring a new free country called Bangladesh.

This was surely India's finest hour!

The victory over Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh soared her popularity. In March 1972, her party won a significant number of state elections. But soon thereafter, several forces grouped together and started a civil disobedience movement in Gujarat first, and then in Bihar, under the veteran leader, Jayaprakash Narayan – the Total Revolution.

In retaliation, Indira imposed a national emergency on the ground of internal disturbance on the 25th of June 1975. She jailed all important political leaders, muzzled the press, curtailed civil liberties and ushered in a totalitarian regime that India holds against her, even till now. When she felt that the opposition had been crushed, she lifted the Emergency on till 21 March 1977 and called for parliamentary elections.

In this election of 1977, she was routed by a strong articulating widespread public opposition to her Emergency. The victorious opposition cobbled together and formed a 'united' Janata Party government under Morarji Desai. In early 1978, Gandhi and her supporters formally split from the Congress Party and formed Congress (I) Party (the "I" standing for Indira). The Janata government was unable to offer stability, but was united in imprisoning her during the period of October 1977–December 1978 on the charges of corruption.

However, post her release from jail, Gandhi was again elected to the Lok Sabha in November 1978, and her Congress (I) Party started to gain strength, sweeping a landslide victory in the General Elections in January 1980.

Indira Gandhi returned to power and followed her father's socialist industrial development policies. In 1975, she introduced the Twenty Point Programme, which was the first ever comprehensive plan aimed at eradicating poverty and raising the standard of living of the poor. The Programme's goals were in line with the Development Goals. Her other notable achievement was the emphasis on the Green Revolution, which revolutionised India's agricultural sector. She then nationalised the coal sector too.

Early in the 1980s, Indira Gandhi sensed threats to India's political integrity. Sikh extremist leader Bhindranwale led a violent movement in Punjab, demanding an independent country called Khalistan. Indira was accused of having helped Bhindranwale's earlier rise to power to curb the Akali Dal in Punjab. But when the situation went out of hand, she sent the army into the holiest precincts of Sikhs, the Golden Temple, to finish off the Khalistan movement. This Operation Blue Star angered the Sikhs, and her own trusted Sikh bodyguards assassinated her in her own New Delhi home on 31 October 1984.

Let history judge her great achievements and her minuses as well.