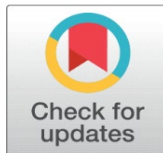


DEMYSTIFYING LEADERSHIP: UNVEILING THE STYLE OF INDIRA GANDHI'S LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

In Indian politics, democratic norms and values always remain unassailable. It is worth mentioning here that citizens have enjoyed their rights and duties without any obstacles since the country's independence. However, the quality of leadership remains an integral fabric of Indian democracy. Hence, India has been experiencing the rule of many robust leaders. Even Indira Gandhi was amongst the leaders who had heard her own voice, not others. She was appointed as the prime minister of India for the periods from 1966 to 1977 and 1980 to 1984. Nonetheless, it gained importance in Indian politics, where female politicians advocated for gender equality and served as the prime minister.

Keywords: Gender, Unveiling, Demystifying, Leadership, Equality

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. LEADERSHIP: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

The concept of leadership is intricate and multifaceted. In today's fast-paced, internationally interconnected world, it has undergone extensive examination over the years and has grown in importance. Despite this, leadership continues to generate intriguing and confusing conversations due to the complexity of the topic. Various academics and researchers have proposed numerous definitions and theories of leadership.

According to Bennis, leadership is the most studied and least understood topic in the social sciences, and never have so many laboured so long to say so little (Bennis, 2009).

Stogdill defines it as 'an influencing process aimed at goal achievement', focusing on leadership as a process directed at influencing a specific group of people to meet a stated objective (Stogdill, 1950).

The question of what leadership is has been a topic of debate among social scientists and academics throughout history. However, it creates a conundrum between the leader, leadership, and the qualities of a leader. Nonetheless, there is a connection between the three. Leadership could be defined as a leader's ability or aptitude that is either directly or indirectly related to the quality. It is a process with a clear mission and vision that aims to accomplish a particular socially

relevant objective. For a deeper understanding of the concept, the writing covers various leadership theories, i.e., the Great Man theory, the Trait theory, the Behavioural theory, and the Situational theory.

The Great Man theory: The Great Man theory thrived around the mid-90s. Although it is challenging to identify the qualities or characteristics of great leaders, everyone accepts that those who possess a distinct vision, extraordinary qualities of decisiveness, and the talent to exercise power are considered great leaders (Carlyle, 1841). This theory was publicised by Thomas Carlyle, a writer, who wrote the book 'On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History'.

The great man theory is based on the qualities of a leader, which are instinctive. In the 19th century, this theory was at its height among social scientists and researchers. According to it, leaders are born, not made or trained. This theory believes that great leaders have some innate qualities that make them distinct from the rest. However, the leaders shape the different pages of history by their inherent qualities, which are naturally generated by birth. Some of the prominent leaders of the world are Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Abraham Lincoln, and Napoleon Bonaparte, whose commemorative leadership signifies different periods of history.

The Trait Theory: The trait theory is one of the prominent theories of leadership. The main goal is to pinpoint the particular traits that outstanding leaders have. Behind the great man theory of leadership lies the trait theory. In the early 20th century, this theory gained traction. According to this theory, leaders possess unique traits that are acquired from birth. They are recognised as successful leaders by their innate characteristics. It mostly concentrates on successes and acts that are based on qualities. One of the prominent social scientists, Ralph Stogdill, states that effective leadership depends on traits (Stogdill, 1950). However, trait theory believes that the leaders who have idiosyncrasies earn some qualities that are a lapse from the rest of the people in society. Most importantly, qualities like highly intensifying mission and vision, a distinct and clear purpose, explorative and innovative ideas, and commanding capabilities.

Behavioural Theory: The theory first appeared in the middle of the 20th century, in part in reaction to the shortcomings of previous trait-based theories that said leaders were born with their skills. The behavioural theory of leadership provides a contrasting perspective to the trait theory. According to this theory, leaders are always made, not born. It believes that becoming an effective leader is not sudden, but it is a process. However, this is a learning process where the learner can acquire knowledge from different dimensions, i.e., observation, exploration, implementation, and discussion (Northouse, 2022). The prime focus of the theory is on how the behaviour of an individual would make them become a leader by acquiring certain qualities.

The previous discussion clearly indicates that there is no specific and distinct theory of leadership capable of defining it properly. Each theory explicates differently about leadership. However, leaders are always special and play a significant role in the country. Like that, Indira Gandhi, the first and only woman prime minister in India, played a crucial role during her period.

2. UNVEILING THE STYLE OF INDIRA GANDHI'S LEADERSHIP

Indira Gandhi, India's first and only woman Prime Minister, remains one of the most iconic yet polarising figures in the nation's post-independence political history. Her tenure stretched across two distinct periods, 1966 to 1977 and 1980 to 1984, each marked by triumphs and failures that shaped India's trajectory as a modern nation. Admired for her decisiveness and ability to command authority, she was equally criticised for her authoritarian style, suppression of dissent, and concentration of power. To unveil the truth of Indira Gandhi's rule, one must navigate a complex landscape of achievements and controversies that continue to influence Indian politics.

This article undertakes a comprehensive examination of her governance, highlighting her political strategies, economic measures, foreign policy decisions, and the darker aspects of her rule, such as the Emergency and Operation Blue Star. By doing so, it attempts to unravel the paradox of a leader hailed as the "Iron Lady of India" yet blamed for undermining the very democratic institutions she represented (Sinha, 2006).

Indira Gandhi's ascension to power was shaped by political calculations within the Congress Party. Initially underestimated and dismissed as a "goongi gudiya" (dumb doll) by senior Congress leaders, she soon proved to be far from a mere puppet. Following Lal Bahadur Shastri's sudden death in 1966, she was chosen as a compromise candidate for Prime Minister, but within a few years, she consolidated power by sidelining the Congress Syndicate and centralising decision-making in her office.

Her populist slogan “Garibi Hatao” (Remove Poverty) during the 1971 general elections won her massive support from the masses and marginalised the party’s old guard (Mehta, 1975). By bypassing traditional political structures and appealing directly to the people, she redefined Indian politics. However, this centralisation of authority eroded internal democracy within the Congress Party and weakened India’s federal political structure, laying the foundation for a personality-centric political culture.

Indira Gandhi’s impact on India’s political system was such that it became unrecognisable and totally different from the Nehru period. Under Jawaharlal Nehru’s style of politics, there was a system of checks and balances between conflicting regional interests and powerful party bosses. The dominant political leaders were accommodated by the federal structure of the Indian Constitution. This gave strength to India to weather the turbulent formative years. The Shastri government also followed the Nehruvian line.

The Indian political system was confronted with the most serious internal crisis during the latter period of Indira Gandhi’s regime. Well-accepted peaceful procedures and peaceful means for resolving internal conflict were shattered. Fragmented political cultures of the Indian political system. The systematic and structural failures became obvious. She had personalised and centralised Indian politics. Indira Gandhi was intolerant of political personalities who showed signs of entering into competition with her. She dismissed non-Congress as chief ministers in the Congress-ruled states.

The structure of the Congress Party underwent a qualitative change. There was enormous centralisation

3. ECONOMIC POLICIES: ACHIEVEMENTS AND LIMITATIONS

Indira Gandhi’s economic policies reflected a socialist orientation, emphasising state control and redistribution. Her government nationalised 14 major commercial banks in 1969, a bold move that democratized access to credit and empowered farmers, small entrepreneurs, and rural communities (Das, 2000). This step contributed to the expansion of rural banking and supported agricultural modernisation. She also nationalised key industries, including coal, steel, copper, and oil, thereby extending state control over strategic sectors. The Green Revolution, initiated in the late 1960s but strongly promoted under her leadership, transformed India from a food-deficient country into a self-sufficient nation. High-yield seeds, modern irrigation, and fertilisers boosted agricultural productivity, especially in Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh. However, critics argue that the Green Revolution widened regional disparities and primarily benefited larger landowners while marginalising small farmers and agricultural labourers.

Despite these gains, her economic model created a heavily bureaucratic system prone to inefficiency and corruption. The “License Raj,” which imposed strict government controls on businesses, stifled entrepreneurship and innovation. While her socialist policies promoted equity in the short term, they also hindered India’s long-term economic liberalisation and global competitiveness.

4. FOREIGN POLICY AND GLOBAL STATURE

Indira Gandhi pursued a pragmatic and assertive foreign policy, positioning India as a leading power in the developing world. Her close alignment with the Soviet Union ensured strategic support, especially in military and defence matters. Her most significant foreign policy success came during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 (Raghavan, 2013). Following Pakistan’s brutal crackdown in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), millions of refugees poured into India. Indira Gandhi sheltered them and mobilised international opinion against Pakistan’s atrocities. Eventually, India intervened militarily, defeating Pakistan in December 1971 and paving the way for the creation of Bangladesh. This victory enhanced India’s regional dominance and elevated its stature globally. In 1974, India conducted its first nuclear test at Pokhran, codenamed “Smiling Buddha.” Though presented as a peaceful nuclear explosion, it demonstrated India’s technological capability and nuclear potential. While this was a landmark achievement for national security, it led to international isolation and sanctions from Western powers.

Her foreign policy also balanced relations with non-aligned nations, though her tilt toward the Soviet Union sometimes contradicted India’s official Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) stance. Nevertheless, her strategic choices reinforced India’s position as a regional power.

4.1. THE EMERGENCY (1975–1977): A DARK CHAPTER IN INDIAN DEMOCRACY

The most controversial episode of Indira Gandhi's rule was the proclamation of the Emergency from June 25, 1975, to March 21, 1977. Triggered by the Allahabad High Court's verdict that invalidated her election on charges of electoral malpractice, she declared a state of Emergency citing "internal disturbances."

During these 21 months:

- Fundamental rights were suspended.
- Censorship of the press was imposed, silencing critical voices.
- Opposition leaders were jailed, including Jayaprakash Narayan, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and Morarji Desai.
- Forced sterilisation campaigns, led by her son Sanjay Gandhi, targeted poor and marginalised communities.
- Slum demolitions in Delhi displaced thousands under the pretext of urban beautification.

While the Emergency provided political stability and some administrative efficiency, it severely undermined democratic institutions and eroded public trust. For many Indians, it remains a period of fear, repression, and authoritarian excess.

The 1977 elections, held under public pressure, resulted in a humiliating defeat for Indira Gandhi and the Congress Party, marking the first time Congress lost power at the national level. The episode highlighted the resilience of Indian democracy but left an indelible stain on her legacy.

4.2. RETURN TO POWER (1980–1984)

Despite her defeat, Indira Gandhi's political comeback in 1980 demonstrated her resilience and ability to connect with the masses. The Janata Party, which had replaced her, soon collapsed due to internal conflicts, paving the way for her return.

Her second tenure, however, was marked by rising political instability, particularly in Punjab. The growing militancy of Khalistani separatists led to escalating violence. In June 1984, she ordered Operation Blue Star, a military operation to flush out militants from the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Although the operation succeeded militarily, it caused immense damage to the temple and deeply hurt Sikh sentiments worldwide.

This decision proved fatal. On October 31, 1984, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, triggering anti-Sikh riots across India in which thousands were killed. Her death marked a tragic end to one of the most dramatic political careers in Indian history.

4.3. LEADERSHIP STYLE: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Indira Gandhi's leadership style was a blend of charisma, decisiveness, and authoritarianism. She embodied the image of a strong, fearless leader who could stand up to both domestic and international challenges. Her ability to connect directly with ordinary citizens through slogans and populist measures made her immensely popular.

However, her centralisation of power, weakening of institutions, and disregard for democratic norms revealed the darker side of her leadership. She often prioritised loyalty over merit, undermined internal democracy within her party, and encouraged a culture of sycophancy.

Her legacy is thus a paradox: she is remembered as both a visionary leader who transformed India's political and economic landscape and an authoritarian who threatened the foundations of democracy.

5. CONCLUSION

Unveiling the truth of Indira Gandhi's rule in India reveals a complex narrative of power, ambition, and contradictions. She was a leader who commanded authority and reshaped Indian politics with bold decisions. Her role in the liberation of Bangladesh, promotion of the Green Revolution, and nuclear achievements brought her admiration, while the Emergency, suppression of dissent, and Operation Blue Star tarnished her image. Indira Gandhi's rule reflects

the duality of democratic politics: the potential for visionary leadership as well as the dangers of excessive centralisation of power. She remains one of the most studied, debated, and controversial leaders in India's history—an enduring symbol of both inspiration and caution.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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