Indira Gandhi's centenary passed in November 2017 with little fuss or ceremony. The absence of any official commemoration and the low-key observance by the party and political dynasty she founded, reflect the parlous state of her twin bequests. Enraptured in every sector within India's great democracy, dynastic succession is a principle in politics that needs vindication by popular endorsement. This in turn requires a form of popular bonding that goes beyond the mundane, certainly no part of a dynastic bequest. Indira Gandhi was well aware of this compulsion, remarking at one point during her years in political wilderness, as she struggled to redeem an image shattered by a 20-month interlude of authoritarian rule, that few had any idea “how tiring it (was) to be a goddess” (Ghose, p 219).

There was an element of wry self-deprecation there, perhaps reserved for foreign correspondents. Before domestic audiences, there were few instances when Indira Gandhi let the mask of authority slip. She realised at some stage that quite apart from its instrumental use in social change, power is its own justification. Requiring promises made to win popular loyalty then became an effort at pleasing all, often by pandering to elemental political urges. In a milieu of fragmented civic solidarities, where caste and communal loyalties loomed large in every citizen’s public persona, this was often a zero-sum game. Promises made in one quarter were seen potentially to diminish entitlements in another. It was a political strategy predisposed to fail, and in failure lay the seeds of bitter resentments and brutal violence.

**Final Legacy**

Sagarika Ghose opens *Indira: India’s Most Powerful Prime Minister* with a remiscence of the day a nation in disbelief learnt of Indira Gandhi’s assassination by two policemen in her security detail. Anguish mingled with cries of vengeance against a religious faith held collectively, responsible for the murder. Days of brutality followed, when India’s capital city, epicentre of the dreams of modernity that Indira Gandhi and her father had nurtured, became a killing field. A “pogrom tore through Delhi,” says Ghose, as “vengeance reared a cobra-like head.” It was, Ghose goes on to say, “one of the darkest chapters in the history of India’s police, [as] law enforcers looked away [and] in many instances, were complicit in the violence” (p 6). That violent institutional rupture, when instruments of the law became agents of rampaging lawlessness, was in Ghose’s rueful recollection, the final legacy of Indira Gandhi’s leadership. She inherited a political world view from a great father, through years spent as his loyal understudy. But the moment she fell to the assassins’ bullets it seemed the legacy she left was of “a democracy assailed by violent fundamentalism of many hues” (Ghose, p 10).

Circumstances compel Ghose to go over territory already much traversed, rehashing facts of a life well-written about. She introduces an element of novelty in the shape of interrogatory letters, where she seeks possible destinations the country may have reached on roads not taken. In the first of these letters that keep recurring through the book, Ghose identifies as Indira Gandhi’s significant failure, her muddying of “the secular waters.” Though aware of the “urgent daily need for secularism,” she failed “to create a living, breathing secularism among the people” (Ghose, p 10).

Clearly, given this record of failure with which she begins, Ghose needs to justify the characterisation of her subject as “India’s most powerful prime minister.” There is a substantial narration, for instance, of Indira Gandhi’s resentment early in her first term, against the many fetters placed on her power. She found ways to cut through these restraints, but with never more than transient success. Despite that aura she always cultivated, her politics was as much about compromise as the exercise of power. It clearly takes a greater effort at explanation to make the epithet of “most powerful” stick to a political career that was so complex.

A deeper problem with Ghose’s characterisation is that it elides the sources from which Indira Gandhi drew her power during each distinct phase of her career. Indira Gandhi’s first significant political assignment was as Congress president for a brief but tumultuous term.1 The Communist Party of India (CPI) had won Kerala’s first state legislative assembly election and had introduced a wide-ranging amnesty for political prisoners held since the civil unrest of the early independence years. This caused some discontent, but then came a raft of legislation in sectors such as land reforms and education, where older interest groups—mostly of a communal stripe in Kerala’s plural religious landscape—were strongly entrenched. Nehru found nothing objectionable in these reforms and may in fact have envied the CPI government for the ease with which it got the legislative measures enacted (Jeffrey 1991).

Gandhi, though, went along eagerly with protests that broke out from communal lobbies and propertied sections...
that could not bear the thought of their traditional hegemonies being undermined. Nehru was ambivalent, and as Ghose records, Indira Gandhi’s husband Feroze Gandhi—then an influential member of Parliament from Raebareli in Uttar Pradesh—expressed very strong reservations. Greatly embittered at his failure to prevent the summary dismissal of elements of the Congress old guard, such as Home Minister Govind Ballabh Pant were insistent on the dismissal of since it was made out to be,” hersif. “My part,” she said, “was not as necessary in later years to invent an alibi for away in a rage and perhaps found it necessary in later years to invent an alibi for herself. “My part,” she said, “was not as important as it was made out to be,” since elements of the Congress old guard, such as Home Minister Govind Ballabh Pant were insistent on the dismissal of the Kerala government (Ghose, p 70).

Could this be put down as the first instance when Indira Gandhi allowed a distrust of dissent, and a jealousy of other agents of social change, to thwart a valuable reform initiative? Jeffreys (1991) has identified the significance of Kerala in being the only “significant drama” in which both Nehru and Indira Gandhi played out “key official roles.” In the end, Jeffrey concludes, “it was she who had her way; he, indeed, seemed to have no will in the matter at all.”

Indira Gandhi had occasion as Prime Minister to call upon the communists to keep herself afloat, but that was far in the future and ironically it was to earn herself a reprieve from captivity by the Congress old guard. This informal “syndicate” cast her in the role of the pliable young woman who brought them a political bonus as legatee of Nehru’s aura. It was not a happy time for her, when she also had to deal with the condescension of a senior and rather resentment cabinet colleague, Morarji Desai.

Here again is a phase of Indira Gandhi’s prime ministerial tenure that belies the “most powerful tag.” Nehru too had a reason to resent the right wing within the Congress in the early years of India’s independence, but moved decisively within a year to settle matters. He saw Purushottam Das Tandon as an unreconstructed reactionary, and a votary of the imposition of Hindi on unwilling people, who had inflamed sentiments in the tense aftermath of partition with calls for vengeance against Pakistan. When the Congress went ahead and elected Tandon as party president in 1950, Nehru made no secret of his disappointment. He was clear about the principles at stake and was unafraid about airing them in public. Two weeks after Tandon’s election, he issued a statement deploiring the invasion of “the spirit of communalism and revivalism” into the Congress (Guha 2007: 129–30).

Vallabhbhai Patel, Nehru’s most influential rival and the main prop of the right wing, passed away a little afterwards. When kindred spirits in the socialist wing of the Congress—dismayed at its rightward turn—parted company, Nehru forced a showdown with Tandon and secured his resignation. He then took over as party president and held the position for three years, before entrusting it to the reliable and inconspicuous U N Dhebar for five years.

Communal Resurgence

Indira Gandhi faced a rather more determined opposition when she assumed the prime ministership in 1966. If Nehru’s last years were overshadowed by the military debacle against China, his last months were traumatic due to a savage eruption of communal violence. Incapacitated by a stroke early in this cycle of violence, Nehru may have been spared the bad news for several days as he recovered. As the violence escalated and spread, press reports attributed it to Nehru’s inability to “exercise his old authority since he suffered [the] stroke” (New York Times 1964).

After a relative cooling off in 1965, the communal temperature began to rise once again the following year. In October 1966, a procession demanding a nationwide ban on cow slaughter triggered a riotous situation in Washim in Maharashtra, leading to police firing in which 11 were killed. The cabinet discussed the matter and Home Minister Gulzarilal Nanda recommended that all states introduce a ban on their own initiative. Nanda’s unseemly proximity with the Bharat Sevak Samaj (BSS), a freshly confected organisation of militant monks and mendicants, was now an open secret. Early in November 1966, a violent BSS mob marched on Parliament, entered the premises and destroyed assets on a large scale. It then went on a rampage through neighbouring streets, setting fire, among other things, to the residence of Congress President K Kamaraj. By that evening, as Guha (2007: 414) records, “the army was patrolling the streets, for the first time since the dark days of 1947.”

In Ghose’s narration, these incidents and the disturbed communal background merit less attention than the economic crisis Indira Gandhi faced as she entered office. Two successive monsoon failures had caused acute agrarian distress and urban unrest. Aid from abroad was conditional on a painful devaluation of the rupee, which Indira Gandhi in a typically pragmatic vein, acceded to. Elements within her party, including Nehru’s closest confidant V K Krishna Menon, were outraged, and castigated her for the sacrifice of national pride. To redeem herself, she then swung to the other extreme with a blistering attack on the United States’ imperial arrogance, jeopardising the food aid she had worked hard to secure.

Ghose infers that the “storm over devaluation” convinced Indira Gandhi that the political game was played on the power of populist acclaim. That then becomes a convenient peg on which to hang an account of Indira Gandhi’s subsequent political course.

There seems to be a rather gross elision here of the real and potentially violent consequences of the Congress party’s regression into a communal posture after Nehru’s death. Nehru was able to maintain peace for almost his entire tenure of 17 years, but Indira Gandhi entered office threatened by the prospect of a violent rupture. Additionally, the members of the syndicate did not seem greatly averse to seeking political mileage from stoking the fires of communal animosity.

In a comment in January 1967, the Economic & Political Weekly noted some of the ironies of the situation arising from the agitation over cow slaughter, stating:
The Prime Minister may say that the agita-
tion for a ban on cow-slaughter is not an
election issue but [Congress strongman
and syndicate member] S K Patil, obviously
thinks otherwise. At a press conference in
Bombay ... he left no one in any doubt that as
a protector of the cow he yielded to none ... It
deserves to be noted that for the first time
perhaps Patil has found it necessary to call
a press conference to propagate his candida-
ture for the Lok Sabha from the South Bom-
bay constituency, which has been considered
as his pocket borough ... But what was most
significant were the views [which] seem to
have been entirely aimed at projecting himself
as a champion of the cow, a good Hindu and
a staunch Maharashtrian. (EPW 1967)

It was also significant that Patil's op-
ponent in the imminent general elec-
tions was the fiery socialist trade union-
ist George Fernandes, a Christian from
Mangalore. In the event, Patil's appeal
to the true spirit of the Maharashtrian
Hindu did him little good. He was one
among a number of Congress stalwarts
defeated in 1967. Atulya Ghosh in West
Bengal and K Kamaraj in Madras were
other syndicate men to go down in that
election, when the Congress coalition
that Nehru had constructed fragmented
and fell apart.

The compelling need for reconstruc-
tion was the occasion for widening di-
vergences in perception and in strategic
perspectives. It may seem a stretch to
say that a parting of ways was inevita-
ble, though there is perhaps greater fal-
lacy in reading the Congress split of
1969 and Indira Gandhi's subsequent
leftward course as personal idiosyncra-
sy, or clever political calculation. Ghose
barely seems able to conceal her re-
proach in the plain she pens to her sub-
ject on this sequence of events:

When it came to your own survival did de-
mocracy within the party simply not mat-
ter to you? If you had handled the situation
better and attempted greater dialogue and
consultation perhaps your conflict with the
Syndicate would not have become so big
and taken the heavy toll it ultimately did.
(Ghose, p 113)

These are possibilities that need to be
conceded, though the counterfactual is as
dubious a device of explanation as the arg-
ument of historical inevitability. The haz-
ards inherent in the right-wing line were
very real and not—as when Nehru took
on the challenge from Tandon—abstract
possibilities. Challenges on the economic
front may have abated somewhat since
the grim early days of Indira Gandhi's
accession to the prime ministership, but
communal violence had spiralled dan-
gerously out of control.Ahmedabad and
other parts of Gujarat witnessed the
country's worst riots since partition in
1969, just weeks before the nationwide
observance of Mahatma Gandhi's cente-
nary. And in May 1970, the powerloom
town of Bhiwandi in Maharashtra was
gutted by a savage orgy of violence. On
both occasions Indira Gandhi and her
associates called out majoritarian ag-
gression and affirmed their solidarity
with the minority faith, by far the great-
er sufferer of violence.

In the years that followed, Indira Gan-
dhi tackled firmly towards a leftward
course, and succeeded in pulling the
Congress back from the state of infirm
ideological commitment it had fallen
into. This healed some of the dangerous
fissures that had emerged through the
political uncertainty and turbulence of
the 1960s. Indira Gandhi's populist elec-
tion campaign for the 1971 general elec-
tions gave large numbers of people a
reason to renew hope.

Changing Rhetoric
Indira Gandhi's own sense of commit-
tment to the urgency of restoring peace
on the communal front is evident in
India's Indira: A Centennial Tribute, the
collection of speeches edited by Anand
Sharma. In May 1970, just days after the
Bhiwandi riots, Indira Gandhi spoke at a
Delhi venue on the theme of “fighting
communalism.” Democracy, she said,
was a choice that the country made at
independence, not “because it is the
quickest path [but] because it is the path
which helps the people to grow to politi-
cal maturity.” Yet the situation then rep-
resented a danger in that the majority in
some places were trying to “change cer-
tain minorities.” Democracy, she said,
does mean that you vote, you express your
view and ultimately you accept what the
larger number of people want. But this can-
not mean that there should be reglementa-
tion of any kind. This does not mean that
only one group of people, even if they are in
larger number, has the right to say that the
others should change and conform to their
way of thinking. (Sharma, p 56)

Moving the story forward a decade—
not beyond Indira Gandhi's moment of tri-
ung or the mid-1970s civil unrest,
which prompted her to suspend the Con-
stitution in a recklessly contrived “Emer-
gency”—these words stand in sharp
contrast to the vague, dissembling rhet-
oric she adopted from 1980 onwards.
Back in power after a spell in the wil-
derness, she faced another alarming
upward spiral of communal violence.
When violent riots broke out in Mor-
adabad in 1980, soon after her second
coming, Indira Gandhi showed a curi-
ous ambivalence and a reluctance to
identify the perpetrators and the victims,
instead blaming the disturbances on un-
named “foreign forces” (Ghose, p 247).

It was a shift in political strategy pres-
aged by her assumption of office in 1980.
In 1966 and all subsequent occasions till
1971, she had taken her oath of office
with the “solemn affirmation” of her
commitment to the Indian Constitution.
In 1980, she took her oath “in the name
of god,” picked an astrologically propi-
tious time and performed a slew of ritu-
als to placate newly discovered divine
overseers of her destiny.

Indira Gandhi remained quiescent
through the shameful record of commu-
nal violence since her return to power in
1980.3 When the veteran Congressman
Shah Nawaz Khan warned her of a pro-
gramme of civil disobedience, Indira
Gandhi's reply was telling: “We must
remember,” she said, “that no minority
can survive if their neighbours of the
majority are irritated.” The Rashtriya
Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) mouthpiece,
Organiser, quoted this approvingly, add-
ing that “nobody need quarrel with Mrs
Gandhi if she says or does something
right.”

In the June 1983 elections to the Jam-
mu and Kashmir assembly, Indira Gan-
dhi put her strategy of competitive com-
munalism to test in what seemed the
perfect laboratory. In the Kashmir
Valley, she projected herself as the cham-
pion of rapprochement with Pakistan,
while in Jammu she portrayed herself as
the saviour of Hindus. In October 1983,
she inaugurated the Bharat Mata Mandir built by the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) at Haridwar. Faced with public criticism, her trusted lieutenant C M Stephen sprung to her defence with the claim that “the wavelength of Hindu culture and Congress culture is the same.”

Ghose tells the story with a fair degree of detail, though without a larger perspective. Perhaps because she gets wrapped up in her subject’s personality, to the degree that factual narrative is interspersed with deeply personal mis-sives, Ghose may have overlooked wider historical forces and forgotten the old maxim that “men [or in this case women] make history; but not in circumstances of their choosing.”

**Economic Populism?**

To take the narrative back, the nationalisation of a number of privately owned banks in 1969 is regarded as one of the main initiatives of Indira Gandhi’s effort at regaining the political initiative that was lost through the crises of the mid-decade. Ghose describes the move as politically “bold, calculated and strategic,” even if the “economics was to take a toll on India’s emergence as a liberal economy.” This description carries the clear implication that the liberal doctrine India embraced—hesitantly in the 1980s and with greater conviction the following decade—was in some senses the natural destination that Indira Gandhi should have set course towards, back in the late 1960s.

Supportive evidence for the assessment that bank nationalisation was mere populism is offered from the journalist and economic commentator Swaminathan Aiyar, using the sole metric of the poverty ratio. Ostensibly, the stubborn refusal of this ratio to fall, between 1947 and 1983, lays bare “the fraudulent intent and outcome of Indira Gandhi’s Garibi Hatao policies, spearheaded by bank nationalisation” (Ghose, p 109).

This assessment has to be pitched against that offered by Sharma even if it comes with admittedly hagiographic intent. “Bank nationalisation,” he says in his introduction, largely owned by them. The nation’s savings became available to the people. Bank branches spread to the villages and financial services were extended to rural India. The farmers and the poor gained access to bank credit for the first time. The weavers and artisans too were drawn into the mainstream of economy, where small and medium enterprises were encouraged through priority lending by banks. (Sharma, p 31)

C Rangarajan (2017), the economist and banker who has served under regimes of every political stripe, offers a more neutral assessment, pointing out how nationalisation led to “a spectacular spread of banking.” Indeed, all objective assessments have shown that nationalisation did contribute to a spurt in bank credits to neglected strata and regions of the country. That this did not contribute to economic growth could be a pointer to the measure’s deficiencies; and if the outcome for the health of the financial system was not salutary, the state of the banking system today, after a quarter century of liberalisation, is a rather poor testimonial for the policy in which Ghose reposes faith.

The poverty ratio is again a thin peg on which to hang a sweeping judgment about Indira Gandhi’s economic populism. Long-term comparisons using the measure are bedevilled by changes in methodology and coverage, and even for the period prior to 1983, the picture is not one of clear stagnation in the battle against poverty. A rather exhaustive study distinguishing between the impact on poverty of two different aspects of economic change, growth and redistribution, finds that “it is not until the mid-1970s that we witness the beginnings of a trend decline in poverty relative to the levels observed for 1951–55.” The growth aspect was clearly more important when one of the indexes of poverty is considered, “accounting for nearly 87 percent of the decline by 1993–94.” Redistribution policies also tended to be “favourable to the poor,” though “its contribution to the overall decline was quantitatively small.” That is where the complexities begin: in terms of two other indexes, redistribution accounted for one-third and two-fifths of the decline in poverty. However, most of the “favourable impact of redistribution was realised early on … during the early-to-mid-1960s” (Datt 1998).

The purpose of this detour into an abstruse area of economics is simply this: technical parameters such as the poverty ratio are useless in explaining complex political phenomena. The statistics Ghose cites do not by any means point towards the futility of the redistributive effort, but towards the tenacity with which certain sections within the Indian polity fought against it. Every political party had its own position in these battles over how the constitutional mandate on social justice was to be operationalised. The judiciary was an active player, striking down Nehru’s early legislative initiatives in two realms of particular concern, land redistribution and affirmative action. The obduracy of the judiciary in upholding the fundamental rights in a very narrow sense, where they related to inherited privileges and property, led to Nehru’s rather rueful observation as he introduced the first constitutional amendment bill in 1951: “Somehow, this magnificent constitution that we have framed was later kidnapped and purloined by the lawyers” (Venkatesan 2007).

The first amendment was adopted with the specific intent to increase the possibilities of autonomous action by the executive and minimise judicial encumbrances. Yet, this did end the conflict, only to its mutation and intensification. In the Golaknath case settled in 1967, the Supreme Court decided, with a very narrow focus on property, that no constitutional amendment could abridge the fundamental rights. Then came a series of adverse rulings premised upon a view of property as an immutable right, cutting at the root of Indira Gandhi’s most ambitious measures, such as bank nationalisation and the abolition of the lifelong taxpayer subsidy granted to princes for their accession to the Indian union in 1947. A final blow came in 1973 when the Supreme Court ruled in a judgment decided by one vote in an eleven-member bench, but involving six concurrent judgments on behalf of the majority, that Parliament could not amend the constitution in its “basic structure.”

The doctrine of the “basic structure” has since been diversely interpreted, but...
it was a dispute over the right to property that triggered this line of reflection. A political establishment restless for change found this philosophical posture unduly obstructive. Indira Gandhi’s reasons were set down in a speech delivered in 1980, which former vice president Hamid Ansari quotes at length in his contribution to the Anand Sharma volume. “A major ideological battle has been raging in our country,” states Gandhi, between those who swear only by the Fundamental Rights chapter of our Constitution and those who hold that legislation should strive to fulfil the hopes held out in the Directive Principles chapter. I should like to add that the common man’s faith in democracy in our country depends in large measure upon the manner and speed with which we can solve his economic problems. To him, the Constitution should be a charter for change rather than a bulwark of the status quo. (Sharma, p 185)

There was in short a complex struggle underway on the terms in which the constitutional mandate should be implemented through representative democracy. B R Ambedkar, the Constitution’s main architect, had a view that was rather contrary to the Supreme Court’s fundamentalist interpretation. In his memorable valedictory address to the Constituent Assembly on 25 November 1949, Ambedkar spoke of the Constitution as a document representing the “views of the present generation.” Certain critiques had been emanating from socialist quarters about its limitations. “The Socialists want two things,” Ambedkar said:

The first thing they want is that if they come in power, the Constitution must give them the freedom to nationalise or socialise all private property without payment of compensation. The second thing that the Socialists want is that the Fundamental Rights mentioned in the Constitution must be absolute and without any limitations. (Parliament of India 1949)

Neither proposition was without merit, but Ambedkar counselled patience while invoking the us constitutional author Thomas Jefferson. “Each generation” he said quoting Jefferson, could be considered “a distinct nation, with a right, by the will of the majority to bind themselves.” However, this right did not extend to the right to “bind the succeeding generation” of the nation, any more than it did to “the inhabitants of another country.”

The right to property went through six different amendments since the adoption of the Constitution and every change was put through minute judicial scrutiny. The 44th amendment enacted in 1978, when Indira Gandhi was in the political wilderness, was the last word, introduced by law minister Shanti Bhushan with the explanation that removing property from the fundamental rights chapter and placing it under “contracts” would cause little harm. The “vast majority” of Indians, he said, owned no property and to “equate the right to property to more important rights” had resulted in them not being able to enjoy “the other fundamental rights” (Austin 2003).

Ghose obliterates much of this complex history with her view of the pre-1980s economic policy as a swamp of error. She bemoans Indira Gandhi’s failure, even when she held absolute power during the Emergency, to “push for a growth-oriented economic structure.” She expresses a similar grievance with the 44th amendment, in which she sees not a complex history of debates over distributive justice, but merely the failure of the Janata Party which succeeded the Emergency regime, to escape from the cocoon of socialist group-think.

In her second avatar in the 1980s, Indira Gandhi felt little sense of urgency in tackling these thorny questions. Jawaharlal Nehru’s imperious daughter had decided that if it was not possible to beat them, it was just as well to join those of property and privilege. She remained avid in terms of her micromanagement of the internal politics of the Congress, but far from seeking to overwhelm the forces of authoritarianism in civil society, her effort since then was to harmonise the sources of her own power with the traditional centres of authority in society.

**Environmental Inclination**

In *Indira Gandhi: A Life in Nature*, former union environment minister Jairam Ramesh sets out to write what he describes as an “unconventional biography” that deals with Indira Gandhi in “only one aspect of her personality and her record in office.” His justification is simply that “a naturalist is who Indira Gandhi really was, who she thought she was.” Even when she was mired in politics, the real person was someone “who loved the mountains, cared deeply for wildlife, was passionate about birds, stones, trees and forests, and was worried deeply about the environmental consequences of urbanisation and industrialisation” (Ramesh, p 4).

Ramesh mines deeply into his subject’s correspondence over the years to uncover a rich vein of reflection on nature, even in times of personal and political worries. Her first visits to the hills were to accompany an ailing mother seeking a cure, and the mountains remained a passion all her life. An early influence was her mother’s younger brother, Kailas Nath Kaul, a student of the legendary botanical scientist Birbal Sahni.

Ramesh’s narration is organised around a linear frame, going from one year to the next and excavating Indira Gandhi’s writings, speeches and deeds for all they reveal about her concern for the environment. It was in 1969 in Ramesh’s telling that she came into her own, both as a political leader and as one whose love...
for nature would be a powerful influence on policy. Alerted to the alarming decimation of India’s wildlife, that year she ordered the reconstitution of the body tasked with its protection. The first subsequent meeting of the Indian Board for Wildlife set down ambitious targets for cataloguing all relevant plant and animal species, and identifying which among them required attention. That this occurred 11 days before she announced her decision (much more momentous in other narratives) to nationalise a number of banks, shows in Ramesh’s estimation, a deep sensitivity that goes well beyond the norm for politicians.

Project Tiger was launched under her watch, to halt and reverse the alarming deterioration in the numbers of the great animal. A number of bird parks were likewise notified as protected sanctuaries, an enterprise in which she would frequently seek the advice and assistance of the renowned ornithologist Salim Ali. In the early 1970s, reflecting the growing global awareness that human settlements and the environment were “two sides of the same coin,” she wrote to the chief minister of Maharashtra, arguing that his intention to develop the Backbay area in Bombay through extensive reclamation would be disastrous. As against this favoured scheme of local politicians and the real estate lobby, she argued the case for the twin city project, involving the development of New Bombay through bridging the creek separating Bombay from the mainland. “We simply cannot afford mass social discontent arising out of urban chaos,” she wrote (Ramesh, p 147).

Ramesh’s survey of the Indira Gandhi archives is thorough and conscientious, though organising the wealth of material that he has uncovered into a coherent narrative that avoids the hazard of hagiographic excess would be difficult, considering the absence of any other references or source material. There are ample suggestions though, that a person portrayed as obsessively political—driven by the urge to power—had an entirely different side to her, with ample time and attention for less tangible aspects of human existence.

In March 1977, the day votes were being counted in national elections that would result in her unceremonious ejection from power, she is seen writing to the chief minister of Assam, warning that the clear-felling of trees for promoting monocultures would have “disastrous effects” for his state, as well as West Bengal and Bangladesh. Two big dam projects conceived in the late 1970s are widely believed to have triggered the modern-day environmental movement in India. In both these, Indira Gandhi’s interventions were frequent and nuanced. The final outcome of her interventions may have been skewed in particular instances by political calculations, a factor that Ramesh perhaps tips-toes around delicately. Her commitment though is evident from the message sent out on World Environment Day, 5 June 1984, urging a “massive effort … to make barren lands, denuded hillsides and eroded water sheds come alive with trees and plants.” Operation Bluestar was just beginning in Amritsar and the country remained riveted on the army action to clear Sikhism’s holiest shrine of terrorist occupants. She evidently had time in the midst of all her other tensions, to dilate upon her most passionately held commitment to the environment.

Perhaps Indira Gandhi’s most eloquent testament was her speech to the World Conference on the Environment in Stockholm in 1972. Aside from the Prime Minister of the host nation, she was the only other head of government to attend. Media reports about the speech have remained sketchy and the notes that Ramesh discovered from the archives of Indira Gandhi’s principal secretary at the time, P N Haksar—a reliable adviser in every matter from bank nationalisation to Bangladesh and the environment—suggest that he had a major hand in drafting the speech. Certain flourishes, though, seem to have been added by an unknown author.

Whoever deserves the ultimate credit, the speech was in 2014 hailed as a major landmark in environmental awareness by a columnist for the Guardian. It touched upon a range of themes, each of which resonated with particular constituencies. Those focused on development found that the emphasis on poverty as the biggest polluter reflected exactly how they felt. Those concerned with peace took courage from the robust denunciation of war. Finally, Indira Gandhi also delivered a stinging rebuke to those who spoke of population as a threat. “Countries with a small fraction of the world’s population,” she said, “consumed the bulk of natural resources.”

One observer who took all the wrong cues from the speech was Norman Borlaug, whose contribution to India’s so-called “green revolution” is widely acknowledged. In an excited letter written shortly afterwards, Borlaug congratulated Indira Gandhi on her speech and sharply deprecated what he called the “eco-maniacs” who had begun a campaign against chemical pesticides and fertilisers on grounds of their supposed harmful environmental impact. In a measured reply, Indira Gandhi cautioned the Nobel laureate agro-scientist against “sweeping generalisations,” stating further, that India remained interested in the world debate on the use of persistent pesticides … We are deeply concerned at the erosion of natural resources and the encroachment on natural beauty that is taking place at such a tremendous rate all over the world. … I hope the scientific community, of which you are a leader, will develop integrated methods ... to raise crop yields and fight insect and pest menaces with minimum damage to nature’s balance. (Ramesh, p 135)

**Beyond Politics**

Perhaps, Indira Gandhi was a political figure with the right instincts, but without the ability to institutionalise these in a complex social milieu. In the three decades since her death, the environmental crisis has by no means abated. The productionist logic of the green revolution remains untempered, with all its attendant ecological harm. Water stresses have multiplied because of resource-intensive cultivation and erratic rainfall. An enlightened urban policy remains a distant prospect, with all India’s major cities continuing to
expand beyond their feasible carrying capacities.

Ramesh’s book is a reminder that there was a time, not very far back, when the country’s political leadership could take time off from urgent preoccupations of winning and retaining power, to attend to intangible aspects of making the world a better place for all. But, the practical benefits of that enlightened leadership remain elusive for most, as political interests have merged with business and finance to create a power conglomerate that rolls over all who stand in its way. Indira Gandhi’s life as it emerges from various narratives in her centenary year, is a reminder that another world was possible. It also is simultaneously a reminder of the reasons why that possibility has been receding for most people in the country and, indeed, the planet.

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NOTES
1. She was briefly imprisoned during the Quit India movement and campaigned for her father and her husband Feroze Gandhi in the 1952 and 1957 general elections to the Lok Sabha, but held no formal position in any political body until she succeeded U N Dhebar as Congress president at a special session of the party in 1959.
2. These events have been well documented by Guha (2007: 370–80) among others. In early January 1964, disturbances that began in the Kashmir Valley after the disappearance of a holy relic from Srinagar’s Hazratbal mosque, set off a wave of revenge attacks on people of the Hindu faith in distant Dhaka, in what was then East Pakistan. As a tide of refugees crossed into India, the contagion of violence spread, targeting people of the Muslim faith in Calcutta. Subsequently, the riots spread to various other cities in the east, closely tracking the movement of partition refugees, whose resettlement was moved up as a high priority item following the violence in Calcutta.
3. Ghose and all the other books referred to here, only sporadically catalogue these incidents. The following narration of the communal incidents and what it suggested of Indira Gandhi’s newly transformed political persona, draws much from Muralidharan (2000).
4. A version has been published in Sharma and Ghose also provides detailed extracts, though Indira Gandhi is known to have added sections to the text just prior to delivery.

REFERENCES

[All URLs were accessed in December 2017.]