

The journey of a noble soul

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He was sent to London in 1961 to study his A-levels. In 1962, he was offered a place at Trinity College, Cambridge, to study engineering. Rajiv stayed at Cambridge until 1965. In 1966, he was offered and took up a place at Imperial College London, working for Indian Airlines as a professional pilot while his



mother became Prime Minister in 1966. He exhibited no interest in politics and did not live regularly with his mother in Delhi at the Prime Minister's residence. In 1970, his wife gave birth to their first child Rahul Gandhi, and in 1972, to Priyanka Gandhi, their second. Even as Rajiv remained aloof from politics, his younger brother Sanjay became a close advisor to their mother.

Following his younger brother's death in 1980, Gandhi was pressured by Indian National Congress party politicians and his mother to enter politics. He and his wife were both opposed to the idea, and he even publicly stated that he would not contest for his brother's seat. Nevertheless, he eventually announced his candidacy for Parliament. His entry was criticised by many in the press, public and opposition political parties. Rajiv also became member of the Asian Games Organizing Committee in 1982 with his close friend and then sports Minister Sardar Buta Singh as president of the committee. He fought his first election from Amethi Lok Sabha seat. In this by-election, he defeated Lok Dal leader Sharad Yadav, in February 1981, Rajiv ji became an important political advisor to his mother. It was widely perceived that Indira Gandhi was grooming Rajiv for the prime minister's job, and he soon became the president of the Youth Congress the Congress party's youth wing. Rajiv Gandhi was in West Bengal when Indira Gandhi was assassinated on 31 October 1984 by two of her bodyguards. Senior Congress Leader and then union minister Sardar Buta Singh, as well as President Zail Singh pressed Rajiv to become India's Prime Minister, within hours of his mother's assassination by two of her bodyguards. Soon after assuming office, Rajiv asked President Zail Singh to dissolve Parliament and hold fresh elections, as the Lok Sabha completed its five-year term. Rajiv Gandhi also officially became the President of the Congress party. The Congress party won a landslide victory with the largest majority in history of Indian Parliament giving Gandhi absolute control of government. He also benefited from his youth and a general perception of being free of a background in corrupt politics. He increased government support for science and technology and associated industries, and reduced import quotas, taxes and tariffs on technology-based industries, especially computers, airlines, defence and telecommunications. In 1986, he announced a National Policy on Education to modernise and expand higher education programs across India. He founded the Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya System in 1986 which is a Central government based institution that concentrates on the upliftment of the rural section of the society providing them free residential education from 6th till 12 grade. His efforts created MTNL in 1986, and his public call offices, better known as PCOs, helped spread telephones in rural areas. He introduced measures significantly reducing the License Raj, in post-1990 period, allowing businesses and individuals to purchase capital, consumer goods and import without bureaucratic restrictions. Rajiv Gandhi began leading in a direction significantly different from his mother's socialism. He improved bilateral relations with the United States long strained owing to Indira's socialism and friendship with the USSR and expanded economic and scientific cooperation. During his state visit to the Soviet Union he met with Premier Nikolai Tikhonov, Andrey Gromyko of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mikhail Gorbachev. Rajiv authorised an extensive police and army campaign to contain terrorism in Punjab. A state of martial law existed in the Punjab state, and civil liberties, commerce and tourism were greatly disrupted. There are many accusations of human rights violations by police officials as well as by the militants during this period. It is alleged that even as the situation in Punjab came under control, the Indian government was offering arms and training to the LTTE rebels fighting the government of Sri Lanka. The Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord was signed by Rajiv Gandhi and the Sri Lankan President J. R. Jayewardene, in Colombo on 29 July 1987. The very next day, on 30 July 1987, Rajiv Gandhi was assaulted on the head with a rifle butt by a young Sinhalese naval cadet named Vijayamunige Rohana de Silva, while receiving the honour guard. The intended assault on the back of Rajiv Gandhi's head glanced off his shoulder and it was captured in news crew photographs and video. With his speech while addressing the Joint Session of the US Congress and India, he said, "India is an old country, but a young nation; and like the young everywhere, we are impatient. I am young and I too have a dream. I dream of an India, strong, independent, self-reliant and in the forefront of the front ranks of the nations of the world in the service of mankind." Bofors scandal Rajiv Gandhi's finance minister, V. P. Singh, uncovered compromising details about government and political corruption, to the consternation of Congress leaders. Transferred to the Defence ministry, Singh uncovered what

became known as the Bofors scandal, involving tens of millions of dollars concerned alleged payoffs by the Swedish Bofors arms company through Italian businessman and Gandhi family associate Ottavio Quattrocchi, in return for Indian contracts. Upon the uncovering of the scandal, Singh was dismissed from office, and later from Congress membership. Rajiv Gandhi himself was later personally implicated in the scandal when the investigation was continued by Narasimhan Ram and Chitra Subramaniam of The Hindu newspaper. This shattered his image as an honest politician; he was posthumously cleared over this allegation in 2004. Opposition parties united under Singh to form the Janata Dal coalition. In the 1989 election, the Congress suffered a major setback. With the support of communists and the Bharatiya Janata Party, Singh and his Janata Dal formed a government. Rajiv Gandhi became the Leader of the Opposition, while remaining Congress president. While some believe that Rajiv and Congress leaders influenced the collapse of V. P. Singh's government in October 1990 by promising support to Chandra Shekhar, a high-ranking leader in the Janata Dal, sufficient internal contradictions existed, within the ruling coalition, especially over the controversial reservation issue, to cause a fall of government. Rajiv's Congress offered outside support briefly to Chandra Sekhar, who became Prime Minister. They withdrew their support in 1991, and fresh elections were announced. Assassination

Rajiv Gandhi's last public meeting was at Sriperumbudur on 21 May 1991, in a village approximately 30 miles from Chennai, Tamil Nadu, where he was assassinated while campaigning for the Sriperumbudur Lok Sabha Congress candidate. The assassination was carried out by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). At 10:21 pm, a woman (later identified as Thenmozhi Rajaratnam) approached Rajiv Gandhi in a public meeting and greeted him. She then bent down to touch his feet (an expression of respect among Indians) and detonated a belt laden with 700 grams of RDX explosives tucked under her dress. The explosion killed Rajiv Gandhi, his assassin and at least 14 other people. The assassination was caught on film through the lens of a local photographer, whose camera and film were found at the site. The cameraman himself died in the blast but the camera remained intact. Rajiv Gandhi's mutilated body was airlifted to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi for post-mortem, reconstruction and embalming. A state funeral was held for Rajiv Gandhi on 24 May 1991. His funeral was telecast live nationally and internationally, and was attended by dignitaries from over 60 countries. He was cremated on the banks of the river Yamuna, near the samadhis of his mother, brother, grandfather. The Rajiv Gandhi Memorial was built at the site recently and is one of the major tourist attractions of the small industrial town. The Supreme Court judgement, by Judge Thomas, confirmed that the killing was carried out due to personal animosity of the LTTE chief Prabhakaran towards Mr Rajiv Gandhi arising out of his sending the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to Sri Lanka and the alleged IPKF atrocities against Sri Lankan Tamils. The Rajiv Gandhi administration had already antagonised other Tamil militant organisations like PLOTE for reversing the military coup in Maldives back in 1988.

The judgment further cites the death of Thileepan in a hunger strike and the suicide by 12 LTTE cadres in a vessel in Oct 1987. In the Jain Commission report, various people and agencies are named as suspected of having been involved in the murder of Rajiv Gandhi. Among them, the cleric Chandraswami was suspected of involvement, including financing the assassination. Arrested on June 14, 1991, she was sentenced to death, along with 25 others, by a special court here on January 28, 1998. However, the SC confirmed death only on four of the convicts, including Nalini, on May 11, 1999. S Nalini Sriharan is the lone surviving member of the five-member squad behind the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi and is serving life imprisonment. Nalini, who was a close friend of an LTTE operative known as V Sriharan alias Murugan, another convict in the case who has been sentenced to death, later gave birth to a girl, Harithra Murugan in prison. Nalini was earlier given the death sentence. On the intervention of Rajiv Gandhi's widow and Congress president Sonia Gandhi petition for clemency for the sake of Nalini's daughter in 2000, the death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. Nalini was being treated as 'A' class convict from September 10, 1999 till the privilege was withdrawn in May 2010 after a mobile phone was allegedly recovered from her cell during a surprise check. She "regrets" the killing of the former Prime Minister and claims that the real conspirators have not been booked yet. President of India had rejected the clemency pleas of Murugan and two others on death row, T Suthendaraja alias Santhan and A G Perarivalan alias Arivu in August 2011. The execution of the three convicts was scheduled on September 9, 2011. However, the Madras High Court intervened and stayed their execution for eight weeks based on their petitions. Nalini was shifted back to Vellore prison from Puzhal prison amidst tight security on September 7, 2011. In 2010, Nalini had moved the Madras High Court seeking release as she served more than 20 years in prison. She argued that even life convicts were released after 14 years of prison term. However, the state government rejected her request. Interestingly, Murugan, Santhan and Perarivalan, the three convicts condemned to death sentence, claim that they are not ordinary criminals but political prisoners. The interim report of the Jain Commission created a storm when it accused Karunanidhi of a role in the assassination, leading to Congress withdrawing its support for the I. K. Gujral government and fresh elections in 1998. A memorial christened Veer Bhumi was constructed at his cremation spot in Delhi. In 1992, the Rajiv Gandhi National Sadbhavana Award was instituted by All India Congress Committee (AICC) of the Indian National Congress Party. The International Airport constructed at Hyderabad has been named Rajiv Gandhi International Airport and was inaugurated by UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi. Rajeev Gandhi Memorial Boarding School in Sheopur is named after him. **Gagan Sharga**