



When a leader in Indira won over mother's grief

On Indira Gandhi's birth anniversary, November 19, Somen Sengupta, penned a tribute to the "iron lady" and her indomitable spirit.

She is called the "iron lady of India." But when did Indira Gandhi show the real steel in her?? Was it the day she won the war and split Pakistan into two or the day the Janata Party Government came to arrest her or the day she decided to impose emergency? One who has done an extensive study of the chronology of Indira's life knows that Indira un-cavereed her real spirit of fortitude not during any political crisis but at the moment of her most brutal personal tragedy.

After a nightmarish three years out of power since 1977 Indira bounced back to in January 1980. This time she had a new political ambition with a clear plan to project her younger son as her successor. The evil of dynastic politics was by then a common practice in Indian politics. Sanjay Gandhi the 34 years old dashing younger son of Indira was destined to take over the leadership of Congress from his mother. Sanjay who was enjoying several extra constitutional powers since 1973 was her shadow turned out to be her nemesis. Arrogant, impolite, notoriously media unfriendly, over confident and always beaming with pride for being the son of the Prime Minister, his politics was harsh. He by that time was beyond Indira's control and was acting like an extended PMO in almost every context. The Congress party and India as a

nation was waiting to taste a new era of ruthless politics under Sanjay.

23 June 1980 was an uncomfortable hot summer day in Delhi. Indira was having her breakfast when Sanjay left home for the Delhi Flying Club around 8: 50 am. He arrived at the club with plans to do some air loops in the sky with his friend Madhav Rao Scindia in a newly bought red-coloured American single-engine two-seater plane named Pitts S 2A. As Madhav Rao did not arrive by that time a restless Sanjay invited experienced pilot Subhash Saxena to join him. They were soon air borne.

In the next twelve minutes they did some deadly air loops, wobbled and suddenly lost control. The plane crashed head down near the Wellington Crescent area killing both Sanjay and Subhash on the spot. The locality was shaken with huge crashing sound followed by fire.

By 8:20 am Rajesh Dhawan rushed to Indira to tell her the news and within seconds she left for spot. VP Singh then CM of UP, who was waiting to meet Indira saw her running helplessly with a wild vacant look and got inside a car waited outside.

By the time Indira reached the accident site it was cordoned by police and several fire engines. The mutilated body of Sanjay was lifted on to an army truck. Indira too got on it. She herself removed the red blanket from the body and seeing

the distorted face of her dead son she let out a cry, that can only be described as that of a mother's. She fainted but soon regained consciousness. From that very moment she virtually took over charge, forgetting the monumental grief that she suffered a few minutes back. The mortal remains of both Sanjay and Saxena were taken to Ram Monohar Lohia Hospital a place where 34 years ago Indira while giving birth to Sanjay was almost at the verge of death due to some serious pregnancy related complications. The cruel game of destiny again took both Indira and Sanjay to the same place but this time mother was alive and son was dead.

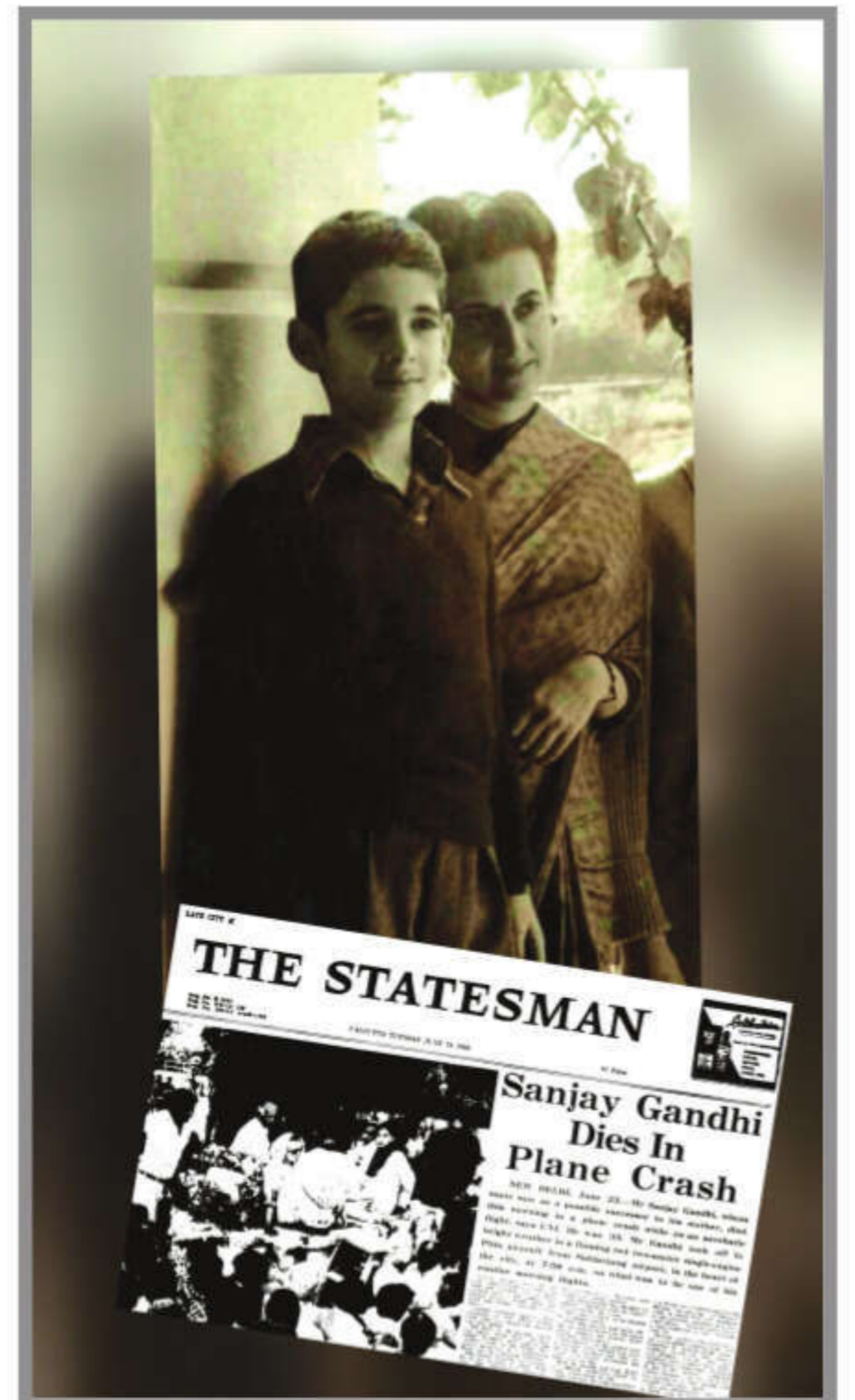
An army of top doctors tried to stitch Sanjay's body parts together. It took three hours and Indira stayed in the room throughout the operation. Maneka wife of Sanjay left her three-month-old son at home and frantically rushed to the hospital. She was comforted by Indira telling who told her that Sanjay met with an accident and the doctors are trying to save his life. Maneka and her mother were shifted to a room next to the operation theatre.

Meanwhile to hide her red eyes and tears Indira covered her face with big dark glasses. She without showing any kind of emotional tumult in her conduct started instructing Government officials. She first asked the police not to stop journalists who gathered in large numbers

at the hospital. As more and more people started arriving causing a din, Indira came out to the balcony and requested all not to create any kind of inconvenience to other patients of the hospital.

Soon leaders of all parties started arriving at the hospital. Two of them, Atal Behari Vajpayee and Chandra Shekhar were first to talk to Indira when she was outside of the operation theatre. Vajpayee in his signature style told Indira that in this most difficult moment she needs to gather more courage to stay strong. Hearing that Indira looked at him and offered a strange look pretending that such an advise is not needed by her. Vajpayee was apparently embarrassed. Indira then turned to Chandra Shekhar and said that she wants to discuss the Assam issue with him as soon as possible. Chandrashekhar was equally surprised and told her that the meeting on Assam can wait. Indira insisted that they start the discussion as soon as possible because the situation is turning bad there. Vajpayee later said that she found Indira to be a lady of stone. Vajpayee was wondering how a mother can think of her official work when her son's distorted dead body lay in the next room. VP Singh who came to the hospital almost at the same time with Indira was told to go back to Lucknow immediately. It is only an interesting coincidence that all three leaders with whom Indira met on that nightmarish hour went on to become Indian Prime Ministers. After the doctors somehow managed to stitch Sanjay's lifeless body parts together Indira took Maneka in a room and broke the news of Sanjay's death. Indira always had a very insecure relation with her younger daughter-in-law but in that hour of grave emotional devastation she played a perfect mother to Maneka. Soon afterwards Indira met the mother and wife of Subhash Saxena and offered her condolences.

Rajiv was travelling in Italy and Indira asked her to return to India as early as possible. By 1 pm Sanjay was taken to IAKbar Road and his body was kept on a huge block of ice. An arrangement to manage the visiting mourners was done under the supervision of Indira herself. She soon changed her clothes and sat next to Sanjay's body holding Menaka's hands. Meanwhile not once but twice Indira visited the accident site and this created a rumour that she was looking for some special objects in the debris of the twisted metal of the air craft. Katherine Frank in her book "Indira - The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi" clearly mentioned that these mysterious visits of Indira created a buzz in the Capital that she was looking for a key and Sanjay's watch which contained some secret code of Swiss bank and safe locker in which Sanjay's fortunes are kept. However as these all were surmises without any basis, Frank opined that Indira's visits of the accident site is a normal human gesture where a mother helplessly tried to rebuild the shattered scenes to imagine the moment when her son was alive for the last time.



Among many who arrived at the house was Frontier Gandhi Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan her father's contemporary. He took Indira in his arms and tried to console her and share some of the pain with his fatherly affections. Pupul Jayakar one of the closest friends of Indira who later authored one of the most reliable biographies of her arrived in the late afternoon. Her presence was a great healing touch for Indira who was trying her best to put up a brave face before the nation. Pupul Jayakar writes that Indira cried before her. As Pupul and a few others decided to stay back that night Indira herself arranged mattresses and pillows for them. She herself did not sleep the entire night and walked aimlessly on the lawn and other rooms. Yet she checked on all to see whether toast and tea are served to all.

Rajiv arrived at 3 am in morning from Europe and by that time Sanjay's funeral plan was under execution. Next day braving the scorching summer sun of June Indira sat next to Sanjay's dead body in an open truck. Her eyes were again covered with dark glasses and she remained calm. She was occasionally looking at the corpse of Sanjay which as per Frank was looking like "an Indian Frankenstein's monster".

At Shantivaan when the body was loaded with woods and the funeral pyre was about to be lit up it was Indira who noticed that the body of Sanjay was still wrapped in the national flag. So all the woods were taken down so that the flag could be removed from the dead body.

On 27 June Sanjay's ashes were taken to Allahabad's Sangam by Rajiv and Sonia. Indira remained in Delhi.

On 28 June Indira Gandhi the Prime Minister of India joined her office on time just five days after the death of her son and potential successor. She had an appointment to give an interview to an American professor named Francine Frankel who was sure that the interview would be cancelled. It was not. Indira gave the interview with the same zeal and enthusiasm as she always shows.

Indira's extraordinary handling of the day of Sanjay's death and her ability to regain strength will always be a testimony to her steeliness.

No wonder then that the following day both The Statesman and The Times of India on their respective front pages used the word "Fortitude" to salute her indomitable character.

