



*«Indira Gandhi had once memorably remarked that everything said of India, and its opposite, are equally true. This is a land of both magnificent diversities and painful contrasts, a land where poverty and prosperity co-exist, where perpetual struggles cohabit with burgeoning opportunities. »*

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CHAPTER TWENTY - FOUR

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THE SECULAR LIFE

*Extract from two addresses given in Europe in 2006 and 2007*

Since the end of the Cold War, we are still struggling to come to terms with new and rapidly changing realities. The story I have to tell is a bit like the works of two of Holland's greatest artists. Like Rembrandt's, it is a story of light and darkness, of mystery and the hidden hand of Destiny. Like Van Gogh's, it is also a story of inner struggle and torment, a story of how the experience of loss can impart a deeper meaning to life. I was born in Europe, but was soon claimed by another world more diverse and more ancient. Mine was a middle-class family from a provincial town in the north of Italy. It was a close-knit family typical of its time, conservative and in essence not very different from a traditional Indian family: strong in adherence to values such as loyalty and obedience, to modesty and truthfulness, to generosity and respect for elders. Yet my father, for all his forbidding ways, was progressive enough to encourage me to learn languages and travel abroad. At school, I learnt of the Risorgimento, of Mazzini and Garibaldi and the unification of Italy. But of India, its great history and its emergence as a modern nation-state, I was taught nothing. My discovery of India happened differently, through an encounter with a remarkable human being. This discovery would take up the rest of my life! That is, in fact, my theme today. I can speak only of my experience, of what I have seen, felt and thought. And if at times, I express myself too much in the first person singular, I hope you will forgive me.

I first met Rajiv Gandhi when I was enrolled in a language school

in Cambridge. It was very soon evident to both of us that we would spend our lives together. Two years later, I came to India to marry him. That was almost forty years ago. Not in my wildest dreams could I have imagined then the course my destiny would take. My husband was not in politics when we began our married life. He was a pilot, absorbed and fascinated by the world of aviation; a devoted husband and loving father to our two children; a man of wide interests who pursued his passion for nature, wildlife and photography in the company of his family and a few close friends.

Though his mother Indira Gandhi headed the government, and we lived in the Prime Minister's house, the life that we made together was essentially private. This was the life we had chosen, a life that brought us joy and deep fulfillment. Yet it was a life permeated by the turbulence of politics. Looking back, I can say that it was through the private world of family that the public world of politics came alive for me: living in intimate proximity with people for whom larger questions of ideology and belief as well as issues relating to politics and governance were vivid daily realities. There were other aspects of living in a political family that had an impact on me as a young bride. I had to accustom myself to the public gaze, which I found intrusive and hard to endure. I had to learn to curb my spontaneity and instinctive bluntness of speech. Most of all, I had to school myself not to react in the face of falsehood and slander. I had to learn to endure them as the rest of the family did.

My mother-in-law was regarded as a strong, rather formidable personality. Indeed, she had the calm authority of a natural leader. She had come a long way from the shy and agonized young woman she had been. But I knew her also as a sensitive, intuitive person with a love for the arts and for the conservation of nature, a sense of humor and the ability to laugh at herself. In the midst of preoccupation with affairs of state, she never failed to make time for personal concerns — a grandchild's birthday, the illness of a friend or a relative, the problems of a staff member. Her breadth of

spirit was evident: although rooted in a traditional society, she had accepted her son's decision to marry a girl from a distant land. She opened her heart, her family, and her culture to me, treating me like the daughter she never had. Along with my husband, she guided me patiently through the confusions and hesitations of my early adjustments to India.

In time I came to relish the flavors of India's many cuisines, to feel comfortable in Indian clothes, to speak Hindi and acquaint myself with the cultural heritage of my new homeland. The glorious and multi-hued palette of India came to be as dear and precious to me as it was to them. Over the years we drew closer together. She shared her experiences about her personal life, her loneliness as a child with her mother ailing and her father imprisoned, of her involvement from her childhood in the freedom movement, of the values that took shape in those formative years. I watched her deal with crises and triumphs. I saw her interact with the common man and with heads of state, with allies and with opponents. She faced adulation and acclaim as well as criticism, slander, rejection and imprisonment.

At the time I entered my new family, India was not quite 21 years independent from British colonial rule. The Congress Party, now led by my mother-in-law, was still pre-eminent, but was beginning to face a resurgent political opposition. Her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, had passed from the stage less than four years earlier, and his successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri, was Prime Minister for less than two years. Indira Gandhi, who succeeded him, was as yet untested in statecraft. She had come to power in the wake of two wars and two famines. Her first challenge was a trial by fire, as she strove to establish her authority over her party and government. In that struggle, her shield was her ability to connect directly with the people; her sword was her empathy with the poor, and the policies she initiated on their behalf.

My first political classroom thus echoed to momentous unfolding

events. Two stand out in my memory. The first was the 1971 crisis which transformed Mrs. Gandhi into a statesman. Following a crackdown by the Pakistan military in what was then East Pakistan, more than 10 million refugees flooded into India from across the border — that is, about two-thirds of today’s population of the Netherlands. Obviously India could not shoulder such a burden. My mother-in-law travelled to all the major world capitals, striving to convince the international community to intervene in what was a humanitarian catastrophe. She was met largely with indifference, and in some cases, opposition. When India was attacked, her response was swift and sure. She withdrew Indian forces immediately after a representative government took charge in the new-born country of Bangladesh. Evident here was the importance in politics of patience and tenacity, of daring and courage and, above all, of action at the opportune and decisive moment. Another memory I have of her as a political leader is of her steely determination to raise India out of the cycle of famine and dependency on imports of food grains. She took tough decisions which laid the foundations of the Green Revolution that transformed our economy. Her actions saw India move from being seen as indigent and helpless to becoming self-sufficient in food grains production. This reflected the driving force of her passion to uphold the dignity and independence of her country. That was the mainspring of her political creed.

With all the political twists and reversals that formed the background of our first 13 years of marriage, our domestic life had remained relatively tranquil. Then suddenly our world was devastated by a succession of tragedies. In June 1980, my husband’s only brother died in an air-crash. My mother-in-law was shattered. Her younger son had been active in public life. She now turned to my husband for support. He was tormented by the choice he had to make, between protecting the life he had chosen and stepping forward to his mother’s side when she needed him most. Months elapsed before I could bring myself to accept that if he felt such a

strong sense of duty to his mother, I would stand by his decision. In 1981 he was elected to Parliament.

Though I often travelled with him to his constituency and became involved in welfare work there, my main concern remained to ensure a warm and serene environment at home. Politics had now entered our lives more directly, but I resisted its further ingress.

Four years later came the event that shook our nation and forever altered the destiny of our family. My mother-in-law, the pivot of our lives, was assassinated by her own bodyguards in our home. Within hours of her death, the Congress party asked my husband to take over the leadership of the party and government. Even as I pleaded with him not to accept, I realized that he had no option. I feared for his life. But his sense of responsibility to the country, and to the legacy of his mother and grandfather, were too deeply ingrained in him. The life we had chosen was now irrevocably over. One month later, he led the Congress Party to a landslide victory in the general elections. He was 40 years old when he became Prime Minister. I now had official duties as the Prime Minister's wife. But I also had to balance this with our family life, bringing up our children and ensuring they had as normal an existence as possible, given the extensive security restrictions around us all.

Our world had been overturned with the death of my mother-in-law. As often happens when one loses a loved one, I sought to reach out to her through her writings. I immersed myself in editing two volumes of letters between her and her father. Through most of her youth, while her father was in British jails, their loving and close relationship found expression in a flourishing correspondence, recording a rich and vivid interplay between two lively minds. These exchanges brought alive to me the freedom struggle as it was felt and acted by two people who went on to play important roles in shaping modern India. Along with the books of Jawaharlal Nehru, which I had read earlier, they provided a philosophical and historical underpinning to my direct experience of observing my husband as

he carried forward their vision for India.

I accompanied him on his travels to the remotest and poorest parts of the country. We were welcomed into people's huts and homes. They opened their hearts to him, speaking of their sufferings, as well as their hopes and aspirations. I came to understand and share his feelings for them, to see what it was that drove him to work as he did with so much energy, enthusiasm and attention to detail. His commitment to making a real difference to their lives brought a fresh and vigorous approach to the imperatives of combining growth with social justice. He mobilized Indian scientists and technologists to tackle basic areas like tele-communications, drinking water, mass immunization and literacy. It is a matter of satisfaction to me to see so many of the seeds he sowed now yielding flourishing harvests. To name a few: India's recognition as an IT power in the world owes much to him; space satellites and telephone networks are improving the living standards of large segments of our population, especially the rural and urban poor; India's entrepreneurial talents, which began to be unshackled in the early 1980s, are now spearheading our country's impressive rate of economic growth; the revival of local self-government institutions is strengthening the foundations of our democracy. These were all cherished endeavors of his. But the time given to him by Fate was all too short.

My husband remained Prime Minister for five years. Soon after came the moment I had been dreading since the trauma of my mother-in-law's death. On May 21, 1991, while campaigning in the national elections, he was assassinated by terrorists. The Congress Party asked me to become its leader in his place; I declined, instinctively recoiling from a political milieu that had so devastated my life and that of my children.

For the next several years I withdrew into myself. I drew comfort and strength from the thousands of people who shared our grief, cherished my husband's memory, and offered my children and me their love and their support. We set up a foundation to take forward

some of the initiatives closest to his heart.

The years that followed saw change and turbulence in India. Economic growth was accelerating. New groups and communities, long deprived, were seeking their legitimate share. Democracy was making India much more egalitarian, but it was also giving new power to some old forces — forces that sought to polarize and mobilize communities along religious lines. They threatened the very essence of India, the diversity of faiths and cultures, languages and ways of life that have sprung from its soil and taken root in it.

The Congress Party was being buffeted by these currents. This was the party that had fought for India's independence and nurtured its infant democracy till it became a robust institution. It now found itself in the midst of uncertainty and turmoil. In 1996 it lost the national elections. Pressure began to build up from a large number of Congress workers across the country urging me to emerge from my seclusion and enter public life.

Could I stand aside and watch as the forces of bigotry continued in their campaigns to spread division and discord? Could I ignore my own commitment to the values and principles of the family I had married into, values and principles for which they lived and died? Could I betray that legacy and turn away from it? I knew my own limitations, but I could no longer stand aside. Such were the circumstances under which the life of politics chose me.

I was elected President of the Congress Party in 1998 when it was in Opposition. This gave me an opportunity to travel to all corners of the country. I found the people at large responded to me spontaneously. Intuitively, they seemed to understand that, like them, I too valued their traditions, their philosophy and their way of life. This seemed to build a bond between us, especially with the poor who welcomed me and opened their hearts without hesitation. Again and again, I have been moved and humbled by the gaze of trust and hope in people's eyes. This link between successive generations of Indians and my family is no abstract one. I had witnessed it in the

case of both my mother-in-law and my husband: the almost electric charge that sparked between them and the people: a meeting of eyes, sometimes hands, a communication that surged across all barriers. The attachment accorded so generously to this family is to some extent in recognition of their sacrifices, achievements and selfless devotion to the country. But perhaps their appeal also lay in their transcending the four basic markers of the Indian identity – religion, caste, language and region. They came to embody the all-inclusive ethos of our country, its essential oneness.

At times people refer to the Nehru-Gandhi “dynasty.” What this word fails to signify is two crucial elements: one is the sovereignty of the people. Through the democratic process, they have repeatedly vested their expectations in one or another member, and equally on other occasions, they have chosen to withdraw their support. The other essential factor, one that lies at the heart of this relationship, is not the exercise of power but the affirmation of a sacred trust. It is this love and faith that imposes its own responsibility and obligations, that has inspired even a reluctant politician such as myself, to enter the public domain.

Success in the 2004 national elections came after six years of political work. I was unanimously elected as my party’s leader in Parliament. The next step was to form the government. But I always knew in my heart that if I ever found myself in that position, I would decline the post of Prime Minister of India. I have often been asked why I turned it down. In trying to explain that choice to my colleagues in the party, I described it as dictated by my “inner voice.” Indeed, that voice has been my wisest guide in political life. The plain fact is that power for itself has never held any attraction for me.

My aim in politics has always been to do whatever I can in my own way to defend the secular, democratic foundations of our country, and to address the concerns and aspirations of the many whose voice often remains unheard. Too often, we think of politics

as a public arena, quite apart from our private world — let alone the inner life. But experience has taught me that such separations are illusory: to pretend a distinction between the values we bring to our personal lives and to our public dealings inevitably deprive both of meaning. Practical considerations aside, I have tried to see that, as far as possible, the significant political decisions of my life flow out of the inner experience of emotion and belief, and of the need to be true to myself.

The India to which I belong can aptly be likened to a mosaic in which each element retains its distinct identity but as part of a unified whole. No doubt it is flawed by cracks and fissures, some old and some new. Yet, it holds together with unmatched beauty because of our people's deeply ingrained commitment to it. Indeed, it can be difficult to comprehend the great mosaic that is India — a land which is home to no fewer than 22 major languages, more than 400 dialects and 4,635 distinct communities. It is a land that has given rise to four of the world's major religions. It is home to the world's second largest Muslim population. It welcomed Christianity long before Europe embraced it. It offered refuge to people fleeing from religious persecution, whether they be Jews or Zoroastrians. It is a land comprising different ecological and cultural regions, each with its own distinctive history. India is thus a multi-religious, multi-linguistic, multi-ethnic and multi-regional civilization without parallel. There is no better way of describing this than in the words of Jawaharlal Nehru himself who described India as, and I quote: "...An ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been previously written... though outwardly there was diversity and infinite variety among our people, everywhere there was that tremendous impress of oneness, which had held all of us together for ages past, whatever political fate or misfortune had befallen us."

Soon after India gained her freedom, a British Army chief had

remarked, “No one can make a nation out of a continent of many nations.” Against all odds, our country has remained united and moved ahead. In a world where nations are increasingly founded on the basis of common faith and common language, as we have seen in many of the new countries in Europe, the Indian experiment is a glorious example that unity can also be based on the values of pluralism and multiculturalism. The driving spirit of our country is its liberal and inclusive ethos. India has never sought uniformity or homogeneity. It seeks to integrate, rather than assimilate.

India is a secular country. For us, the term secularism means equal respect for all religions. Our nation is founded on the conviction that all Indians must be free to practice the religion of their choice, to speak and write in their native language, to give expression to their own regional ethos and culture.

Indira Gandhi had once memorably remarked that everything said of India, and its opposite, are equally true. This is a land of both magnificent diversities and painful contrasts, a land where poverty and prosperity co-exist, where perpetual struggles co-habit with burgeoning opportunities. This is a land where tradition and modernity go together, where science and spirituality intermingle. What appear as contradictions to the external world, are seen by us as two sides of the same coin. We recognize that these polarities are held in a certain balance by opposing tensions. The tendency to establish separateness is countered by the need to assert unity. These are the sources of our resilience.

There is, indeed, huge social ferment underway in India as age-old and stratified social and economic structures are being eroded, as political power flows to deprived people and communities and as aspirations rise. It might appear to some that contentions between different interest groups are hampering stability and progress. But I submit that this ferment is a natural process, it is a corollary to rapid social and economic change. In some cases, my own party’s interests have received an electoral setback from the rise of newly emergent

groups or interests. I do see even this as a movement towards social emancipation.

My life in India has been one of continuous learning. But being a direct participant in the rough and tumble of politics has been a whole new process of discovery. I am convinced that India can flourish only as a centrist democracy. Over half a century of elections and democratic governance have clearly demonstrated that no government can last if it is seen to pursue narrow interests and is insensitive to the concerns of all sections of our society. India's many identities, languages, faiths and customs cannot coexist peacefully if any one assumes dominance, or if the collective will of the majority denies rights and space to any of the minorities. The defining principle of our nation has been "Unity in Diversity"; in practice, we celebrate these diversities in a manner that gives expression to the voices of all our people and by giving shape and flow to their aspirations.

There can be no doubt that India's tradition of tolerance, synthesis and the ability to live with seeming contradictions has provided fertile soil for democracy to take firm root. Our Independence movement, unique in many respects in world history, firmly embedded democratic values in our consciousness. A generation of outstanding men and women created the foundations of the Indian nation-state with a magnificent Constitution as its bedrock. Affirmative action, anchored in law, has given the poor and the disadvantaged the largest stake in our democratic enterprise. Democracy is the most visible engine of social mobility and it is this that has ensured its flowering.

Challenges there are, some arising from the process of economic growth itself. Rapid development, ostentatious consumerism and social insensitivity can sharpen disparities and raise tensions. Unfulfilled expectations can lead to upheavals. Others arise from the forces of fanaticism and terrorism, those who seek to unleash violence and destruction on the innocent in the name of religion

or region, thus attempting to polarize our society. Even so, I am confident that the center of gravity is holding and will continue to hold — because the spirit of our people wills it so.

I believe that while remaining representative of all interests, politics has a particular duty to those in need. As a politician in a country where many still live in poverty, it is my obligation and my responsibility to strive to empower the poor and the vulnerable. At times, this means being willing to fight entrenched social injustice. Indeed, the Indian, so long disempowered by poverty, has a greater claim on the fruits of our growing prosperity. To eradicate poverty, inequality and injustice from our society is an enormous task and it does remain our motivating goal.

There are some who argue that faster growth will in the long run solve problems of social inequality and poverty and narrow the gap between the rich and the poor. This argument has been made in the context of other economies as well, including European ones where migrant communities are yet to be integrated fully. This is an old debate — the relative importance of growth and equity. To my mind, it is not a matter of choosing one over the other. Growth without equity tends to destabilize societies, while equity without growth simply cannot be sustained. Yes, if we had an infinite time at our disposal, economic growth alone would result in a transformation of our economies and societies. This was true of Europe two hundred years ago. This cannot be true of India or indeed of any developing society now.

In recent years India has achieved a greater integration with the global economy. It has reformed economic regulations that were not in keeping with the times, and has, as a result, achieved consistently high levels of economic growth. Our entrepreneurs and professionals are playing a critical role in generating and sustaining this momentum, and we are proud of them. Yet, as I travel across the length and breadth of our country, the limitations of growth alone stare me in the face. People constantly demand that the government

respond to their basic needs. I am aware that the market in many quarters is seen as the new ruling deity, but our experience shows that there is still a critical role for the state and its institutions. Market-led growth is necessary, but it is not sufficient. That is why it is important to sustain programs of poverty-alleviation, even though these need constant vigilance to ensure that the budgeted allocations reach the people they are meant for.

Politics may be the art of the possible, but it must be anchored in truth. In India, we are fortunate to have the example of Mahatma Gandhi so clearly before us: a visionary who shunned expedient strategies, who frequently chose the most difficult way because it was the right way. For him, the means had to be worthy of the ends. His transparent commitment to truth was such that it inspired millions of Indians from all walks of life to participate in the freedom struggle and to face untold hardships, including long years of imprisonment. This created a new model for mass movements in the world: one based on an unflinching moral core, on personal sacrifice and a dedication to absolute non-violence.

Mindful of this history, I believe that politics must have at its heart one guiding principle — to achieve its goals through just and ethical means. It is my conviction that coercion, expediency and the cynical manipulation of popular sentiment and public opinion to attain one's ends, no matter how worthy they are, can never be justified. But I do recognize that this is easier said than done. Very often, practice and precept diverge, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously. When we compromise, we must have the courage and candor to admit to it and not abandon our commitment to basic principles.

It is not easy, in the space of a single lecture, to distill all that India has taught me. It has taught me above all else that politics is not just the art of the possible; it can also be the art of the impossible. To have won freedom and forged nationhood through a unique non-violent movement and to have launched universal adult

suffrage more than half a century ago, in a society that was then 85 percent illiterate and desperately poor, was a daring act of faith. To have helped democracy take root, and to have nurtured it through 60 years amidst continuous challenges, has been a stupendous achievement. Politics everywhere is an exacting mistress, nowhere more so than in India, with its multiplicity of political parties and ideologies pulling in different directions. Its sheer size, diversity and variety, the huge development tasks it is undertaking in a framework of open democracy, the growing aspirations of over a billion people, all make it a formidable mission.

The exuberance and vitality of our people, especially our youth, gives me the confidence that India will continue to push the boundaries of the possible, for its own well-being and for that of the world. My journey from the placid backwaters of a contented domestic life to the maelstrom of public life has not been an easy one. Yet, despite its sorrows and difficulties, I have found in my new existence both fulfillment and a larger sense of purpose. The family to which I first pledged my fidelity was in the confines of a home. Today my loyalty embraces a wider family — India, my country, whose people have so generously welcomed me to become one of them.