

India's *enfant terrible* or man of tomorrow?



Scott Reynolds

In Conversation With Sanjay Gandhi

Ralph Buultjens

India, the world's largest democracy, held its eighth national election in the first week of January. It was an election surrounded by extraordinary excitement: the failure of two governments to secure the confidence of the Lok Sabha, the House of Representatives; disputed constitutional decisions by India's head of state, President Sanjiva Reddy; a midterm dissolution of Parliament; an unusually long period of caretaker government between last August's dissolution and the January polls. The results were equally exciting: an overwhelming victory for Indira Gandhi—and, not incidentally, a complementary victory for Sanjay Gandhi.

As the election date drew near, Sanjay Gandhi had become the most controversial public personality for one-sixth of the world's population, the 650 million people of India. In the labyrinthine world of Indian politics, where images are often etched in the muted tones of consensus appeal, Sanjay stands in bold relief; neutrality is an emotion he rarely evokes. At thirty-three, the younger son of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi is a major

factor in the power struggle that will determine who rules India for the next five years. It is not so much his policies or his life-style, both of which are relatively moderate, as his presence at the hub of power and his past and potential influence that make *him*, rather than his ideas, the lightning rod of India's political monsoon.

Those who dislike him are many. Some claim that he has a malevolent impact on civic life, manipulating his immensely popular mother for his own misguided ends. Others allege that his business activities are questionable and cite his conversational brevity as arrogant discourtesy. Intellectuals have never forgiven him for not being one of them, high society looks at his modest living habits as inversely pretentious, older political functionaries resent a youthful upstart—the inventory of dislikes reaches unrealistic and fearsome proportions. There is also a smaller group of fanatically loyal supporters, willing to follow him into political battle, and to prison if necessary. These are men and women for whom the young Gandhi is the leader of a new generation of Indians.

Although his name is known throughout India and large crowds gather to see him, few have met Sanjay Gandhi personally. Hearsay is the principal source of

RALPH BUULTJENS is the author of several books on Asia, most recently *China After Mao—Death of a Revolution?* He is Chairman of the Society for Asian Affairs and teaches international politics in New York.

most knowledge, and hearsay generally promotes notoriety. Yet, this level of national recognition suggests a powerful potential. Negative and positive perceptions are so interchangeable in politics that hostility and popularity often seem to be sides of the same coin; recognition is the raw material of political specie.

There is an element of mystery about Sanjay. He grants interviews infrequently and rarely, if ever, receives the press. Conversation with him does not flow easily. Long-term political observers accustomed to the garrulity of Indian public life, and raised on the erudite discourses of his illustrious grandfather, Jawaharlal Nehru, or the sharp wit encapsulated within the graceful phrases of his mother, Indira Gandhi, feel uncomfortable with the inexplicable directness of Sanjay.

This was my first sensation upon meeting with him shortly before the January elections. Seated alone with Sanjay in the spacious visitors' room of his mother's house in Willingdon Crescent in New Delhi, I sought to separate the public from the private man. The initial impression contrasts sharply with the worst elements of his reputation: The Sanjay of bloodshot eyes and blood-stained hands is in reality lean, austere dressed, and pleasant-looking, a young man whose receding hairline and heavy eyeglasses frame a serious face. He is soft-spoken, calm, and somewhat laconic. At no time during our discussion, which lasted several hours, did I sense any pressure or tension. For someone who has been consistently villified and occasionally imprisoned since Indira Gandhi lost the last national election in March, 1977, Sanjay's composure suggests either a remarkable talent for acting or inner resources that are deeper than most people suspect.

I began by focusing on elements of his background. What early formative influences could he recall? *"We lived with my grandfather [Prime Minister Nehru], and I suppose his presence was an influence, but not too directly. Of course my mother was always very close, but she was also careful not to impose her values and beliefs on my brother and myself. I can't tell you that there were many conscious influences, although the atmosphere of our home probably did have a major impact."* What was that atmosphere? Sanjay felt that it was a very free-thinking environment, in which exchanges of ideas were encouraged and even children could express their opinion without inhibition. How did he view his father, the politician Feroze Gandhi, who was latterly estranged from his mother? *"My father died in 1960 at the age of forty-eight. What stands out in my mind is that he was a very thorough person. If he took up anything, he always saw it through to the end. I remember him as very outspoken and independent."* Did he feel he had inherited any of these qualities from his father? *"Perhaps my tendency to be frank and straightforward with people. I think it is my greatest strength and probably my greatest weakness. But I really am not very good at small talk, and I want people to know where they stand with me."*

Sanjay's early education was in India, after which he

went to England to study mechanical engineering at the Rolls Royce factories. Why did he not enroll at a college? *"Well, I was more interested in engineering than in obtaining a college degree."* After three years in England he returned to India to begin planning an automobile manufacturing business, which later evolved into the controversial Maruti car project. What was his impression of life in England? *"Interesting and useful experience,"* was the noncommittal answer. Recalling his mother's early admiration for Joan of Arc, I asked Sanjay whether there was any boyhood hero with whom he had identified. *"There was none."* I wondered whether this was a defensive response, perhaps to avoid providing a glimpse of the inner self. Yet, the way in which it was said left little doubt of its truth. Maybe, I thought, talking about his mother would be more revealing.

Sanjay and his attractive wife, Maneka, have lived with Mrs. Indira Gandhi since their marriage five years ago. I probed his relationship with her. How did he view his mother as a political figure? *"In many ways, she is a statesman. Her instinct is generally to put India first, often contrary to her own interests."* What about her personality? *"Well, she is very strong-minded and determined, and an activist. As she herself has said, she just cannot remain uninvolved."* Was it difficult growing up with such a maternal presence? *"Just the opposite of what you would expect—she was strong enough to refrain from dominating our lives. Although she was very busy, she always found time for us."* Does he advise his mother on political matters, as many people allege? *"She has never asked for my thoughts on political issues. I have given my thoughts when and if I felt it necessary. I don't know whether she ever depends on what I say."* Did he ever disagree with Mrs. Gandhi? Yes, he did from time to time, Sanjay said—but, probably no more than any son does with his mother.

At this moment Mrs. Gandhi herself passed through the room on her way to greet one of the many groups of supporters who gathered in her garden each day. She stopped to exchange a word of greeting. I asked her about the allegations that Sanjay had misused his position as her son before she was defeated in 1977. *"A lot of people who had nothing to do with us, and even some who were connected with us, used Sanjay's name for their own purposes without his knowledge. We are discovering these things now."* Would Sanjay's views influence her? *"Sanjay happens to be my son, but this in no way affects my attitude to policy. When I was prime minister, I did not discuss official events with my family. Sanjay was, unfortunately, given a lot of publicity, but he had nothing to do with the functioning of my government."*

Sanjay and I continued our conversation. We spoke of philosophy. He was uninterested in an esoteric discussion but ready to share his thoughts on more pragmatic issues. I asked about his religion. He was not a believer in ritual, said Sanjay. Was he a Hindu? In a philosophic sense he was, but he did not know too much about the visionary elements of the faith. What motivated his life? Sanjay paused and,

somewhat out of character, gave me a reflective answer: *"I want to do something for others—not for any real reason which I can think of—it's just a feeling I have always had."* There was no moral overtone in this statement, just a flat and somewhat uncertain comment.

The interaction between ideas and power has been a consistent theme of Indian history. In the past, great and sometimes terrible deeds have been the vehicle for the accomplishment of large intellectual conceptions. More recently, visions of nationalism and democratic socialism have inspired the policies of modern Indian leaders such as the Mahatma and Indira Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Did Sanjay Gandhi subscribe to any political or economic ideology? From our talk it was apparent that he has strong nationalist impulses—a feeling that India could develop itself with relatively little outside assistance. But he seems to have no faith in the capacity of Marxism to address the problems of his country. *"I am not a Communist and I don't think it will work here. The Russians have done a good job with their country, but the Soviet Union is not India."* Although a businessman himself, he also tends to reject the capitalist approach. *"Our programs must not benefit the large commercial houses or those who have already accumulated capital. We must think of smaller-scale activities, which are labor intensive and also relatively free from bureaucratic controls. One of the restraints on the economy has been overbureaucratization. There is a place for state intervention in large industrial sectors, but we can develop India faster by encouraging small and medium entrepreneurs. We have plenty of raw materials for them to use here and much labor to employ. If we can reduce personal taxation to a maximum of 50 per cent and reduce bureaucracy, we can succeed."*

About four-fifths of India's population lives in the countryside. A shortage of food and an excess of population have conditioned their way of life. And so I shifted Sanjay's attention to rural development. *"We have done well recently in food production—and this is one of the long-term benefits of my mother's policies in the last years of her government—but we still have serious distribution problems. Another critical handicap is water. If there is one thing I would like to do for the villagers, it is to see that they can get plentiful, good water. Our waterways need to be cleansed and we must reduce dependency on nature and increase artificial irrigation."*

Population programs initiated during Mrs. Gandhi's earlier government became an electoral controversy in 1977. Then, and later, her political opponents claimed that forcible sterilization was inflicted on large numbers of Indians and that Sanjay Gandhi was responsible for these excesses. *"I believe that population control is vital for the future, but the only role I had in the family planning drive in those years was to propagate it and publicize it and ask the youth of the Congress party to help motivate people. If enough publicity was given to the effort, I knew it could succeed. But it became political propaganda in the election and all sorts of false information was proclaimed by those who were against us."* Was there not coercion and intimidation by overenthusiastic Gandhi supporters? Sanjay maintains that the

number of forcible sterilizations was grossly exaggerated and that few, very few, did in fact take place. This is an evaluation loudly contested by many in India. However, despite intensive investigations by government agencies in the past two years, the proof tends to indicate that forcible mass sterilization was the exception rather than the norm during 1975-77, when family planning was vigorously espoused by Mrs. Gandhi's administration. One of India's current tragedies is that the political implications of family planning have reduced this program to almost total inaction, while the population increases by 13 million each year.

Did Sanjay believe in democracy? There is a widespread impression that Sanjay's desire to get things done, his impatience with India's cumbersome bureaucracy, conceal a distaste for democracy. He is often portrayed in the media and denounced from public platforms as an incipient dictator, waiting in the wings to grab power through and from his mother. *"I grew up with democracy and never really questioned it. I think there are many things we can do to make it work better, but it is the only form of government which allows the poor to express themselves. Through democracy, I feel that we can remedy some of the worst injustices in our society—things like caste and inequality of women. I do believe in women's lib—ask my wife—and we must work for liberation of the depressed segments of our people."* But, I asked, could this not be done with greater speed and effectiveness under a more robust political system? *"Perhaps so, but what's the use of speed if you don't have the support of the people? Authoritarianism suits those who think they can always be on the winning side. But how many can be winners all the time?"*

Sanjay's constant references to the poor and the underprivileged suggest that someday he might inherit the political constituency that sustains his mother. Does he see himself as her political heir? *"Political positions are not hereditary, they have to be earned. When my mother entered politics, people said that the crowds came to hear her because she was Nehru's daughter. But people are still drawn to her, two decades after his death. A lot of other politicians' sons have tried to make it too. You can judge their success from the response, or lack of it, which they have got."* Does he aspire to be prime minister of India? *"Hardly likely,"* he responded unemotionally. And then, with a quick smile, he added: *"There is nobody who would give you any odds on that today."*

After Mrs. Gandhi lost the general election of March, 1977, Sanjay experienced difficult times. The successor Janata government expended large resources in investigating his business activities, over forty legal inquiries were instituted against him, political demonstrations led by him have been attacked, and Sanjay has been personally assaulted. He has been imprisoned frequently and violently attacked in the press. However, even his political adversaries allow that he has weathered these indignities with courage and calm.

What is his attitude to the many enemies who have

"Does he aspire to be prime minister? 'Hardly likely,' he responded unemotionally. And then with a quick smile: 'There is nobody who would give you any odds on that to-day.'"

pursued him with such determination? *"They do what they are doing and I do what I am doing. Some of the people who attack me in public come to see me privately. Besides, I know that many of their accusations are false."*

Why has he been so unavailable to the press in recent years? *"There is little point in talking to them. They have always been hostile to me. Many newsmen have fallen for their own stories—it's a vicious circle. So many lies have been published that they have often convinced themselves that their own fabrications are true. There has been a concerted effort to make me out to be a cretin unfit for politics. But how long can blatant lies last?"*

I asked Sanjay about his entry into public life. *"Until a few years ago, I had no interest at all in politics. For the first time, in 1971, I helped the Congress party in the national election campaign. I did some rather general work like helping to organize a few meetings and rallies. It was a very brief phase, and when the election was over, I dropped out and did not take any real interest in political happenings until 1975."* At that time, Mrs. Gandhi's government declared a State of Emergency, which lasted until January, 1977. It was a time in which political life was largely suspended, press censorship was imposed, and several political leaders were detained. It was also a period in which Sanjay Gandhi's name became a household word throughout India.

"I got involved after the Emergency. You see, there was a crisis—the law and order situation had deteriorated, inflation was severe, and everything was on the verge of breaking down. I think everyone should pitch in during a crisis, and so I started doing what I thought was necessary. I thought I could help to mobilize the youth of the country in a constructive national effort. So I suggested a five-point program [abolition of caste and dowry systems, eradication of illiteracy, slum clearance, family planning, tree planting], which the youth wing of the Congress party accepted. I spent a lot of time trying to promote the program and working with the Youth Congress to do it."

During the Emergency, Sanjay toured most of India and addressed numbers of large meetings. What was the objective of these activities? Was it a personal buildup?

Were the crowds artificially created? *"I had taken up a program, so I went to publicize and work for it. I was always invited and never went on my own. The crowds were largely spontaneous. You can bus a few thousand, but not the hundreds of thousands who came to the rallies."*

Was it correct that Sanjay, with a small coterie of associates, influenced major government decisions during the Emergency? *"My role during the Emergency has been expanded out of all proportion. In fact, it was not that important. I was supposed to have led a faction in the Congress party—I don't, and never did, lead or belong to any faction. I was supposed to be really close to some politicians during the Emergency—I never have been really closely associated with any politician. Most of these people did visit our house, but I am not really close to anyone. There were many sycophants in those days, but fortunately most of them have departed since then."*

The shadows were lengthening as the late afternoon sun bathed New Delhi. It was time for me, too, to depart. As he walked me down the short driveway that leads to the entrance of the Gandhi residence, I ventured a last question: How did Sanjay see himself? *"As a pragmatist, a doer—I like to work."* Did this indicate a lack of thoughtfulness? *"To be pragmatic you have to think."*

Impressions of Sanjay Gandhi are not easily integrated into a coherent portrait. He is personally remote, yet conveys an intensity of personality and purpose. He is not a profound thinker, yet has an intelligence that is readily apparent. He is direct and somewhat abrupt in speech, but unfailingly courteous in manner. His has been a relatively easy passage through most of life, yet he has recently endured extraordinary hardships with resolution and courage. He provokes and at times seems indifferent to public hostility, yet is capable of evoking deep personal loyalty. Contrasting impressions that make definition difficult. However, observing Sanjay Gandhi over a long period clarifies a central fact: The reality differs markedly from the conventional image. Up close he is much more complex, interesting, and of a stronger character than distance and hearsay suggest.

And, unfortunately, Sanjay Gandhi is often evaluated against the long shadows cast by his immediate forebears. It is a deadly and unfair comparison, for Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi are among the most remarkable political figures of the twentieth century. Our impressions of them are of fully formed personalities, seasoned by years of experience and trial. Together they link historic moments of the past to modern India. Sanjay Gandhi is shaped by different forces and different times. His is a personality in evolution—finding political roots in the harsh events of contemporary India. But Sanjay is no *enfant terrible*. With his evident determination, growing political maturity, and his first elected position as Member of Parliament, there is little doubt that he will make a considerable impact on public life in the years ahead. [wv]