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Camelot in Bombay

The Gandhis are the Kennedys of India.

By Turna Ray

Jacqueline Bouvier married John F. Kennedy in 1953 wrapped in 50 yards of ivory silk, in a gown that took two months to make. The bride accessorized with her grandmother's heirloom lace veil, a single strand of family pearls, and a diamond leaf pin that was a wedding gift from her soon-to-be father-in-law, Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy. Fifteen years later in India, an Italian beauty of humble beginnings would marry into the most powerful political family of the world's largest democracy, wrapped in yards of the palest pink cotton.

In 1968, Sonia Maino married Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi's son Rajiv Gandhi in a quiet,

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non-denominational wedding. The bride's pink sari was hand-woven in prison by her grandfather-in-law and India's first

prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru and worn by Indira Gandhi at her wedding.

The Gandhi nuptials lacked the fanfare of the Kennedy union. With 1,200 guests and 3,000 eager onlookers outside the church, the Kennedy wedding was highlighted in all the major newspapers, and photos of the stunning bride's off-the-shoulder gown created quite a buzz in women's fashion magazines. The Kennedy wedding was not only the social gala of the year, but it was also part of a young, charismatic JFK's political campaign for the presidency.

Long after the assassinations of JFK and Robert Kennedy and even after Jackie and JFK Jr. passed away, the Kennedys' marriages, scandals, and deaths have remained a constant source of fascination for Americans — just as the Nehru-Gandhi clan has captivated Indians for generations.

Nehru founded the Congress Party on a platform of liberal values, the most important of which was secularism. The party has dominated Indian democracy for nearly half a century, while the Nehru-Gandhi family has ruled India for 38 years. Had Sonia Gandhi accepted the position of India's prime minister after the Congress Party recently defeated the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party in the 2004 elections, four generations of the Nehru-Gandhi family would have ruled India since its independence from Great Britain in 1947.

In 1968, however, the Gandhi-Maino marriage ceremony was a low-budget affair, held in the garden of 1 Safdarjung Road (the prime minister's residence) and attended only by extended family and close friends. Indira Gandhi was focused on prepping her eldest son Sanjay Gandhi to take her place as prime minister, leaving the younger Rajiv Gandhi to pursue a career as a pilot for Indian Airlines.

But as the diamond brooch pinned on Jackie's bridal dress flickered with the Kennedy ambition, within the folds of Sonia's unassuming cotton sari lay the awesome pull of the Gandhi dynasty. As wives, both women were enveloped by their marital families' inescapable political legacies. As widows, each woman ultimately found her own place within a dynasty, as the torchbearer of a fabled era in history.

Initiation into the Clan

Jackie knew what she wanted and what she was getting into by marrying a Kennedy. Sonia, however, only had a "vague idea India existed somewhere in the world" before she married Rajiv Gandhi, she once confessed in interview. Where Jackie easily slipped on the little white gloves of a dutiful Kennedy wife, Sonia

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her first political speech during the 1998 general elections at Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu, where Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated. Sonia transfixed the crowd as she spoke tenderly of her late husband. Others contend that Sonia didn't get her footing in Indian politics until the sectarian violence following the Gujarat train bombing of 2002 riled her into giving impassioned speeches on the Parliament floor against BJP members.

Yet with the surprise return of the opposition Congress Party in the polls, the front page of every major newspaper around the world heralded "the return of the Gandhis," and displayed a snapshot of Sonia Gandhi. She looked confident, even elated, standing comfortably in a crisply pleated sari or walking purposefully through a crowd with mounds of garlands around her neck. From uncertain foreigner to savvy politician, the impenetrable "Sphinx" cracked and revealed the answer to its own riddle. At last, the public had the Sonia Gandhi that they had so desperately wanted to see all these years.

Whenever Sonia's political turning point may have been, once married to a Gandhi, there is no turning back. The larger-than-life legacies of the Gandhis and the Kennedys carry through history and remain palpable to the people, defying time, political scandals, and even death. The Gandhi-Nehru family led a burgeoning nation to embrace its independence and the Kennedys inspired a people by embodying the American Dream.

Politics of Widowhood

If there were expectations of them as wives, Sonia and Jackie became politically indispensable and a national focal point as widows. A London *Independent* editorial recently pointed to the examples of Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Chandrika Kumaratunga in Sri Lanka, Megawati Sukarnoputri in Indonesia, and Cory Aquino in the Philippines, as representing the "iron law of dynasty" in post-colonial south and southeast Asia. "Across an immense swathe of the globe, the parties that achieved independence have, in country after country, turned to the daughters or widows of earlier leaders for direction in the second, third or fourth generations," the editorial noted.

After JFK's assassination, President Lyndon B. Johnson recognized Jackie's political clout, noting that her poll numbers were higher than her husband's at the time of his death. With the outpouring of national sympathy towards Jackie as a widow and the power already attached to her last name, Jackie wouldn't have had to work too hard as a leader, according to LBJ. "God, it would electrify the Western Hemisphere," he had said. "She could go and do as she damn pleases. She can just walk out on that balcony and look down at them and they'll just pee all over

themselves every day." Similarly, Congress Party members, desperate for a leader with popular appeal, could barely hold it in at the news of Sonia's entrance into politics six years ago. Thousands of party loyalists had taken to the streets dancing at the prospect of another Gandhi in the political fray.

In widowhood, however, Jackie retreated from the Kennedy spotlight and attempted to start her own life. Never wanting to be dragged out for her grief, Jacqueline Kennedy put on a pair of dark glasses, tied a scarf around her head, married Greek businessman Aristotle Onassis, and eventually became an editor at Doubleday. "I don't want any medals for Jack," she had said.

After the election, the post of India's prime minister was Sonia Gandhi's for the taking. But even in victory, Sonia recoiled from the Gandhi spotlight. She rejected the post, saying that she must "follow her inner voice." At her stunning announcement, Mani Shankar Aiyar, a member of the Indian parliament's lower house accused, "You cannot betray the people of India. The inner voice of the people of India says that you have to become the prime minister of India."

Sonia had never wanted to be prime minister, according to longtime Gandhi family adviser Rajiv Desai. She only wanted to revive the party of her grandfather-in-law and preserve India's secular identity, he said. Sonia has remained Congress Party president, while the man responsible for saving the Indian economy from collapse in 1991, renowned economist Manmohan Singh, accepted the role of Prime Minister.

Remember Camelot and a Shining India

Beyond titles of power and placards of honor, as a Gandhi, Sonia has a larger duty — to uphold, and if need be, to restore, the family's historic legacy in the hearts and minds of the Indian people. She may be doing just that.

Nehru's model advocated a liberal democracy, with freedom of religion and speech, but his policy of economic nationalization destroyed the Indian economy. Amid calls for Sonia to accept the Indian leadership, the Bombay Stock Exchange plummeted to its lowest levels in its 129-year history.

Now, with Singh as Prime Minister, the business sector will gain more confidence, and keep India on track with its newfound economic growth. Meanwhile, Sonia, at the helm of the Congress party, is poised to steer India away from the BJP-incited religious fundamentalism and to restore the nation's founding ideals of secularism.

The BJP, for all its nationalistic zeal, could not convince the

majority of Indians that India was economically thriving. The people didn't buy into the BJP's expensive pre-election campaign touting an "India Shining" because Indians remember a different era. They still reach for that golden age when the taste of independence was new, Nehru pushed for a secular India, the Congress Party stood for every man, and the oppressive imperialists were ousted from the land. The people of India still reach for the Gandhis, and for "one brief, shining moment" they thought they had found Sonia Gandhi.

— *Turna Ray, a native of Calcutta, India, is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in Foreign Policy magazine, the Asian Age in India, and the Sunday Times in London.*

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