

GANDHI IS A MAGIC NAME IN INDIA

By Joe McGowan

Fifty-eight years ago a baby girl was born in a village near Turin, Italy. Her parents named her Sonia Maino, never dreaming one day she would become one of the most powerful politicians in India, a land of one billion people!

My thoughts were on Sonia, daughter-in-law of the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, recently as India and Pakistan worked toward resolving long-standing disputes.

I first met Sonia in February, 1968, when I attended her wedding to Indira's son Rajiv. I was the Associated Press bureau chief in India.

Indira's two sons, Sanjay and Rajiv, had gone to England in the '60s to study—Rajiv enrolling at Cambridge University. While there he met Sonia.

The wedding date was chosen by Indira's personal astrologer and by great coincidence was the same date that Indira Nehru had married Bombay businessman Feroze Gandhi.

Feroze was no relation to the revered Mohandas Gandhi, but very auspiciously for Indira, she acquired the magic name Gandhi.

It was decided the wedding of Sonia to Rajiv would be a simple ceremony at Indira's modest cottage. The wedding attracted top Indian society, and many foreign ambassadors.

Sonia wore a pink sari, which supposedly came from cloth spun by Indira's father, Jawaharlal Nehru while he

was imprisoned by the British. Government publicists said Indira had worn the same sari for her wedding.

Indira and the bridal couple were festooned with flower garlands. They sat cross-legged on carpets for the ceremony. Afterwards, there was tea and sweets.

Rajiv became an executive with Indian Airlines, while his brother Sanjay went into politics. Sanjay also was a stunt pilot and died in 1980 while doing stunts in a plane built in Afton, Wyo. for crop dusting.

Rajiv resigned the airline post and went into politics against the wishes of his Italian wife. A biographer says she once declared she would rather her children beg in the streets than be politicians.

Indira was assassinated Oct. 31, 1984 and son Rajiv replaced her. Five years later he was ousted amid charges of incompetency and corruption. He, too, was assassinated, on May 21, 1991, as he campaigned for re-election.

Italian-born Sonia, who took Indian citizenship in 1984, became president of the powerful Congress party, the fifth in her family to lead the party. She followed Motilal Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira and Rajiv Gandhi.

The Congress party was expected to elect Sonia to the prime minister's post, but she declined. It was felt she realized many would oppose having a foreign-born woman head their country.

But, as Congress president, she was the power behind Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

And India continues as a land of great contrasts. In backward areas of the

country, women are not allowed to sign contracts or hold property. But a woman has been prime minister.

Many American high tech jobs are being outsourced to India, where 500 million people can not sign their name. Ballots are printed with the parties' symbols, such as the spinning wheel for the Congress party. Illiterate voters are taught to place their mark alongside the chosen symbol.

A wonderful photo printed in the Financial Times told it all: It was a photo of election officials riding on elephant back through a jungle in Assam state, delivering election computers to the voting precincts

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