Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi by Katherine Frank

A "Tragic" Life

The veteran author of critically praised books about Emily Brontë and Lucie Duff Gordon has written an exemplary popular biography of the powerful, controversial prime minister who indelibly shaped the world’s largest democracy. Katherine Frank’s solidly researched narrative is particularly good on the early years of Indira Gandhi (1917-84), cogently delineating her complex relationship with her father, nationalist hero Jawaharlal Nehru, which was intimate when they were pouring out their feelings in letters, but strained when they were actually together. We see an intelligent, strong-minded woman coming of age in a turbulent time marked by her relatives frequent stays in prison as India struggled for freedom from Great Britain. After independence, when Nehru became prime minister, Gandhi was politically active but for many years resisted seeking power in her own right. Following the deaths of her husband (Feroze Gandhi, no relation to the Mahatma) in 1960 and Nehru in 1964, she moved into the top spot, aided by the Congress Party bosses mistaken impression that she would be a figurehead they could manipulate. On the contrary, Frank shows Prime Minister Gandhi prompted by her deep fear of disorder toward increasingly authoritarian acts, most notoriously the state of emergency declared in 1975, when she authorized the arrest of many opposition leaders. Frank depicts Gandhi as having more faith in her personal bond with the Indian people than in the messy workings of democracy. But the religious and political divisions inflamed by her policies came home to roost in 1984, when she was assassinated by her own bodyguard, a Sikh enraged by the massacre of militant Sikhs in the Golden Temple. This sympathetic but unsparing portrait makes it clear that Gandhi was a flawed leader but evinces compassion for a woman striving with a difficult personal and political legacy. --Wendy Smith

My Personal Review:
This is a very good account of Indira Gandhi’s life. I felt very sad after reading it. I knew already about her life and politics as being an Indian. But
this book gave me a very comprehensive account of her life, except her last couple of years, which I think were hurried. I think that spicy tidbits of alleged affairs about her, Nehru and her husband should have been avoided as they distract from the larger point and have given her worshippers an excuse to discount the book. Description of India's early life before she became the Prime Minister is very engaging. You can see how the seeds of her later-day paranoia and siege mentality were sown during her unhappy childhood and her estrangement with her husband. You feel sad that in the end that privileged upbringing, lots of potential, education at the best schools and colleges and tutoring by her father in democratic traditions did not amount to much. She achieved little and destroyed much.

It is amazing that in a vibrant democracy, she was able to undermine every political institution, which is essential for a democracy. How she instigated conflicts in Assam, Kashmir and Punjab. How she shamelessly went around dismissing democratically elected state govts and playing one group against another. How she let loose her son, Sanjay as an extra-constitutional authority to subvert judiciary and beaurocracy. She surrounded herself with sycophants and boot-lickers. In her own words, she herself admits, "men who may not be very bright but on whom I can rely"? Only bright spot in her career was the liberation Bangladesh. She used every weapon available to stay in the power. In the end, the forces she helped unleashed consumed her. Even her son Rajiv who became Prime Minister after her violent death was killed Srilankan Tamil Tigers whom she nourished. It might seem like a poetic justice in the end but India was/is the big loser having lost so much and still fighting those forces.

History will not be kind to her and I hope that Indian people would not let another Indira immerse on the political scene.

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