

ASSASSINATION OF RAJIV GANDHI-AN INSIDE JOB

ONE CONGRESS WORKERS' SUSPICION

Rarely has the news of the death of an important leader travelled so fast as that of Rajiv Gandhi. He was killed at 10.25 pm and the 11 pm news bulletin of AIR carried the news all over the country. Mind you, there were no private news television channels or cellphones and just two women journalists, both from foreign media, were accompanying him that night since he was not holding any public office when he died, except chairing the largest political party of the country, but nevertheless out of power. Doordarshan and AIR teams ought to have been present there, but the available record indicates that perhaps Doordarshan borrowed the footage from a private videographer engaged by the organisers of the meeting.

An obvious explanation for this unusual haste could be the shock and disbelief at the sudden and gruesome death of a young charismatic leader of some promise, paralleled by the killings of other equally eminent promising leaders like US President John F Kennedy, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, Rajiv's mother Indira Gandhi and later the killing of Benazir Bhutto in similar shocking situations. It was so sudden and so shocking that perhaps it took most by surprise and they could not contain or plan to conceal it for a while, because it was more gruesome than all other such killings put together. Besides, since

he was no more the Prime Minister, his death was not going to affect the functioning of the state in anyway, so there was perhaps no need felt immediately to keep it under wraps, even for a short while.

But if the purpose was to create shocked reaction in Tamil Nadu itself and the rest of the country, particularly in southern India, then the sooner the news spread, the faster and more angry the reaction, which is what was eventually witnessed, for riots brokeout in Tamil Nadu within hours of the assassination.

Curiously, there are many a parallel between the John F Kennedy assassination and that of Rajiv Gandhi. For one, they both became the heads of their respective states at a very young age. Both had a short tenure (Kennedy's was even shorter than Rajiv's), they both were highly charismatic and both died in the prime of their political career. But the comparison does not end there. The involvement of the powers that be in theirrespective countries has been suspected in all three cases, namely Kennedy, Rajiv and Benazir.

Their assassinations remain shrouded in mystery to date, because the investigators assigned to unravel the conspiracy did more of a coverup job than actually caring to go deep enough to expose the real conspirators behind the killings in all three cases, who were evidently so powerful in each of the cases that the investigators dreaded pointing their fingers at the real hand behind the scene, andinstead preferred to maintain a shroud of mystery around the real conspiracy. And that is why the most important common thread joining John F

Kennedy to Rajiv Gandhi, and now Benazir Bhutto, is the near conviction of their families and even others that everything possible was done to enact an obviously clumsy, ham handed, coverup job. Kennedy's wife Jacqueline was convinced that her husband was done in by the conservative southern Texan mafia in which Kennedy's successor Lyndon B Johnson was complicit. Benazir's husband Asif Ali Zardari was silenced by clearing the way for him to become the President of Pakistan, though he did make some feeble noise about a larger conspiracy to kill his martyred wife.

And as for Rajiv, we have Sonia on record while testifying before the Jain Commission, saying in her deposition that the grossly inadequate security provided to her husband was 'virtually an open invitation to liquidate him... The dilution of security was politically motivated, carried out with the intention of increasing his threat perception of reducing his level of mass contact', in effect blaming the then government of Chandra Shekhar. Who knows, Sonia or Rahul may have also penned their own assessments and may release it at the appropriate time. Right now they cannot raise an accusing finger at anyone in the Congress since they are heading the Congress Party whose then head, Narasimha Rao, did all in his power to obfuscate the probes.

As Congress president, Sonia cannot lead a campaign against an ousted and now dead Narasimha Rao. Neither Rahul nor Sonia can turn around and accuse Congress leaders of complicity in a

coverup when they are leading it, for, after all, Raowas chosen with Sonia's tacit consent.

Returning to the subject of immediate dissemination of the news and going by the Indian precedent, we have so far allowed prudence to prevail over immediate emotional outburst, be it the case of the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi or Indira Gandhi. Take the case of Indira Gandhi's assassination for instance. Her body guards, Satwant Singh and Delhi Police Inspector Beant Singh, joined in to pump enough bullets into her to ensure that she died on the spot. But the actual news of her death was withheld for several hours, though the communal identity of her assailants was deliberately and mischievously announced within minutes of the incident.

Similarly, earlier when Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated, the news of his death was not broken till the investigating agencies had established the identity of the killer, though again he was shot dead in full public view. But this was not the case with Rajiv. It seemed as if the clock was ticking for Rajiv and everyone was waiting with bated breath for this eventuality. Was this on account of some premonition or anticipation or preparedness? Within no time that Tuesday night, Congress workers started collecting in large numbers at the Congress headquarters, 24, Akbar Road in the capital, next door to Rajiv's 10, Janpath residence. He had shifted here from the Prime Minister's residence, 7, Race Course Road, soon after demitting the Prime Minister's office. Sonia Gandhi continues to live there to date.

The ire of confused and angry Congress workers collecting outside 24, Akbar Road that night was directed at many. Especially at former Prime Minister VP Singh, whom Congress workers were not willing to forgive both for what they perceived as betrayal of Rajiv by dethroning him, but more importantly, effecting reservation in government services for the OBCs. Any south Indian walking past or standing nearby was also being looked at with hostility, some occasionally raising a slogan against M Karunanidhi. But their main anger was directed against the then Prime Minister, Chandra Shekhar, and his constant companion those days, the then Haryana Chief Minister Om Prakash Chautala.

There was a reason for that. Chandra Shekhar's government, relying solely on the crutches of Congress support, had collapsed just two months ago because of the perception among Congressmen that Chandra Shekhar was deliberately denying Rajiv adequate security cover, which could protect him well from any intended assault. Chautala too was a red rag to the Congressmen, because the controversy between Congress and Chandra Shekhar started with Congressmen catching two Haryana policemen in plain clothes sitting and sipping tea in the AICC canteen next door to Rajiv's residence. Congressmen alleged these cops were spying on Rajiv at Chautala and Chandra Shekhar's behest.

We have it on the authority of none other than Subramanian Swamy, the man who by his own admission, mediated between Rajiv Gandhi and Chandra Shekhar to dislodge VP Singh and form the Chandra Shekhar-led government with just 60 MPs, solely on the strength

of 220 MPs of the Congress Party of Rajiv Gandhi. Swamy writes: 'I proposed the name of Chandra Shekhar for the Prime Ministership. It was I who suggested that if his (Rajiv's) 220 MPs could combine with 60 MPs split from the Janata Dal, we could form a new government...' 'But', Swamy says further of Rajiv Gandhi's reaction to make Chandra Shekhar the Prime Minister, 'At first, he (Rajiv) was reluctant on the name. But I said, no one else from JD can have an incentive or gumption to come out. He then said, "Go ahead then."' (Swamy's book, *The Assassination of Rajiv Gandhi: Unanswered Questions and Unasked Queries*, Chapter 1, page 39.)

A few pages down, he further writes: 'There was never any warmth in the Chandra Shekhar-Rajiv relationship', (page 43) and recalls how Rajiv did not even bother to attend Chandra Shekhar's swearing-in ceremony at Rashtrapati Bhavan. Swamy also discloses how Chandra Shekhar, in spite of being dependent on 220 Congress MPs, cocked a snook at Rajiv right from the beginning by caring little for Rajiv's sentiments. He writes: 'As my courtesy call (on RG) progressed, it became apparent why he had not come for the swearing-in ceremony. At least two of the MPs who had been made ministers, Rajiv Gandhi did not like at all. One was a persona non grata in his family (Maneka Gandhi) and the other was involved in a feud in his constituency (Sanjay Singh), that had hurt his sentiments.' (Page 43)

Swamy also discloses how Chandra Shekhar's 60-member pack (actually there were probably only 55 Lok Sabha MPs and the other five were most likely from the Rajya Sabha) was near certain that

with the Bofors sword dangling over Rajiv's head, he would never dare to withdraw support to Chandra Shekhar's apology of a party, lest VP Singh returns to power; so the Balia Thakur was confident of completing the remaining full four-year term in office without bothering in the least about Rajiv Gandhi, who he thought would keep cringing and supplicating before the Prime Minister to save him from the Bofors probe.

This is relevant in the present context because however Swamy may defend himself and his then government on the question of inadequate security cover for Rajiv in his book, it was perhaps this confidence which made both Chandra Shekhar, and his men including Swamy, and the entire Home Ministry dismiss with disdain repeated pleas by P Chidambaram to provide adequate security cover to Rajiv. We have it on the authority of none other than Sonia Gandhi, who in her book on Rajiv (*Rajiv*, by Sonia Gandhi, 1994), narrates how the whole family was concerned about Rajiv's security and apprehended a threat to his life and that Rahul Gandhi, on a vacation from the US, told his mother that if no heed were paid to Rajiv's security he may have to come next time to attend his funeral and Rahul's utterance turned out to be so prophetic because soon thereafter, Rahul really had to rush to India upon hearing of his father's assassination in Sriperumbudur.

Chandra Shekhar was away in Bhubhaneshwar, the capital of Odisha that night when the news broke and flew back to New Delhi in

the early hours of 22 May, by which time the impact of the first flash of news had sunk in. With fingers pointing at him and his party, the first thing Chandra Shekhar did was to order an enquiry into the killing of Rajiv Gandhi. The MC Jain Commission, constituted later by the succeeding Congress government, has detailed the developments which led to instituting two parallel commissions of enquiry for this incident.

It is important to recall this to demonstrate how Chandra Shekhar, aware of accusations against him, was keen to acquit himself of the charge of complicity in Rajiv's assassination.

Also, it shows that in spite of this attempt, he suffered from considerable trust deficit and, therefore, these investigations and judicial probes were mired in controversies from day one. It has to be examined whether the succeeding inquiry commissions, the first set up by Chandra Shekhar and the second one by his successor, PV Narasimha Rao, were aimed actually at unraveling the mystery or simply to procedurally close the case, to declare that all aspects had been probed and none but the LTTE was guilty of killing Rajiv! At the end of the day, be it the Verma Commission of Chandra Shekhar and the SIT-led by DR Kaarthikeyan or MC Jain's confused and directionless inquisition, set up by Narasimha Rao on the insistence of those loyal to Sonia Gandhi, led by Arjun Singh, all surmised the same thesis of the LTTE killing Rajiv, fearing his return to power.

Curiously though, the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government to whom Justice Jain submitted his final report (a government which had

nothing to do with this assassination), for some unexplained reason did nothing more than completing the formality of setting up a Multi-Discipline Monitoring Agency (MDMA) which has done precious little except empty the coffers of the Indian treasury and sit in the comfort of airconditioned rooms, first in the South Block and now in the new CBI building in the CGO complex for last seventeen years.

The Verma Commission

But first things first. Justice MC Jain, in his Commission report, recalls the sequence of events leading to instituting the enquiry commission chaired by him and since the Verma Commission was set up before his appointment, naturally it starts with the setting up of the Verma Commission, explaining why, in spite of the Verma Commission, his Commission was also appointed. Jain recalls how, 'The Cabinet under the chairmanship of Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar met at (sic) the early hours of 22 May, 1991 and after adopting a condolence resolution on the sad and tragic demise of Shri Rajiv Gandhi, decided that a Commission of Inquiry presided over by a judge of the Supreme Court should be set up to go into the circumstances of the assassination of Shri Rajiv Gandhi.'

Jain also underlines, in para 2.2 of the 'Genesis' of his commission, the urgency that the Union Cabinet felt for appointing such a Commission of Inquiry and mentions that, 'The incident in which Shri Rajiv Gandhi met with his death gave rise to speculation as to whether the security arrangements made by the Government were sufficient or not or was it merely a chance which caused this incident or

whether there was an attempt by a person who without caring for his/her life indulged in this act of vandalism. It was therefore necessary to examine the security aspect and the Commission of Inquiry which the Home Ministry proposed to set up should be looking into this aspect. The Commission will inquire into causes of the adequacy or inadequacy of the security arrangements. It will also point out the deficiencies so that the details would assist the Government in future security for such eminent persons.'

Justice Jain recalls that the next day, the then Home Minister, Subodh Kant Sahay, addressed a letter to the then Chief Justice of India, Ranganath Mishra, stating that 'the Government of India has decided to set up, under Section 3 of the Commissions of Inquiry Act, 1952 (60 of 1952), a Commission of Inquiry comprising a sitting judge of the Supreme Court to inquire into the matter of public importance, namely the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, former Prime Minister of India', on 21 May 1991 and requested the Chief Justice to spare the services of a sitting judge of the Supreme Court to head the Commission.

Justice Mishra replied by his letter dated 25 May 1991, stating that while the Supreme Court has taken a decision generally not to spare the services of sitting judges for such purposes, the Court has agreed to make an exception in the present case 'keeping in view the impact of the incident on our democratic polity and nominated Mr Justice JS Verma, a sitting judge of the Court for the purpose, who has given his consent.'

The Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, issued Notification SO No. 356 (E) dated 27 May 1991 appointing a one-man Commission of Inquiry headed by Justice JS Verma. However, as Justice Jain details in this genesis, 'The terms of reference of the Verma Commission of Inquiry did not satisfy the Congress Party' and this was echoed in the Rajya Sabha during the Short Duration Discussion held on 4 June 1991 on the assassination of Shri Rajiv Gandhi. PV Narasimha Rao, appointed the Congress president upon Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, addressed a letter dated 2 June 1991 to the then Prime Minister wherein he, at the instance of his party colleagues, forwarded a 'revised draft of the terms of reference' which in their view, would meet the ends of justice and satisfy the people and hoped that the Prime Minister would do the needful.

The revised terms of reference included in the proposed draft notification, read as under:

Whether the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi could have been averted and whether there were lapses or dereliction of duty in this regard on the part of individuals on security duty before/at/during the time of the commission of the assassination.

The deficiencies, if any, in the security system and arrangements as prescribed or operated in practice which might have contributed to facilitate the commission of the assassination. Whether any person or persons or agencies were responsible for conceiving, preparing and planning the assassination and whether there was any conspiracy on this behalf and if so, all its ramifications.

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