

# Indira's

**T**he bullets aimed this week at India's Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, and its President, Zail Singh, who were attending a memorial for the murdered Mahatma Gandhi, are grim proof that the sins of the mother have now come to haunt the son.

Two years ago, prime minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her own Sikh guards. Since then her son Rajiv, who quickly inherited his mother's political mantle, has tried to damp down the fires of Sikh nationalism that had been ignited by Indira's political policies. Whether the assailant was a Sikh or not, the latest attack shows that political violence continues to shape Indian history.

Much of the fault lies with the late Indira Gandhi. In 1978 her Congress(I) party was in opposition. India was ruled by the Janata party, and the important state of Punjab by a coalition between Janata and the moderate Sikh Akali party. Indira, encouraged by her righthand man in Punjab, Zail Singh, sought to bring down the state government by splitting the Akali party — something she was to do later in other Indian states.

In a remote Punjab village, the Gandhi forces found an obscure local Sikh priest named Sant Jarnail Bhindranwale, and set him in motion to build an extremist political party that would overturn the moderate Akali. Indira Gandhi and Zail Singh succeeded beyond their wildest nightmares.

By 1984, when Indira was again in power in New Delhi, Bhindranwale and his extremists had shattered the Akali party and turned Punjab into a boiling cauldron of Sikh-Hindu violence.

# sins are Rajiv's legacy



**Eric MARGOLIS**

Hindus — the great majority in India and the core of the Congress(I) party's voters — rallied to Gandhi. She posed as the champion of Hinduism against the Sikhs who, though a majority in Punjab, are less than 2% of India's 750 million people. The final explosion came in June, 1984, when Gandhi rashly ordered the army to storm Sikhdom's holiest place, the Golden Temple at Amritsar.

Bhindranwale and a thousand other Sikhs were killed. The attack against the Golden Temple is regarded by many Sikhs as the worst event in their 400-year-old history. And, as we saw, they vowed — and got — revenge.

Rajiv Gandhi, who is now forced to wear a bullet-proof vest, has inherited the Sikh hornet's nest from his mother. In addition, he must also deal with serious turbulence she created in the predominantly Muslim state of Kashmir, in the important northern state of Andhra Pradesh and in the Himalayan kingdom of Sikkim.

There is also simmering secessionist violence among Nepalese Gurkhas living in northern India; Hindu

extremist groups; and with Mizo and Naga tribal minorities of the northeast frontier. Add to these festering sores the ever-present threat of slaughter and pogroms launched by the Hindu majority against India's largest ethnic minority, its 100 million Muslims.

India, of course, has never been an easy place to govern. Considering that this subcontinent is, as a nation, only 39 years old, it is remarkable that India holds together at all and manages to sustain a democratic system which, though deeply flawed, somehow still clunks and chugs along.

But as this week's assassination attempt showed, the level of political violence — never far below the surface in India — is fast rising. Can Rajiv Gandhi, a young man and former airline pilot with only two years political experience, cope with India's elephantine problems?

People who know Rajiv have told me he is sincere, honest and happily lacking, at least for now, in either the imperial ambitions that characterized his ruthless mother or the rather shady nature of his late brother, Sanjay. "Indira was nine feet tall," I was told. "Rajiv is only five feet tall." Many knowledgeable people share this view but hope that India's young leader will be able to grow in stature as his experience deepens.

If not, the outlook for India is disturbing. Indira drove most capable men out of the Congress(I) party and replaced them with hacks, sycophants and local warlords. Should Rajiv prove unable to dominate his party-men, India could be in for some rough times. And even worse if assassins' bullets ever do find their mark.