

Indira memory fading fast with the masses

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in NEW DELHI

INDIA, a land where personality cults spring up overnight, is struggling to find a pedestal on which to put its assassinated leader Indira Gandhi.

In the year since her murder last October 31, the woman once portrayed by a leading painter as a goddess has become mainly a face looking out from old election posters.

The swift fall of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi from public memory moved the respected Times of India newspaper to comment this month that the "deIndiraisation of Indira" seemed to be in progress. For many of her ardent supporters the final indignity came last month during the Punjab state election when Mrs Gandhi's name was mentioned only briefly in campaign speeches.

Campaign posters also studiously avoided showing her at the scene of the crisis which claimed her life. The campaign was a far cry from last December's national poll when crude drawings of Mrs Gandhi's blood-spattered body, alleged to have been shot down by two Sikh bodyguards, helped elect her son Rajiv.

"Who could have imagined that her name

would become almost a taboo even for us and so fast," the Times of India quoted a former Mrs Gandhi aide as saying. Memorial services are likely to be attended by hundreds of thousands of people on October 31 but some of Mrs Gandhi's supporters take a cynical view of the remembrance ceremonies.

"Of course when her death anniversary comes around we would all be bowing at her *samedhi* (memorial) giving big speeches but we'd all be careful about what we say," the aide said.

As Mrs Indira Gandhi's impact has receded there has been renewed interest in the nation's two great independence leaders, Mahatma Gandhi and Indira's father Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister.

During the past year, as Indira Gandhi's memory has dimmed, there has been a spate of articles and academic conferences which have examined, almost unanimously with favour, the contribution to Indian history by the Mahatma and Nehru.

"Nobody fails to notice how assiduously the young prime minister (Rajiv) skirts all references to Mrs Indira Gandhi at his press conferences, how quick he is to hark back to grandfather Jawaharlal," the Times of India said.

Mrs Indira Gandhi's opponents judge her 15 years of rule — with a three-year gap — in the

period from 1966 to 1984 as among the most turbulent in independent India.

It included for Mrs Gandhi the high of the 1971 war with Pakistan which led to the creation of Bangladesh and the lows of the 1975-77 emergency rule and her three years in the political wilderness until her re-election in 1980.

After the 1971 war, artist M.F. Hussain painted her as the Hindu goddess of war, Durga. Civil Aviation Minister Jagdish Tytler, a close friend of Mr Rajiv Gandhi, credits Indira with holding the nation together during the 1960s and 1970s and laying the basis for the modernisation policies introduced by her son.

During her life Mrs Gandhi's opponents often accused her of pursuing short-term aims and acting only to retain power, a charge that has followed her to the grave.

Janata party leader Mr Madhu Dandavate, who was part of the opposition that unseated Mrs Gandhi from 1977 to 1980, is not surprised that she has faded so quickly from public memory.

"When one compares Mrs Gandhi with her father, one cannot escape the historical lesson that those politicians who are guided by value judgments preserve their honour in the long term," he said.

— Reuter

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