



# *Policies & Perspectives*



VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

## *The 'What Ifs' of Feroze Gandhi and Others Out There*

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*As one reads 'Feroze the Forgotten Gandhi', a recently published biography of Jawaharlal Nehru's son-in-law and Indira Gandhi's husband, authored by Swedish journalist Bertil Falk, many 'What Ifs' come to mind. What if Feroze Gandhi's marriage had not failed? What if Feroze Gandhi had not been indifferently treated by Nehru and his family? What if he had not been cold-shouldered by his wife? What if he had lived longer and had a chance to realise his full potential? What if he had been around when Lal Bahadur Shastri, with whom he shared a close relationship, became the country's Prime Minister? The 'What If' endeavour is admittedly an academic excursion which is indulged in, at leisurely moments. There is often little purpose behind the exercise but to weigh tantalising possibilities as against irreversible situations. And yet these possibilities offer not just a different roadmap but at times, a preferable one to that adopted as a consequence of circumstances.*

*For instance, the 'forgotten' Gandhi would not have been so forgotten if Nehru had groomed him. Feroze Gandhi might even have been Nehru's right-hand man — the way Indira Gandhi became. Had he lived longer, he may have occupied a ministerial position in Shastri's Cabinet. And who knows, he could have played a key role in the choice of the next Prime Minister after Shastri's untimely and sudden death. And even if Indira Gandhi had become Prime Minister, under his sobering influence — he was a democrat and a staunch federalist — she would probably not have imposed the Emergency. Indeed, it can be contemplated that Feroze Gandhi may have lived longer had members of his illustrious in-law family and his wife especially, exercised their influence and tempered his somewhat reckless lifestyle. And, if the Congress had been destined to go the way of political dynasty, this eventually 'forgotten' Gandhi could well have been in the race — and succeeded.*

*Today, he is almost never invoked by either the Congress or the family which controls it and to both of which he belonged. The only one in the family who proudly carries his name as part of his own is Varun Gandhi — he is listed on the Lok Sabha website as "Feroze Varun Gandhi". There are two ironies here. The first is that Varun Gandhi belongs to the Bharatiya Janata Party and not the Congress. The second is that when he was just about a toddler, he and his mother Maneka Gandhi were literally shown the door by the powerful family's most powerful member, Indira Gandhi.*

*But the ironies do not end here. The family, most particularly Nehru's two sisters, Krishna Hutheesing and Vijayalakshmi Pandit, could not warm up to the 'outsider' Feroze Gandhi who had barged into their cosy life, first courting and then marrying Indira Gandhi. Falk writes in his book that they looked down at him as one from a trader community and wholly inappropriate to their stature. (It's true that Nehru's wife Kamala Nehru was very fond of him, but she had passed away years before the wedding took place). And yet, Indira Gandhi who had hardly done anything to make the 'outsider' Feroze feel acceptable in a hostile environment,*



*and who had unceremoniously thrown out Maneka Gandhi — it must be remembered that even Maneka Gandhi, a former model, had faced problems in certain quarters after she became part of the family, having married Sanjay Gandhi — was to warmly embrace a true ‘outsider’, Sonia Gandhi. Given that Sonia Gandhi, like Maneka Gandhi and Feroze Gandhi, too came from an ‘ordinary’ family, the class discrimination and the use of different yardsticks stick out like a sore thumb. And the Mother of All Ironies is this: While the Congress swears by the Gandhi family and the family proudly flaunts its lineage, both have forgotten the man who gave them the ‘Gandhi’ surname.*

*Reverting to the ‘What If’ game, what shape would Indian and Congress politics have taken had Maneka Gandhi not fallen foul of her mother-in-law? She could have been the heir apparent and Rajiv Gandhi would have continued to pilot commercial flights. Or perhaps he would have relocated to someplace abroad along with his wife Sonia Gandhi who, and many reports had it then, never wanted her husband into politics and had sought to persuade him to settle out of India. Today, it would have been Maneka and Varun Gandhi, and not Sonia and Rahul Gandhi, who would have been The Family! As an aside, media reports have it that Varun Gandhi, who is supposedly feeling sidelined in the BJP, might cross over to the Congress. This is of course strictly speculation, but through the application of “What If”, if we were to assume that he will join the Congress, the future which awaits him will be akin to that which confronts a prince who has returned to a kingdom where his elders have already occupied key positions and he has to make do with the crumbs.*

*But why must the ‘What If’ game be restricted to the Congress? Taking it elsewhere, what if Mulayam Singh Yadav had heeded his younger brother Shivpal Yadav’s advice in 2012 and not anointed his son Akhilesh Yadav as Uttar Pradesh’s Chief Minister after his Samajwadi Party won the Assembly election? The younger Yadav had completed college and had begun showing interest in politics. His cycle rallies had become popular and he was the party’s face of the youth. In an act of magnanimity and against the wishes of party veterans, Mulayam Singh Yadav refused to become the Chief Minister and gave his son the privilege. Less than five years down the line and as the 2017 Assembly poll approached, Akhilesh Yadav effected a coup, ousting his father from the party chief’s post, sidelining those who owed allegiance to the senior Yadav, installing himself as the undisputed party leader, and tying up with the Congress in the face of stiff resistance from the seniors. Would the electoral outcome have been any different had Mulayam Singh Yadav led the Samajwadi Party? Perhaps not, but at least the party founder would not be living out in politics, as he does today, a life of humiliation. Whatever little hopes he may have nurtured of a comeback has been dashed with a recent decision of the party to appoint Akhilesh Yadav as the chief for the next five years. He has extended his ‘blessings’ to the son, but he himself certainly does not appear blessed.*

*And, ‘what if’ the BJP had not won the 2012 Gujarat Assembly election so decisively under then Chief Minister Narendra Modi’s leadership? Would Modi then have arrived on the national stage and eventually become the Prime Minister? Going back a bit further, ‘what if’ the lobby which wanted Chief Minister Modi ousted in the wake of the 2002 communal violence, had succeeded? What if senior leader LK Advani, next only to AB Vajpayee both in party and Government ranks, had not led the drive to save the Chief Minister?*



*Modi's political career would have taken a huge knock at a stage when it had just started. Also, what if Sonia Gandhi had not heeded her "inner voice" and become the Prime Minister in 2004? Given the 'outsider' tag, could she have managed the support of other parties who were principally opposed to a person of foreign origin occupying that post? The likes of Sharad Pawar of the Nationalist Congress Party would have found it difficult, given their stated positions, to back a Sonia Gandhi-led Government.*

*The 'what if' modern Indian saga would be incomplete without the following addition: What if Modi had not been projected by the BJP as the party's prime ministerial candidate in the 2014 Lok Sabha election? Would the BJP have won — and so sweepingly — with another face, or would it have ended second yet again, as it did in 2004 and 2009? At least here, there ought to be no confusion. All empirical evidence of that time suggests that candidate Modi had galvanised the party like never before since the last one decade, become the beacon of hope for millions of Indian voters cutting across caste and gender lines, and single-handedly placed the BJP in a pole position to an extent that the electoral outcome was all but known to be heavily in the BJP's favour.*

*There is at least one instance in Mughal India where the 'What If' comes into play for one good reason: The alternative which never happened, had it happened, it could have changed not just the social equations of that time in large tracts of India but also perhaps created the ground for future communal amity. What if Dara Shikoh and not Aurangzeb had succeeded Shah Jahan? Being the ruling emperor's eldest son, he was the heir apparent. Indeed, Shah Jahan had even conferred the crown to him for the future when he named the young prince as Shahzada-e-Buland and Governor of a large Province. He even commanded a huge chunk of the Mughal emperor's Army. But he lost out in a bitter and violent power struggle to his younger sibling Aurangzeb and was eventually assassinated. Unlike Aurangzeb, Shikoh fervently believed in a harmonious and equal co-existence of the sub-continent's two major faiths — Hinduism and Islam. He was a Sufi prince and thus considered a heretic by the hardliners. Had he ascended the throne, many historians believe, the communal bloodbath that happened in Aurangzeb's time, targeting not just the Hindus but also the Sikhs, would not have happened. Earlier, how would history in the sub-continent have shaped if Jaichand had not betrayed (according to popular folklore) the 12th century ruler, Prithviraj Chauhan, and helped craft the victory of Mohammad Ghori? Ghori's triumph in the second Battle of Tarain was a turning point in the eventual Islamic conquest of India.*

*Nearly 18 years ago, the 'What If' industry truly arrived with the publication, by the publishers, Putnam, of the 800-plus page, 'The Collected What If?' in which a variety of historians and academicians imagined what might have been. It had essays by the likes of John Lucacs, John Keegan, James Bradley and Caleb Carr, among others. This intellectual exercise had to be given a proper name and the academic circles rose to the challenge, terming the 'What If' pursuit as 'counterfactual'. It had a ring of both seriousness and provocation. Seeking to shrug off the perception that the counterfactuals are mere hobbies to keep an otherwise empty mind occupied, the book's editor Robert Cowley observed, "What ifs can lead us to question long-held assumptions" and can "define true turning points". This certainly sounds like genuine academic*



*exercise. For example, in one of essays in the book (it's a collection of articles that appeared in 'What If' and its sequel, 'What If? 2'), the historian John Keegan contends that the history of the world — or at least Europe for sure — could have been very different had Hitler not invaded Russia in a hurry. He could have first taken control of oil (and the money that came with it) by dominating Turkey or the Near East and then turning his attention to Russia with a better chance at victory.*

*The collected writings have an amazing timeline of events, from 701 BC to the mid-20th century, and a few thoughts that might appear unacceptable to even imagine — because imagining is all that the counterfactuals can do to construct their narrative. For example, Professor of History and Religious Studies Carlos MN Eire, writing on the possible scenario had Pontius Pilate, the Roman Procurator of Jerusalem, not ordered the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, argues that without a crucifixion, Christianity would have still come as a monotheistic religion, but one that Rome could have adopted as an official religion to help the empire survive. Eire explains the challenges of considering the possibilities of Christianity minus the Cross: "What if Jesus hadn't been nailed to a cross at Pilate's orders? What if he had lived a long, long life? Or even just ten more years? Or one? What if his person and message had been interpreted different, as surely they would have been?" The Professor acknowledges that he runs the risk of sounding profane. "These are impertinent questions for a believing Christian — questions only an impious dog would dare ask, as John Calvin might have said in the sixteenth century. Believing that the world was saved through the crucifixion of Jesus its central to the Christian faith. For any believing Christian this counterfactual exercise is the ultimate blasphemy." But it could have well happened, had Pilate heeded his wife's warning against the crucifixion.*

*The unfortunate part is that the Cowley-edited collection, although exhaustive, has no Indian story to tell. There is need for an Indian 'What If'. This counterfactual is a treasure waiting to be explored. It would be interesting to read an academic analysis of 'What if Sardar Patel had become the Prime Minister instead of Nehru?'; or 'What if Netaji Bose had established his hold over the Congress?'; or "What if a uniform civil code had been implemented across all communities in India from the day the Constitution came into being?"; or even, 'What if India had not been partitioned?' Needless to say, in any such collection, the Feroze Gandhi story would be a prominent entry.*

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## About VIF

*Vivekananda International Foundation is a non-partisan institute for dialogue and conflict resolution from a nationalist perspective. Some of India's leading experts in the fields of security, military, diplomacy, governance, etc have got together under the institute's aegis to generate ideas and stimulate action for greater national security and prosperity, independently funded.*

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