

# Visiting Indian journalist reacts to death of Gandhi

By Peter Robison  
Staff writer

Having worked as a journalist in India for nearly 15 years, Nirmal Mitra got used to assassinations. But he was still "too shocked for words" by last Tuesday's killing of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

"It's a watershed," Mitra said. "It's a complete break with the past. For 13 years I had reported tragic events, but they were nothing compared with the enormity of the problem this presents."

Mitra, 34, is a senior correspondent for Sunday Magazine, India's equivalent of Time or Newsweek. For the past nine months, he has been studying economic issues of developing countries as a Knight Fellow at Stanford. The Knight Fellowship Program allows American and foreign journalists to take classes at Stanford for a year and examine issues from an academic perspective.

His fellowship will end in June, and he said he is anxious to return home to New Delhi shortly thereafter. As a journalist used to covering key political issues in India, Mitra is not accustomed to being away from home during what may be the greatest challenge to democracy the country will face since it achieved independence 44 years ago.

"I feel quite cut off," he said. "It's quite strange sitting here while all my friends are in the middle of things. They're on a 24-

hour vigil."

Gandhi's assassination marks the end of a political dynasty that began with his grandfather, Jawaharlal Nehru, who was India's first prime minister. Nehru's Congress Party has ruled India for 40 of its 44 years.

"If you hit the Nehru family, you are hitting the stability of India," Mitra said. "It's a mischievous crime. It took a family like that to keep India together."

Now, with the last of the adult members of the dynasty gone, Mitra said he fears that a window may be opening for the right-wing Hindu movement to take power — a turn of events he would consider disastrous for India.

"India has 14 languages and more than 300 dialects," Mitra said. "It has many different cultures. The problem is trying to unite them into a common whole. The Congress Party tried to do that through a process of accommodation, by giving representation to minorities."

But he said the Indian People's Party, the main party of the Hindu movement, will do quite the opposite. He compared the party's appeal to the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini and their attempts to create a unified state at the expense of minorities.

India is 80 percent Hindu and 12 percent Muslim, with the remaining 8 percent consisting of other ethnic groups. The Indian People's Party, Mitra said, unites a coalition



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**Nirmal Mitra, currently a Knight Fellow at Stanford, has worked as a journalist in India for 15 years. "I feel quite cut off," he says of living in the United States while his countrymen cope with Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. "It's quite strange sitting here while all my friends are in the middle of things. They're on a 24-hour vigil."**

# Mitra

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of Hindus — including small businessmen, petty traders and “urban yuppies” — who are linked by their prejudice against Muslims.

“It’s a very narrow core of retrograde individuals interested in turning back the clock,” he said. “I don’t see how a party like that could take over where Rajiv Gandhi left off.”

A fundamentalist Hindu takeover “would create a theocratic state that would jettison the secular constitution,” Mitra said. “That is the worst danger that looms on the horizon.”

Mitra’s concern is that without the Gandhi family at the center of the Congress Party, the Indian People’s Party will be able to paint itself as the party that will unify India.

“If you don’t have a Gandhi in the Congress, it’s as good as non-existent — it disintegrates, morally and physically,” Mitra said.

If the Indian People’s Party manages to win a majority of

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— Nirmal Mitra

seats in the legislature in the elections, it will quickly augment its power, much like Hitler’s Nazi party, Mitra said. He lamented that the Indian People’s Party can “come in through the democratic process, and there’s nothing we can do about it.”

After Gandhi’s assassination, India’s staggered elections — which were to have concluded Sunday — were postponed until June 12. Holding elections in India is “a mammoth exercise,” Mitra said. The electorate of 500 million is twice the size of the population of the United States.

Mitra criticized U.S. newspapers’ coverage of Gandhi’s assassination. The New York Times, he said, has been “flippant and dismissive about India’s ability to get through the problems.”

He said India “is not a banana republic” and “it is far more developed and mature than most

people think.”

Before he came to the United States, Mitra covered what he calls “the dark side of Indian life” for Sunday Magazine — child labor issues, tribal oppression and police brutality.

He said that although he has become more pessimistic as a result of that experience, he is hopeful for India’s future — as an Indian, if not as a journalist.

“There is a survival instinct in India,” he said. “It has the ability to withstand shocks and crises — war, drought, floods, cyclones and assassinations. It has the ability to get out of this one, too.”

Gandhi’s assassination is overshadowed by the fact that India’s constitution remains, Mitra said.

“Even at my cynical worst,” he added, “I think that eventually all the parties will sit down together and will keep the country intact.”