

International

Raise the Waratah The mystery of the unsinkable ship that sank years before the Titanic **14**

Star rises again for Gandhi family business

Priyanka hits election trail to revive Congress party fortunes

Randeep Ramesh
in Rae Bareilly

Donning a garland of port-coloured carnations, a young woman climbs on to a platform and begins a speech to several hundred villagers in the swirling dust of north India. Her peroration begins with a family history and ends with the words "Jai Hind" (Victory to India).

Immediately she finishes Priyanka Gandhi, whose father, grandmother and great-grandfather became Indian prime ministers, disappears into a surging crowd of children and women. Set against the backdrop of mud and thatched houses, it is a scene repeated a dozen times that day.

Ms Gandhi has taken to the hustings in India's general elections to campaign for her mother, Sonia, who leads India's Congress party, and her elder brother, Rahul, who is standing as a parliamentary candidate for the first time. Both mother and son are contesting seats in Uttar Pradesh, the country's largest state, which sent two generations of Gandhis to parliament.

"It is an emotional relationship we have with the people here. They remember what my family has done for them," Ms Gandhi told the Guardian.

Politics is often a family affair in India and scions of more than 100 dynasties are taking part in a national election that begins tomorrow and continues for the next four weeks. But with a name that has been synonymous with Indian politics for half a century, Ms Gandhi has emerged as the star of the ballot which



Priyanka Gandhi campaigns in Uttar Pradesh for her mother and brother and their Congress party Photograph: Pablo Bartholomew

will determine who will lead the world's largest democracy.

While opinion polls predict that the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies will return to power, the psychology graduate and mother of two has revived interest in the Congress party which has previously lacked a charismatic campaigner who could transcend religion, caste, region and language — the fault lines of Indian society.

"The Congress party should have brought her out earlier. Priyanka has the look of Indira Gandhi and could be a Princess Diana figure for Indian politics," said VP Singh, a former prime minister of India.

The 31-year-old listens to the complaints of villagers: they have to walk two miles to fetch water, there is no electricity and political opponents of the Gandhis are intimidating people into not voting.

"People here do not even

have the basic amenities ... the budget for development in one year built just 15km of road. Too often the money just gets hijacked by people with criminal backgrounds," said Ms Gandhi, who is known by her maiden name.

Nowhere are these problems more apparent than in Uttar Pradesh, which has a population of 170m — an electorate bigger than Russia's — and sends 80 parliamentarians to India's 543-strong legislature.

With 8% of the world's poor, the state is known for having India's lowest literacy rate and, according to the World Bank, some of the worst corruption.

While India's recent economic success has become an election issue the national debate has become polarised around two issues of national identity. One is a commitment from the BJP to bar foreign-born persons from "important offices of the Indian state". The other is a promise to build a

"magnificent" temple on the site of a mosque razed by Hindu mobs in the early 1990s.

The law on foreign-born citizens, analysts say, is aimed at one person: Sonia Gandhi, the leader of the opposition, who was born in Italy. "Do I look like a foreigner's daughter?" is Ms Gandhi's response. "The BJP's ideology is a divisive one ... how can it improve lives with that kind of agenda?"

A few hours' drive from Rae Bareilly lies the city of Ayodhya. It was here, in 1992, that mobs destroyed a 16th century mosque which rightwing Hindus said had been built on the site of the birthplace of Lord Ram, a warrior god in northern India. That act led to thousands of deaths during riots and launched the Hindu nationalist movement. Muslim groups have demanded that the mosque be rebuilt, while Hindus will not settle for anything less than a new temple. There have been leaks suggesting that a deal has been done between representatives from the Muslim and Hindu communities that will assuage both.

"We will build the temple," said Laloo Singh, the BJP's candidate for Ayodhya, who has been party to the discussions. "The mosque will be built as well but where and when will have to be decided."

The town has long been a centre of religious tensions and Muslim leaders say they are being coerced to agree to a temple without the pledge of a new mosque. "They cannot build anything because there are still cases going through the courts," said Mohammed Hashim Ansari, of the Babri Masjid Reconstruction Committee. "Both Congress and the BJP have lied over the years to us about the issue and nobody should trust either of them now."

● A Bollywood star, Soundarya, died yesterday when her small plane crashed near the southern Indian city of Bangalore.



Indira Gandhi, centre, with son Rajiv behind, his wife Sonia seated right, and Rahul and Priyanka in the foreground

India's leading dynasty puts out fresh shoots

Jawaharlal Nehru

Led India to independence in 1947 and continued as prime minister until his death. Nehru was so popular that he wrote unsigned articles warning about the possibility of dictatorship.

Indira Gandhi

Nehru's only child. Came to power in 1966. Voted out of power in 1977, Mrs Gandhi returned to office in 1980. She was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards after ordering the Indian army into the religion's holiest shrine in Punjab.

Rajiv Gandhi

Younger son of Indira. Became prime minister after his mother's death. An Indian army peacekeeping foray into Sri Lanka's civil war sowed the seeds of his destruction. He was blown up by a Tamil

suicide bomber in 1991.

Sonia Gandhi

Italian-born wife of Rajiv. Inherited the Gandhi mantle in 1998 to stem Hindu nationalism. Speaks English, Italian, French, Spanish and Russian but as opposition leader converses now mostly in Hindi.

Rahul Gandhi

Son of Sonia and Rajiv. Born 1970. Standing for his father's seat. Educated at Harvard and Cambridge, Rahul returned to India to set up a software company. Has now entered the family business: politics.

Priyanka Gandhi

Daughter, aged 31, of Sonia and Rajiv. She has a confident style and is tipped for India's upper house after the election.

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