

Leadership in Contrast – Narendra Modi vs. Indira Gandhi – A Civil Services Perspective



As Prime Minister Narendra Modi crosses his 11th consecutive year in office in 2025, comparisons with Indira Gandhi — India's longest-serving Prime Minister before him — are both inevitable and insightful. Despite their shared status as dominant leaders of their times, their political origins, ideological postures, and leadership styles offer rich contrasts and thought-provoking parallels. This article explores their journeys across five critical dimensions – political settings, domestic politics (especially their 11th year), foreign policy, economic governance, and leadership similarities.

Political Setting at Appointment – Contrasts in Mandate and Circumstances

Indira Gandhi's ascent to power in 1966 was circumstantial and reluctant. Following Lal Bahadur Shastri's sudden demise, the Congress chose her as a compromise candidate. She lacked a mass electoral mandate initially and was underestimated, famously dismissed as a "goongi gudiya" (dumb doll). Narendra Modi, by contrast, assumed office in 2014 with a thumping majority — the first single-party majority since 1984. Unlike Gandhi, Modi was the face of the BJP campaign and carried immense political capital even before assuming power. The economy was stable, and his leadership was the product of a planned and peaceful transition. In short, Gandhi inherited instability; Modi inherited expectation.

Domestic Politics in the 11th Year – The Emergency vs. Electoral Legitimacy

Indira Gandhi's 11th year (1975–76) is infamously remembered for the Emergency — a dark chapter in Indian democracy. Civil liberties were suspended, the press was gagged, and opposition leaders were jailed. She extended her rule through constitutional amendments and suppressive means, not elections. In contrast, Modi's 11th year in 2025 is the result of an electoral process. While his 2024 win saw a dip in seats to 240, he retained power through alliances. Despite criticism over weakening institutions and dissent suppression, there is no Emergency-like authoritarianism. His authority remains electorally sanctioned and politically undisputed within the BJP. Thus, Gandhi ruled by suppressing opposition; Modi rules by dominating it electorally.

Foreign Policy – Cold War Balancing vs. Multi-alignment in a Fragmented World

Indira Gandhi led India during the Cold War's most turbulent phase. She balanced pressures by signing the Indo-Soviet Treaty (1971) and leading the Non-Aligned Movement. Her biggest foreign policy triumph was the creation of Bangladesh after the 1971 war.

Modi's foreign policy initially embraced multi-alignment – building relations with the US, Russia, and the Gulf. But Pakistan-China challenges, and the unpredictable shifts under US administrations like Trump's, disrupted his balancing act. The 2019 Balakot strike and Pahalgam episode (2025) indicated a shift to assertive military diplomacy. While Gandhi navigated a bipolar world, Modi manages a fragmented, multipolar reality.

Economic Policies – From Socialism to Reform-Plus-Welfare

Indira Gandhi embraced a deep socialist agenda – bank nationalisation, state control, and the license-permit raj. Public sector expansion was central. Despite green revolution success, her tenure was marked by economic stagnation.

Modi, though ideologically opposed to socialism, ironically mirrors Gandhi's statism. His government has avoided aggressive privatisation and continues investing in public sector undertakings. However, he has also introduced major reforms like GST, Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, and digital infrastructure. Still, major reforms — land, labour, and agriculture — have stalled. His "Hindutva rate of growth" (6–6.5%) has been respectable, but not transformative. Modi talks reform, walks cautious statism — echoing Indira Gandhi in a market economy.

Leadership Similarities – Centralisation, Charisma, and Nationalism

Both leaders are characterised by –

1. **Centralised power** – Gandhi marginalised party stalwarts post-1969; Modi replaced regional BJP sa-
traps with loyalists.
2. **Charisma** – Gandhi's image as "Mother India" post-1971 mirrors Modi's "nation-builder" persona.
3. **Institutional command** – Both had compliant Presidents; both faced criticism for undermining institu-
tions.
4. **Nationalism** – Gandhi's nationalism was born out of war victories and global diplomacy. Modi's is iden-
tity-based and militarised – using surgical strikes and a Hindu cultural resurgence.

They ruled with conviction, confidence, and an iron grip – shaping political discourse around their personas.

Conclusion – Two Titans, Two Times

Indira Gandhi and Narendra Modi are India's strongest post-Independence prime ministers. Their leadership shaped India's political structure, for better or worse. Gandhi ruled in chaotic times with coercion;

Modi in stable times with electoral dominance. Their paths diverged ideologically – socialist vs. cul-
tural nationalist – yet converged in style – commanding, centralised, and narrative-driven.

For civil services aspirants, their comparative study reveals the evolution of Indian democracy –
from institutional fragility to strength, from ideological experimentation to assertive nationalism. It also un-
derlines how leadership must adapt to global challenges, domestic aspirations, and constitutional values.
Both leaders etched their legacy. The real question is – who will inspire future leadership more?

Main Practice Question.

1. Compare and contrast the leadership styles of The Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and Narendra Modi in
their 11th year of rule, focusing on domestic politics, foreign policy, economic governance, and nationalism.

Answer Guidelines –

1. Introduction (30–50 words) – Briefly introduce both leaders as dominant figures in post-independence
India. Mention their respective timelines (Indira Gandhi – 1966–77, Narendra Modi – 2014–2025) and signifi-
cance of the 11th year in each tenure.

2. Body – Thematic Comparison

1. Domestic Political Landscape –

1. Indira Gandhi – Emergency, centralised power, suppression of dissent, constitutional amendments.
2. Narendra Modi – Electoral mandate, party centralisation, strong opposition control, but within electoral
democracy.

2. Foreign Policy –

1. Gandhi – Cold War balancing, Indo-Soviet Treaty, creation of Bangladesh.
2. Modi – Multi-alignment, assertive diplomacy, Balakot strike, challenges with China and US realignment.

3. Economic Governance –

1. Gandhi – Socialism, nationalisation, state-led development.
2. Modi – Reform-welfare mix, digital economy, cautious privatisation, statist tendencies despite reform
rhetoric.

4. Nationalism –

1. Gandhi – Strategic nationalism through wars and diplomacy.
2. Modi – Cultural nationalism, Hindutva, muscular foreign policy, mass polarisation.

5. Leadership Style –

1. Centralised command, charismatic image, control over party and government in both cases.
2. Modi's use of technology and direct communication vs. Gandhi's institutional route.

3. Conclusion (50–70 words) – Conclude by stating that while the context and ideology differ, the leader-
ship strategies show striking similarities in centralisation and narrative control. Their tenures are critical to
understanding the evolving nature of Indian democracy and governance.