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Interpreting the Emergency

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Introduction¹

At a time of Hindu majoritarian ascendancy and the rise of illiberal democracy in India, the Emergency continues to elicit interest in the contemporary press, the past informing the present. But as is often the case when history is mined to search for morals, straightforward and didactic interpretations crowd out complex ones.

In the dominant *imaginaire*, Indira Gandhi is often portrayed as an absolutist dictator who eliminated free speech, dissent, and liberty. This view, in writing off agency on the part of the rest of the nation, omits mention of the role that a motley coalition of classes and political parties on the one hand, and an ambivalent as well as divided opposition on the other, played in legitimising the Emergency (see, *inter alia*, Nayar, 1977; Kapoor, 2016; Mehta, 1978[2015]; Guha, 2009 [2011]: 186ff; Hart, 1976: 241-74). Contemporary accounts also present a romantic view of the underground – here agency is overdetermined – overlooking its chaotic nature and marginal influence to weave the narrative of a successful democratic movement eventually displacing an autocratic premier in 1977 (see, *inter alia*, Sahasrabudhe and Vajpayee, 1991; Nayar, 1977; Kapoor, 2016; Mankekar and Mankekar, 1977; Kelkar, 2011; Advani, 1978; Malkani, 1978; Deshmukh, 1979).² A more revisionist repertoire, especially popular among Mrs Gandhi's apologists, describes the Emergency as a social revolution that promoted progressive policies (Dhar, 2000; Mukherjee, 2015; Drieberg and Mohan, 1975).³

The Emergency was in fact a far more complex phenomenon. Certainly, it was postcolonial India's first experiment with authoritarianism. But of what kind? And how may we explain its establishment as well as its place in India's history? Was the Emergency an aberration, a parenthesis of twenty-one months after which the country returned to the *status quo ante*? Or was it on the contrary a turning point after which things were altered forever? Or should it be seen as a moment in a larger history showing as many continuities as ruptures?

The What and Why of the Emergency

In June 1975, Mrs Gandhi chose the path of legitimacy rather than outright absolutism, which entailed operating at least seemingly within juridical and parliamentary restraints.

In the main these restraints were constitutional. Mrs Gandhi did not suppress or set aside the constitution. Eager to project the Emergency as a democratic endeavour, she instead chose to amend its provisions to recast Indian political life. Her constitutional dictatorship therefore retained features of parliamentary democracy, including the continuation of parliamentary sessions, and some mainstays of the rule of law, including the relative autonomy of the Supreme Court. That such sweeping changes occurred on the back of the same forces that governed the country before the Emergency – Congressmen, the judiciary, parliament, the bureaucracy, and the police – highlights the fact that Mrs Gandhi's power was not quite as absolute as much of the existing literature imagines. The courts, parliament, and the institutions of the *Rechtsstaat* were interfered with but not abolished; and no serious efforts were made to implement the far-reaching changes that Mrs Gandhi and her counsellors sometimes spoke of: a new constituent assembly, a shift to presidentialism, and the consolidation of a single-party dictatorship. The announcement of a snap election in January 1977, abruptly ending the autocratic experiment, was another manifestation of the constitutional fetters the premier and her party had placed themselves in.

But because these fetters proved mostly ineffective, there is little doubt that this constitutionally permitted dictatorship did in its actual operation fulfil the criteria of authoritarianism. If parties and trade unions were not formally banned, the upshot was that many of their leaders were nonetheless imprisoned – and some even tortured. If parliament continued to function as before, the absence of jailed MPs and the hegemony of the ruling party saw to it that parliamentary debates were rendered meaningless – all the more so as the press was not free to express dissent. And if the regime never did for the corporate media, Mrs Gandhi nevertheless disciplined it through censorship, intimidation, and financial persecution.

The Emergency fulfilled two other criteria of authoritarianism: it promoted no ideology, and, relatedly, it tried to depoliticise society. The absence of ideology is evident from Mrs Gandhi's lack of doctrinal consistency. While her Twenty-Point Programme suggested her leftist inclinations, very few progressive reforms were in fact implemented. The parts of the programme that were followed through, the disciplining of labour and liberalisation of the economy, were the bits intended to please India's capitalists. In this respect the

Emergency shows affinities with a peculiar type of social organisation: corporatism.

If the Emergency had no ideology, its leadership style centred around the personality of Mrs Gandhi, and populism was its main idiom. A depoliticised society could have only one good reason to be out in the streets: to support the supreme leader. Mrs Gandhi played on nationalist sentiments, cashing in on that relatively unideological “ism”: patriotism. It was always local saboteurs, fifth columnists, and foreign powers that had it in for India.

The Emergency also calls to mind “sultanism”, a variant of authoritarianism in Juan Linz’s typology. This “ism”, already obvious in 1975 through the arbitrariness and nepotism of Mrs Gandhi’s regime, was further manifest in 1976 with the rise to power of Sanjay, whose sterilisation and gentrification drives pushed the Emergency in a more violent direction.

If the Emergency was not the same all the time, it was not the same everywhere either. The contrast between North and South India, was striking, and partly due to the character of the dominant party and the ruling chief ministers. This diverse geography of the Emergency further complicates an already complex version of authoritarianism.

The chasm between policy announcements and implementation involved another restraint on Mrs Gandhi: her regime was hijacked by sectional interests – Sanjay Gandhi and the Youth Congress, capitalists, the emerging Congress satrapies that were Mrs Gandhi’s clients – that prevented her from delivering on her progressive promises. While the latter may have been suspect since she first espoused them – around the time of the Congress split of 1969 – the handful of socialist policies that were adopted in the late sixties and early seventies, such as the nationalisation of a small number of banks and private enterprises, a commitment to break up monopolies, manoeuvres calculated to expedite expropriation, and the attempts to build grassroots cadres in the Congress to reduce the party’s dependence on the gentry, were all abandoned one after another during the Emergency.

Finally, Mrs Gandhi was thwarted by circumstances. The initial “successes” of the Emergency – inflation under control, foreign exchange and food reserves dramatically improved – were the results not of authoritarian rule but the generous monsoon rains of

1974 and 1975, and a tightly run monetary policy.⁴ Around June 1976, when inflation began climbing again, Mrs Gandhi's hold over the Emergency narrative started to crumble. The Emergency was, in short, an authoritarian regime operating in a space constrained by the constitution, clientelism, and circumstance.⁵

But why has it happened in the first place? We need to distinguish the Emergency's immediate causes from the longer-term factors that made it possible. The JP Movement and the Allahabad judgment have to be contextualized: the former as the outcome of a deeper socio-economic crisis, and the latter in conflicts between the executive and the judiciary since the late 1960s.

Yet another explanation for the Emergency can be found in an interrogation of the authoritarian personalities of its two protagonists. This too has to be put in perspective: the Emergency is the culminating point of a process of personalisation and centralisation of power going back to the gradual replacement of old-guard Congressmen by new and loyal followers and the weakening of state institutions in the late 1960s.

The Emergency was also made possible because Mrs Gandhi could rely on a large coalition of supporters, ranging from the Communist Party of India to their capitalist arch-enemies. For the Left the Emergency was a tool for redistribution and secularisation. For industrialists it heralded an era of discipline: lower wages and higher profits. For the middle class the Emergency meant the return of political and social order after years of unrest (on the relation between the Indian middle class and the Emergency, see the excellent article by Rajagopal [2011]).

The coalition of the supporters was so large, the hold of the regime over society so severe, the dissidents so few, and international pressure so weak that the Emergency would probably have continued had Mrs Gandhi not decided to go to the polls. Democracy, we suggest, fell apart so quickly in India in 1975 because its core values, including liberty, were poorly institutionalised in the Indian setting. This raises a larger question: If postcolonial India could turn its back so quickly on democracy, where does the Emergency fit in its history?

A Parenthesis? A Turning Point? Or More of the Same?

Scholars have read the Emergency variously. For some it was an aberration, an interregnum, a parenthesis of twenty-one months; for others it was a turning point after which nothing was the same. Yet others argue that between the authoritarian regime and democracy before and after, there was a difference of degree not nature. There is something to be said for each of these interpretations, the third in particular.

We could start our survey with the first interpretation. To the nationalist historian Bipan Chandra, the Emergency, along with the JP Movement, “proved to be mere passing interludes in the long march of Indian democracy India’s ‘political miracle’ has continued.” (Chandra, 2003: 283, 294) His argument is a rather conventional one: The Emergency was declared on 26 June 1975 and withdrawn on 23 March 1977, at which point political prisoners were freed, censorship lifted, and power transferred. Fear vanished just as quickly as it had taken root, and institutions recovered the relative autonomy they had enjoyed before June 1975. Journalist Janardan Thakur echoes this view: “After I had finished writing *All the Prime Minister’s Men* in July 1977, I had shoved all my notes and clippings on Mrs Gandhi into a large envelope, sealed it with sellotape and consigned it to the bottom of my filing cabinet, hoping it would never have to be brought out again, except to be thrown.” (cited in Tarlo, 2003: 202) In this interpretation the Emergency is but a moment, a blink of the eye, which yields no lessons because nothing in it really applies to anything afterwards. This is roughly a call to amnesia.⁶ It is possibly one of the reasons why there have been such few books on the Emergency.⁷

This interpretation, we believe, is both flawed and problematic. It is, for one, convincing only from a strictly legalistic point of view. True, the damage the Emergency did to Indian political institutions was to a large extent soon undone. But those who see the Emergency as a “turning point”, as Gyan Prakash does in his *Emergency Chronicles*, rightly point out that such reductionism detracts more than it adds to our understanding of Indian democracy.

The Emergency, incontrovertibly, was a milestone. As Prakash notes, the Janata was quick

to reinstate preventive detention and put to use the authoritarian regime's laws to serve its ends (Prakash, 2019: 376, 379). He also discerns in the Emergency the onset of another malaise: the growing power of money and muscle in Indian politics. On this account, traditional political intermediaries, members of political parties, gave way to "influence peddlers" with criminal and corporate connections. After the Emergency, the regime changed, but these figures remained a fixture on the Indian political landscape. Today, "an army of fixers and middlemen operate at every level to distort and corrupt the everyday experience of democracy, turning it into 'a feast of vultures'." (Prakash, 2019: 376-7)

Indeed, there is no gainsaying the fact that the Emergency accentuated the criminalisation of politics. A case in point was Arjun Das, whose protection rackets pre-dated the Emergency by a year (Thakur, 1977: 141). Many of the villains of 1975–7 long remained influential in the party apparatus; some of them stoked the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi.⁸ Because of the impunity the architects of this authoritarian regime enjoyed after the Emergency was lifted, it soon became a truism that Indian politicians were above the law. In sum, the mould of the typical post-Emergency politician was forged in the crucible of the Emergency.

The Emergency also, as we noted, furthered the mainstreaming of Hindu nationalism that the JP Movement had initiated. The Sangh Parivar gained a new legitimacy in 1975–7 because of its role in the underground resistance. As L.K. Advani declared, the stigma of "untouchability" had gone.⁹ The Bharatiya Janata Party, heir of the Jana Sangh, was created in March 1980 in the context of the Janata Party's disbandment and included former Congress (O) leaders such as Sikander Bakht. But even before its founding, the rehabilitation of Hindu nationalism had begun. The number of RSS *shakhas* jumped from 8,500 in 1975 to 11,000 in 1977. After the Emergency, it further increased to 13,000 in 1979, 17,000 by 1981, and 20,000 by 1982. In the early 1980s, the RSS had a million members according to an official report of the Government of India (see, Balasaheb Deoras, 1979: 7, 32 cited in Jaffrelot, 1996: 302; Andersen and Damle, 1987: 215). In parallel, BMS membership increased, too, from 1.2 million in 1977 to 1.8 million in 1980, and the ABVP's from 170,000 in 1977 to 250,000 in 1982.

The Emergency was, finally, a watershed moment for industrial relations. It threw an

already skewed balance of forces out of kilter. In the years that followed, the last vestiges of working-class politics were imperiously wiped out from the republic. After a number of wage freezes and bonus slashes, the Essential Services Maintenance Act of 1981, which allowed for the banning of strikes and the arrest of obdurate workers who refused to work overtime and institutionalised the use of the armed forces as blacklegs, was another nail in the workers' coffin. The swan song of the labour politics of old was the unsuccessful 1982 textile strike in Bombay, brutally put down by millowners and the Congress government, leaving 150,000 unemployed. In its wake, the bargaining power of labour rapidly diminished. Unions were denied recognition, leaders fired, and the workforce increasingly casualised – all with state complicity.

New neoliberal nostrums swept away what little appetite the Indian state had for controlling the commanding heights of the economy. A growing rejection of statism in the wake of the Emergency encouraged industrialists, wealthier and more determined than ever, to step in.¹⁰ Dhirubhai Ambani, founder of the Reliance conglomerate, guilefully pointed out in the pages of *India Today* that capital markets had grown by 2,500 per cent between 1980 and 1985, even as the state struggled to fund power projects, the railways, and public enterprises. “There is no money in the government, that is true, but there is money with the public. We can pump that money to a hundred Reliances and build a strong country”, he enthused (Rajagopal, 2011: 1007). This was after growing his businesses in the shadow of Mrs Gandhi (see, McDonald, 1998).

In the 1980s “socialism” was no longer needed even as a rhetorical device. In her last term, Mrs Gandhi, as before, had no qualms in playing second fiddle to private capital: credit extended by public banks to private industries doubled; licensing procedures were centralised and expedited; export credit agencies set up to pump capital into the private sector; taxes lowered; legislations aimed at weakening monopolies and restricting foreign-exchange transactions diluted; free-trade zones inaugurated; and state expenditures increasingly met by indirect taxation. After her passing, Mrs Gandhi's son Rajiv continued these policies until the voters kicked him out (Maiorano, 2015: 90-2, 94).

While it is clear that “the Emergency enjoys an afterlife”, it is also obvious that some of the

developments that Gyan Prakash sees as the Emergency's legacies in fact pre-date the regime – by his own admission. The calibre of political personnel is a case in point. “After Nehru's death [in 1964], the political elite became consumed with scheming to maintain power in response to the rapid unravelling of state–society relations”, he writes, before lamenting that “politics became only a chess game of power” (Prakash, 2019: 378). Likewise, much ink is spilled equating Narayan with Mrs Gandhi. On Prakash's account, the two titans had pushed Indian politics in a different direction long before the Emergency. In highlighting the similarities in their élan, Sudipta Kaviraj, too, makes the case that both Narayan and Mrs Gandhi – by resorting to populism, substituting personality for programme, welding Left rhetoric with conservative praxis – irredeemably changed the political landscape well before she pressed the panic button (Kaviraj, 1986: 1703).

If the turning point of Indian political history was marked by the rise of what Ashis Nandy calls “pure politicians”, why, then, single out the Emergency for this development? For other watersheds are equally compelling: 1967, the first time Congress hegemony was seriously threatened; 1964, the year of Nehru's death; or even 1947, when Indian elites for the first time came to fully control what was soon to become the Indian republic. In the final section of the Conclusion, we will explore the continuities between the Emergency and the periods that bookended it.

Differences of Degree – and Nature

For all the high political changes of the mid-1970s, it must be remembered that for large swathes of society, the Emergency made no fundamental difference: neither for political prisoners and those who were tortured, nor for the Indian masses, and especially not for the poor.

First, there is the fact of the state's weak penetration into the countryside, which somewhat insulated the mofussil from the authoritarian dispensation, more so the further one went from the regime's core – Delhi, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh. Beyond this perimeter, that the Emergency arrived tardy to the mofussil is evident from Lee Schlesinger's study of a village in the Satara district of Maharashtra. Private discussions of the

anibani – the Emergency, lit. “commotion”, “fervour” – only began to take shape several months after its declaration (Schlesinger, 1977: 628). In fact, it was only around September 1976 that the Emergency came home in this village: policemen from the state capital knocked on doors and scouted fields, extracting as much as they could in cash or kind and threatening those who resisted with MISA arrests. The violence, however, was minimal. Just thirteen men from this village of 400 families were sterilized (Schlesinger, 1977: 632, 638, 641). Here, local authority was in practical terms a function of caste and landlord power: people had no time for claptrap about democracy and liberty. Paradoxically, villagers had a marked preference for *hukumshahi* over *lokshahi* (authoritarianism over democracy) because a strong state meant work got done. In any case, the Emergency did not really belong there. The quip of a low-level administrator in the village illustrated how common it was in rural settings to make light of the regime change: he was “considering declaring a state of emergency in the village”, he would joke to anyone who cared to listen (Schlesinger, 1977: 629-30). Locking up the opposition, cracking down on black marketeers, and browbeating lethargic bureaucrats to turn up on time were seen as urban concerns; rural issues, on the other hand, related to poor land distribution, caste oppression, credit undersupply, mercurial landlords, corrupt policemen and administrators – and these as ever went unaddressed. As for the belated arrival of the Emergency in the few thousand villages where it seems to have been experienced, the regime in power hardly seemed an aberration. Certainly, there was some awareness of the greater barbarity that the Congress was perpetrating on the poor through its sterilisation drive. This owed to the fact that in the absence of a welfare state, the scalpel was robbing indigents of their only asset: the ability to produce children, who as adolescents would have laboured in the fields, and as adults provided for their aged parents. But still, every report of rural injustice on the front pages of the dailies of the 1960s and 1970s confirms that the “excesses” of the Emergency were of the same coercive order as quotidian state-society and class relations experienced for years on end before the Emergency arrived. The 1977 election bears out the truth of this: while the Congress polled on average 40 per cent in urban constituencies, it registered 47 per cent of the vote in rural ones (Weiner, 1978: 79).

In a sense, the same could be said of the urban setting, too. Here, in terms of quotidian policy-making the Emergency appears neither as a parenthesis nor as a turning point, but

the intensification of an established style of rule. Several of the draconian policies associated with the Emergency, in fact, predated it. It was in June 1974, for instance, that the Wage Freeze Act was rammed through Parliament, allowing for half of every citizen's dearness allowance to be withheld from them as "compulsory deposit". Likewise, gentrification and mass sterilisation were well under way before the Emergency.

The poor were the main targets of birth-control policies before the Emergency and remained so during it. In 1973, a survey of over half a million respondents who had been sterilised found that about 75 per cent earned less than Rs 100 a month. In most places, the "cash incentives" offered for these surgeries were worth at least a month's income, and in a few, such as Gorakhpur, over twice that. Moreover, some of the sterilisation drives were cynically timed during drought periods, when it was known that labour shortages would drive the unemployed straight into the operating theatre. Furthermore, the tyranny of numbers, both in terms of targets and incentives, dictated that the poor be kept in the dark about alternative contraceptive methods. A survey of rural India in 1972 showed that only 9.4 and 18.2 per cent were aware of the existence of the pill and prophylactics, respectively, whilst 70.5 per cent knew what a vasectomy entailed (Vicziány, 1982: Part II, 563, 568). In the event over a million sterilisations took place every year in the late 1960s and 3.1 million in 1972-3, tellingly more than the 2.6 million figure for the first year of the Emergency.

As with the sterilisation programme, so with the gentrification of cities. In Delhi, Jagmohan, the chief architect of "beautification", was already in charge in 1975 and, as he put it, during the Emergency "the same scheme, the same policy, and the same procedures were continued; only the pace of work increased." (Jagmohan, 1978: 1, 45) Indeed, while the two and a half years to June 1975 witnessed the demolition of 1,800 houses in the capital, the nineteen months that followed saw the destruction of 150,105 (Jagmohan, 1978: 78). It was in early 1975, a couple of months before the Emergency, that Jagmohan published his manifesto for urban renewal, *Rebuilding Shahjahanabad: The Walled City of Delhi*. By then he had already put some of his dreams of rebuilding Delhi into practice, having initiated slum-clearance operations as early as 1967 (Jagmohan, 1978: 31-3). The Emergency simply allowed him to see his dreams materialise more quickly.

Similarly, Mrs Gandhi's war on beggars had an older history. As early as 1954, the then Congress Bombay chief minister Morarji Desai had a bill shot down that was aimed at providing beggars with public housing. It would cost the state "a crore of rupees" to "convert the beggars into useful citizens", he protested; rather than "divert funds from development projects", a simpler solution was to have beggars "kept on the run by the police" (*Times of India*, 4 April 1954, p. 10). In 1967, a small town in Maharashtra piloted a programme whereby authorities arrested beggars and carted them off to work on bunding and railway projects without pay. "If the experiment is successful", this form of modern slavery would take root in other cities as well, *zila* officials enthused (*Times of India* 14 July 1967, p. 3). In 1972 the Lok Sabha's estimates committee proposed making "willful begging by able-bodied persons" a penal offence (*Times of India*, 18 November 1972, p. 6). The press shared in these values. In 1960, when 10,000 beggars unionised in Hyderabad demanding unemployment benefits, the *Times of India* opined that it would be "absurd" for beggars to "be enabled" in this manner – "it is for the families themselves to try and provide for any member who, through infirmity, is unable to make a living for himself" (*Times of India*, 7 November 1960, p. 6). In a 1973 profile of Bombay's beggars, the *Times* alleged they were making "easy money", that the town was a "safe haven" for them, and that most were not even "genuine" beggars: in fact "hardly 20 to 25 per cent" of them worked, which was unfortunate, because they had a tendency to spend their "leisure hours" gambling.¹¹ Similarly, the regular supply of stories of "rich beggars" found with thousands of rupees as well as the aesthetic concern regularly voiced in opinion pieces that they were "spoiling" neighbourhoods – nowhere was the "sight of beggars" more "harrowing than in the capital, spruced and dolled up with fountains and gulmohurs" – and making it harder for "citizens" [that is propertied ones] to commute, were all part of the gentrification war waged against the lumpenproletariat by the state, the press, and the bourgeoisie.¹²

Emma Tarlo's remarkable historical ethnography of the Emergency's twin programme of gentrification and sterilisation, too, confirms the continuities between India under authoritarianism and the years preceding it. To her informants, Delhi's slum dwellers, the Emergency was the *nasbundi ka vakt* (the time of sterilisation) (Tarlo, 2003: 131, 173). But those twenty-one months were no better or worse than what came before or after. For this

was neither the first nor the last time they were on the receiving end of state power. Resettlement was not a new phenomenon either; only “the scale of activities was different as was the speed of execution.” (Tarlo, 2003: 140) During the Emergency, as before and after, the poor were submitted to what Tarlo calls “forced choices”: the inescapable and unchanging fact was that they could not escape the violence of the powerful, whether the state’s or the local notable’s (Tarlo, 2003: 177). In her judgment, Sanjay’s sterilisation drive only brought into sharper relief the lived experience of India’s working poor: “the commodification of the body was neither so exceptional nor so specific to the Emergency as such.” (Tarlo, 2003: 200) For one of her interviewees “it was one type of business which even today is still going on. If you go to Irwin Hospital then you will find people lined up on the pavement to give blood or to sell a kidney for money. What’s the difference?” (*cited in Tarlo, 2003*)

A brief survey of the Morarji Desai administration confirms that, to the average citizen, the years that followed the Emergency proved no better. A harbinger was the Janata Party’s unforced embrace of the Twenty-Point Programme, which the new prime minister’s secretariat endorsed *in toto*, describing it as “accepted national policy”.¹³ As with rhetoric, so with action. By October 1977, Raj Narain, minister for health and family welfare, was threatening to cut off central funds to states that failed to render enough citizens infertile. The limited incentives on which the programme relied were producing less than stellar results, Narain averred.¹⁴ In February 1979 his successor to the ministership was exhorting family-planning officials to apply “gentle pressure” on citizens baulking at the operation (Vicziány, 1982: Part I, 386, 397). The main difference was that the pressure was now placed on women, for men had grown defiant since the Emergency.¹⁵ Moreover, the Janata refused to offer recanalisation facilities to the bulk of the victims of the Emergency: ministrations were reserved only for the unattached and those with “less than two children”.¹⁶

The gentrification of urban centres continued apace too. Old Delhi, one of the Emergency’s most dreaded flashpoints, is as good an example as any. “In the master plan of Delhi there is a proposal for the removal of unauthorised fish markets from the Jama Masjid area is not anything being done in this behalf?” Morarji Desai enquired of the ministry of works and

housing a few months into his term.¹⁷ There was “no mention” of this in the city’s master plan, he was informed; nevertheless, the ministry began “look[ing] into . . . the question of shifting”, and within a month had accomplished the “removal of [the] unauthorised fish market.”¹⁸

What of industrial relations? Here, Jayaprakash Narayan invoked both *laissez-faire* and *raison d'état*: “Some trade unionists . . . are again pressing their sectional demands without heeding the national interest. They must remember that in doing so they are assaulting the open society.” (Narayan, 1978: 207) Morarji Desai suggested with commensurate reactionary discomfiture that the “agitations . . . instigated by members of Yuva Janata”, the ruling party’s youth wing, were doing “more harm than good to the cause of labour”; he felt it relevant to add begrudgingly that he had “no objection to their participation in trade union activities.”¹⁹ Likewise the Janata’s economic policy statement was clear that strikes “could only be resorted to after the approval of the government”, lest its fomenters face “penal and pecuniary action”.²⁰ In other regards, too, the corporatism of the Janata years had clear affinities with the authoritarian regime that preceded it. Only a few months into his ministership, labour minister Ravindra Varma came out in favour of the National Apex Body that Mrs Gandhi had set up during the Emergency, whose sole objective was to curb the menace of collective bargaining by hammering out “conciliatory” settlements in boardrooms (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1978: 390-1). Despite the presence of many “socialists” in power, monopolies were left untouched: the Janata referred not a single case to the MRTP Commission in its first year in power; in its next two, it uncovered the presence of just two monopolies in the republic (*See the table in*: Beena, 2014: 33). That none of these trends was substantially altered, never mind reversed, when Mrs Gandhi returned to power in 1980 suggests that the élan of Emergency rule had by then become a peculiarity of the Indian political repertoire.

Conclusion

Studying the Emergency helps us understand the nature of the Indian polity. For this period reveals both the vulnerabilities and limits of Indian democracy. It is fair to conclude, then, that in subjecting so many of its citizens to such inhumane treatment, the Emergency

regime was merely intensifying recognisable trends from the past. In many domains, and for the poor especially, between Indian authoritarianism and Indian democracy there was only a difference in degree.

It is only such a bleak assessment that can account for the popularity that Mrs Gandhi and Sanjay continued to enjoy after the Emergency, even in places like Tarlo's Welcome Colony. Over thirty years after the lifting of the Emergency, Tarlo's interviewees, who had borne the heavy hand of the regime's sterilisation and gentrification drives, still believed that Mrs Gandhi had been "the greatest leader the country had ever had." (*cited in* Tarlo, 2003: 205) And that "you will not easily come across another man like Sanjay Gandhi . . . the country needs a strong leader like Sanjay Gandhi." (*cited in* Tarlo, 2003: 214) While her informants did not approve of the atrocities of the Emergency, they simply did not attribute them to Mrs Gandhi and her son. For they believed the two "had been unaware of the sterilisation abuses being perpetuated in the name of family planning." (*cited in*: Tarlo, 2003: 212) The Emergency, in essence, helps us look at Indian history through different lenses. Seen from the perspective of subalterns and a citizenry almost continuously subordinated and oppressed by the state, this is the history of a constant struggle between the people on the one hand and the republic's rulers on the other. While the tribulations of ordinary Indians grew considerably during the Emergency, it is important to recognise that the difference was more a matter of degree than nature: The Emergency was, in essence, "more of the same". Here, then, is a lesson for the present. If this reading of Indian political history is correct, there appears to have been no linear deepening of democracy in the country. But the past need not be prologue. Indeed, at a time when a Hindu nationalist authoritarian populism is accentuating, in the manner that the Emergency did, the illiberal aspects of Indian democracy that have been present all along, all the while conforming to the shibboleths of democratic formalism, the task of putting Indian democracy to rights remains more pressing than ever.

Notes

¹ This paper draws from the conclusion of C. Jaffrelot and P. Anil, *India's First Dictatorship. The Emergency, 1975-77*, London, Hurst, 2020. Now for sale: <https://www.hurstpublishers.com/book/indias-first-dictatorship/>

² The Shah Commission reports, too, blame virtually every transgression of the regime on Sanjay (*SCR*, vol. 2,

p. 119).

³ In a weaker version of the same argument, it is suggested that while Mrs Gandhi's government aided industrialists and undermined democracy – hence, she was no champion of the democratic Left – she got trains to run on time, cracked down on smugglers, and brought peace to the republic after years of popular protest and union activity. For this view, see Chandra (2003); Moraes (1980); Sahgal (1978); Malhotra (1989).

⁴ The PMS admitted as much: see its “20-Point Economic Programme Review of Implementation”, 3 August 1975, PMSP, File 37/633/15-A/1975 PMS. Money supply had begun decelerating months before the Emergency. See Annexure 3 in *The Reserve Bank of India: Volume 3, 1967–1981*, p. 430.

⁵ The thrust here has been on the latter two, if for no other reason than to escape the constitutional determinism that has dogged many contemporary interpretations of the Emergency, wherein not only are the prodromes of authoritarianism seen in the Constituent Assembly debates of 1946-9, but, for all intents and purposes, a causal link is drawn between the two set pieces three decades removed from one another. See, for instance, Prakash (2019).

⁶ The very fact that no trial worth its name could ever take place, too, contributed to erasing the Emergency from India's collective memory. When Mrs Gandhi came back to power in 1980 she not only disbanded the L.P. Singh Committee that investigated the misuse of intelligence agencies during the Emergency and withdrew all the cases against her in the courts, she also destroyed all copies of the Shah Commission Report her government could lay its hands on. In 2010 Era Sezhiyan, realising that the Shah Commission report was no longer available, published extracts from it under the title *The Shah Commission: Lost and Regained*.

⁷ A second reason, as Nandy puts it, is the “enormous political effort [that] has gone into wiping out the Emergency as a live memory” after the Congress returned to power (*Times of India*, 22 June 1995). A third is the guilt that much of the intelligentsia felt after 1977. In Emma Tarlo's judgement, regret was rife among the upper segments of society: many “journalists, government servants, politicians, writers or activists felt they could have done much more to oppose the Emergency.” Tarlo (2003: 224) We have highlighted another factor above: the lack of commitment to democratic values among India's elite groups.

⁸ Coomi Kapoor notes that “many of the key players in the Congress in later years were his [Sanjay's] protégés. These include Pranab Mukherjee, Kamal Nath, Ambika Soni, Ghulam Nabi Azad, Ahmed Patel, R. Gundu Rao, Ashok Gehlot, Digvijay Singh, Jagdish Tytler, Vayalar Ravi, Kalpnath Rai, Anand Sharma, (Dumpy) Akbar Ahmed, Ram Chandra Rath and Gufra-e-Azam.” (Kapoor, 2016: 329)

⁹ Interview with L.K. Advani, 11 February 1994, New Delhi.

¹⁰ In this, the intellectual groundwork had already been laid by early postcolonial Indian socialists, all of whom placed a greater accent on “self-help” than on the state: Sherman (2018: 485-504).

¹¹ Not once in the profile was a solution proposed: *TOI*, 25 November 1973, p. 3

¹² See, *inter alia*, *TOI*, 17 July 1961, p. 5; *TOI*, 12 February 1971, p. 3; *TOI*, 22 May 1971, p. 5; *TOI*, 25 July 1972, p. 4. The quote comes from Usha Rai, a journalist known for raising development and feminist issues. Female beggars “seem to be more persistent than men in asking for alms”, she writes. Most beggars con passers-

by with “usual tricks of the trade”, but not all – “there are some genuine cases”.

¹³ Note on “Lok Sabha Starred Question No. 152”, 1 April 1977, PMSP”, File 37/633/Parl/Ques./1977

¹⁴ The incentives – “special increment in the form of personal pay”, a more generous insurance policy, and lower interest rates to finance home construction – were introduced in December 1979. In the case of puerperal tubectomies, no special leave was granted because the existing maternity leave was deemed sufficient for recovery. See the memorandum on the “Grant of Special Leave to Government Servants for Undergoing Sterilisation Operation”, 11 April 1977, MHAP, File 28016/3/78-Estt(A); memorandum of the Department of Personnel & A. R. on sterilisations, 9 January 1980, MHAP, File 11030/22/79-AIS-II.

¹⁵ Thus, while three-quarters of sterilisations had been conducted on men in 1976-7, the next three years would witness a reversal: each year, women accounted for between 73 and 80 per cent of operations.

¹⁶ Note on “Family Welfare Programme – facilities for recanalisation at government expense”, 21 June 1977, MHAP, File 28016/4/77-Estt(A). The need to limit availability was in part guided by the fact that recanalisation necessitated forty-two days of hospitalisation, that is, twenty-one to recanalise each *vas deferens*: ministry of railways memorandum on recanalisation, 7 July 1978, MHAP, File 28016/4/77-Estt(A); Note by the Department of Personnel & A. R. on recanalisation, 14 October 1977, MHAP, File 28016/4/77-Estt(A).

¹⁷ Special Private Secretary to the Prime Minister to the Secretary, Ministry of Works and Housing, 28 July 1977, Prime Minister’s Secretariat Papers, File 7/419/1977 PMS.

¹⁸ K. Biswas, Director of the Ministry of Works and Housing to the Prime Minister’s Office, 5 September 1977; R.M. Agrawal, Joint Secretary to S.M. Goyal, Commissioner, Municipal Corporation of Delhi, 5 September 1977; Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Ministry of Works and Housing to the Prime Minister’s Office, 2 October 1977. All Prime Minister’s Secretariat Papers, File 7/419/1977 PMS.

¹⁹ Desai to Chandra Shekhar, 24 February 1978, Morarji Desai Papers, Subject File 13.

²⁰ The Janata Party’s “Statement on Economic Policy”, 23 November 1977, Prime Minister’s Secretariat Papers, File 37/692/1977 PMS.

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