

The Authoritarian Streak in Indian Democracy

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India's First Dictatorship – The Emergency 1975-77

By Christophe Jaffrelot and Pratinav Anil

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In June 1975, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed a state of Emergency, resulting in a 21-month suspension of democracy. In India's First Dictatorship, Christopher Jaffrelot and Pratinav Anil explore this constitutional dictatorship of unequalled impact. Along with focusing on Mrs Gandhi and her son, Sanjay, the book equally exposes the facilitation of authoritarian rule by Congressmen, Communists, trade unions, businessmen and the urban middle class, as well as the complacency of the judiciary and media. While a tiny minority of citizens fought for democracy, an even greater number of people bowed to this strong woman in power. Yet, the Emergency was neither a parenthesis nor a turning point but a concentrate of a style of rule that is very much alive today.

On 25 June 1975, then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, declared a state of Emergency, which established 'India's first dictatorship'. During the following 21 months, democratic India transformed into an authoritarian regime, during which politicians were arrested and censorship was imposed, the Constitution was radically restructured and human rights abuses occurred on a large scale. In January 1977, Mrs Gandhi, surprising nearly everyone, released prisoners and called for fresh elections. With the victory of the opposition Janata Party, and the acceptance of the results by the prime minister, democracy was restored.

The standard¹ interpretation of this 21-month-long period focused on its exceptionality: the Emergency was an accident in the otherwise remarkable democratic trajectory of the India state – an almost lonely exception amongst post-colonial nations. More recently, historian Gyan Prakash² offered a radically different interpretation of the Emergency and argued that it represented a turning point in India's independent history, as it is then that some important traits of India's democracy, including the role of criminal-politicians and the abuse of state power, became structural features of its political system.

In their excellent book, based on an impressive wealth of sources, including never-before-accessed archival material and numerous interviews with key actors, Christopher Jaffrelot and Pratinav Anil offer a novel re-interpretation of this important period in India's history. "How exceptional was this episode for the average Indian?" they ask. "Comparing the Emergency to the quarter-century of democracy that preceded it and to the decades following it suggests – especially when seen from certain regions (such as India's peripheries) and from the eyes of certain classes (the country's working poor in particular) –

¹ Bipan Chandra, *In the Name of Democracy: JP Movement and the Emergency* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2003).

² Gyan Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles – Indira Gandhi and Democracy's Turning Point* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

not very much" (p. 20). In other words, the book makes a strong argument that highlights the continuities within India's democracy of certain authoritarian traits, of which the Emergency was "a concentrate of a style of rule" (p. 20). While the authors recognise the important points of rupture that the Emergency represented, especially the criminalisation of politics, the legitimisation of Hindutva and the start of economic liberalisation, they argue that for the great majority of the population, the difference was a matter of degree, not kind.

The book develops its main thesis through three parts that answer as many questions. First, what kind of regime was the Emergency? Second, what were its causes? And, finally, how and why did it end?

Regarding the 'what', Jaffrelot and Anil's answer is a complex one, to which the authors arrive from multiple points of view. First, the Emergency was peculiarly a "constitutional dictatorship": the suspension of India's democracy happened following the constitutional provisions. This had repercussions for the kind of regime that Mrs Gandhi (and, in the later part, her son Sanjay) put in place, as the formal democratic institutions remained in place and a façade of legality was constantly sought, despite the high level of arbitrariness and at times brute use of state force. Second, the Emergency was a right-wing regime, masked as a left-wing one: while paying lip-service to the poor, the government actively promoted the interests of the economic elites. While the authors' analysis of the political economy of the Emergency is more complex than that, and shows the very broad range of interests that the regime defended – a leitmotiv of the book – unquestionably the losers of the book were the country's poor, who suffered most from state violence, in particular through the city "beautification" programmes and forced sterilisation, without getting any substantial economic benefit from it.

Third, the Emergency was an example of a "sultanist" regime, where arbitrariness and the "rule of the leader" reigned supreme despite the façade of legality that remained in place. Finally, the Emergency was a very uneven regime. This is an important contribution of the book, as most previous accounts of the period were like the Emergency itself: Delhi-centric. Jaffrelot and Anil show how the Emergency meant very little outside of a relatively small circle around the capital.

Another question that has been debated and to which the book provides an answer concerns the causes of the Emergency. This is the central question of part two of the book. Jaffrelot and Anil provide a multi-faceted answer that distinguishes between short- and medium-term factors. The former include the JP movement (led by veteran politician Jayaprakash Narayan), which is deemed particularly threatening because it was, in the analysis of the authors, a symptom of a deeper socio-economic crisis, which in turn resulted from slow economic growth coupled with exceedingly unrealistic expectations promoted by Mrs Gandhi from the early 1970s with her promise to abolish poverty. Among the medium-term factors, Jaffrelot and Anil argue that the deinstitutionalisation of the Congress party and the high degree of personalisation and concentration of power in the hands of the prime minister since the mid-1960s meant that when facing the threat of the JP movement and the deeper socio-economic crisis which it represented, Mrs Gandhi had at her disposal

the tools to impose the Emergency – in particular a powerful executive branch – while the state lacked any substantial check and balance to counter the suppression of democracy.

Finally, in part three, the book covers the resistance to the Emergency and shows how and why there was so little of it. Importantly, the book demonstrates that regardless of whatever resistance existed, it was not the reason why the Emergency finally came to an end. Rather, it was a decision of Mrs Gandhi herself, most probably due to a misreading of the political situation, miscalculations regarding the opposition's ability to form a united front but also a desire by Mrs Gandhi not to be remembered as an autocrat, particularly by the West.

To conclude, the book offers a meticulous and convincing analysis of the Emergency, but also does more than that. The suspension of democracy in India is used as a lens to understand the maladies and weaknesses of India's democracy and to remind the contemporary reader that the brief authoritarian interlude of the 1970s might not have been India's first and last dictatorship.

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