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India's Survival and Evolution as a Complex Modern Nation-State – Part III

The Emergency: The Gravest Threat to Indian Democracy

Thus far, we have discussed the ideas that framed modern-day India and the wars that have shaped its character. In this segment of “India’s Survival and Evolution as a Complex Modern Nation-State,” we will discuss internal threats that have challenged Indian democracy. While Nehru and Shastri guided India in the first couple of decades, it was Indira Gandhi who would be the monumental figure in the 1970s and early 1980s. By 1972, Indira Gandhi was a towering personality. She had just won a crucial reelection campaign with major reform promises to help alleviate India’s poverty. The Indian National Congress dominated the national agenda and held the majority in the central government as well as most of the state assemblies. Indira Gandhi’s leadership helped India achieve its first decisive military victory in a millennium, liberated the Bangladeshis from West Pakistan’s rule and genocide, and established India as a prominent regional power. By 1971, the uncertainty around a united India and more importantly, a democratic India, had subsided. Although secessionist movements in the Kashmir Valley and Nagaland in the northeast still persisted, the threat was not as serious anymore. Most of the citizens had now bought into the idea of India. Furthermore, despite being involved in four wars in the first twenty five years, India had managed to survive geographically. Now that external security seemed assured, internal disturbances began to surface. The period from 1975-77 is now infamously referred to as the Emergency, India’s most prominent blemish to

democracy. The events leading up to the Emergency had generated civil unrest, which propelled Mrs. Gandhi to impose this extreme measure. In the nineteen month period that followed, India would see its basic democratic principles such as the freedom of press and freedom of speech drastically restricted. It would be dominated by the radical social programmes proposed by Mrs. Gandhi's son, Sanjay Gandhi. In the upcoming essay, we will discuss Ramachandra Guha's analysis of the Emergency in *India After Gandhi* —the events leading up to the Emergency, Indira Gandhi's consolidation of power, Sanjay Gandhi's social programmes, the aftermath of the Emergency, and a reflection of her leadership.

The Emergency was a response to a series of events that had begun to occur two years prior. The seeds of the Emergency were sowed in early 1974 in the state of Gujarat, where Chimanbhai Patel was the chief minister. Due to corruption charges, students protested against his incumbent government and demanded its dismissal. This movement “turned violent, with busses and government offices being burned,” forcing Patel to resign and causing Gujarat to come under ‘President’s Rule.’ (Guha 476). As it turned out, the impact of these protests would change the course of Indian history. The actions in Gujarat “inspired students in Bihar to struggle against misgovernment in their own state,” a state known for its political instability (476). In Bihar, the “Congress regime” had been in power for a couple of years, “corruption was rife,” land inequality had caused “deep discontent in the countryside,” and “steep rise in the prices of essential commodities” generated anxiety in the cities (476). The members involved in the protest included leftist groups such as the Communist Party of India (CPI) and right-wing student groups such as ABVP (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarti Parishad). “Campus life was in turmoil and classroom instruction came to an abrupt halt” and finally on 18th March, a group of protesters marched on the state assembly (476). The police clashed, students were hurt, three

died, and these student-police clashes spread. In order to gather momentum, the students requested Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) to lead their movement. JP, a freedom fighter who was now seventy-one, was considered “a great moral authority” in India (477). He had stayed away from politics despite invitations from Nehru in his cabinet, and rather, was a “veteran of movements,” devoting his energy towards social causes across India (477). Following the police clashes, Narayan accepted their request since he could “no longer ‘remain a silent spectator to misgovernment [and] corruption’ ” (477). Along with corruption, he protested against “blackmarketing, profiteering and hoarding,” fought “for the overhaul of the educational system,” and called for a ‘total revolution’ in order to establish a “real people’s democracy” (477). What started with student protests against a state government had now turned into a national movement known as the ‘JP Movement.’ His supporters went as far as declaring that JP’s movement was the “‘second freedom struggle,’ completing the business left unfinished by the first” (483). At the same time, massive railway strike halted the nation, leading to numerous arrests. The famous picture of trade unionist George Fernandes smiling in handcuffs epitomizes the rising tensions. The JP movement worsened as the public crisis slowly turned personal. Mrs. Gandhi and JP traded public remarks against each other and “exchanged a series of letters, beginning on a civil note but ending in acrimony” (479). By the end of the year, the “polarization was nearly complete” with citizens who were not in the opposition but still “thought the Congress too corrupt and Mrs. Gandhi too insensitive to criticism” (483).

Indira Gandhi’s rising power was evident with the diminishing authority of important national institutions. In her second term, Indira moved out of her father’s shadow and pushed India into a new era. Most of the stalwarts from Nehru’s generation were at the twilight of their careers and had differing opinions to Mrs. Gandhi on numerous issues. The growing support

towards Indira Gandhi provoked a rift within the Congress Party, breaking it into two factions. Similarly, her increasing power was visible with her actions towards the judiciary. In 1973, in an unprecedented move, the government would supersede three senior judges and appoint Justice A.N. Ray as the chief justice, a judge who had made favorable decisions towards their government in the past. In addition, “many key jobs in government had been assigned to bureaucrats who shared the socialist ideology of Mrs. Gandhi and her advisers” (473). The political culture was beginning to shift towards support for a single individual rather than the involvement of competing ideologies. With the backdrop of her growing power and the JP Movement, another factor fueled the situation. At the Allahabad high court, Raj Narain, her opponent in the previous election, had filed a “petition alleg[ing] that the prime minister had won through corrupt practices, in particular by spending more money than was allowed, and by using in her campaign the official machinery and officials in government service” (486). This lawsuit forced Indira Gandhi to testify in a court, the first Indian prime minister to do so. Although she was acquitted of twelve out of the fourteen charges on electoral malpractice by Justice Sinha, the case was now appealed to the Supreme Court. Calls for her to resign grew louder, but “516 members of Parliament from the Congress party signed a resolution to urge her to stay on” (488). On 23 June, the Supreme Court declared that the “prime minister could attend Parliament but could not vote there until her appeal was fully heard and pronounced on” (489). In addition, her election was termed as ‘null and void’ and she was barred against running for any office for another till six years. The press insisted that Mrs. Gandhi resign. Several of her cabinet members now agreed and “advised [her] to step down temporarily and let one of her colleagues in the cabinet” take her place until the Supreme Court upheld her decision. On the other hand, at the advice of her son, Sanjay Gandhi, and chief minister of West Bengal, Siddhartha Shankar

Ray, an ordinance declaring a state of internal emergency was being prepared which would let her stay in power. Although the domestic unrest was out of control, it was the lawsuit that actually pushed Indira Gandhi over the edge.

On 26 June 1975, three days after the Supreme Court's decision, Indira Gandhi declared from the "a studio of All India Radio (AIR)" that "The President has proclaimed Emergency" (490). Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed was the President at the time. This was actually the third time India had declared emergency, but the other two were imposed due to external disturbances, the 1962 China War and 1971 Indo-Pakistan War. She specifically stressed in the radio announcement that "there is nothing to panic about" and this radical action was taken "in response to the 'increasing violence' caused by a 'campaign of hate and calumny'" (491). Under the Emergency, the fundamental freedoms such as the freedoms of speech, expression, assembly, association, press, and movement would be suspended. The large-scale impact was immediately palpable. Overnight, thousands were arrested under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) including opposition leaders, student activists, and trade unionists to name a few. Any opposition was quelled. Even the queens (rajmatas) of Jaipur and Gwalior were jailed "under an act supposedly meant for black marketeers and smugglers" because of their old political enmity with Mrs. Gandhi (492). Indira Gandhi claimed that the "extra-constitutional challenge [of the JP movement] was constitutionally met," and "the emergency was 'declared to save the country from disruption and collapse'" (492). From the actions of the prime minister, one could notice that India was leaning towards a quasi-dictatorship. Just like other military dictators, she claimed that although "she had denied her people freedom, she would give them bread in exchange" (493). Within a week of the declaration, she offered a 'Twenty Point Programme for Economic Progress,' which included a "reduction in prices of essential commodities, the speedy

implement of land reforms, higher wages for workers, lower taxes for the middle class, and the abolition of indebtedness and of bonded labour” (493). Initially, prominent businessmen and social workers applauded the declaration. Normalcy, discipline, and calm had returned. Government officials came to work on time, inflation was low, some of the economic programmes succeeded, and corruption was nonexistent because of the government’s fear. Yet, the cons outweighed the pros. Around 40,000 individuals were jailed without trial, freedom of press was censored except for communicating government’s agenda, and amendments were added to the Constitution to ensure Congress stays in power. There were a few courageous newspapers that resisted the censorship and published their views disguised as political satires. However, there was no political opposition. Since the opposition members of the Parliament were locked away, several constitutional amendments were passed to prolong Mrs. Gandhi’s rule. The Thirty Eighth Amendment, “barred judicial review of the emergency,” the 39th “stated the election of the prime minister could not be challenged by the Supreme Court, and the 42nd gave “unprecedented powers to the Parliament” (498). The actions of the Congress Party are best described by J.B. Kripalani, one of India’s greatest freedom fighters. As a nonagenarian he regretfully expressed “I have no Constitution—all that is left are Amendments” (564). All in all, one newspaper headline epitomizes the Emergency: “D.E.M. O’Cracy, beloved husband of L.I.Bertie, brother of Faith, Hope and Justice, expired on June 26.”

While Mrs. Gandhi was consolidating her power politically, it was her son, Sanjay Gandhi, who came to the fore socially. He had been an early supporter of the Emergency and had persuaded her to not resign. Although he was not officially elected, he was often sighted by “Mrs. Gandhis’ side, and was even advising her on cabinet appointments” (506). For example, I.K. Gujral (future prime-minister) was replaced “as being too soft on the press” while the most

experienced and uncontroversial member, Swaran Singh, was “replaced as defence minister by Sanjay’s friend Bansi Lal” (506). While fighting to end privy purse in her first term, Mrs. Gandhi had “once chastised the India princes for promoting birth over talent” but now she had succumbed to that temptation herself” (508). To complement her mother’s twenty-point economic programme, Sanjay Gandhi unveiled a five-point social programme with (1) family planning, (2) afforestation, (3) abolition of dowry, (4) eradication of illiteracy, and (5) slum clearance. Of these five, the Emergency is known for its harsh implementation of slum clearance in Delhi and family planning nationwide. At this time, “the capital was dotted with slums that had formed spontaneously” where “sweepers, rickshaw pullers, domestic servants, and office boys” resided (508). There were approximately 100 such settlements in Delhi amounting to about a half a million residents. Several of these settlements were forcefully bulldozed and demolished. The most infamous incident was known as the Turkman Gate incident, where the residents resisted and were subsequently massacred by the police (Since the press was censored, this news did not reach the public till later). Although slum clearance’s implementation was controversial, it was the forced sterilization of citizens in the name of family planning that became the icon of the Emergency. The “Malthusian spectre had long haunted India,” with “western journalists [fearing] large-scale famine, [and] western biologists [writing off] India altogether” (511-12). At the turn of the twentieth century, India’s population numbered 240 million but by 1971 it had reached nearly 550 million. Sanjay Gandhi believed that “if his programme was implemented, ‘50 % of our problems will be solved’” (512). Even the World Health Organization (WHO) endorsed family planning in India. In order to implement compulsory sterilization, “targets were announced to district officials,” “truck drivers would not have their licenses renewed if they did not produce a sterilization certificate,” and “slum dwellers

would not be allotted a plot for resettlement” if they did not do the same (513). Officials were rewarded or transferred depending if they met their targets or not, and in order to fulfill them, coercion was used. However, just like with the slum demolition, resistance emerged.

Underground newspapers reported a “wave of protests’ against family planning in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh,” especially “schoolteachers, who had been asked to conduct house-to-house surveys in pursuance of the sterilization campaign” (513). Around hundred and fifty of these teachers were jailed. The worst of these incidents, though, the “Turkman Gate of family planning, so to speak took place in the town of Muzaffarnagar,” where the mob-police clash caused about 50 deaths. The Turkman Gate and Muzaffarnagar clashes only portray the major incidents that occurred during the Emergency, but numerous other incidents occurred frequently. Sanjay Gandhi’s social programmes created a violent atmosphere, especially towards individuals that were not well off or not politically connected. His surge in public life was reflected by the emergence a new generation of Indian Youth Congress in the political life. Altogether, although Indira Gandhi imposed the emergency, it is Sanjay Gandhi that is associated with this infamous period due to his controversial social programmes.

On January 18th, 1977, after a year and a half under the Emergency, Indira Gandhi suddenly announced on All India Radio “that Parliament was to be dissolved and elections were to be held,” (516). Her political opponents in prison were released immediately. This decision was puzzling because of its sudden nature and also for the fact that it was Indira Gandhi’s individual decision, without even Sanjay’s consultation. She had no opposition and the Parliament could easily have extended their stay every year. There was no reason for Indira to remove the Emergency. So, the question arises, why did Indira Gandhi take this decision? The author elaborates on at least three theories. First, the “gossip was that her intelligence chief had

assured her that the Congress would be re-elected with a comfortable majority” (517). She had hoped that since the civil unrest had dissipated, the INC would be easily elected again. Second, “some people felt that her decision was a consequence of competitive one-upmanship” since Pakistan’s Prime Minister Bhutto announced elections in a historically unstable Pakistan. A third explanation comes from Indira Gandhi’s secretary. He asserted that the Emergency “had cut Mrs. Gandhi off from the public contact that previously nourished her” (517). Mrs. Gandhi ““was nostalgic about the way people reacted to her in 1971 campaign and she longed to hear again the applause of the multitudes’ ” (517). Lastly, another facet to the conversation might be international pressure. Although India’s media was censored, foreign observers and press were vocal about India’s deviation from democracy, something that the prime minister may have been impacted by. A few months before the emergency was enacted, the “*Indian Express* had paid tribute “to the resilience and maturity of Indian democracy,” noting that it allowed ‘even the most serious differences [to] be harmonized and reconciliations effected’” (473). Ironically, the *Indian Express* and other Indian newspapers were now censored, and so, the foreign press had to take the burden to mount the pressure against the Indian government. Fenner Brockway from the *Times*, for example, “deplored the conversion of ‘the world’s greatest democracy’ into a ‘repressive dictatorship’ (515). Regardless, the fact that the Emergency was reversed saved Indian democracy. One may never know what would have happened if the Emergency would have stayed for longer. India’s political atmosphere may not have returned to a democracy and political instability may have crept in like its neighbors. Ultimately, elections were called and democracy was reinstated. Indira Gandhi’s unexpected decision pulled India out of the depths of a dictatorship and returned it back to normalcy.

The day after the emergency was lifted, an opposition movement began. Four parties, made up of the right-wing Jana Sangh, farmer based Bharatiya Lok Dal (led by future prime minister, Charan Singh), the Socialist Party, and Morarji Desai's old Congress combined to make a new party, Janata Party (People's Party). In the next few days, Jagjivan Ram, a respected Congressman and leader of the Scheduled Castes, decided to resign from the INC. He made his own party, Congress for Democracy (CFD) and led an alliance with the Janata Party. Fascinatingly, "it was Ram who had moved the resolution endorsing the emergency" in the Parliament (519). Ram was known for "his political acumen," and his decision was "considered a sign that [Congress's] ship was, if not yet sinking, leaving heavily" (519-20). The intelligence report had underestimated the strength of the opposition. The election results were announced on March 20th, 1977. Indira Gandhi lost to Raj Narain, Sanjay Gandhi lost to "an obscure student leader," Congress lost all 85 seats in the state and only won 153 seats from 540 nationally. On the other hand, the opposition of the Janata Party and the CFD swept the elections with 298 seats, and Morarji Desai, a lifelong Congressman, became India's new prime minister. It was the power of democracy that had swept away the Congress in the north (the impact of the Emergency in the south was not as severe and so Congress's influence stayed there). This was the first non-Congress national government. There were lawsuits against the prior administration and although some were found guilty, police action could not be taken due to lack of evidence. Nevertheless, modifications to the Constitution ensured that an Emergency could not occur again. In the next three years, India witnessed turmoil from the Janata Party. The Janata government was marred by administrative inefficiency and personal battles. By 1979, the conglomeration of the four parties would break apart and Morarji Desai would resign. Charan Singh would be the interim prime minister for six months until elections were held. In

the 1980 elections, the mandate from the public against the administration was evident and—Indira Gandhi would become the Prime Minister yet again. On another note, Sanjay Gandhi died in a plane crash in 1980 and Indira Gandhi would be assassinated in 1984, which would push her older son, Rajiv Gandhi, to become prime minister. India had survived its only test against a democracy. The 1977 and 1980 elections portray that the Indian public were more concerned with social and economic progress rather than personal battles—yet not at the expense of losing individual liberties.

In 1971, Indira Gandhi was at the height of her popularity, but by 1977, she was heavily defeated. How should one assess her leadership? She was definitely India's strongest prime minister but also its most controversial. Along with Israel's Golda Meir and UK's Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi was one of the three major women leaders in world politics during the twentieth century. The twentieth century saw powerful dictators, but Indira Gandhi may have been the closest to a women dictator. Her own words perhaps best describe the nature of her power. In an interview after the Emergency, she exclaimed ““What else could I have done except stay? You know the state the country was in. What would have happened if there had been nobody to lead it? I was the only person who could, you know’ ” (489). It was not the imposition of the Emergency that is revealing in this interview but exactly why it was imposed. India was indeed suffering from internal disturbances, but the fact she believed she was the *only* person who could be the savior, escalated the issue. Her leadership during her first and second term was extremely contrasting, but Guha warns that although “it is tempting to view Mrs. Gandhi's political career as being divided into two phases, with the emergency and Sanjay Gandhi providing the dividing line,” it is wise not to do so (514). Guha states that some may argue that “before Sanjay, she won elections, created Bangladesh, reformed the Congress party,

and made bold attempts to reorganize the economy” but “under Sanjay’s malign influence she turned her back on these larger social goals and became obsessed with the preservation of herself and her family” (514). On the contrary, he stresses that the Emergency was not necessarily a “radical departure from [Mrs. Gandhi’s] past practice, but a deepening of it” (515). One can see Mrs. Gandhi’s “impatience with the democratic procedure had been manifested early” with the packing of the judiciary, bureaucracy, and the INC itself with her supporters (564). Sanjay’s arrival took the process further, “vulgarized and corrupted it, and made it more violent” (515). In comparison to U.S. politics, Indira can loosely be compared to Andrew Jackson and even Abraham Lincoln. Both Andrew Jackson and Indira Gandhi were powerful head of states but were responsible for changing the political institutions and instilling a degree of ‘spoils system.’ Lincoln’s suspension of the writ of habeas corpus is debatable but he is widely acknowledged for his leadership during the Civil War. In comparison, Indira presided over the Indo-Pakistan victory of 1971, but was responsible for the removal of fundamental rights.

Another interesting aspect from a political science perspective is the contrasting political leadership of Nehru and Indira. Nehru tried to establish India into a socialist democracy with “honest attempts to promote a democratic ethos in a hierarchical society” but ironically, this “was undone by his own daughter, and in decisive and dramatic ways” (515). Nehru’s death had pushed Indira reluctantly into politics, but Indira consciously groomed her sons, Sanjay and later, Rajiv into politics (although Rajiv was also a reluctant entrant). Nepotism had crept into politics and the tradition of family lineages in politics continues even today. Nehru most likely would not have approved of nepotism or of an opposition-less Parliament. A *New York Times* reporter concluded that “had Jawaharlal Nehru lived while Indira Gandhi reigned, the two would have been political opponents, rather than allies” while another reporter “captured that imagined

scenario: ‘Indira is in the Prime Minister’s house, and Jawaharlal is back to writing letters to her from jail again’ (518). It is intriguing to compare Nehru’s views on democracy in *Glimpses of World History* with one of his letters to Indira. In a special postscript, from November 14th, 1938, Nehru “outlined the major political developments of the latter part of the decade in which he wrote the following:

‘The growth of fascism during the last five years and its attack on every democratic principle and conception of freedom and civilization have made the defence of democracy the vital question today. Unfortunately, democracy and freedom are in grave peril today, and the peril is all the greater because their so-called friends stab them in the back’” (518).

Little did Nehru know that the arrival of ‘peril’ to democracy and freedom in India would be due to the Indira and rather than a friend, it would be his own daughter that would be stabbing the protectors of democracy. MJ Akbar describes democracy as not necessarily the “right to vote in elections every five years; [rather], it is the right to say nonsense every day.” During the Emergency, the Indian people had lost the latter privilege for nineteen months and maybe it is because of that experience, India’s democracy survives today. In the next essay, we will conclude Ramachandra Guha’s review on *India After Gandhi*, reflect on the highs and lows from 1980 to the turn of the century, and culminate by analyzing this intriguing question further, ‘Why India Survives’?