

## Historical and Political Discourses of 1975 Indian Emergency – A Study

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### *Abstract:*

The present article aims to study the historical and political discourses of the 1975 Indian Emergency. In course of studying these discourses, it makes you understand the overwhelming impact and multitudinal dimensions of the emergency rule. The impact of the emergency has many dimensions. Politically, the event demonstrated how vulnerable even a democratic nation like India is in the hands of ambitious politicians. Further, it destabilized the smooth-running bureaucracy and administrative machinery. On the social side, the emergency demoralized the common man. The people of India who had enjoyed freedom since 1947 were on the verge of losing their freedom again, this time to an elected head. More importantly the Indian emergency shackled the sensibilities and perceptions of the press, thinkers, writers and the educated class of the nation. Therefore, the Indian emergency, a political problem, could also be seen as a human problem.

*Keywords:* Discourses, multitudina dimensions, emergency, democracy, machinery, demoralized

## Introduction

The study of major socio-political events of the past remains inexhaustible because of its inherent complexity. The practitioners of the human sciences in general and the historians in particular often engage in scientific research to comprehend those complexities. They argue that it is always the present that matters when we examine the past, not the study of the past for its own sake. Therefore, one of the underlying assumptions of the present enquiry is that an attempt to understand the nuances and various facets of the emergency through the political and historical discourses definitely helps us to have a better perspective not only on the contemporary forms of political life in India, but also on the long-lasting implications of the emergency.

## A Study of Historical and Political Discourses

There have been several attempts to represent, reconstruct, re-present or simply document the experience of the emergency in different discourses. Historians like Bipan Chandra in his book *In the Name of Democracy: JP Movement and the Emergency*(2003) tries to give an account of the factual details of this major political crisis of the democratic nation. This book, unlike earlier studies, looks at the happenings of this event sequentially, seeking to understand their character and the nature of the challenge they posed to our democracy. It spreads light on two crises of an unprecedented magnitude which rocked India during the years 1974 to 1977. The first being the two massive popular movements in Gujarath and Bihar which demanded the prime minister Indira Gandhi's resignation. The second being the declaration of the emergency by Indira Gandhi on 26<sup>th</sup> June 1975 which was marked by a series of agitations, unwarranted arrests, strikes and shutdowns, closure of colleges and universities, etc.... Bipan Chandra calls it "the second 'watershed' in India's recent history". (Chandra "Democracy" 1). His observation in this book is, as he writes, "not an examination and evaluation of the politics and intellectual development as a whole either of JP or of Indira Gandhi, rather I focus on their politics and thought" (Chandra "Democracy" 2). He gives us the knowledge of 'look' of things, i.e., what actually happened during those crucial years and why and with what consequences. He narrates actualities in detail.

*India since Independence* (2008), an outstanding book by Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee and Adithya Mukherjee, has two separate chapters titled *The Indira Gandhi Years, 1964-1973*, and *The JP Movement and the Emergency: Indian Democracy Tested*. These chapters narrate the details of the pre-emergency crises, the JP Movement, and the emergency. As historians, these writers sum up how this crucial time of the Indian national politics received different interpretations as they write, “Many of the Cassandras felt justified when the emergency was declared. Many argued that it provided a signpost to India’s political future. Some went further and said that the democratic system in India was finally and permanently in eclipse, or at least it would never be the same again” (Chandra “India” 5). They tried to enquire into this complex issue with a set of questions which they mention in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of their book. The questions are, “How did the emergency come about? Was there no other choice, as Indira Gandhi maintained, or was it the ultimate expression of her authoritarian tendencies, as the opposition alleged?” (Chandra “India”, 311).

Granville Austin in his famous book *Working a Democratic Constitution, A History of the Indian Experience*, (2014), discusses the overwhelming impact of the internal emergency done to the democratic structure of the nation in Part III of his book titled *Democracy Rescued or the Constitution Subverted? The Emergency and the Forty-Second Amendment, 1975- 77*. He writes that “This book is a history of the working of the Indian Constitution from 1950 to 1985, written for Indians and non-Indians who are interested in the country and in its constitutional experience” (Austin 1). It is in chapter 13 of this book that he gives an account of how the ruling party defended its proclamation of the emergency as he quotes the words of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who says, “this is totally within our constitutional framework and it was undertaken in order not to destroy the Constitution but to preserve the Constitution, to preserve and safeguard our democracy” (Austin 293). At the same time he gives an account of how the Opposition parties united to fight against this event. They thought that it was not to preserve democracy, but to stop it in its tracks. They intensified their fight because it was proclaimed to

protect the political office of one individual. This chapter records the cause and effect of the emergency on national politics.

Francine R. Frankel in his monumental exploration of *India's Political Economy: The Gradual Revolution 1947-2004* (2006) gives the most comprehensive analysis of Indian political economy since Independence. In one of the chapters titled *Emergency and Beyond* he discusses how the effect of the emergency, "has revealed the obstacles in the basic structure of the rural political economy to effective implementation of growth and distribution policies" (Frankel 548). Further, he gives an account of the problems of the implementation of the Twenty-Point Program. He records the details which support the dramatic "gains of the Emergency". The control of illegal activities or undesirable activities, campaigns against tax evasion and smuggling, dramatic improvement in the price situation and the increased production in industrial and agricultural sectors have been the gains of the Emergency. This offers us a different understanding and views on the emergency.

M. G. Devasahayam's *JP Movement, Emergency and India's Second Freedom* (2012), unfolds the moving history of the JP Movement which was set against the emergency period. As an economist, political thinker, analyst and magistrate, he recounts his hands-on experience of this dark period of autocracy. This book reveals the details about draconian laws, extinguished freedom, Gestapo-type arrests, severe censorship and forced sterilization which made India a fascist type police-state. Further, this book tells about the abject surrender, marked by terror, of the millions and the slavery of the elite. The book views this period as the defeat of the entire population that loved freedom. It is also a window to Mrs. Gandhi's unprincipled son Sanjay Gandhi, who manipulated the political powers for exploitation. The writer calls JP as the architect of India's second freedom.

Pranab Mukherjee's *The Dramatic Decade, The Indira Gandhi Years* (2015), is a brilliant political narrative with a historian's rigor and insight, documents the developments surrounding the birth of new political era after the declaration of the emergency in his book. As an insider, he

gives the political account of the emergency period as he witnessed it very closely. In chapter two, *The Midnight Drama: Declaration of the Emergency* he shares his experience of this crucial event. He says, "Before the midnight of 25-26 June 1975, the country had been passing through a difficult Phase" (Mukherjee "Realism" 48). He continues to record how the Allahabad High Court judgment intensified political activity across the country and the subsequent period became politically turbulent leading ultimately to the emergency being declared on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1975.

*Emergency Retold* (2015) by Kuldip Nayar is an interesting document in which the writer attempts to retell the political story of the emergency. In his preface to the paperback Edition he writes about the purpose of this book. He begins with a question, "What happened during the emergency? My explanation, its purport" ( Nayar "Emergency" ix). He gives an account of how the constitution was suspended to tackle a situation which was not there. It was done by gagging the press, the opposition leaders and critics. He shows in his book how, as he writes, "the nation was first confused, then sank into a state of stupor, and subsequently, caved in. The administration fell in line without any resistance to follow the dictates of the ruler, and in fact, became instruments of tyranny" (Nayar "Emergency" ix). Further, he writes about what happened after the emergency. He says, "The institutions never got back their vigor or sanctity. Those who ruled after the emergency concentrated more on undoing Mrs. Gandhi than correcting her misdoings" ( Nayar "Emergency" xii).

Ramachandra Guha's *India after Gandhi, The History of the World's Largest Democracy*, (2007), unfolds very important details of the internal emergency in the 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter titled *Autumn of the Matriarch*. He begins this chapter with Mrs. Gandhi's speech on AIR (All India Radio) after the declaration of the emergency. It's a chapter with 10 sections with all the causalities of the emergency period. He records Mrs. Gandhi's speeches and interviews which defend her cause. He quotes what Mrs. Gandhi said in one of the interviews to *Saturday Review of New York* in which she said, "What has been done is not an abrogation of democracy but an effort to safeguard it" (Guha 494). He gives an account of the victims of political vengeance who were

housed, fed and clothed like common criminals. He comments on the pre-censorship, a system instituted by the government within the first week of the emergency period. It is in section 7 of this chapter Guha recalls that, “it was Sanjay Gandhi who had warned his mother against resignation, and he who had most strongly endorsed the Emergency” (Guha 509).

## Conclusion

It is interesting to know that these discourses give an account of the photographic memory of the past event like the 1975 Emergency. This helps to understand how and under what circumstances the nation like India built on the socio-democratic principles turned to be an autocratic nation under the rule of Smt. Indira Gandhi. The study of the above-mentioned works is really enlightening.

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