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The Meaning of the  
Indian Experience:  
**THE EMERGENCY**

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## INTRODUCTION

The papers and documents included in this book were presented and discussed at two consultations held under the auspices of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society. All the papers except the one on the Lok Sabha elections of March 1977 are from the Consultation on the Meaning of the Indian Experience of the Emergency for Asia. This Consultation was held in Cochin in August 1977 in collaboration with the Christian Conference of Asia and the World Council of Churches.

The papers seek to analyse not only the basic factors which led to the authoritarian rule of the Emergency but also the new directions to be discerned from the people's unambiguous condemnation of that rule. The underlying economic, social and political forces which are brought to light in these papers point to the need for renewed commitment to the struggle of the people for a fundamental transformation of society. The group reports which embody the thinking of the Consultation, therefore, emphasise the role of the action groups and organisations committed to social justice, the study and action on the proximate goals of socialism, the solidarity and linkage between all those who fight for justice and, since this was a primarily Christian group, the active role of the churches and Christian groups in fostering and supporting genuine movements for social and economic transformation.

Running through the pages of this volume is the distinct belief that a change of government does not *ipso facto* make for a new social order based on redistribution of power and on justice which alone can eliminate the authoritarian forces which are bred by our social and economic structures today. While democratic rights are absolutely essential for the self-reliant struggle of the people, Indian politics must look beyond the initial steps for their restoration and generate the political will to transform society.

This book is a very small contribution towards that end.

S. K. CHATTERJI

**PART I**

**THE EMERGENCY AND AFTER—ANALYSIS  
AND INTERPRETATIONS**

# THE INDIAN EVENTS FROM THE INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

AJIT ROY

## Choice of Perspective

The Indian events compressed within the span of the 19 months of the Emergency rule are characterised by the capture and exercise of political power by a very small coterie in complete disregard for all norms of not only constitutional rule but also of enlightened self-interest of the ruling elite. The fact that a small band of illiterate or half-literate persons, either notorious for their immoral escapades, or absolutely faceless non-entities, were entrusted with seemingly unlimited powers over the life and death of 600 million population of the second most populous country in the world—a country which occupies a key position in the international geo-politics—carries its own verdict not only on the elite of this country, but also on statesmen of the world. For, not only did the Indian elite (and in the final analysis, the Indian people) permit this unthinkable abomination to continue for a long 19 months, but the world statesmen, from Leonid Brezhnev and Joseph Broz Tito at one end, to the US Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter at the other, either applauded or at least condoned (along with increased financial subsidization) this tragi-comic performance at the centre of the Indian political stage.

The prime consideration in the choice of an Indian perspective for viewing this macabre episode of history should be to locate the vantage point of view that will yield the key to the riddle: how this absurdity had become possible?

The following is a tentative framework for such an appraisal :

## I

### Some Surface Features

1. The foremost characteristic of this tragic episode is that almost none in the country had anticipated the fatal blow that befell the nation on the midnight of 25-26 June, 1975.

Except for less than half a dozen conspirators in the capital, neither the Cabinet Ministers nor the tallest leaders of the opposition Sangharsh Samity had any inkling of what was coming. The Cabinet Ministers, that is those who were in Delhi, were summoned to the dawn session of the Cabinet to be faced with the *fait accompli*, while the opposition leaders were roused from literal as well as political slumber to be whisked away into prisons.

2. Although there are reports about some minor slips here and there, the whole operation of crackdown, though it was planned and executed by a commando of less than half-a-dozen persons, was carried out with a streamline-efficiency.

3. The sum total of the repressive impact of the crackdown was fiercer than anything the Indian people had ever experienced, including the similar operations on August 9, 1942, by the then British Government against the 'Quit India' movement, yet there was no, or very little, overt, spontaneous protest by the masses.

4. From June 26, 1975, onward, day by day, week by week and month by month, the Union Cabinet, the Indian Parliament, the haughty Indian Bureaucracy, the Supreme Court of India, (with a few noble exceptions) and the State Governments as well as the multimillion strong Congress organisation increasingly succumbed to both the crude and subtle logics of the developing situation—and co-operated with the caucus to legitimise Indira Gandhi's *coup* against the Indian people, and acquiesced in the induction of her politically uncouth son as the Crown Prince-cum-Joint Prime Minister, and the gradual build up of the surrogate power centre (of Sanjay, Bansilal, Dhawan and Co.).

5. By the time the real nature of Indira Gandhi's *coup* started revealing itself in the form of the demolition of the Turkman Gate residential area in Delhi; accompanied by mass shootings, forced mass sterilisation—disrupting normal life in vast rural areas and resulting in massacre in the Muzaffarnagar district in UP gestapo-type police torture in many parts of the country and the total eclipse of the institut-

ional power structure by the so-called extraconstitutional power centre; and the reduction of the ruling party to the simple role of cheer-leaders for the Prime Minister and her son; murmurs of dissent and protests that started to rise within the ruling party and among the people were for the time being to prove to be no more effective than crying in the wilderness.

At this stage, it will be quite pertinent to draw one major conclusion from the foregoing: in the absence of popular vigilance and mass resistance, it is possible, at least for a short period, for a streamlined, specially created and super-imposed apparatus with a determined and unscrupulous high command at its head to impose its will on a vast country with a huge population.

## II

### Different Levels of Enquiry

How do we explain this tragic degeneration of the Indian policy which has a tradition of a continuous struggle for more than a century for liberal-democratic-humanist (with many imperfections no doubt) values ?

This question has to be probed at four different levels :

#### *First Level*

Nothing happened during the Emergency on the national scale that had not happened on a smaller scale during the previous five or six years.

- Bansilal had set up his own 'Emergency' rule as the Chief Minister of Haryana, and a prototype of Crown Prince and extra-constitutional authority in the person of his son.
- Repeated open riggings of polls in Jammu and Kashmir and West Bengal on large scales and in individual cases like the election of Abdul Gaffar in Bihar.
- Gagging or terrorising the Press as in Haryana and Bihar.
- Open liquidation of Naxalites in Srikakulam, West Bengal and Punjab.
- Mass terror of police-cum-military machine in Gujarat and Bihar in 1974 and 1975.

Over the years, Mrs. Indira Gandhi had built up a closely-knit administrative apparatus including, and more particularly, para-military forces numbering 600,000 men under her direct control and concentrated in her own hands vast powers, overriding and cutting into the powers and authority of the formal/institutional organs of power. She had also chosen people as her place-men in key positions in the administrative machinery, governments and the Congress Party in the States.

She had not even spared the judiciary. Through various measures she had clipped the wings of the judiciary, including, and particularly, the highest tribunal, the Supreme Court, so that these guardians of law and legality had lost the powers and the inclinations to subject her actions to a close security.

Indeed she had even enacted a final rehearsal of her coming Emergency rule when in May 1974 she had first provoked the all India railway strike by treacherously arresting the topmost leaders of the railwaymen while ostensibly engaging in negotiations and then directed the full fury of her streamlined repressive machine with many unprecedented innovations of terror tactics against the striking railwaymen.

Although, the relative freedom of speech and Press in this phase had permitted all these episodes and incidents to be widely broadcast, there had been at no stage any coordinated attempt at mobilising popular forces at the *national* level to combat these dangerous manifestations.

There was a failure at the national level to analyse these isolated developments and to generalise about the *basic trend*. As a result, when the final crackdown came on June 25-26, 1975, people were caught napping. Even more, unaware of what was really in store for them, large masses of the people and the top leaders of opposition Sangharsh Samity were naively expecting a victory over Mrs. Gandhi when she turned the tables against them by declaring Emergency.

As a result of all this, viewed even *superficially*, when Mrs. Gandhi dealt her 'pre-emptive' blow against democracy in India, there was no force in the country, which was prepared in terms of consciousness, or organizational cohesion to

challenge it. At deeper levels, the situation was even more difficult for the democratic forces.

*At the Second Level*

Mrs. Gandhi's success was predicated by two massive reserve forces operating in her favour (i) passivity of the rural masses, and (ii) loyalty of the armed forces.

The large scale opposition movements that had scored significant successes in Gujarat in 1974 and had engaged in ding dong battles with the Congress rule in Bihar during 1974 and 1975 were largely confined to urban petty bourgeoisie. Even some parts of these sections of the population were developing apathy and antipathy towards the policy of continued but indecisive confrontation with the regime which adversely affected their daily life, including transportation and education.

If the working class was only marginally involved in these struggles, the peasantry who constitute three-fourths of the population were either unconcerned or to varying degrees loyal to Mrs. Gandhi who appeared before them not only as the inheritor of the Gandhi-Nehru tradition of popular enlightenment, but also the champion of land reforms, struggle against caste-oppression and protection of minorities.

The fact that the muscle of the opposition movement against Mrs. Gandhi in the northern region was in the main provided by the Hindu revivalist forces in Jana Sangh and RSS in company with the Jat Kulak dominated BLD, further added to the credibility of Mrs. Gandhi's populist, democratic image.

The other, and in the last analysis the decisive force in the short run, the military machine, though not immediately involved in the political equation, was nevertheless a factor of prime importance in the determination of the political configuration. The Indian military machine which had won its first decisive, and spectacular, successes in the war against Pakistan in 1971 and was thus able partly to wipe out the ignominy of its abject defeat in the Sino-Indian border conflicts in 1962, was immensely grateful to Mrs. Gandhi for her overall leadership in that



critical period. Secure in this loyalty the armed forces showed towards her Mrs. Gandhi had the supreme self-confidence to tamper with the established political process without any restraint whatsoever.

*At the Third Level*

Besides the developments at the two levels referred to above, the course of events was primarily determined by the movement of the long term socio-economic process deeper down. For various historical reasons, the Indian socio-economic organism has been heading towards a complete breakdown. The populist, egalitarian and democratic posture adopted by the Indian ruling elite, out of both historical compulsions and also personal predilections on the part of Nehru, Azad, Krishna Menon and some others were proving to be more and more in contradiction with the demands of the basic law of the present socio-economic formation in India.\* Side by side, even the two major components of the ruling elite, the monopoly industrial bourgeoisie and the rural rich were increasingly getting into confrontation with each other and thus deepening the crisis of the system.

The first element, i.e. , the monopoly capital, as the most powerful, modern, organised, centralised and urban-based force enjoys a preponderant influence in the country's polity, more particularly at the central level. But as long as the democratic parliamentary framework of the political process continued to reign, it had to yield before its junior partner, the rural rich, because of the latter's numerical superiority and also capability for mobilising the votes.

So the freedom from the restraints imposed on the monopoly capitalists by the traditional political values and proclamations on the one hand and the numerical superiority of their rural allies on the other—a freedom that was getting to be increasingly indispensable for their growth, could be achieved only by the overthrow of the existing political form. As they could not hope to achieve this on their own and as Mrs. Gandhi with her

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\* For a general enunciation of this aspect, please refer to the Appendix.

charisma as well as ruthless, amoral pursuit of power was eminently suitable as an instrument for achieving this diabolical aim, the monopoly capitalists rallied round her in the joint venture to overthrow democracy in India.

It is this conjunction in June 1975 of the strivings of the most powerful social force in the present day India, the Indian monopoly capital, and the lust for power of the most powerful individual in India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, who had inherited and acquired immense charisma and the particular correlation of broader social forces described above, that accounted for the almost effortlessly smooth passage of Indira Gandhi's *coup*.

#### *At the Fourth Level*

This grotesque regime of illiterate, uncouth, amoral and indeed immoral, caucus headed by Indira Gandhi could have an easy passage for such a long time also because it enjoyed overt or covert blessings from both the 'super powers'.

The Soviet Union, determined to have India on her own side as against the USA and China in international relations and suspicious of the pro-US inclinations of the leading forces and exponents of the anti-Indira constellation, unhesitatingly bestowed her full blessings and unqualified support to Mrs. Gandhi's *coup*, so much so that she and the other countries in the socialist camp had no scruples in sending delegations to the 'Anti-fascist' jamboree at Patna in early 1976 which hailed the Indira Gandhi's semi-fascist rule as a brave new experiment in democracy. The Soviet Union even broke protocol to fete Sanjay Gandhi officially in Moscow and in central Asian republics.

Notwithstanding the sincere concern voiced by liberal democratic opinion in the USA and other western countries (which later on played an important part in forcing Indira Gandhi to plump for general elections despite the uncertainties involved) and some noise of disapproval for record, the hard core decision-makers in the western countries actually welcomed the turn of events. The IMF-World Bank had for years been pressing the India Government for discarding populist economic postures

and imposing 'discipline' in the country. Even the forced sterilisation programme, in essence, derived its inspiration from the IMF—World Bank brain trust. The overall attitude of the West was reflected in the increased quantum of consortium aid which increased from Rs. 1,069.2 crores in 1973-74 (which itself reflected a significant increase over the previous year, apparently in recognition of the Indira Government's new posture reflected in the suppression of the railway strike and restrictions on wage increase and DA imposed by the supplementary Budget in July 1974) to Rs. 1418 crores in 1974-75, to Rs. 1562 crores in 1975-76.

### III

#### Logic of Events

Since the Emergency was the result of the two streams of developments—(i) the urge for an authoritative transformation of the socio-economic system in the interest of monopoly capital, and (ii) the drive for ensuring the security of Indira Gandhi's personal power, the result of the Emergency rule, naturally had to be (i) a bonanza for the monopoly capital and (ii) a consolidation of Indira Gandhi's, in the first instance, personal and subsequently, dynastic powers.

Since both of these objectives could be achieved only by snuffing out all foci of dissent, hence a gradual advance of the process of recasting the institutions of power at the state and the party levels and concentration of all authority in the hands of a small caucus around the persons of the Gandhis—Indira and Sanjay.

In the first phase, the Congress Party had acquiesced in its self-emasculation and in handing over the entire powers to the caucus. But when in order to secure its power base and to forge a new institutional network for exercising its unrestricted powers, the caucus set upon reorganizing the whole set-up by replacing the old politicians with politically raw stooges, picked up by Sanjay Gandhi and his cronies, new foci of dissent, revolt and open and clandestine realignment of forces in the party appeared on the scene, which ultimately spelled the doom of the Emergency regime, when these streams merged with the

elemental upsurge of the common people, following a certain relaxation of the rigours of the Emergency in the wake of the announcement of the general elections.

The people's upsurge in the northern region, though basically a cumulative result of oppressions and suppressions during the entire system of the Emergency rule was triggered off by the forced mass sterilisation campaign, which however, was not an extraneous feature as is generally supposed. The pressures of the IMF-World Bank think-tanks apart, the caucus itself had reasons to plump for this campaign. Having opted for the propping up of the social *status quo*, as it had done, the caucus was fully aware of the extremely narrow limits of growth, if there would be growth at all, of the Indian economy under the existing social framework. Hence, given this constraint, some sort of stability of the system could be visualised only if the population growth rate could be brought down. Hence, the regime had to resort to desperate measures to achieve some elements of control over population growth.

When all these contradictions within the Emergency system of power had deepened—(i) contradictions between the caucus and the wider body of the ruling party, (ii) contradictions between the rising Youth Congress upstarts and the veteran Congress politicians, and above all, (iii) contradictions between the Emergency regime and the mass of the people in the northern areas of the country at least, Mrs. Indira Gandhi was compelled to seek a measure of legitimacy for her refashioned authoritarian power with a view to *strengthening* and *perpetuating* it, under pressures from international forces.

It is possible that she acquiesced to these pressures because of her ignorance of the real correlation of forces. But once the first step of partial relaxation of the Emergency was taken, there was no turning back without involving the country in a veritable blood bath and involving the army as the final arbiter in the political struggle—a contingency she had neither visualised nor planned for—she could do nothing to stem the tide against herself. And, as soon as the portents indicated a turn in the tide, Indira Gandhi's partners in the conspiracy, the monopoly bourgeoisie and the bureaucracy got split—a section coming over to the opposition. Hence, she was left high and dry.

Unexpectedly and smoothly as the Emergency regime had come, similarly was it thrown out.

Without going into a detailed analysis, some of the major conditions that shaped this final denouement should be mentioned in conclusion :

1. The regime's failure to domesticate the Indian working class despite the shameful collaborationist role of the CPI's AITUC in conjunction with the INTUC ;
2. Heroic resistance by a section of judiciary and the vast majority of the legal profession ;
3. Failure of the regime to rope in any significant sections of the intellectuals and even prestigious journalists ; and
4. Failure of Indira Gandhi either to win over any significant leaders of the opposition or to create dissensions among them.

But, taking everything into consideration, it was primarily the shedding of the traditional passivity and, to an extent, the loyalty to the Congress as the inheritor of the Gandhi-Nehru tradition, on the part of the rural masses that liberated the country from the nightmare of Indira Gandhi's immoral, cynical, unscrupulous, semi-fascist rule.

## APPENDIX

### Basic Dynamics of the Socio-economic Crisis in India

(Excerpts from a note published in *The Marxist Review*, August, 1974)

(viii) The basic problem of the Indian economy may, therefore, be stated as below:

The Indian bourgeoisie having a relatively long history of industrial development and relatively strong industrial base (i.e., in relation to other colonial bourgeoisie) has embarked on a course of relatively independent economic (capitalist) growth. As a part of this process, it has undertaken a simultaneous and balanced (again relatively) development on a wide front—stretching from plants to make steel plants to mass consumption goods and inputs for modern agriculture—A certain relative isolation of its protected home market notwithstanding, in the course of its expansion, *Indian industry in general has to attain and keep pace with the present, highly capital-intensive, international technology.*

Even though the rate of surplus value is very high — higher than in the advanced countries—the absolute *mass* of surplus value extracted by the Indian bourgeoisie *as a whole* is far from adequate for meeting the requirements of the minimum investment for extended reproduction in the *relatively large* modern sector of the economy—requirements which are determined by the *international technological level* in the final analysis.

As long as the accumulated sterling balances in the initial years of the planning process and the volume of net inflow of foreign savings in the period till the middle of the Sixties tended to partly make up the shortfalls in internal accumulation, the economy moved forward, despite inevitable fluctuations. This, even though, somewhat halting, advance of material production provided the basis for the bourgeoisie's use of the mechanism of controlled inflation for accelerating its process of accumulation.

The tapering off of the rate of net inflow of foreign savings—more so in real terms on account of the inflationary developments

all over the capitalist world—after the middle Sixties has led to a drastic cutback in the rate of investment in the economy and has thwarted its growth. With the disappearance of the cushion that the growth of material production provided in the past, inflation has acquired a *self-perpetuating* and *self-accelerating* character and, hence, it is no longer *controllable* by the bourgeoisie.

(ix) The present stagnation is thus the result of two parallel Developments:

(a) On the one hand, the shortfalls in key sectors like steel, power and transport capacities, which are themselves the most glaring examples of the lagging investment in the economy, are creating further scarcities of many vital inputs, and are in turn, depressing production further afield; and

(b) The retardation of the expansion of Department I—i.e., the expansion which injects a buoyancy in the economy by expanding demands—is weakening the momentum of growth.

(x) This framework over all stagnation of production and capacity, leading to acute scarcity of commodities on the one hand and the accumulation of latent money capital in the hands of the capitalists, yet unable to be used in the cycle of production because of its inability to grow into the critical mass that is demanded by present technological level, on the other hand, have combined to impart a fillip to the speculative proclivities of the traditionally colonial bourgeoisie.

(xi) The economic factors behind the steadily growing inflationary pressures have been further stimulated by the consequences flowing from the ambitious (and ambiguous) foreign policy postures of the monopolist bourgeoisie—i.e., a large defence budget with a large proportion of non-capital expenditure.

(xii) All this coinciding in the recent years with the effects of unfavourable climatic conditions on an agriculture in the grip of a chronic agrarian crisis has made strong and pervasive inflationary pressures irresistible and uncontrollable within the existing socio-economic framework.

(xiii) The basic alternatives before the Indian bourgeoisie now are :

- (a) Either, to give up the ambition of developing an independent and balanced economic structure (and its associated foreign policy goals) and to bring down the sights to the much more modest objective of developing with the more readily available resources, only light consumer goods industries, conforming to the docile colonial pattern :
- (b) Or, to seek to accumulate a larger mass of internal resources by effecting a very sharp increase in the rate of surplus value, something generally comparable to the process of the primitive accumulation in the period of industrial revolution in the developed capitalist countries. The first course presupposes a shift of political power from the now dominant industrial and monopolistic bourgeoisie to sections of the bourgeoisie with latent comprador inclinations.

The second course implies a much more authoritarian political system and a more naked subversion of the bourgeois democratic framework.

Both the courses involve long drawn and bitter political struggles within the bourgeoisie and between the bourgeoisie and the toiling masses, headed by the working class.

There will also be various attempts at compromises between the two courses.

(xiv) The real alternatives before the working class and the mass of the people are :

- (a) Either, passing under a neo-colonial and/or semi-fascist regime ;
- (b) Or, overthrow of the present system with a view to removing the present fetters on the forces of production, and releasing mass labour enthusiasm so that productivity, consumption and accumulation can be simultaneously raised.