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Remembering the Emergency

By: **Suhas Palshikar**

A diverse set of essays on the Emergency explores its political & social dimensions. While the editors of the volume do not foreground parallels with the present, the shadow of current democratic anxieties persists, underscoring the need for deeper analysis of this pivotal moment in India's history.

Confidence in the strength of democracy can be sometimes deceptive. In 1975, the Constitution of India completed 25 years of its functioning, and India had belied the early fears of state failure. Western apprehensions of its electoral democracy were also negated not merely by regular elections but also by two smooth successions. There were, of course, routine protests and many allegations of wrongdoings against the ruling party, but both these, wrongdoings and protests, were only to be expected in a democratic setup.

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Against this backdrop, the country was pushed into the unknown—an "internal" Emergency that suspended routine democracy. More recently and evocatively, the declaration of the Emergency was officially labelled as the "*sanvidhan hatya diwas*", the day the Constitution was murdered.

To the growing literature on that period, Peter Ronald deSouza and Harsh Sethi have now added one more interesting and thought-provoking volume discussing the many dimensions of the Emergency. (Disclosure: This reviewer has had the pleasure of being associated with both editors.) As time passes, while new research takes place on that period and its antecedents, the Emergency has also produced myths about what caused it and who resisted it.

Anand Kumar, in his essay, tries to clarify the historical record by raising questions about the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its protests during the Emergency. Kalpana Kannabiran, meanwhile, makes the strong point that the "Hindu Right", as she calls it, actually emerged as a force during this period (p. 53). Another intriguing aspect of the Emergency is Vinoba Bhave's use of the term "*anushasanparva*" (the era of discipline). Tridip Surhud examines this idea further, interpreting Vinoba's concept of anti-politics through his vision of the *acharya kul*—a group of wise teachers as custodians of knowledge.

The book brings together a diverse set of essays. In one chapter, Ravi Arvind Palat examines how Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) became a focal point of political activity during the Emergency—a role it has continued to play in recent times. Other contributions include reflections on poetry, the writing of prison letters, and life in Tihar Jail—by Rukmini Bhaya Nayar, Gyan Prakash, and Mahmood Farooqui, respectively.

Finally, the editors present two thought-provoking arguments, through essays by Gopal Guru and Peter deSouza. More about these later.

The Present in the Past

As expected, many contributors bring up a key question that links past and present: If democracy was fragile during the Emergency, is it truly secure today? If institutions were made to fail then, are we seeing them fail again now? And if the Constitution was destroyed in one decisive moment on 25 June 1975, could it be slowly dismantled again today, bit by bit?

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The editors of this volume do not place these and similar questions at the centre of their Introduction. Nevertheless, the inevitable shadow of the present informs much of the discussion in the book. To be fair to the editors, there is a section in their Introduction, titled "Then and Now". In that section, they finally and briefly say, "Many of these tendencies are apparent today. In this sense, 2025 represents a continuity" (p. xxii).

The editors make a key observation at the outset: with 50 years having passed, we are now better able to view the Emergency in the broader context of "the subsequent travails of democracy in India" (p. xi). One wishes they had explored these struggles in more detail, or perhaps included a separate essay on them.

Many essays in the collection, rich in narrative and analysis, link the Emergency era to patterns of democratic weakening even after India's "second freedom" in 1977. For example, R. Sudarshan, in his examination of the judiciary's actions during the Emergency, warns that "India has entered the era of 'autocratic legalism'" (p. 49).

Exploring the legacy of the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA), Ujjwal Kumar Singh and Anupama Roy discuss the enduring "spectre" of MISA-tracing how its legacy is reflected in later anti-terror legislation and changes to the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA).

Pamela Philipose recounts both the notorious incidents of journalists being made to "crawl", and the courageous acts of resistance from the press. She argues that journalists of that time "showed far more resoluteness ... than their later-day counterparts" (p. 177). Quoting Robin Jeffery, she notes that today's governments do not need to break the connection between the media and big business because that link is now so entrenched-and advantageous to politicians and governments.

Beyond the law, constitution, and media, another recurring theme is the role of the police and bureaucracy, who carried out the illegitimate wishes of political leaders during the Emergency. Deepak Sanan, in his revisit of the Shah Commission Report, describes reading it today as a "surreal experience" (p. 89). He emphasises that autocratic governance in India has grown both more sophisticated and more blunt, further restricting the space for protest and dissent, and, most worryingly, narrowing the very meaning of democracy.

Economy and Foreign Hand

The 1970s are often discussed in two main contexts to justify the Emergency: first, that it was a harsh but necessary response to economic problems made worse by unresponsive traders and industrialists; and second, that India was under constant threat from international forces-the so-called "foreign hand"-trying to destabilise the country. The two essays reviewed here, one by Errol D'Souza and the other by Varun Sahni, do not take a firm stance on whether these arguments truly justified the Emergency. However, both authors offer valuable insights into how these contexts served as convenient explanations for imposing it.

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In his essay, "The Economic Roots of the Emergency", Errol D'Souza gives a detailed account of India's economy from the mid-1960s. He shows that this was a period of unprecedented inflation and the lowest economic growth since Independence. D'Souza notes that the government responded with the redistributive 20-point programme, but he does not analyse its actual impact, nor does he question whether such drastic political actions were needed to enforce it. Instead, he focuses on how the economic decline eroded the legitimacy of politics and created pressures for those in power to protect themselves-a point that deserves further discussion.

Sahni, on the other hand, examines the complex stories surrounding the persistent threat of the "foreign hand". He argues that this was not a single entity, but a plural phenomenon: both the USSR and the US were eager to influence India's policies during those turbulent years. Sahni suggests that while major powers frequently interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, in India's case, the US was probably more active than the USSR at that time. His essay ultimately suggests that the supposed link between the "foreign hand" and India's opposition politics was either limited or, as his essay's title hints, largely imaginary or fabricated.

Provocative Contributions

This volume is likely to attract attention thanks to two provocative essays by Guru and Peter deSouza. Both authors set out to escape certain theoretical traps, yet ultimately find themselves caught within them.

In his essay, Guru examines the familiar "bread vs. freedom" debate by engaging with the concepts of negative and positive freedom. Instead of bridging or moving past this unnecessary binary, he ends up favouring positive freedom-expressed through redistributive policies-while downplaying the so-called "middle-class" notion of negative freedom.

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Politically, it is unclear why achieving redistribution required the denial of negative freedoms; and in theory, these two kinds of freedom do not have to be mutually exclusive. Guru's essay does offer an insightful discussion about "unfreedom by birth", but it also raises the question: does unfreedom as a citizen not also affect those already burdened by unfreedom from birth?

Peter deSouza's essay, "Why did She Impose It and Why Did She Lift It?", explores the subjective dimension of the Emergency by focusing on Indira Gandhi. He spends time arguing with absent institutionalists about the importance of the subjective perspective, while perhaps neglecting the point that, despite Mrs. Gandhi's personality and personal motivations, the Emergency would not have been possible without the failure of key institutions. In a democracy, institutional checks and balances are supposed to restrain the personal tendencies and temptations of leaders.

On the other hand, critics of the Emergency have long recognised that Mrs. Gandhi's self-perception and insecurities did play a significant role in the crisis. After all, the moral and political character of leaders can shape how democracy unfolds. However, deSouza's essay does not adequately address the second part of his title-why did she lift the Emergency? This remains something of a mystery. Institutional explanations fall short, and only a subjective approach might offer us a clue to this. But here, deSouza reads too much into the idea of familial and Nehruvian inheritance affecting Mrs. Gandhi.

Questions Remain

To better understand both the events of 1975-77 and their relevance today, volumes like this-and other scholarly works-must also address several additional issues. This reflects a common desire for deeper analysis of a crucial period in India's democratic history.

First, it is important to challenge the narrative that the events of 1977 reversed all the wrongs of the Emergency. After 1977, Indian politics continued to see failures of institutions and instances of individual vanity, both on national and state levels. Equally, we should question the idea that during the 1977 elections, citizens deliberately punished the Congress for imposing the Emergency.

Lack of freedom to serve a leader's vanity is troubling; lack of freedom coupled with a larger social project is even more dangerous.

The outcome of 1977 may have helped democracy survive, but was it truly a rejection of the Emergency? If so, how do we explain the differences between the northern and southern states, and Mrs. Gandhi's eventual return to power, despite being blamed for curtailing democracy? An essay exploring this puzzle would have added valuable insight to a volume like this.

A further area that this book could have explored is the "art of taming citizen agency". Studying the Emergency today means examining new ways in which democracy is undermined. If present-day rulers have perfected surveillance, they have also learned to manipulate public opinion. A weakening of critical thinking can be carried out "democratically"-for example, by saturating society's emotional space through sophisticated forms of "influencing".

Although it is useful to compare the present with the past, we ought to add a caveat. The tactics used to limit democratic freedom today bear an uncanny resemblance to those in the Emergency era. But the central question remains: Why did a popular leader feel the need to impose an Emergency in 1975? Reasons include declining popularity, a desire for greater authority, and an ambition to be remembered as the saviour of a newly independent nation.

Still, another issue deserves attention: Was the Emergency designed to impose a particular ideology on the country? Was there an ideological agenda behind its undemocratic practices? Lack of freedom in order to serve a leader's vanity is troubling; lack of freedom coupled with a larger social project is even more dangerous. While a leader can be defeated and replaced, harm from an ideological project is deeper and much harder to reverse.

Though this line of thinking is not found in the present volume, any meaningful study of the Emergency should remind readers of such uncomfortable possibilities that persist today.

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