



It changed our political DNA

The Emergency, from 1975 to 1977, fundamentally reshaped the landscape of Indian politics and benefited the Hindu Right



■ Standing at the cusp of almost absolute power apparently made Indira Gandhi more sensitive to both its potential and its dangers

VIRENDRA PRABHAKAR/HT

In a recent article on Yogi Adityanath's anointment as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Fali S Nariman recalled the lessons of the Emergency. It was a timely intervention, not because of its warning about the dangers of a majoritarian State, but because it coincided with the 40th anniversary of the end of the Emergency. Nariman's piece treats it as a memento mori for Indian democracy. Four decades on, we remain unable to look back at the Emergency as a historical moment rather than a morality play.

The immediate events leading to the imposition of the Emergency are well known. Less understood is the point that the Emergency was also the outcome of a contest between two sets of ideas that had been brewing throughout Indira Gandhi's tenure, if not earlier still.

In the first place, there was an uneasy coexistence between the notions of the State and democracy. Between the simplicity of the elite using the power of the State to reshape society and the rough-and-tumble of democratic politics that allowed society to take charge of its own destiny. Indeed, the bureaucratic elite was most enthusiastic in its reception of the Emergency. BK Nehru, for example, advised Indira Gandhi that the "Emergency should be taken advantage of while it lasts" to install "a strong executive at the Centre capable of taking tough, unpleasant and unpopular decisions."

Further, there was the struggle between the ideas of democracy and constitutionalism. The radical policies adopted by Gandhi resulted in a prolonged standoff with the Supreme Court. A key point of contention was the competence of Parliament to amend the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution, especially the right to property. The serial challenges by the court on this front led her to move an even stronger set of constitutional amendments during the Emergency that aimed at an enormous concentration of power in the prime minister's hands.

Yet, Indira Gandhi refrained from a wholesale modification of the Constitution and the political system in ways that would have made her position unassailable. Suggestions for revising the Constitution were afloat among her Cabinet colleagues and political advisers from early on. Just three days after the Emergency was imposed, Karan Singh wrote to her that the "question of evolving a constitutional structure better suited to the requirements and genius of the nation has now to be squarely faced." A committee was constituted under Swaran Singh to look into this matter.

Ideas on changing the Constitution flew thick and fast. Bansi Lal insisted that the committee should recommend changes that would give Indira Gandhi lifelong power. BK Nehru advised her to usher in a presidential system on the French model and weaken the federal structure by making the governor the "de facto agent of the Centre". "Make these fundamental changes in the Constitution now", he insisted, "when you have 2/3rd majority".

Ironically, the enthusiasm of her advisers gave Indira Gandhi pause. Standing at the cusp of almost absolute power apparently made her more sensitive to both its potential and its dangers. In the event, the Janata government subsequently repealed the constitutional amendments brought in during the Emergency.

The decision to end the Emergency and to call for polls is equally intriguing. In fact, the Opposition initially saw the move towards elections as aimed at perpetuating Indira Gandhi's rule. As Charan Singh wrote to Jayaprakash Narayan in January 1977: "Smt Gandhi is thinking of staging an election. I call it 'staging' because conditions for a real election — free and fair — will be lacking." Various reasons have been advanced for why Gandhi confounded this expectation, none of which are wholly convincing. This remains an open and tantalising question for historians to tackle.

In retrospect, the Emergency had far-reaching conse-

quences for Indian politics. For one thing, it marked the ascendancy of dynastic politics. Indira Gandhi would later observe that Sanjay Gandhi gave her "the sort of support that comes not from a son but from an elder brother." Sanjay, in turn, promoted both in the Youth Congress and the party a host of young leaders. A roster of those who came up under his patronage reads like a who's who of the party in the last 15-20 years. It is this generation of leaders that ensured the centrality of the Nehru-Gandhi family in the Congress.

Young politicians — often from a student politics background — figured prominently on the other side of the fence too. The JP movement and the Emergency were the cradle for future generations of leaders, both of the BJP and the various OBC parties in north India that came out of socialist politics. Even south Indian parties like the DMK saw an influx of a generation of young leaders — most prominently MK Stalin, son of chief minister MK Karunanidhi, whose opposition to the Emergency led to his removal in 1976.

The foremost beneficiary of the Emergency was the Hindu Right. The RSS' participation in the JP movement as well as the civil disobedience against the government during the Emergency gave it — notwithstanding some craven letters by its chief to the prime minister — a legitimacy that it had hitherto lacked. The mobilisation of RSS cadre during this period also provided the template for the populist Hindutva mobilisations of the late eighties and the early nineties. The Jana Sangh too got its first taste of national power following Indira Gandhi's ouster in 1977. What's more, when Gandhi returned to power three years later, she began appropriating elements of Hindu majoritarian politics.

The Emergency, in short, fundamentally reshaped the landscape of Indian politics. And its historical consequences are still unfolding.

Srinath Raghavan is senior fellow, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi
The views expressed are personal