The JP Movement and the Emergency: Indian Democracy Tested

In 1975, India experienced its greatest political crisis since independence when Internal Emergency was declared on 26 June. 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? Or did both sides indulge in obfuscation. The issue in fact, is quite complex.

The Pre-Emergency Crises

By the beginning of 1973 Indira Gandhi's popularity began to decline. People's expectations were unfulfilled. Little dent was being made in rural or urban poverty or economic inequality, nor was there any lessening of caste and class oppression in the countryside.

The immediate provocation for the rising discontent was the marked deterioration in the economic situation. A combination of recession, growing unemployment, rampant inflation and scarcity of foodstuffs created a serious crisis. The burden of feeding and sheltering nearly 10 million refugees from Bangladesh during 1971 had depleted the grain reserves and, combined with the cost of the Bangladesh war, had led to a large budgetary deficit. The war had also drained foreign exchange reserves. Monsoon rains failed for two years in succession during 1972 and 1973, leading to a terrible drought in most parts of the country and a massive shortage of foodgrains, and fuelling their prices. The drought also led to a drop in power generation and combined with the fall in agricultural production, and therefore in the demand for manufactured goods, led to industrial recession and rise in unemployment. The year 1973 also witnessed the notorious oil shock when world prices of crude oil increased four-fold, leading to massive increase in the prices of petroleum products and fertilizers. This drained foreign reserves, further increased the budgetary deficit and deepened economic recession. With all this, prices rose continuously, by 22 per cent in 1972–73 alone. The price rise, which affected both the poor and the middle classes, was accompanied by scarcity of essential articles of consumption. There were food riots in several parts of the country.

Economic recession, unemployment, price rise and scarcity of goods led to large-scale industrial unrest and a wave of strikes in different parts of the country during 1972 and 1973, culminating in an all-India railway strike in May 1974. The railway strike lasted twenty-two days but was broken in the end. Mrs Gandhi's popularity among the workers was eroded further.

Law and order deteriorated, particularly during 1974–75. Strikes, student protests and popular demonstrations often turned violent. Many colleges and universities were closed for prolonged periods. In May 1973, there was a mutiny in Uttar Pradesh by the Provincial Armed Constabulary, which clashed with the army sent to discipline it, leading to the death of over thirty-five constables and soldiers.

To tackle the deteriorating economic, political and law and order situation firm and clear

leadership was needed, as exhibited during the Bangladesh crisis and in the handling of foreign affairs. But that was not forthcoming. The political situation was worsened by the play of other factors. Congress had been declining as an organization and proved incapable of dealing with the political crisis at the state and grassroots levels. The government's capacity to redress the situation was seriously impaired by the growing corruption in most areas of life and the widespread belief that the higher levels of the ruling party and administration were involved in it. The whiff of corruption touched even Indira Gandhi when her inexperienced younger son, Sanjay Gandhi, was given a licence to manufacture 50,000 Maruti cars a year.

A major new development was the growing detachment of three major social groups from Congress. While the poor continued to support it, though more passively, the middle classes, because of price rise and the stink of corruption, the rich peasantry, because of the threat of land reform, and the capitalists, because of the talk of socialism, nationalization of banks and coal mining and antimonopoly measures, turned against Congress and Indira Gandhi. Desperation of the Opposition parties also contributed to the undermining of the political system. Utterly disparate ideologically and programmatically, the only thing uniting these parties was anti-Congressism. But they were in no position, either separately or in combination, to pose a political challenge to Congress, having been thoroughly defeated and downsized in the general elections of 1971 and state assembly elections of 1972. Unwilling to wait till the next elections to test their popularity they decided, irrespective of the consequences, to blindly support any group or movement in any form against the government at the Centre or in a state.

Gujarat and Bihar Unrest

What turned the various economic and political crises into one of the political system were two popular movements in Gujarat and Bihar against the faction-ridden Congress governments, and the leadership provided to the Bihar movement by Jayaprakash Narayan.

A major upheaval occurred in Gujarat in January 1974 when popular anger over the rise in the prices of foodgrains, cooking oil and other essential commodities exploded in the cities and towns of the state in the form of a student movement which was soon joined by the Opposition parties. For more than ten weeks the state faced virtual anarchy with strikes, looting, rioting and arson, and efforts to force MLAs to resign. The police replied with excessive force, indiscriminate arrests and frequent recourse to lathi charge and firing. By February, the central government was forced to ask the state government to resign, suspend the assembly and impose President's Rule in the state. The last act of the Gujarat drama was played in March 1975 when, faced with continuing agitation and a fast unto death by Morarji Desai, Indira Gandhi dissolved the assembly and announced fresh elections to it in June.

On the heels of the Gujarat agitation and inspired by its success, a similar agitation was started by students in Bihar in March 1974. The students, starting with the gherao of the assembly on 18 March, repeatedly clashed with the overactive police, leading to the death of twenty-seven people in one week. Moreover, as in Gujarat, Opposition parties quickly joined forces with the student agitators.

The Bihar movement was, however, characterized by two new features. Jayaprakash Narayan, popularly known as JP, came out from political retirement, took over its leadership, and gave a call for 'Total Revolution' or 'a struggle against the very system which has compelled almost everybody to go corrupt'.[1] Demanding resignation of the Congress government in Bihar and dissolution of the assembly, he asked the students and the people to put pressure on the existing legislators to resign, paralyse the government, gherao the state assembly and government offices, set up parallel people's governments all over the state, and pay no taxes. The second feature was the firm refusal of Indira Gandhi to concede the demand for the dissolution of the assembly, lest it spread to cover other parts of the country and the central government.

JP also decided to go beyond Bihar and organize a countrywide movement against widespread corruption and for the removal of Congress and Indira Gandhi, who was now seen as a threat to democracy and portrayed as the fountainhead of corruption.

JP now repeatedly toured the entire country and drew large crowds especially in Delhi and other parts of North India which were Jan Sangh or Socialist strongholds. The JP Movement attracted wide support especially from students, middle classes, traders and a section of the intelligentsia. It also got the backing of nearly all the non-left political parties who had been trounced in 1971 and who saw in JP a popular leader who would enable them to acquire credibility as an alternative to Congress. JP in turn realized that without the organizational structures of these parties he could not hope to face Indira Gandhi either in the streets or at the polls.

The fervour of the JP Movement, however, did not last long and it began to decline by the end of 1974. Most of his student followers went back to their classes. Moreover, the movement had failed to attract the rural and urban poor even in Gujarat and Bihar. Denouncing the JP Movement for its extra-parliamentary approach, Indira Gandhi challenged JP to test their respective popularity in Bihar as also the country as a whole in the coming general elections, due in February–March 1976. JP accepted the challenge and his supporting parties decided to form a National Coordination Committee for the purpose.

It appeared at this stage that the issue as to who actually represented the Indian people would be resolved through the democratic electoral process. However, this was not to be. A sudden twist to Indian politics was given by a judgement on 12 June 1975 by Justice Sinha of the Allahabad High Court, on an election petition by Raj Narain, convicting Mrs Gandhi for having indulged in corrupt campaign practices and declaring her election invalid. The conviction also meant that she could not seek election to parliament or hold office for six years and therefore continue as prime minister.

Most observers at the time noted that Justice Sinha had dismissed the more serious charges against her but had convicted her of technical and trivial, even frivolous, offences against the election law. Mrs Gandhi refused to resign and appealed to the Supreme Court. While the Supreme Court would hear her appeal on 14 July, Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer, the vacation judge of the Supreme Court, created further confusion when he decided on 24 June that, till the final disposal of her appeal by the full bench of the Supreme Court, Mrs Gandhi could stay in office

and speak in parliament but could not vote in it.

Meanwhile, Mrs Gandhi suffered another political blow when the Gujarat assembly election results came on 13 June. The opposition Janata front won 87 seats and the Congress 75 seats in a house of 182. Surprisingly, the Janata front succeeded in forming a government in alliance with the same Chimanbhai Patel against whose corruption and maladministration the popular movement had been initiated.

The Allahabad judgement and the Gujarat assembly results revived the Opposition movement. JP and the coalition of Opposition parties were, however, not willing to wait for the result of Indira Gandhi's appeal to the Supreme Court or the general elections to the Lok Sabha due in eight months. They decided to seize the opportunity and, accusing Mrs Gandhi of 'clinging to an office corruptly gained', demanded her resignation and called for a countrywide campaign to force the issue. In a rally in Delhi on 25 June they announced that a nationwide one-week campaign of mass mobilization and civil disobedience to force Mrs Gandhi to resign would be initiated on 29 June. The campaign would end with the gherao of the prime minister's house by hundreds of thousands of volunteers. In his speech at the rally, JP asked the people to make it impossible for the government to function and once again appealed to the armed forces, the police and the bureaucracy to refuse to obey any orders they regarded as 'illegal' and 'unconstitutional'.

Mrs Gandhi's lightning response was to declare a state of Internal Emergency on 26 June.

The JP Movement

How did the Emergency come about, what was its legitimacy, what did it mean in practice, and why was it lifted in the end and with what consequences; these issues deserve critical attention.

The main justification of the JP Movement was that it arose to end corruption in Indian life and politics, whose fountainhead was ostensibly Mrs Gandhi, and to defend democracy which was threatened by her authoritarian personality and style of politics and administration. JP often accused Indira Gandhi of trying to destroy all democratic institutions and establish a Soviet-backed dictatorship in her hunger for power. Her continuation in office, he said, was 'incompatible with the survival of democracy in India'.[2] Later, many other critics and opponents of Mrs Gandhi expressed similar views.

Indira Gandhi justified her action in imposing the Emergency in terms of national political interests and primarily on three grounds. First, India's stability, security, integrity and democracy were in danger from the disruptive character of the JP Movement. Referring to JP's speeches, she accused the opposition of inciting the armed forces to mutiny and the police to rebel. Second, there was the need to implement a programme of rapid economic development in the interests of the poor and the underprivileged. Third, she warned against intervention and subversion from abroad with the aim of weakening and destabilizing India.

In fact, neither JP nor Indira Gandhi chose the democratic way out of the crisis. JP should have demanded and Indira Gandhi should have offered to hold fresh elections to the Lok Sabha, which were in any case due in early 1976, earlier, in October– November 1975 itself, and thus provided

a practical alternative to both the demand for her resignation and the Emergency. Both JP's and Mrs Gandhi's positions need to be examined critically, in light of subsequent political developments.

The JP Movement was flawed in many respects, in terms of both its composition and its actions and the character and philosophy of its leader. Jayaprakash Narayan was justly renowned for his integrity, lack of ambition for office, fearlessness, selflessness and sacrifice and lifelong commitment to civil liberties and the establishment of a just social order. But, ideologically, he was vague. From the early 1950s he became a critic of parliamentary politics and parliamentary democracy. For years, he tried to popularize the concept of 'partyless democracy'. During 1974–75 he also advocated 'Total Revolution' *(Sampooran Kranti)*. Both concepts were unclear and nebulous, and at no stage was he able to delineate or explain what a political system without political parties would involve or how would the popular will get expressed or implemented in it. Similarly, the socio-economic and political content, programme or policies of the Total Revolution were never properly defined. At the same time, JP was a democrat and not an authoritarian leader. Nor was the movement he led in 1974–75 yet authoritarian or fascist, but—and this is important—it was capable of creating a space for its fascist component. JP's talk of partyless democracy and Total Revolution and the critique of parliamentary democracy, hazy and indistinctive, could also be dangerous, for it encouraged cynicism, scorn and despair towards democratic institutions. This could create a political climate favourable to authoritarianism and fascism, as happened in Italy and Germany after 1919 and in Pakistan and Indonesia in the 1960s.

The nebulousness of JP's politics and ideology is also illustrated by the fact that he took the support of political parties and groups which had nothing in common in terms of programme and policies and were ideologically incompatible. The JP Movement came to include the communal Jan Sangh and Jamaat-i-Islami, the neofascist RSS, the conservative and secular Congress (O), Socialists and the extreme left Naxalite groups. Almost entirely negative in its approach, the movement could not fashion an alternative programme or policies except that of overthrowing Indira Gandhi.

In its later phases, the movement depended for organization on the RSS–Jan Sangh, which alone among its constituents had a strong well-knit organization, trained cadre and branches all over the country, especially in northern and central India. Even in Bihar, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), a front organization of the RSS, had come to form the backbone of JP's main political vehicle, the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsha Vahini. Consequently, though JP remained the movement's chief mobilizer, it came to be increasingly dominated by the RSS–Jan Sangh. This resulted in the political character of the movement also undergoing a major change; not change of policies or of the state governments but the removal of Indira Gandhi became the movement's main goal. Furthermore, it had a potentially undemocratic character in terms both of its demands and the methods adopted or planned. Its objective was not the blocking of or bringing about changes in particular government policies but undermining first the government of Bihar and then the government at the Centre. The democratically elected legislatures and governments were to

be dissolved and replaced not through elections but through extra-constitutional mass agitations mainly confined to urban areas. This amounted to a covert demand for a basic change of the political system.

The agitational methods adopted and propagated by the JP Movement were also extra-constitutional and undemocratic. Going far beyond peaceful processions, demonstrations and public rallies, in Bihar, as earlier in Gujarat, the tactic was to force the government to resign and the legislatures to be dissolved by gheraoing government offices, the assembly, and the governor and thus paralyse the government and to intimidate and coerce individual elected legislators to resign from the assemblies. This tactic was to be repeated in June–July 1975 at the Centre.

More serious was JP's incitement to the army, police and civil services to rebel. Several times during the course of the movement, he urged them not to obey orders that were 'unjust and beyond the call of the duty' or 'illegal and unjust' or 'unconstitutional, illegal or against their conscience'. The decision regarding unconstitutionality, and so on, of the orders was to be made by the individuals concerned themselves. But these various exhortations could possibly be considered more an expression of JP's hazy thinking than an actual call for rebellion.

As we have seen earlier, the climax of the JP Movement came on 25 June 1975 when a public call was given for a nationwide mass civil disobedience movement which would culminate in a gherao of the prime minister's residence, thus forcing her to resign or to enact another Jallianwala Bagh massacre—a massacre she would never be able to live down. The entire opposition game plan was made explicit by Morarji Desai in an interview later in the evening: 'We intend to overthrow her, to force her to resign. For good . . . Thousands of us will surround her house to prevent her from going out or receive visitors. We'll camp there night and day shouting to her to resign.'[3] In other words, the opposition plan had all the hallmarks of a coup d'état.

The situation that was being created by the JP Movement was that of insurrection without revolution. The tactics it evolved over time amounted to a revolution. But this was to be a revolution without a revolutionary party, organization, ideology or programme to give it direction and leadership. In fact, it was to be a revolution to be made with reliance on a mix of the ideology-less cadre of the Chhatra Vahini, the conservative cadre of Congress (O), BKD and the Swatantra Party and the communal neo-fascist cadre of the RSS–Jan Sangh.

The adoption by a popular movement of the rhetoric of revolution and of extra-legal and extra-constitutional and often violent agitational methods is not compatible with the functioning of a democratic political system. But, what is more important, when such rhetoric and methods are not part of a revolutionary design to change the socio-economic order in a fundamental manner, when masses enter into a chaotic and disorganized movement without the leadership of a properly constituted and led revolutionary party, when faith in a political system is destroyed without creating faith in an alternative system, the resultant possibility is that of the establishment of an authoritarian, often fascist, regime or of political chaos, anarchy and disintegration of the political entity. Historically, such a mix has been the hallmark not of a revolution but of a counter-revolution, as the history of the rise of fascism in Europe and dictatorial regimes in Latin America indicates.

Let me add a caveat here. The danger of authoritarianism did not come from Jayaprakash Narayan who was not planning or giving direction to an authoritarian coup d'état. But there were, as pointed out above, others around him who were so inclined and who were increasingly coming to control the movement and who could capitalize on his ideological woolliness and basically weak personality.

In any case, the proper democratic options open to the Opposition were: (i) to wait for the Supreme Court judgement and, if it went against Mrs Gandhi, to demand its implementation; (ii) to wait for the general elections to the Lok Sabha due in early 1976 and in the meantime use peaceful agitation and propaganda to erode Mrs Gandhi's standing among the people; (iii) to demand that, because the Allahabad judgement had eroded Mrs Gandhi's mandate to rule, fresh elections should be held immediately—say in October–November 1975.

In fact, those in the Opposition who wanted to defeat Mrs Gandhi at the hustings had won out in October–November 1974 when JP had accepted Mrs Gandhi's challenge to let the next general elections decide the fate of his movement's demands. But one year or even six months is a long time in politics. A popular movement could either gain or lose momentum in that period. There was also no guarantee of success in the coming elections, especially as Congress's base in South India and among the rural poor, women and the minorities seemed to be intact. Even in the Gujarat elections in early June, Congress had failed to get a majority but so had the Opposition Janata combine despite JP and Morarji Desai leading its election campaign. The Allahabad judgement marked a turning point in this respect. Sensing the real possibility of the immediate ouster of Mrs Gandhi, JP, Morarji and others went over to the coup d'état school.

The Emergency

The imposition of the Emergency by Mrs Gandhi was also flawed. She was to claim later that faced with an extra-constitutional challenge she had no other option. Resigning, she said, would have strengthened the forces that were threatening the democratic process and bringing the country to the edge of anarchy and chaos. There was, moreover, no legal, political or moral reason why she should step down during the hearing of her appeal.

But, as already indicated earlier, in reality she too had another democratic option. She could have declared that the Lok Sabha would be dissolved and fresh elections to it would be held in October–November. If JP and the Opposition had accepted her offer, the door to a democratic resolution of the political impasse through an appeal to the electorate would have been opened. If they had not, and stuck to their demand for her resignation and their declared methods to bring it about, she could legitimately declare an Internal Emergency as the only viable and available option for meeting their extra-constitutional challenge. Simultaneously, she could announce that the Emergency would be lifted as soon as the Opposition gave up its demand for her resignation, agreed to adhere to the Supreme Court or parliament's judgement, and accepted the test of elections. Interestingly, it may be pointed out, this is exactly what General de Gaulle did when faced with the much more pervasive and radical upsurge of students and workers in May 1968. And, of course, the protesting students and workers and most of their leaders accepted the

challenge to face de Gaulle in elections. In any case, there was no justification for the longevity (about nineteen months) of the Emergency, once the perceived threat to law and order was over, or for the draconian character of the Emergency measures.

The political tragedy was that both the JP Movement and Indira Gandhi shunned the option of elections, which are in a democracy the vehicles for the legitimation of a political regime and for expression of popular will. This was, of course, so in part because of the manner in which the political conflict during 1974– 75 had developed, with the tragic consequence that a political atmosphere had been created in which dialogue and accommodation between the two opposing forces was not possible.

Mrs Gandhi proclaimed a state of Internal Emergency under Article 352 of the constitution on the morning of 26 June, suspending the normal political processes, but promising to return to normalcy as soon as conditions warranted it. The proclamation suspended the federal provisions of the constitution and Fundamental Rights and civil liberties. The government imposed strict censorship on the Press and stifled all protest and opposition to the government. In the early hours of 26 June, hundreds of the main leaders of the Opposition were arrested under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA). Among those arrested were Jayaprakash Narayan, Morarji Desai, and Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Congress dissidents such as Chandra Shekhar. Several academics, newspapermen, trade unionists and student leaders were also put behind bars. Many of the arrested were gradually released: JP in 1975 on grounds of health and others, including Charan Singh and Vajpayee, during 1976. Several extreme communal and ultra-left organizations, including the RSS, Anand Marg, Jamaat-i-Islami and Maoist CP(ML), were banned. Arrests continued throughout the period of the Emergency though most of the arrested were released after a few days or months. In all, more than 100,000 were arrested during a period of nineteen months. Among those arrested were also a large number of anti-social elements such as smugglers, hoarders, blackmarketeers and known goondas.

During the Emergency, parliament was made utterly ineffective. The opposition of a few brave MPs, who had not been arrested, was nullified as their speeches were not permitted to be reported in the Press. The state governments were rigidly controlled. The two non-Congress governments of DMK in Tamil Nadu and Janata in Gujarat were dismissed in January and March 1976 despite being quite compliant. The Congress chief ministers of Uttar Pradesh and Orissa, were replaced for not being reliable enough. The Congress party was also strictly controlled. Internal democracy within the party was more or less completely snuffed. From the second half of 1976 the Youth Congress led by Sanjay Gandhi became more important than the parent organization.

A series of decrees, laws and constitutional amendments reduced the powers of the judiciary to check the functioning of the executive. The Defence of India Act and MISA were amended in July 1975 to the detriment of the citizens' liberties. In November 1976, an effort was made to change the basic civil libertarian structure of the constitution through its 42nd Amendment. Putting an end to the judicial review of a constitutional amendment, because it was said that the judiciary was obstructing pro-poor socio-economic measures such as land reform legislation in the name

of defending Fundamental Rights, it was laid down that there would be no limitation whatever on the power of parliament to amend the constitution. Fundamental Rights were indirectly emasculated by being made subordinate to an expanded version of the Directive Principles of State Policy embodied in the constitution.

Thus, the Emergency concentrated unlimited state and party power in the hands of the prime minister to be exercised through a small coterie of politicians and bureaucrats around her.

Public Response to the Emergency

While a section of the intelligentsia reacted to the Emergency with marked hostility, the large majority of the people initially responded to it with passivity, acquiescence, acceptance or even, support. It was only from the beginning of 1976 that the Emergency started becoming unpopular. Why was this delayed reaction? For one, the people had no experience in recent memory, that is, since independence, of an authoritarian rule. There was bewilderment as also personal fear of the unknown. Moreover, apart from the arrest of Opposition leaders, the repressive measures were almost entirely directed either against anti-social elements or against the extreme communal right or the minuscule far left, who had enjoyed little popular support before the Emergency and who were in any case known to be averse to democracy. The number of persons arrested in the first few days in the entire country was less than 10,000. But many of the detenus were released within a short span of time. Above all, a large number of people were impressed by the positive outcome of some of the well-publicized Emergency measures most of which could, of course, have been taken without an Emergency.

With the restoration of public order and discipline, many felt relieved that the country had been saved from disorder and chaos. There was less crime in the cities; gheraos and uncontrolled, often violent, demonstrations came to an end; there was a perceptible lessening of tension in the air; there was calm and tranquillity on the campuses as students and teachers went back to classrooms. Inder Malhotra, a perceptive journalist, was to write later: 'The return of normal and orderly life, after relentless disruption by strikes, protest marches, sit-ins and clashes with the police, was applauded by most people . . . In its initial months at least, the Emergency restored to India a kind of calm it had not known for years.'[4]

There was also an immediate and general improvement in administration, with government servants coming to office on time and being more considerate to the public. Quick, dramatic and well-publicized action was taken against smugglers, hoarders, blackmarketeers, illegal traders in foreign currency and tax evaders, with several thousand of them put behind bars under MISA. There was a major, dramatic improvement in the economy, though only some of it was really due to steps taken under the Emergency; some of it being the result of excellent rains and some, of the policies initiated much before the Emergency. Most welcome was the dramatic improvement in the price situation. Prices of essential goods, including foodstuffs, came down and their availability in shops improved.

Popular hopes were raised and the Emergency made more palatable by the announcement on 1 July of the omnibus Twenty-Point Programme by Mrs Gandhi, its edge being the socio-

economic uplift of the vast mass of the rural poor. The programme promised to liquidate the existing debt of landless labourers, small farmers and rural artisans and extend alternative credit to them, abolish bonded labour, implement the existing agricultural land ceiling laws and distribute surplus land to the landless, provide house sites to landless labourers and weaker sections, revise upwards minimum wages of agricultural labour, provide special help to the handloom industry, bring down prices, prevent tax evasion and smuggling, increase production, streamline distribution of essential commodities, increase the limit of income tax exemption to Rs 8,000, and liberalize investment procedures.

Serious efforts were made to implement the Twenty-Point Programme; and some quick results were produced in terms of reduction of prices, free availability of essential commodities, and check on hoarding, smuggling and tax evasion. But the heart of the Twenty-Point Programme was its agenda of the uplift of the rural poor. Some progress was made even there. Three million house sites were provided to the landless and the Dalits. About 1.1 million acres of surplus land was distributed to the landless; this was, however, less than 10 per cent of the surplus land. Bonded labour was made illegal but little dent was made in the practice. Laws were passed in different states placing a moratorium on the recovery of debts from the landless labourers and small farmers and in some cases to scale down or liquidate their debts. But the scale of the alternative credit provided through nationalized banks and rural cooperative institutions was small and dependence on the usurious moneylenders, who were often also the big landowners, remained. Minimum wages for agricultural labourers were enhanced but their enforcement was again tardy. On the whole, however, the rural segment of the Twenty-Point Programme ran out of steam as its progress was hindered by large landowners and rich peasants and an unsympathetic bureaucracy. Consequently, though the programme brought some relief to the rural poor, there was little improvement in their basic condition.

A major factor in the people's acceptance of the Emergency was its constitutional, legal and temporary character. It was proclaimed under Article 352 of the constitution. It was approved by parliament and legitimized by the courts. To the people, it represented an interim measure, a temporary suspension of the normal rules and institutions of democracy. They did not see it as a substitute for democracy or as an attempt to impose a dictatorship. Throughout the Emergency, Mrs Gandhi asserted that she was fully committed to multi-party democracy and a free press, that the Emergency was an abnormal remedy for an abnormal situation, and that democratic conditions would be restored and elections held as soon as the situation returned to normal. The Indian people tended to take Mrs Gandhi at her word.

Towards Ending the Emergency

Within a few months, however, the people started getting disillusioned with the Emergency. Popular discontent from mid1976 reached its zenith six months later. The reasons for this are varied.

Relief to the people did not last long. Economic growth of the first year of the Emergency was not sustained. Agricultural output declined; prices rose by 10 per cent by the end of 1976. The

corrupt, blackmarketeers and smugglers resumed their activities as the shock of the Emergency wore off. The poor were disenchanted with the slow progress in their welfare and workers were unhappy because of limits on wages, bonus and dearness allowance and restrictions on the right to strike. Government servants and teachers became discontented because they were being disciplined in their workplaces and in many cases were being forced to fulfil sterilization quotas.

In fact, no real progress along the proclaimed lines was possible, for Mrs Gandhi and Congress failed to create any new agencies of social change or organs for popular mobilization. Reliance for the implementation of the Twenty-Point Programme and other developmental programmes was placed exclusively on the same old corrupt and inefficient bureaucracy and manipulative and discredited politicians. So far as the common people were concerned, matters took a turn for the worse, for there were no avenues of protest or any other mechanism for the voicing and redressal of their grievances. Even common people and not merely intellectuals and political workers lived in an atmosphere of fear and insecurity.

The bureaucracy and the police now got increased power that 'was unchecked by criticism and exposure from the Press, courts, MLAs and MPs, political parties and popular movements. The two set out to abuse this power in usual forms. This affected all but eventually the poor were the most affected. This was particularly true in northern India. Simultaneously, the drastic press censorship and the silencing of protest led to the government being kept in complete ignorance of what was happening in the country. Also, because the people knew that what appeared in the Press or on the radio was heavily censored, they no longer trusted them. They now relied much more on rumours and tended to believe the worst regarding the government's actions or intentions.

Denial of civil liberties began to be felt by the common people as it began to impact their daily lives in the form of harassment and corruption by petty officials. Delay in lifting the Emergency began to generate the fear that the authoritarian structure of the rule might be made permanent or continue for a long time, particularly as Mrs Gandhi had got parliament to postpone elections by one year in November 1976. The intelligentsia—teachers, journalists, professionals, and small town lawyers—and the middle classes in particular viewed the 42nd Amendment to the constitution, passed in September 1976, as an effort to subvert democracy by changing the very basic structure of the constitution. The Emergency, earlier acceptable, began to lose legitimacy.

A major reason for the growing unpopularity of the Emergency regime was, however, the development of an extra-constitutional centre of power associated with the rise to political power of Mrs Gandhi's younger son, Sanjay Gandhi, who held no office in the government or Congress. By April 1976, Sanjay Gandhi emerged as a parallel authority, interfering at will in the working of the government and administration. He was courted and obeyed by cabinet ministers, Congress leaders, chief ministers and senior civil servants. Within Congress, he emerged as the leader of the Youth Congress which soon rivalled the parent party in political weight.

In July 1976, Sanjay put forward his four points which gradually became more important than the official twenty points. The four points were: don't take dowry at the time of marriage; practise family planning and limit families to only two children; plant trees; and promote literacy. Sanjay Gandhi was also determined to beautify the cities by clearing slums and unauthorized structures

impeding roads, bazaars, parks, monuments, etc.

Pushed by Sanjay Gandhi, the government decided to promote family planning more vigorously and even in an arbitrary, illegitimate and authoritarian manner. Incentives and persuasion were increasingly replaced by compulsion and coercion and above all by compulsory sterilization. Government servants, school teachers and health workers were assigned arbitrarily fixed quotas of number of persons they had to 'motivate' to undergo sterilization. The police and administration added their might to the enforcement of the quotas. The most affected were the rural and urban poor who often protested in all sorts of everyday ways, including recourse to flight, hiding and rioting. Moreover, in view of press censorship, stories, true and false, of forcible vasectomies and violent resistance by the people spread quickly and widely.

Slum clearance and demolition of unauthorized structures followed the pattern of the family planning programme but were enforced with even greater callousness and cruelty, though they affected mainly Delhi and a few other cities.

Thus, the already existing climate of fear and repression, corruption and abuse of authority was further worsened by the excesses committed under Sanjay Gandhi's direction.

Surprise Elections 1977

On 18 January 1977, Mrs Gandhi suddenly announced that elections to the Lok Sabha would be held in March. She also simultaneously released political prisoners, removed press censorship and other restrictions on political activity such as holding of public meetings. Political parties were allowed to campaign freely.

The elections were held on 16 March in a free and fair atmosphere, and when the results came in it was clear that Congress had been thoroughly defeated. Both Mrs Gandhi and Sanjay Gandhi lost their seats. Mrs Gandhi issued a statement accepting the verdict of the people with 'due humility'.

Why did Mrs Gandhi announce and then hold open and free elections? After all she had got parliament to postpone elections by one year only two months before in November 1976. There is up to now no satisfactory answer to the question, though there has been a great deal of speculation. Three broad explanations are offered.

First, the favourable view is that the decision was an expression of Mrs Gandhi's underlying commitment to liberal democracy and democratic values. Mary C. Carras, her biographer, has argued that, 'Throughout her life her self-image had been that of a democrat; indeed her self-respect derives in good part from this self-image . . . She was compelled to prove to the world and, above all, to herself, that she is and always has been a democrat.'[5] In the opinion of some other writers once Mrs Gandhi became aware of the Emergency excesses and realized that matters were getting out of her control, she decided to get out of this trap by holding elections even if it meant losing power.

The unfriendly view is that Mrs Gandhi completely misread the popular temper and,

misinformed by sycophants and intelligence agencies, was convinced that she would win. Isolated from public opinion, she was unaware of the extent to which her rule had become unpopular. By winning the election she hoped to vindicate the Emergency and also clear the way for Sanjay Gandhi to succeed her.

The third view is that she realized that the policies of the Emergency had to be legitimized further through elections. The imposition of the Emergency had been legitimized at the outset by the constitutional provision, but that was not enough in view of the deep-seated traditions of the Indian people. Moreover, there were clear signs of restiveness and even discontent among the people. The Emergency regime, she must have realized, was increasingly getting discredited and was quite fragile. Either the authoritarian content of the Emergency would have to be deepened, with recourse to increasing ruthlessness and brutality in suppressing dissent, or greater legitimacy and political authority acquired by changing back to a democratic system. The former option would not work in a country of India's size and diversity and also in view of its democratic traditions. The people would not accept the level of repression that it would require.

During 1975–77, many Indians and India's friends abroad had doubts about the future of the democratic system in India, though they hoped that it would survive the political crisis. The less sympathetic said that democracy in India was 'permanently in eclipse' and that India had finally joined the ranks of other postcolonial societies as an authoritarian state. Many others said that the basic changes initiated by the Emergency and the essential features of the new kind of regime would continue even if the Emergency were ended and the parliamentary system restored. Some commentators went further and argued that the shift towards authoritarianism had been going on since 1950 and was inherent in a poor and illiterate society. Others held that the democratic constitutional system established in India in 1950 was not suited to the genius of India or the needs of its people. Still others felt that it was not possible to combine economic development with democracy. Many radicals argued that, in any case, liberal democracy was only a facade hiding the underlying brutal reality of class domination and the suppression of people's struggles. The Emergency had, therefore, only removed the facade; it did not mean any basic political change except that the social and political reality was now visible to all.

There were, of course, many in India and abroad who were convinced that the Emergency was a temporary departure from the basic commitment of the people of India and its political leadership to democracy and that democracy would be sooner or later restored in the country.

The democratic system in India not only survived the JP Movement and the Emergency but emerged stronger. Since 1977, all talk of the need for dictatorship to develop economically and to end corruption has died down. Those who hold this view have been reduced to a tiny minority and that too among the middle classes; no intellectual or political leader of any stature has espoused it for several years.

In this sense, the lifting of the Emergency and the free elections that followed were a defining moment in India's post-independence history. They revealed the Indian people's underlying attachment to democratic values which were in turn the result of the impact of the freedom struggle and the experience of democratic functioning, including free elections, since 1947. As Tariq Ali pointed out, in the elections of March 1977 'the urban and rural poor demonstrated in a

very concrete and striking fashion that questions of basic civil rights were not merely the preoccupations of the urban middle classes'.[6] Inder Malhotra, covering the election campaign, reported of the 'truly remarkable' manner in which 'village audiences in the remote countryside react to sophisticated arguments about civil liberties, Fundamental Rights and independence of the judiciary'.[7]

Whatever the character of the JP Movement or of the Emergency regime, there is no doubt that the decision of Mrs Gandhi to hold genuinely free elections, and her defeat and the Opposition's victory that followed were a remarkable achievement of Indian democracy. The years 1975–77 have been described as the years of the 'test of democracy'; there is no doubt that the Indian people passed the test with distinction if not full marks.