AUTUMN OF THE MATRIARCH

> Future generations will not remember us by how many elections we had, but by the progress we made.
>
> SANJAY GANDHI, December 1976

I

AT 6 A.M. ON 26 JUNE 1975, a meeting of the Union Cabinet was convened. The ministers, unthinking and bleary-eyed, were informed of the state of emergency, in effect since midnight. Their formal consent was obtained before Mrs Gandhi proceeded to the studios of All-India Radio (AIR) to convey the news to an equally unsuspecting nation. 'The President has proclaimed Emergency', she announced: 'There is nothing to panic about.' This, she said, was a necessary response to 'the deep and widespread conspiracy which has been brewing ever since I began to introduce certain progressive measures of benefit to the common man and woman of India.' 'Forces of disintegration' and 'communal passions' were threatening the unity of India. 'This is not a personal matter,' she claimed. 'It is not important whether I remain Prime Minister or not.' Still, she hoped that conditions would 'speedily improve to enable us to dispense with this Proclamation as soon as possible'.[1]

The disclaimers betray a certain defensiveness. For the fact was that the emergency had come hot on the heels of the Supreme Court order forbidding her from voting in Parliament. When the emergency was declared, the prime minister's closest friend, the designer Pupul Jayakar, was away in the United States. On the 27th Mrs Gandhi sent Mrs Jayakar along note, explaining that the action was taken in response to the 'increasing violence' caused by a 'campaign of hate and calumny'. The number of arrests, she claimed, were a mere 900, most detainees kept not in jail but 'comfortably, in houses'. The 'general public reaction' was 'good', and there was 'tranquillity all over the country'. The emergency, the prime minister told her friend, was 'intended to enable are turn to normal democratic functioning'.[2]

Across India people were being picked up and put into jails. These included leaders and legislators of parties other than the Congress, student activists, trade unionists, indeed, anyone with the slightest connection to the Jana Sangh, the Congress (O), the Socialists, or other groups opposed to the ruling party. Some of the detainees, such as Jayaprakash Narayan and Morarji Desai, were placed in government rest houses in the state of Haryana, not far from Delhi. However, the majority were sent to already overcrowded jails. And Mrs Gandhi's arithmetic was soon shown to be wildly off the mark. Thousands were arrested under MISA – the Maintenance of Internal Security Act, known by its victims as the Maintenance of Indira and Sanjay Act. And there were other legal instruments at hand. The Rajmatas of Gwalior and Jaipur, old political opponents of Mrs Gandhi, were jailed under an act supposedly meant for black-marketeers and smugglers.[3]

In the first few months of the emergency, the prime minister gave a flurry of interviews defending its proclamation. These too displayed a deep defensiveness. It is wholly wrong to say that I resorted to Emergency to keep myself in office,' she told the *Sunday Times* of London. 'The extra-constitutional challenge [of the JP movement] was constitutionally met.' The emergency was

‘declared to save the country from disruption and collapse’; it had ‘enabled us to put through the new economic programme’, and led to ‘a new sense of national confidence’. ‘What has been done’, she told the *Saturday Review* of New York, ‘is not an abrogation of democracy but an effort to safeguard it’. In these interviews she attacked the Western press for ‘India-baiting’, for picking on her country in preference to more visibly authoritarian nations such as Pakistan andChina.[4]

In her interviews and broadcasts the prime minister spoke of the need to infuse a ‘new spirit of discipline and morale’. The government’s copywriters were put to work, coining slogans such as ‘Discipline Makes the Nation Great’, ‘Talk Less, Work More’, ‘Be Indian, Buy Indian’, ‘Efficiency is our Watchword’. Other exhortations were less impersonal, such as She Stood between Order and Chaos’ and ‘Courage and Clarity of Vision, Thy Name is Indira Gandhi’. Rendered in Hindi as well as English, these slogans were painted on the sides of buses, across bridges and on outsize hoardings erected outside government buildings.

These were the signs of a creeping dictatorship. Like military men who seize power via a coup, Mrs Gandhi claimed to have acted to save the country from itself. And, like them, she went on to say that, while she had denied her people freedom, she would give them bread in exchange. Within a week of the emergency she was offering a ‘Twenty Point Programme for Economic Progress’. This promised a reduction in prices of essential commodities, the speedy implementation of land reforms, the abolition of indebtedness and of bonded labour, higher wages for workers and lower taxes for the middle class.[5]

Female dictators are altogether rare – in the twentieth century Mrs Gandhi may have been the only such. However, as a woman autocrat, she could use images and symbols denied to her male counterparts. On 11 November, four and a half months into the emergency, the prime minister came to the microphone to ‘meet’ and ‘have a heart-to-heart talk’ with her countrymen. She spoke for over an hour, on the need for discipline, on her economic programme, on the glories of ancient India and the duties of its modern citizens. ‘Our opponents’ wanted to ‘paralyse the work of the Central Government’, said the Prime Minister, and thus

> we found ourselves in a serious situation. And we took certain steps. But many of the friends in the country were rather puzzled as to what has Indiraji done? What will happen to the country now? But we felt that the country has developed a disease and, if it is to be cured soon, it has to be given a dose of medicine even if it is a bitter dose. However dear a child may be, if the doctor has prescribed bitter pills for him, they have to be administered for his cure . . . So we gave this bitter medicine to the nation.
>
> . . . Now, when a child suffers, the mother suffers too. Thus we were not very pleased to take this step . . . But we saw that it worked just as the dose of the doctor worked.[6]

II

On 15 August 1975 *The Times* of London carried a full page advertisement taken out by the ‘Free JP Campaign’. The ad had been paid for by individuals: the first person to contribute being Bishop Trevor Huddles-ton, the last Dame Peggy Ashcroft. The other signatories to the appeal included such long-standing friends of India as the socialist Fenner Brockway, the economist E. F. Schumacher and the political scientist W. H. Morris-Jones, as well as celebrities with no specific connection to India,

such as the actress Glenda Jackson, the historian A. J. P. Taylor and the critic Kenneth Tynan. On the page were printed photographs of Mahatma Gandhi and Jayaprakash Narayan. Aside from the long list of names, the text show cased at estament to JP's character and patriotism from the Mahatma himself.

'Today is India's Independence Day', said the ad. 'Don't Let the Light Go Out on India's Democracy'. The signatories called upon Mrs Gandhi to release all political prisoners, and Jayaprakash Narayan especially. The singling out of one person was not just in deference to his leadership of the oppositional movement in India. The prime movers of the 'Free JP Campaign' had known him from long before he launched his 'Total Revolution'. The left-wing Labourites, such as Brockway, had known him from the 1930s, as a great hero of the independence movement. The environmentalists, such as E. F. Schumacher, had known him from the 1950s, as alike-minded votary of decentralized development. The political scientists had known him from before and after Independence, as an ever-present, always influential exemplar of what Morris-Jones had called the 'saintly idiom' in Indian politics.

These foreign friends of India's freedom were old enough to have seen how close Jawaharlal Nehru and Jayaprakash Narayan had once been. They were appalled that Nehru's daughter had jailed JP, and hoped that an appeal to history would take him out of prison. So did that great group of pacifists, the Quakers, who did not put their name to the *Times* advertisement but tried the back-channels of reconciliation instead. The group had an old and honourable connection with India. Quakers such as Agatha Harrison and Horace Alexander had played crucial intermediary roles between British colonialists and Indian nationalists. More recently, they had worked with JP in attempting reconciliation between India and Pakistan and between the Naga rebels and the government in New Delhi.

In August, a month after the emergency was declared, the sociologist Joe Elder was sent by his fellow Quakers on a fact-finding mission to India. He met many people; JP's followers, Congress politicians and the prime minister. He found himself 'decreasingly prone to condemn one side or the other'.JP had erred in launching a mass movement without a cadre of disciplined, non-violent volunteers. His ideas had 'struck many as naive, untested, or unconvincing'. His movement's credibility was weakened by the presence within it of extremists of left and right. On the other hand, the prime minister had clearly over-reacted in imposing the emergency. This had created fear in the minds of the people, and undermined the democratic process and democratic institutions.[7]

As Elder's account suggests, the emergency was a script jointly authored by JP and Mrs Gandhi. Both had shown too little faith in representative institutions: JP by asking for the premature dismissal of elected governments, Mrs Gandhi by jailing legally elected members of Parliament and legislative assemblies. Neither properly appreciated the role of the state in a modern democracy. JP wished simply for the state to disappear, for the police and army to 'disobey immoral orders'. On the other hand, Mrs Gandhi sought to make the state's functionaries ultimately dependent on the will of a single person at the helm.

The clash was made poignant by the fact that the adversaries had once been friends, bound by ties of history and tradition and by intimate personal relationships stretching across generations. One does not know how Mrs Gandhi felt about jailing JP. We do know that her staff had deeply ambivalent feelings. The prime minister's Information Adviser, H. Y. Sharada Prasad, was an old patriot and freedom-fighter himself. He had been jailed in 1942, in the same Quit India campaign that first made JP a national figure. Unlike Joe Elder, he could not bring himself to admit that the prime minister had over-reacted. Yet, as he wrote to a friend, he grieved that a man like JP, 'at a moment of

crucial ethical importance, decide[d] that RSS and CPM are more acceptable than the Congress. This is an excursion in reasoning that I have not been able to understand, much less excuse. I can only console myself with the thought that he would not have been so desperate if [his wife] Prabhavatiji had been alive.'[8]

Also unhappy about JP's incarceration was the economist P. N. Dhar, who had succeeded P. N. Haksar as the prime minister's principal secretary. He sent several emissaries to JP to see whether a conciliation could be effected, with prisoners released and the emergency lifted, in time for the next parliamentary elections, due in early 1976. The emissaries found JP willing to negotiate. A flood in his native Bihar had made him impatient to go and work among the sufferers. Talk that his irresponsibility had caused the emergency had reached his ears. He said he had no desire to revive the popular movement, but when elections were called would ask for a combined front to oppose the Congress, and canvass for its candidates.[9]

JP was keen that his old friend Sheikh Abdullah, now also a part of the Indian establishment as chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir, be the mediator between him and Mrs Gandhi. He had read a report quoting the Sheikh as saying that he was in favour of 'conciliation at All-India level', and that the prime minister was 'more than keen to end the emergency'. JP now wrote to Abdullah offering him his 'full co-operation' in any move he might make to resolve the differences between the opposition and the government. That said, the letter betrayed signs of wounds still not healed, as in JP's reference to himself being portrayed as 'the villain of the piece, the arch-conspirator, the culprit number one', and in his concluding challenge that 'the first test of [the prime minister's] keenness [to end the emergency] will be whether this letter is allowed to be delivered to you and whether you are permitted to see me'.[10]

The prime minister failed the test. The letter was not passed on to the Sheikh, and the moves to effect a reconciliation died with it. However, in November 1975 JP's health took a turn for the worse. With his kidneys failing, he was taken to a hospital in Chandigarh and, when the doctors there proved unequal to the task, released on parole and shifted to the Jaslok Hospital in Bombay, to be placed under the care of the nephrologist M. K. Mani. The government's action was hastened by the realization that all hell might break loose if JP were to die in jail.[11]

Although JP lay in a Bombay bed, chained to a dialysis machine, there was no general parole of political prisoners. An estimated 36,000 people were in jail under MISA, detained without trial. These were rather ecumenically spread across the states of the Union, 1,078 from Andhra Pradesh, 2,360 from Bihar and so on down the letters of the alphabet, until one reached 7,049 from Uttar Pradesh and 5,320 from West Bengal.[12]

These victims of political vengeance were housed, fed and clothed like common criminals – in fact, made to share their cells with them (prompting the witticism that Mrs Gandhi's much vaunted socialism was at least practised in the jails). Older prisoners looked nostalgically back to the days of the Raj, when the jails had been cleaner and the jailers altogether more humane. It seemed that women prisoners were singled out for special treatment. The Rajmatas of Gwalior and Jaipur were now living in conditions of unaccustomed austerity and filth. The socialist Mrinal Gore, more used to the simple life, was asked to share a toilet with the woman in the adjoining cell – who happened to be a leper. In the cell opposite was a lady lunatic who wore no clothes and shrieked day and night.[13]

III

Writing to a friend in January 1963, Indira Gandhi complained that democracy 'not only throws up the mediocre person but gives strength to the most vocal howsoever they may lack knowledge and understand-ing'.[14] Three years later, when she had just become prime minister, Mrs Gandhi told a visiting journalist that 'the Congress has become moribund', adding, 'Sometimes I feel that even the parliamentary system has become moribund.' Besides, the 'inertia of our civil service is incredible'; we have a system of dead wood replacing dead wood'. 'Sometimes I wish', said the newly elected prime minister of the world's most populous democracy, that 'we had a real revolution – like France or Russia – at the time of independence.'[15]

The impatience with democratic procedure had been manifested early, as for instance with the packing of the civil service, the judiciary and the Congress Party with individuals committed to the prime minister. But the process was taken much further with the emergency. Now, with opposition MPs locked away, a series of constitutional amendments were passed to prolong Mrs Gandhi's rule. The 38th Amendment, passed on 22 July 1975, barred judicial review of the emergency. The 39th Amendment, introduced two weeks later, stated that the election of the prime minister could not be challenged by the Supreme Court, but only by a body constituted by Parliament. This came just in time to help Mrs Gandhi in her election review petition, where the Court now held that there was no case to try, since the new amendment retrospectively rendered her actions during the 1971 elections outside the purview of the law.[16]

Some months later the Supreme Court did the prime minister a greater favour still. Lawyers representing the thousands jailed under MISA argued that the right of habeas corpus could not be taken away by the state. Judgements in the lower courts seemed to favour this view, but when the case reached the Supreme Court it held that detentions without trial were legal under the new dispensation. Of the five-member bench only one dissented: this was Justice H. R. Khanna, who pointed out that 'detention without trial is an anathema to all those who love personal liberty'.[17]

It was suggested that the judgement was influenced by extralegal considerations – by the hope of three of the judges that they might one day become chief justice, by the fear inspired by the punitive transfers of officials that had commenced with the emergency. In a despairing editorial entitled 'Fading Hopes in India', the *New York Times* remarked that 'the submission of an independent judiciary to an absolutist government is virtually the last step in the destruction of a democratic society'.[18]

In fact, there were other steps still to be taken. These included the 42nd Amendment, a twenty-page document whose clauses gave unprecedented powers to Parliament. It could now extend its own term -which it immediately did. The amendment gave laws passed by the legislature further immunity from judicial scrutiny, and further strengthened the powers of the centre over the states. All in all, the 42nd Amendment allowed Parliament 'unfettered power to preserve or destroy the Constitution'.[19]

In January 1976 the term of the DMK government ended in Tamil Nadu. Rather than call fresh elections, the centre ordered a spell of President's Rule. Two months later the same medicine was applied to Gujarat, where the Janata Front had lost its majority owing to defections.

Mrs Gandhi, and the Congress, were now supreme all over the land. When the art historians Mildred and W. G. Archer went to meet her in March 1976, the prime minister expressed satisfaction with the progress of the emergency. The new regime, she told them, 'had made the State Ministers shake in their shoes'. This was long over-due and was excellent', for 'too much devolution [was] fatal to India'. 'I have to keep India together', insisted Mrs Gandhi. 'That is an absolute must.'[20]

IV

Among the casualties of the emergency was the freedom of the press. Within its first week the government had instituted a system of 'pre-censorship', whereby editors had to submit, for scrutiny and approval, material deemed to be critical of the government or its functionaries. Guidelines were issued on what did and did not constitute 'news'. There could be no reports on processions or strikes, or of political opposition, or of conditions in the jails. Reports of open dissidence were naturally *verboten*, but in fact even stories mildly critical of the administration were not permitted.[21] As a newspaper in the Punjab was to recall, items 'killed' by the censor included

> reports about the closure of shops in Chandigarh's Bajwara market to protest against the arrest of shopkeepers, the six-year absence of a health officer and observations about the town's sanitation, especially the open drains; . . . three letters to the editor about pay anomalies and inadequate salary scales of college lectures in Himachal Pradesh; an unsatisfactory bus service; a Chandigarh report about the rise in the price of tomatoes; the death of two persons while patrolling the rail tracks near Amritsar; and a brief item about black-marketing in essential drugs.[22]

The space had to be filled; and it was, by the words of the prime minister or by stories in praise of her government. (Editors who tried to print the liberty-loving essays of Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru instead were quickly brought to book.) 'Our newspapers, of course, give world news all right', wrote a reader in Simla to an English friend, 'but hardly any other news pertaining to the country itself, except the speeches of the PM . . . I have decided to forgo the pleasures of reading a newspaper.'[23] In truth, the disgust was shared by the journalists themselves. As a reporter for the Bombay weekly *Blitz* told *his* English friend: 'My paper is a supporter of the Emergency. But if we only sing the praises of the Government, what will our readers think of us?'[24]

Jokes tinged with satire were especially forbidden. The Tamil humorist Cho Ramaswamy failed to sneak in a cartoon showing the prime minister and her son Sanjay talking above the caption: 'A national debate on the Constitutional Amendments'. When a reader asked the question, 'Who is Indira Gandhi', Cho answered: 'She is the granddaughter of Motilal Nehru, the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, and the mother of Sanjay Gandhi'. This, too, was cut. The censors were vigilant, but the odd joke or two escaped their eye. Thus V. Balasubramanyam was able to print an article in the *Eastern Economist* on 'Livestock Problems in India', which began with the line: 'There are at present 580 million sheep in the country', and an anonymous democrat was able to place an ad in the *Times of India* announcing the 'death of D. E. M. O'Cracy, mourned by his wife T. Ruth, his son L. I. Bertie, and his daughters Faith, Hope, and Justice'.[25]

As the emergency proceeded, the government tightened its hold over the dissemination of information. The independent news agencies, the United News of India (UNI) and the Press Trust of India (PTI), were amalgamated with two lesser agencies into a single state-controlled news service called Samachar. The Press Council, an autonomous watchdog body, was abolished. A law granting immunity to journalists covering Parliament was repealed. And as many as 253 journalists were placed under arrest. These included Kuldip Nayar of the *Indian Express*, K. R. Sunder Rajan of the *Times of India* and K. R. Malkani of the *Motherland*.[26]

Some freedom-loving journalists resisted, but their newspapers' owners were mostly compliant,

fearing the government might shut down their presses or seize their properties. They feared the stick, but were happy to bit eat the carrot. This took the shape of government announcements paid for by the Directorate of Audio-Visual Publicity (DAVP). While 'liberally granting advertisements to so-called "friendly" periodicals', the DAVP withdrew their favours from those deemed critical of the government. More than one news paper, and editor, and owner, was happy to change its tune in response to the inducements on offer.[27]

Among the major newspapers that willingly complied with the new regulations were the *Hindu*, the *Times of India* and, especially, the *Hindustan Times*. The editor of the last-named newspaper, the hugely respected B. G. Verghese, was sacked by its owner, the industrialist K. K. Birla, merely to please Mrs Gandhi. (Birla was a devoted acolyte of the prime minister-after the Allahabad High Court judgement of 12 June, he had taken a delegation of 500 businessmen to plead with her to stay on in office.[28])Among the newspapers that struggled nobly to maintain their independence were the *Indian Express* and the *Statesman*. Both refused to toe the government line, resisting threats and blandishments alike. When their power was cut they got the courts to restore it. When their own stories were censored, they chose to leave white spaces rather than fill them with propaganda material. And they artfully reproduced, without comment, reports on the Indian situation in the foreign press, under such neutral headings as 'News Digest' or 'What our Contemporaries Say'.[29]

The mass-circulation newspapers were hardest hit, but the government did not spare the high-quality and slow-selling journals of opinion either. Two esteemed Delhi journals, the weekly *Mainstream* and the monthly *Seminar*, closed rather than submit to the censor's scrutiny. The Bombay weekly *Himmat* fought the censor doggedly, but finally shut down when asked to pay aprohibitively high deposit as a guarantee of good behaviour, the fine imposed for apiece that quoted, among other people, the Mahatma. Literary magazines also closed down, finding the curbs on their independence impossible to live with.

In some ways the government feared the little magazines even more. Their owners could not be bought; so they had to be coerced or bankrupted instead. Among the chosen targets was *Opinion*, a four-page newsletter brought out in Bombay by the former ICS officer A. D. Gorwala. A man of legendary integrity, Gorwala focused on attacks on the individual by the agencies of the state. He had also fought a long battle against corruption. A year into the emergency, *Opinion* was ordered to shut down, but Gorwala was able to print one last issue in which he observed that

> the current Indira regime, founded on June26, 1975, was born through lies, nurtured by lies, and flourishes by lies. The essential ingredient of its being is the lie. Consequently, to have a truth-loving, straight-thinking journal examine it week after week and point out its falsehoods becomes intolerable to it.[30]

V

The day after the emergency was declared, a British reporter found the streets of Delhi to be 'uncannily normal'. The city's 'jingling flotilla' of cyclists setoff for work in the morning. 'No angry crowds gathered. Shops and factories opened as usual. Beggars begged. The sleek racehorses of the rich had their daily exercise...'[31] As the veteran journalist Inder Malhotra wrote, 'in its initial months at least, the Emergency restored to India a kind of calm it had not known for years'.[32]

This calm was in sharp contrast to the strife-filled decade that preceded it; one reason why the emergency was widely welcomed by the middle class. The crime rate had come down and the trains ran on time. A good monsoon in 1975 meant that prices also fell. A visiting American journalist was told by an official in Delhi that it was only foreigners who cared for such things as the freedom of expression. 'We are tired of being the workshop of failed democracy,' said the official. 'The time has come to exchange some of our vaunted individual rights for some economic development.'

The journalist found that the business community were especially pleased with the emergency. A Delhi hotel owner told him that life now was 'just wonderful. We used to have terrible problems with the unions. Now when they give us any troubles, the government just put them in jail.' In Bombay, the journalist met J. R. D. Tata, arguably India's most respected industrialist. Tata too felt that 'things had gone too far. You can't imagine what we've been through here – strikes, boycotts, demonstrations. Why, there were days I couldn't walk out of my office into the street. The parliamentary system is not suited to our needs.'[33]

One fact is conclusive proof of the quiescence of the middle class – that hardly any officials resigned in protest against the emergency. Back in the days of British rule, Gandhi's call to 'non-cooperate' with the rulers led to thousands of resignations of teachers, lawyers, judges, even ICS officers. Now, the abrogation of democracy was protested by only a handful of people in state employment. These included Fali Nariman, who resigned as additional solicitor general, M. L. Dantwala, who declined to continue as an adviser to the Reserve Bank, and Bagaram Tulpule, who left his high position in a public-sector undertaking.

There was, however, some resistance offered in the Indian Parliament. On 23 July the House met to ratify the emergency. The Congress commanded a comfortable majority; and 34 MPs were in jail. Those opposition MPs at liberty to attend made speeches of protest before walking out. The CPM member A. K. Gopalan said the arrests had reduced Parliament to a 'farce and an object of contempt'. A Jana Sangh MP accused Mrs Gandhi of betraying the mother land for 'the sake of personal ends'.[34]

The opposition MPs later boycotted the House (or were jailed), but an independent member who continued to attend was P. G. Mavalankar of Ahmedabad, apolitical scientist by vocation and the son of the first Speaker of the Lok Sabha. His lineage made it difficult for the government to arrest him. So he stayed and, when given the chance, quoted the Holy Trinity of Indian nationalism, Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru – quoted them on the merits and virtues of liberty and freedom. Their views were contrasted with the 'draconian' MISA, used to further 'the political purpose of a vindictive government', an act which was 'the most obnoxious piece of legislation ever enacted in the recent history of India'.[35]

There was also resistance in the streets. On 14 November 1975 – the birthday of Jawaharlal Nehru – a body styling itself the Lok Sangharsh Samiti (People's Struggle Committee) began a *satyagraha* in Bombay. Every day a group of protesters would stand at a busy intersection and shout slogans such as 'Down with Dictatorship' and 'JP Zindabad'. Within a month 1,359 people had been arrested – including 146 women. The protests spread to other states, where bus stands, railway stations and government offices became the theatre of slogan shouting and the courting of arrest. One report claimed that in the first three months of the *satyagraha* as many as 80,000 people had been put behind bars.[36]

On 15 August 1976 (Independence Day) another *satyagraha* commenced in Ahmedabad. It was led by Manibhen Patel, daughter of India's first home minister, Vallabhbhai Patel. Raising slogans such as 'Remove Emergency' and 'Release Political Prisoners', the fifty marchers proceeded on the road to Dandi, the same route that Gandhi had taken to break the colonial salt laws forty-six years

previously. Manibhen Patel was arrested a mile down the road, but the next day a judge ordered her release. She continued the march to the sea, accompanied by a handful of policemen in plain clothes.[37]

One of those arrested in the Bombay *satyagraha* was the distinguished Marathi writer Durga Bhagwat. Other members of her fraternity protested in ways more congenial to their profession. A group of Kannada writers circulated, in samizdat form, poems satirizing the emergency and its prime mover. Consider these stanzas from G. S. Shivarudrappa's poem 'In this Country':

> In this country
> Hero worship, family pride
> Should all go.
> But
> Concessions to my family deity
> Should stay untouched.
> In this country
> Everybody should shut their mouth
> And remain quiet.
> But
> They better keep their ears open
> For my words.[38]

Other writers expressed their dissent in other ways. Bengali essayist Annada Sankar Ray announced that he would 'stop writing altogether in A fit of non-cooperative pique'. He refused to 'put pen to paper so long as the state of emergency continues'. The cartoonist K. Shankar Pillai, who had once sarcastically compared the loquacious Nehru to the Niagara Falls (and been cheered by his victim for it), now closed down his magazine before the state did so. 'Dictatorships cannot afford laughter', he remarked mournfully. 'In all the years of Hitler, there never was a good comedy, not a good cartoon, not a parody, or a spoof.' The Hindi novelist Phanishwaranath Renu returned the Padma Shri bestowed upon him by the government of India, the act recalling Tagore's disavowal of his knighthood after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. And the Kannada polymath Shivarama Karanth gave back an even higher honour, the Padma Bhushan. Back in the 1920s he had entered the freedom movement under the inspiration of Gandhi; now, after fifty years of striving to uphold its values, Karanth felt 'impelled to protest against such indignities done to the people of India'.[39]

Finally, there was resistance that was carried on underground. The key figure here was George Fernandes, the firebrand socialist who had led the railway strike of 1974. When the emergency was declared Fernandes was in the Orissa town of Gopalpur-on-Sea. He lay low for a few weeks, in which time he had grown a beard and come to disguise himself as a Sikh. Then he travelled from town to town, meeting comrades and planning the sabotage of state installations. Dynamite was collected and stored, and young men trained in the act of blowing up bridges and railway tracks. From his ever-shifting hiding place, Fernandes sent out letters attacking 'the dictator', 'that woman', and the 'Nehru dynasty', and urging the people to rise against the regime.

No dynamite was actually detonated, yet the government of India was visibly angry that it could not capture Fernandes. His brother Lawrence was picked up from his home in Bangalore and brutally beaten and tortured. His friend, the actress Snehalata Reddy, was also imprisoned. Placed in a damp cell and denied proper food, her asthma was seriously aggravated; released on parole, she died a few weeks later. George Fernandes's wife and child fled the country, fearing persecution if they stayed

behind. Fernandes himself was finally arrested in Calcutta on 10 June 1976, nearly a year into the emergency.[40]

In the summer of 1976 one of the few opponents of the regime still at large was the nonagenarian J. B. Kripalani. He complained that he had been left out while all his friends were given the privilege of imprisonment. Then he recalled a Sindhi proverb: 'When a witch goes through a street destroying everything, she leaves one house untouched.'[41] On 2 October 1975, Gandhi's birthday, he led a prayer meeting at the Mahatma's memorial in New Delhi – speeches were made and several people arrested, but not him. It was not so much his age as his sheer stature which kept him at large. Not Shivarama Karanth, not Morarji Desai, not even JP, had patriotic credentials as good as Kripalani's. He had joined the Mahatma in the Champaran *satyagraha* of 1917; several years before Jawaharlal Nehru did. He had been president of the Congress when freedom came three decades later. Later, three different states had sent him as their representative to the Indian Parliament. In sum, his CV was such that even the prime minister would have been embarrassed to arrest him on account of activities deemed a threat to the 'unity and stability' of the country.

In April 1976 Kripalani dared the government to print the names of those it had put in jail. Then he fell seriously ill. He was taken to hospital, where all manner of tubes and wires were put into him. When a friend came visiting he had a fresh complaint: 'I have no Constitution – all that is left are Amendments'.[42]

VI

The emergency revived the debate as to whether India could, should, or ever would be reliably democratic. In October 1975 a reporter from *Time* visited the country, and was much impressed by what he saw. He thought that press freedom and the like were 'of no great interest to the majority of India's 600 million people', who were 'more concerned' with the rate of inflation (down 31 per cent in the past year). 'The Prime Minister', he wrote, 'has won widespread support for seizing a rare opportunity to ram through a score of social reforms. These days India is engrossed in a frenzied campaign to encourage discipline, punctuality, cleanliness, courtesy.'[43]

So at least someone was taking the slogans seriously. Where the *Time* reporter thought that democracy was unsuited to India, the *Sydney Morning Herald* despaired that it had died out in a country which had been 'the main hope of democracy in Asia, indeed in the developing world'. If India had 'relapsed into traditional Asian autocracy', said the paper, the blame must be shared between 'Empress Indira' and her father, who had fostered 'heavy industrialization and nationalized bureaucracies upon the Indian entrepreneur, Soviet style, in the name of "socialism". To make his "socialism" work his daughter has merely added the complementary Soviet-style political dictatorship.'[44]

The 'India and/vs democracy' question was, as one might expect, most vigorously discussed in the British press. The political class in the United Kingdom was divided; while some MPs signed the 'Free JP appeal', Mrs Gandhi's regime was endorsed by, among others, Labour's Michael Foot (on the grounds that Nehru's daughter could do no wrong) and Jennie Lee, and the Tory Margaret Thatcher. Both of the last named visited India and concluded that the emergency was, on balance, beneficial to its people. After travelling to India and speaking to Congress leaders, a Conservative MP named Eldon Griffith wrote to *The Times* protesting that the regime was 'far less oppressive' than that paper reported it to be. He also suggested that the Westminster model was unsuited to non-

Western contexts. In a spirited rejoinder, W. H. Morris-Jones observed that such denigration was 'a sport in which high imperial Tory and revolutionary Marxist could find common enjoyment'. As Morris-Jones pointed out, 'a growing number of Indians had begun to make the habit of liberal democracy indigenous'. Five elections had been successfully conducted, and a free press and autonomous institutions forged, before the emergency came to bring 'massive damage' to 'a way of political life which in two decades had already converted into citizens so many who had been subjects beyond the political pale'.[45]

What was the prospect for the future? In an assessment on the emergency's first anniversary, the *Observer* claimed to see a stirring beneath the calm. A bad monsoon could shatter the fragile economy, leading to inflation, and 'igniting the mass discontent that smoulders beneath the surface. The resulting explosion might well produce a political crisis more serious than that of June 1975.' Among the possible outcomes, in the *Observer*'s view, one could discount a return to democracy. For the most likely successor to Congress remains the Army'.[46]

VII

The *Observer* made the mistake of focusing on institutions rather than individuals. For, within India, what was being witnessed was not the army rising behind the facade of Congress rule, but the prime minister's second son emerging as the most likely successor to her office.

Recall that it was Sanjay Gandhi who had warned his mother against resigning, and he who had most strongly endorsed the emergency. In its first months he acquired a higher public profile. He was often to be seen by Mrs Gandhi's side, and was even advising her on Cabinet appointments. When the liberal I. K. Gujral was seen as being too soft on the press, he was replaced at the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (I&B) by the more hard-line V. C. Shukla. When the experienced Swaran Singh (once a senior member of Nehru's Cabinet) was less than enthusiastic about the emergency, he was replaced as defence minister by Sanjay's friend BansiLal.[47]

Six weeks into the emergency Sanjay Gandhi gave a long interview to the Delhi magazine *Surge*. He spoke there of his personal life – he didn't drink, or smoke – and of his relationship to hism other ('yes, she obviously listens to my views', he said in answer to one question; 'She listened to them even when I was five years old') He spoke of his work – he claimed to spend twelve to fourteen hours a day a this Maruti factory – and of the car he would soon produce, which would 'out-corner either the Fiat or the Ambassador' (the two cars that dominated the Indian market). He expressed himself in favour of free enterprise – 'the quickest way to grow' – and thought that the government should remove all controls on where, how and in what manner industries were established. Asked his idea of democracy, he said that it 'doesn't mean the freedom to destroy everything there is in a country. Democracy means the freedom to build a country.' Asked about the Congress, he said it should become a 'cadre-based party'. When the interviewer pointed out that both the Jana Sangh and the communists were based on cadres, Sanjay dismissed the first as 'a favour-based party'. As for the latter, he commented that 'if you take all the people in the Communist Party, the big wigs-even the not-so-big wigs – I don't think you will find a richer or more corrupt people anywhere'.[48]

Surge was a new magazine, and the interview was a scoop. The editor quickly sold the story to the agencies, who in turn passed it on to newspapers both Indian and foreign. These chose to highlight Sanjay Gandhi's views on free enterprise – so at odds with his mother's professed socialism – and his characterization of her loyal allies, the communists, as 'corrupt'. When these excerpts were

published, the prime minister sent a panic-stricken note to her secretary, P. N. Dhar. Sanjay's comments were 'exceedingly stupid', she wrote. It would 'not only grievously hurt those who have helped us', but create 'serious problems with the entire Socialist Bloc'. Dhar was able to contain the damage – no more snippets appeared in the press, and *Surge* was prevented from printing the interview. Sanjay himself was persuaded to issue a statement clarifying that leaders in the Jana Sangh and Swatantra parties were even more 'corrupt', and that the CPI must be saluted for its support to 'progressive policies, specially those affecting the poor people'.[49]

Sanjay was not deterred from giving more interviews, though. When the *Illustrated Weekly of India* asked him about curbs on the press, he answered that the papers 'constantly told blatant, malicious lies. Censorship was the only way to put an end to this.' Asked to provide a balance sheet of the emergency, he said that 'the greatest gain is a sense of discipline and the speeding up of work'. And 'what has the country lost? Smuggling, black-marketing, hoarding, bus burning and the habit of coming late to work.'[50]

The editor of the *Weekly*, Khushwant Singh, emerged as the chief cheerleader and trumpeter of the rising son. Sanjay was termed as 'The Man Who Gets Things Done' and chosen as the 'Indian of the Year'. The magazine ran lavish features on Sanjay and his young wife, Maneka, pages and pages of photographs accompanied by an invariably fawning text. (Samples: 'He has determination, a sense of justice, a spirit of adventure and a total lack of fear'. 'Sanjay Gandhi has added anew dimension to political leadership: he has no truck with shady characters or sycophants; he is a teetotaller, he lives a simple life, . . . his words are not hot air but charged with action.')[51]

Less surprising perhaps was the attention paid to the prime minister's son by All-India Radio and the state-run television channel, Doordarshan. In a single year, 192 news items were broadcast about Sanjay Gandhi from the Delhi station of AIR. In the same period Doordarshan telecast 265 items about Sanjay's activities. When he made a twenty-four-hour trip to Andhra Pradesh, the Films Division shot a full-length documentary called *A Day to Remember*, with commentary in three languages.[52]

The surest sign of Sanjay Gandhi's growing importance in Indian politics was the deference paid him by Union ministers and chief ministers. Before deciding on which admiral to promote, the defence minister, Bansi Lal, took the two candidates to be questioned by Sanjay. When the young man visited Rajasthan, the state's chief minister came to the airport to receive him; on his drive into Jaipur city, Sanjay passed 501 arches erected in his honour. A similar show was organized when he visited Uttar Pradesh; at Lucknow airport, when Sanjay stumbled on the tarmac and lost his slipper, it was picked up and reverentially handed back by the UP chief minister himself.[53]

VIII

The prime minister had once chastised the Indian princes for promoting birth over talent. Now she had succumbed to that temptation herself. The elevation of hers on followed a notably feudal route. Just as an heir apparent is given a title at an early age – a duke of this or the prince of that – Sanjay was given charge of the Congress's youth wing. (He was in theory merely a member of the Executive Council, but in practice the Youth Congress's president took orders from him.) And just as sons of Mughal emperors were once given a *suba* (province) to run before taking over the kingdom itself, Sanjay was asked to look after affairs in India's capital city. Within a few months of the emergency, the word had got around: 'the PM herself wanted all matters pertaining to Delhi to be handled by her

son'.[54]

By now, Sanjay Gandhi had formulated a five-point programme to complement his mother's twenty-point one. These dealt with, respectively, family planning, afforestation, abolition of dowry, the removal of illiteracy and slum clearance. Of these the focus was on the first, nationally, and on the fifth, when it came to Delhi. The capital was dotted with slums that had spontaneously arisen to house the migrants who did the low-paying jobs in residential colonies and government offices. Here lived sweepers, rickshaw-pullers, domestic servants, office boys and their families. There were almost a hundred such settlements in the city, housing close to half a million people.[55]

Sanjay Gandhi wanted these slums demolished and their inhabitants settled in farmland across the river Jumna. Here, his ideas coincided with those of Jagmohan, the ambitious vice-chairman of the Delhi Development Authority (DDA). Jagmohan's great hero was Baron Haussmann; he hoped to do for Delhi what that town planner had once done for Paris. By clearing the slums and building boulevards, the baron had transformed the French capital. Once 'an ugly and despicable town', it had become a 'seat of vigorous and vibrant culture'. However, Jagmohan's admiration for autocratic methods was catholic. He praised what the Chinese communists had accomplished in Shanghai, for example: this a 'result of firm national policy and commitment', when 'in India, on the other hand, we are still in a state of drift'. The DDA vice-chairman once lamented that he was

> No Haussmann reborn
> No Lutyens with a chance
> Nor Corbusier with Nehru's arms
> I am a little fellow
> An orphan of these streets

Still,

> With all the millstones
> Around my neck
> I stand erect
> Restless and keen
> Willing to fight
> Willing to dream. ..[56]

This was written in 1974, before the emergency. A year later Sanjay Gandhi arrived, to free Jagmohan's arms, to remove the millstones from round his neck. The town planner had long been disturbed by slums, signs of a 'sick and soulless city'. Impatient to clean and clear them, he had been impeded by the messiness of democratic procedure – the need to obtain consent, to provide proper resettlement, to deal with political activists purporting to represent the people.

Jagmohan was a key member of a coterie that had sprung up around Sanjay Gandhi. Others included Naveen Chawla, who was secretary to the lieutenant governor, and the senior police officer P. S. Bhinder. Among the women who worked with Sanjay were the president of the Youth Congress, Ambika Soni, and a socialite-cum-social worker, Ruksana Sultana, who was seen as his unofficial representative to the slum dwellers. Every morning the group met in Sanjay's office to take orders and provide reports. Also in attendance was the prime minister's stenographer, R. K. Dhawan, who provided the link between this Delhi cabal and the doings of the government of India. Preceptor to the lot was Dhirendra Brahmachari, a long-haired swami who first entered the Gandhi home as Indira's yoga teacher, but stayed on to become a favourite of her son. Dressed and trained as a Hindu holy

man, Brahmachari was yet modern enough to own and run a firearms factory in Kashmir.

The names of this coterie became known in the city, their doings discussed in hushed whispers. It was said that the surest way to have the government act in your favour was to speak to (and please) one of the above. Businessmen seeking licences or tax exemptions rushed to them; so did MPs hoping for a Cabinet appointment. Contrasts were drawn between Sanjay's largely 'Punjabi mafia' and his mother's once-powerful Kashmiri lobby. The brashness of the former was compared with the sophistication of the latter. However, the differences were not so much of style as of intent. Where the Kashmiris were 'committed' to their shared socialist ideology as much as to their leader, Sanjay's gang was committed only to Sanjay himself.[57]

The exception to this general rule was Jagmohan. He had already identified the tidying-up of Delhi as his life's mission – and was delighted to find it endorsed by the prime minister'sson. Now, Sanjay's support and the emergency's cover gave legitimacy to the DDA vice-chairman's preference for coercion over persuasion. The bulldozer scould move into the slums, free even of the probing eye of the press. In the fifteen years preceding the emergency the DDA had moved a mere 60,000 families; in the fifteen months following it the number more than doubled.[58]

Jagmohan's operations focused on the old city, where Mughal monuments and mosques nested cheek-by-jowl with damp houses and dark streets. On the morning of 13 April 1976 a bulldozer moved into the Turkman Gate area, behind Asaf Ali Road, the street that divides Old Delhi from New. In two days it had demolished a slum of recent origin, housing forty families. Then it moved towards a set of *pucca* houses of uncertain antiquity. The residents contacted their MP, a Congress Party member and old associate of Mrs Gandhi named Sub-hadra Joshi. Mrs Joshi in turn contacted the officials of the DDA; Jagmohan himself was appealed to.

The negotiations stalled the operations temporarily, but in a couple of days they had resumed. Three bulldozers were at work, acting, they said, on Jagmohan's orders. They had demolished more than a hundred houses when, acting in desperation, a group of women and children squatted on the road and defied the bulldozers to run over them. When they refused to move, the DDA called for the police. In sympathy with the protesters, shops in the vicinity began to close.

The police tried to shift the squatters with sticks and, when that failed, with tear-gas. The retaliation came in the form of stones. The fighting escalated and spread into the narrow lanes. The numbers of the mob grew; the police progressed from using tear-gas to using bullets. It took the better part of a day before order was restored. Estimates of the number who died in the fighting range from 10 to 200. Curfew was imposed in the Old City; it was a full month before it was lifted.[59]

The offices of India's leading newspapers are on Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, less than a mile away from Turkman Gate. Yet in the conditions of the emergency none could write about the incident. However, the underground picked it up and played it up. The news reached Sheikh Abdullah, who was 'terribly distressed' by the shootings. He complained to the prime minister, who agreed that he could visit the area. Accompanied by a leading Congress politician, Abdullah toured the Old City, speaking to people about their recent experiences.[60] There he learnt that aside from the natural reluctance to leave their houses, the protesters had been hurt by being subject to the first of Sanjay Gandhi's five points – family planning. In June1976 the underground newspaper *Satya Samachar* reported that the Sheikh had told a group of Congress MPs that 'the whole trouble began when young, old and even invalid people were dragged off to the sterilization camps. Nobody has any quarrel with the economic policies of the Prime Minister, but the way in which they are being implemented, I am sure, will lead to an explosion.'[61]

IX

In fairness, Sanjay Gandhi was not the only person concerned about his country's large and still growing population. The Malthusian spectre had long haunted India, as the pages of this book should have made clear already. Western journalists feared large-scale famine; Western biologists had written off the country altogether. Many Indians also worried that a rising population would put paid to the other achievements of their nation. Between 1857 and 1947 gross national product stagnated; there were periods in which it even declined. After Independence, GNP grew at 3 per cent per annum. However, with the high increase in human numbers, the per capita income grew at a mere 1 per cent a year.

The debates on India's population size dated from the earliest days of Independence. Social workers had set up a Family Planning Association of India in 1949. The Planning Commission had spoken of the importance of family planning since its inception in 1950–1. However, culture and economics worked in favour of large families. The biases in educational development meant that girls were still valued more as child-bearers than as wage-earners. The continuing dependence on agriculture placed a premium on children. Indian Muslims and Catholics were enjoined by their clergy to abjure family planning. And Hindu couples greatly preferred sons to daughters, trying and trying again until they had one.

In 1901 the population of India stood at about 240 million; by 1971 it had reached close to 550 million. In this period, birth rates had fallen slightly, from nearly 50 births per 1,000 Indians to about 40. However, the decline in death rates had been far steeper, from 42 per 1,000 at the turn of the century down to 15 by the 1970s. Advances in medical care and more nutritious food allowed all Indians, including infants previously liable to early death, to live longer. But since the birth rate and average family size did not decline at a comparable rate, the population continued to rise.[62]

It is difficult precisely to date Sanjay Gandhi's own interest in family planning. His *Surge* interview of August 1975 does not mention the subject at all. Yet a year later, the *Illustrated Weekly of India* was speaking of how 'Sanjay has given a big impetus to the Family Planning Programme throughout the country'. He claimed that if his programme was implemented, '50 per cent of our problems will be solved'. He expressed himself in favour of compulsory sterilization, for which facilities should be provided 'right down to the village level'.[63]

Of Sanjay Gandhi's five points, writes his biographer, the other four were humdrum, unglamorous, 'hardly the stuff to build charismatic leadership credentials on'. But 'family planning was. Here was a Herculean project, the solving of which, everyone acknowledged, was vital if the nation hoped to survive, let alone prosper'. And so, 'family planning became the lynchpin of Sanjay Gandhi's Emergency activities'.[64]

In his tours around India, Sanjay Gandhi catalysed a competitive process between the states of the Union. Sanjay would tell one chief minister of what another had claimed to have done – '60,000 operations in two weeks' – and encourage him to exceed it. These targets were passed down to district officials, who were rewarded if they met or exceeded them and transferred otherwise. The process led to widespread coercion. Lower government officials had to submit to the surgeon's knife before arrears of pay were cleared. Truck drivers would not have their licences renewed if they could not produce a sterilization certificate. Slum dwellers would not be allotted a plot for resettlement unless they did likewise.[65]

The hand of the state fell heavily in the towns, but the villagers were not spared either. An

anthropologist doing fieldwork in Maharashtra's Satara district reported that the emergency had little impact in its first year. A few homes were built for the landless under the twenty-point programme. A few slogans were painted denouncing the dictatorship. Then, in September 1976 – shortly after Sanjay Gandhi's visit to the state – a campaign for compulsory sterilization began in the villages. Local officials prepared lists of 'eligible men', that is, of those who already had three or more children. Police vans would come and take them off to the nearest health centre. Some men fled into the hills to escape the marauders. Those who had undergone a vasectomy were too embarrassed to talk about it.[66]

As with slum demolition, here too there was resistance. In September 1976 an underground newspaper reported a 'wave of protests' against family planning in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. There were clashes between health officials and shopkeepers refusing to be sterilized. Resistance was reported from many towns in UP – Sultanpur, Kanpur, Bareilly.There was great resentment among school teachers, who had been asked to conduct house-to-house surveys in pursuance of the sterilization campaign. As many as 150 teachers were arrested for defying orders.

The worst incident, the Turkman Gate of family planning so to speak, took place in the town of Muzaffarnagar, seventy miles northwest of Delhi. The district magistrate here was notorious for his zeal, and for his communalism – under his orders, the chiefly Hindu police had gone with particular relish for Muslim artisans and labourers. On 18 October a scuffle broke out between officials promoting sterilization and their potential victims. Their pent-up anger released, the mob torched the health clinics and threw bottles and stones. The police were called in, and resorted very quickly to firing, in which more than fifty people died. A delegation of opposition MPs rushed to the town but were prohibited from speaking to the residents. However, reports leaked into the foreign press, and the prime minister was constrained to admit in Parliament that there had been an 'incident' in Muzaffarnagar.[67]

An incidental victim of Sanjay Gandhi's family planning drive was the great popular singer Kishore Kumar. Other film stars and musicians agreed to perform in a programme to raise money forsterilization, but Kishore refused. As a consequence, his songs were banned from Vividh Bharati, the AIR channel that exclusively broadcast film music. The Film Censor Board was instructed to hold up the release of movies in which Kishore acted or sang. Sanjay's men also warned record companies against selling Kishore's songs. It was an act of petty vindictiveness in keeping with the times.[68]

X

That the prime minister chose, at a time of crucial political importance, to rely on Sanjay Gandhi rather than P. N. Haksar and company – this was an excursion in reasoning that even her close friends found difficult to understand. Various theories were offered – that it was the manifestation of the guilt of a working mother and single parent, that she was paranoid about assassination and hence could trust only her family, that Sanjay knew her darkest secrets and hence had a hold over her, that she was grateful for his support when the emergency was declared. However appealing to the biographer, to the historian such speculation is nearly useless. For what matters here is not intent but consequence – not why Mrs Gandhi chose to rely so much on her younger son but on what this reliance meant for India and Indians.

It is tempting to view Mrs Gandhi's political career as being divided into two phases, with the

emergency and Sanjay Gandhi providing the dividing line. Before Sanjay, it might be said, she won elections, created Bangladesh, reformed the Congress Party and made bold attempts to reorganize the economy. Under Sanjay's malign influence she turned her back on these larger social goals and became obsessed with the preservation of herself and herfamily.[69]

However, when one views the prime minister's career in the round, Sanjay and the emergency should be said to mark not a radical departure from past practice, but a deepening of it. From the time of the Congress split, Mrs Gandhi had worked to place loyal individuals in position of authority, and to make public institutions an instrument of her will. Institutions such as the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the presidency and the Congress Party had been eroded well before the emergency. Sanjay's arrival took the process further – some would argue much further. It also vulgarized and corrupted it, and made it more violent. But the process itself antedated his entry into Indian politics.

By June 1975 Mrs Gandhi had been prime minister of India for a little less than a decade. When one compares her tenure with that of her father, one is struck by a striking paradox – that Nehru's halting yet honest attempts to promote a democratic ethos in a hierarchical society were undone by his own daughter, and in decisive and dramatic ways. The grievously mistaken dismissal of the communist government in Kerala aside, Nehru took seriously the idea of an opposition. But Mrs Gandhi paid other political parties scant respect. She attended Parliament less regularly than Nehru, and spoke much less when in it. Nehru forged abiding friendships with politicians of other parties – something quite inconceivable in the case of Mrs Gandhi. Then there was the contrast with how they treated their own party. In Nehru's time the Congress was a decentralized and largely democratic organization. Even had he been so inclined, he would not have been able to impose a chief minister against the will of a state's own politicians.

The contrast is reinforced when one considers the other, non-political aspects of democratic life in India. Nehru respected the freedom of the press, and allowed it to flourish. Nehru respected the autonomy of the bureaucracy and the judiciary: there are no known cases of his having intervened to favour or act against a particular official.

At least from the time of the Congress split in 1969, Mrs Gandhi had begun to depart from the political traditions of India's founding premier. The departures became more marked over the years, and became fully apparent only with the enactment of the emergency and the repression that followed. For partisan reasons of their own, opposition politicians could not posit a contrast between the first and third prime ministers of India. Because they had once opposed Nehru, and because the Congress was now led by his daughter, they could scarcely praise one and diminish the other.

Unbound by such constraints, Western writers who knew both leaders could see quite clearly how Indira Gandhi had departed from Jawaharlal Nehru. A year into the emergency, two British friends of Nehru made the contrast the focus of their criticisms of the regime. Writing in the *Times*, Fenner Brockway deplored the conversion of 'the world's greatest democracy' into a 'repressive dictatorship'. Himself 'a son of India', Brockway 'appeal[ed] to Mrs Gandhi in memory of the principles of her distinguished father, to end these denials of freedom and liberty'.[70] Writing in the Spectator, John Grigg recalled Nehru's commitment to free elections and a free press. India's first prime minister was 'a true patriot because he was a true democrat . . . During his long premiership he made many mistakes but on the vital libertarian issue he never broke faith with the Indian people.' But now, noted Grigg sadly, 'Nehru's tryst with destiny seems to have been turned into atryst with despotism – and by his own daughter.' Mrs Gandhi 'should have been the proudest upholder of India's democratic experiment, which was proving to the whole world that people did not have to be rich or educated to enjoy civil liberties'. Yet by her actions she had 'spuriously confirmed' the view

of 'old-fashioned imperialists' that 'only authoritarian methods can work in a country like India'. Grigg asked the prime minister to free herself from her son's influence and return to the values of her father's generation. Indeed, he implore[d] her – at whatever cost in power, "face", and mother-love – to restore the freedoms she has taken away'. To do so, he wrote, 'would be the hardest act of her career but it would also be the bravest and best'.[71]

Other British friends wrote privately to Mrs Gandhi, urging her to end the emergency. One such was the old Quaker Horace Alexander, who had once mediated between Mahatma Gandhi and the British Raj, and also first introduced the current prime minister to the delights of bird watching in the Indian countryside.[72] There was also impersonal yet very public criticism, offered in the then widely respected *Times* newspaper by the even more widely respected columnist Bernard Levin. In October 1976 Levin wrote two long articles on the recent attacks on democracy in India. Speaking of the suspension of habeas corpus, and the curbs on the press, he warned that Mrs Gandhi was turning her country into a 'tin-pot dictatorship'. In the first week of January 1977 he wrote two more essays, criticizing the constitutional amendments passed to emasculate the presidency and the judiciary. These 'tyrannous provisions' were 'entirely unnecessary except to one who wants total power and the ability to use it without check'. These latest changes, said Levin, had confirmed the 'transformation of India into a fully authoritarian regime under its seedy dictator, Mrs Indira Gandhi'.[73]

On 18 January 1977 the prime minister announced that Parliament was to be dissolved and fresh elections held. This came as a surprise to her political opponents, who were let out of their cells even as the announcement was being made on All-India Radio. And, from all accounts, it came as a shock to hers on Sanjay, who too had not been informed before hand. The term of the present Parliament could have been extended, year after year. The underground resistance had been fully tamed. And yet Mrs Gandhi decided, suddenly and without consulting anyone, to return India to democracy.

There was much speculation as to why the prime minister had turned her back on emergency rule. In the Delhi coffee houses, the gossip was that her intelligence chief had assured her that the Congress would be re-elected with a comfortable majority. Some felt that it was the consequence of competitive one-upmanship. President Bhutto had just announced elections in his usually autocratic Pakistan; could Mrs Gandhi delay elections in her unnaturally autocratic India? Her secretary, writing long after the event, offered yet a third explanation. The emergency, he noted, had cut Mrs Gandhi off from the public contact that previously nourished her. 'She was nostalgic about the way people reacted to her in the 1971 campaign and she longed to hear again the applause of the multitudes.'[74]

Perhaps all these factors contributed. So did the criticism from Western observers and (especially) friends. Aside from those already quoted, the emergency was strongly condemned by the former German chancellor Willy Brandt and the Socialist International 'all socialists must now feel a great sense of personal tragedy at what is happening in India'; by the World Council of Churches in Geneva ('a very serious abridgement of human rights'); and by the leading American trade union organization, the AFL/CIO 'India has become a police state in which democracy has been smothered'.[75]

What, finally, persuaded Mrs Gandhi to end the emergency? One cannot say for certain, but it does seem that she was stung by the comments of those foreign observers impossible to dismiss as enemies of India. Fenner Brockway and John Grigg were not Richard Nixon and the CIA. Nor were they sceptics who had sneered at India, who had hoped that its democracy would fail. These, rather, were very old friends of India's freedom. While the Raj lasted they had pressed the British to leave, and after Independence had saluted the installation of a democratic regime. We do not know whether Mrs Gandhi read their essays, or indeed the articles by Bernard Levin. Yet it is more likely than not

that she did. They might have been placed before her without comment by a member of her own staff, or of her intimate circle, himself less than enamoured of the emergency. It is a striking coincidence that the elections were called two weeks after Levin's second series in *The Times* – just enough time for them to be air-mailed to India, seen by someone in the PM's office, clipped and passed on to her.

But coincidence it may be. We shall never know for sure, one reason being that Mrs Gandhi's papers remain closed (and shall probably always be so). Still, it is appropriate to end this chapter with a fragment underlining how the dictatorship imposed by India's third prime minister was so much at odds with the democratic legacy of her father. Visiting New Delhi during the emergency, the *New York Times'* s A. M. Rosenthal – who had once served as his paper's correspondent in India – concluded that, had Jawaharlal Nehru lived while Indira Gandhi reigned, the two would have been political opponents rather than allies. An Indian friend of Rosenthal's captured that imagined scenario in this way: 'Indira is in the Prime Minister's house, and Jawaharlal is back to writing letters to her from jail again.'[76]

The allusion was to a series of letters written to Indira Gandhi by Nehru in the early 1930s, while lodged in a British jail. These presented his thirteen-year-old daughter with a panoramic sweep of world history. Starting with the Greeks, and ending with the Indian freedom struggle, the story as told by the father unfolded the (oft-interrupted) progress of the human animal towards greater sociability and freedom. The later letters explored how 'democracy, which was for a century and more the ideal and inspiration of countless people, and which can count its martyrs by the thousands,' was now 'losing ground everywhere'. The last letter, sent to Indira on 9August 1933 – three years after the first – ended with the stirring paean to freedom contained in Rabindranath Tagore's great poem *Gitanjali*.

When published in book form, the letters sold briskly, and in time the author was persuaded by his publisher to bring out an expanded edition. A freshly written postscript, dated 14 November 1938, outlined the major political developments of the latter part of the decade. 'The growth of fascism during the last five years and its attack on every democratic principle and conception of freedom and civilization' wrote Jawaharlal to Indira, 'have made the defence of democracy the vital question today.' Unfortunately, 'democracy and freedom are in grave peril today, and the peril is all the greater because their so-called friends stab them in the back'. [77]