

Penning Protest: A Literary Response to the Indian Emergency

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Abstract

This paper will briefly touch upon the emergency, and present an overview of the special literature that emerged both during and after this event. While the event was characterized by censorship, the people responded through the pen in voicing their experience of the event and marking a protest against the arrogation and misuse of power that was witnessed by India during these nineteen months. This paper leads to reflections on contemporary political trends and in which manner the phase of emergency has been not so distance predictor.

Keywords: Emergency, Protest, Democracy, Indira Gandhi, Indian literature

The history of any nation is fraught with various moments of pride, glory and at times with those of trauma and excesses. It is a matter of convenience and political exigency as to what is prioritized over the other at different points of time. India an old civilization, and yet a young democracy has many such moments as part of its career which form the larger narrative of its historical consciousness. The internal Emergency which was imposed on 25th June 1975 and revoked in 1977 is one such event which poses an uncomfortable silence in India's discourse of nationalism fraught as it is with complexities. The event is one which is complicated at many levels: its imposition, the excesses which took place and the subsequent manner in which it has been relegated to the more obscure corners of modern Indian history, these are all aspects that demand a greater study. This paper will briefly touch upon the emergency, and present an overview of the special literature that emerged both during and after this event. While the event was characterized by censorship, the people responded through the pen in voicing their experience of the event and marking a protest against the arrogation and misuse of power that was witnessed by India during these nineteen months.

Why and how things happened the way they did are still subject of intense debate and speculation, however it would be helpful to give a brief background to the event. The internal Indian Emergency was declared by the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi on 25th June 1975, under Art. 352 of the Indian Constitution on grounds of 'internal disturbance' even while the external Emergency declared in 1971 on account of the Indo-Pak war was still in operation. It was subsequently revoked on 21st March 1977. The overnight imposition of the emergency was cited as a response to what was then considered a threat to India's political stability by the JP Movement led by the Gandhian, Jay Prakash Narayan. Various political parties had given support to the JP movement and were clamoring for Indira Gandhi's resignation after the Allahabad High court held her guilty for electoral malpractices. Unwilling to relinquish power, Mrs. Indira Gandhi imposed the emergency which was followed by press censorship, mass arrests, a rather aggressive forced sterilization program, beautification drives, and a general atmosphere of fear which came to prevail across the nation. To a large extent, the nature of the emergency, whether it was the public perception of the event or the excesses that took place, was determined by the press censorship as it was by far the most important tool in the hands of the government for controlling dissent.

The Emergency which lasted for a brief period changed India for better or for worse, and we are living in the midst of those changes today. This is not to say that the Emergency or the then ruling government affected such far-reaching changes; rather certain changes were set in motion consciously or otherwise with the Emergency, which led to a reworking of the system from within. One might question "whether it makes sense to isolate the period as an object of reflection at all" since "time has intervened to recreate the Emergency."¹ With the villains long forgotten, the records obscured, even memories of the victims hazy, and the slew of official discourse, it would appear a self-defeating purpose. However, revisiting the Emergency is important, not because of any perverse need to dig the past, but rather to understand our present in terms of this event as an integral part of our history.

The Indian Emergency is unique not just with respect to the circumstances in which it was imposed but also due to its nature and the time period for which it lasted. Was it a dictatorship, a decisive response to a situation of unrest and anarchy, or the personalisation of power by a lone individual? It was too short to become a full fledged dictatorship, too long to be called a brief period of Emergency. It saw excesses which revealed the authoritarian streak of the state, and yet did not involve a military takeover or the dismantling of the fundamental institutions of democracy, though there was a pressure on these to perform as per the government's wishes. The Emergency is a complex event which forms a clear divide between India pre 1975 and post 1977 as it changed the political landscape of India. It is dominantly viewed as an aberration, an isolated event, a nightmare, a dark spot in Indian history because of the state controlled excesses. Conceded that the Emergency was all these but was it these alone? The event can be viewed in two ways: as India's darkest hour on one hand, and on the other, as the defining moment of Indian democracy when it came into its own.

The problem with most of the studies that have been done on the Emergency is that it is seen only as an Indira and Sanjay phenomenon or in terms of JP's call for Total Revolution. However, this is too simplistic an explanation which obfuscates the larger forces at play behind the Emergency. They were simply the people who executed it, set it in motion, but the event was primarily a systemic failure aggravated by a political crisis. I agree with Naipaul when he states in his book *India: A Wounded Civilisation*, that even if Indira Gandhi had not been there, the Indian system was headed for the Emergency because there were problems bigger than one person and would have manifested themselves in some other crisis sooner or later². However extending my argument further with respect to the nature of the Emergency, it is not an isolated event in Indian history; rather it is a very tangible outcome of the events that preceded it. It is the expression of that disarray and chaos which was already present in the Indian system. A nation which was pressed by problems of development and a massive population, was trying to find its locus while undergoing transformation from an erstwhile colony into an independent nation. It invariably had to fall into some crisis. It is a fact that Indira Gandhi's centralization of power played a major role in fermenting the causes for the Emergency to take place, and yet apart from this the Indian system itself was veering close to a crisis with poverty, corruption, lack of basic amenities, a lop-sided development and secessionist movements. The question is not how the Emergency could have been avoided, because it could not have been, as it was simply the form that the whole situation took to express itself, the rupture could have erupted in

¹ Tarlo, Emma. *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of Emergency*. (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 137

² Naipaul, V.S. *India: A Wounded Civilization*. (New Delhi: Vikas, 1977).

some other way too. The socio-economic circumstances and the political scenario in India were in such a state of flux and turmoil that a political crisis was waiting to happen. The structural causes were responsible to a large extent for aggravating the crisis that had been building right from Independence itself. If the Emergency had not been clamped, the turmoil would have taken some other form to wreak its wrath. It is important to state that at a larger level perhaps Indira Gandhi *alone* cannot be held responsible for *why* the Emergency took place even though she precipitated the crisis and gave it a tangible form. However, she along with Sanjay, the political system and the bureaucracy were definitely responsible for a lot of what happened *during* the event, in terms of the excesses that took place. Therefore rather than positing a normativist discourse that seeks to analyse how this could have been averted if elections had been called or reducing it to a mere power-struggle between two leaders, it is necessary to assess how it has influenced India.

The inherent complexity of the Emergency can be shown through the fact that despite being documented extensively, it is deliberately ignored and exists at the periphery of modern Indian historiography and yet at the same time is able to emerge as a tangible and powerful event precisely because it does not fit in with the established discourse. It has been forgotten partly because it not only 'implicates the state as the key agent of violence' but also 'challenges' the 'discourse of democracy.'³ It is easier to forget that it happened than to remember that the people let it happen. Several questions arise while studying this phenomenon. Why did the intelligentsia and the bastion of the people's voice, the media, sit back and in some cases grovel in servility and sycophancy at the feet of a tin-pot dictator? Is it this silent complicity, this sullen submissiveness and servility that the people wish to forget? Or is it just that the Emergency has not yet become an 'event' in the historical sense? One reason is that much of what took place was deliberately kept away from the public eye then, and even now, most of the government records about this period are yet to be released⁴ making it difficult to arrive at a conclusive picture of the Emergency since most of the facts available in unofficial sources are dismissed as rumours and exaggerations.

This brings us to the memory, representation and reconstruction of the Emergency via literature. This body of literature: fiction, nonfiction or poetry, written both during and after the emergency, form voices of anger, of protest against a system which was used for brow-beating an independent nation into a classroom of puppets who were expected to perform as per government guidelines. The event gave birth to a plethora of emotions some of which are still awaiting release from the sterility of those times, and it is unfortunate that although the pain of the Partition has been partially cleansed from the body of the nation through extensive works in fiction and poetry, the guilt and anger of the Emergency are still trapped somewhere in the past, surfacing every now and then when similar repressions take place on a smaller scale in the country.

Since this was a highly political event, it brought about a lot of political literature- books dealing with the Emergency, explaining the how and why of it all. Along with this, a lot of underground literature also got circulated during this period. What emerges from a study of this literature is that there were few who actually voiced their dissent openly *during* the Emergency

³ Tarlo, Emma. *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of Emergency*. (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 22

⁴ Chandra, Bipin. *In The Name of Democracy: JP Movement and the Emergency*. (New Delhi: Penguin, 2003), 5.

due to censorship and fear of arrest under the dreaded MISA (Maintenance of Internal Security Act). Once the Emergency was lifted and the Janata Government came to power, everyone felt that they could expose the government with their 'eye-witness accounts'. Some of the literature was written by people who had borne the brunt of the Emergency first hand because they had been sent to jail, had faced harassment, had relations who were tortured or had groundless cases filed against them and so on. While some of this enormous corpus of writing is quite objective in its outlook, most can qualify as literature that simply rode along the mounting anti-Emergency and anti-Indira wave after the Emergency was lifted. However, even this prolific outburst of writing died soon after as the people saw that the 'ideal' Janata party government they had installed after Indira Gandhi stepped down in 1977 was in reality no better than the earlier one. As Indira Gandhi came back to power once again in 1980, Emergency was relegated to a dark corner. No one wanted to revisit it because sadly enough the people suffered yet another betrayal at the hands of the so called saviour, the Janta Dal party also and all the ideals came crashing down with the debacle of the political charade that was subsequently played out. It is only recently that stray works dealing with this event in a more analytical way have come to light to break the self imposed silence that we have chosen with regard to the Emergency.

Ironically enough for an event that was characterised by a stringent censorship, there is available an extensive range of narratives which arrive at multiple versions of the truth, leading to the formulation of a body of such 'truths' which, though based on a common corpus of facts, are determined by various individual voices. Since there was near total censorship during this period, people were very eager to know the 'truth' or whatever consisted of the truth. Newspapers had lost their credibility in the very early days of the Emergency, and so rumours replaced facts. Later these rumours were mixed with some facts, first-hand accounts, hearsay, statistical data pertaining to the excesses, a must have insight into Indira Gandhi's personality and Sanjay's coterie, and the whole mishmash was presented under the new genre of 'Emergency literature'. This unique literature is one that bore the marks of censorship, voiced protest, tried to assuage the feeling of collective guilt, denounced the villains, and sought to affix the memory of the event in national consciousness. While it managed to fulfill all other aims, it failed to create a larger awareness of the event with the result that the Emergency exists as a part of the long gone past and a reference in history books.

The most immediate genre to emerge after the emergency was the nonfiction written on the event. These texts depict immediate responses of the people towards the event, as most of these books were published during 1977-78. They seek to offer a pleasing blend of realism doctored with compelling narrative and language for literary acceptability. Since they were written in the immediate aftermath of an event which had suppressed and gagged the freedom of speech, they are full of a desire to voice discontent and anger against the Emergency and its architects. Reports of the detenus, prison diaries, as also speeches and letters which were written during the Emergency but published afterwards form a part of this category, and help in reconstructing the immediate truth about the Emergency. However, most of this political literature seeks to judge the politics of the time along with the key players of the Emergency. The bias against Indira and Sanjay is understandable since there was no time lag within which to objectively view the event, and, moreover, the memory of the excesses was still too fresh to dispel the anger which people felt against the two. The main themes in these books are dominantly those of the Emergency, Indira and Sanjay, and the excesses, and the hope of a new order from the Janata government.

The creative response of writers through fiction and poetry towards the event gives it a more universal appeal as they do not just deal with hard facts and statistics concerning nameless people, but rather show us how the Emergency pervaded the lives of ordinary people at various levels. There is a bias in these books as well but it is subsumed by the emotive content wherein the Emergency and the people are dominant, rather than the politics of blame which is foremost in the nonfiction. They not only assert the people's voice and convey the anger and the disappointment at the degeneration of the political system in the country, but also enunciate the social problems which assailed India at that point and were aggravated during the Emergency. While there are references to some common aspects and themes of the Emergency, the treatment is varied consisting of the allegorical, surreal, realistic and descriptive modes of narration and representation. All these depict the myriad ways in which the Emergency opened itself to representation and study, making it difficult to essentialise it in any one way or reduce it to any one perception. The dark imagery or the brutal realism of many of these texts and poems are more harrowing and convincing at times than the numerous analyses and exposés on the Emergency. The treatment of the Emergency in these texts also reflects the perception of the event in public and creative imagination. They do not offer the same clichéd ways of viewing the Emergency but present new ways of looking at the event which is the outcome of the subsequent opening up of public consciousness and awareness of the state and their rights.

Later works of fiction like Nayantara Sehgal's *Rich Like Us*,⁵ Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*⁶ or a large body of protest poetry have a much more symbolic and subjective reference to the Emergency, wherein instead of factual evidence we see this dark, sinister phenomenon as it really was. The journalistic accounts, on the other hand, offer a somewhat clinical picture of the whole event divorced from the actual trauma that people underwent. The pain, the humiliation, the horror that millions of people went through is missing in these accounts. It is this human side of the story that the later poems and novels seek to bring out. While some authors have based their stories against the backdrop of the Emergency with all that was going on during those days, others like O.V. Vijayan in *The Saga of Dharamapuri*⁷ and Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children*⁸ portray the Emergency at a more allegorical level. The images are nightmarish, surreal and grotesque, but then so were those nineteen months. These novels were not written during the emergency however, they are important literary testimonies of the event which are inspired by lived experience, reportage and the general imagination of the event in the psyche of the nation. Such texts can be seen as markers of protest against a time which was dark and dismal in modern India's career.

In Salman Rushdie's well known novel, *Midnight's Children* the birth of the protagonist Saleem Sinai at the stroke of midnight 15th August 1947 is linked inextricably with India's independence and the partition. The novel and Saleem move through modern India's eventful history and important personages culminating in the birth of Aadam Sinai, Saleem's son who is born at the stroke of another midnight but this time that of 25th June 1975, "at the precise

⁵ Sahgal, Nayantara. *Rich Like Us*. (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2003).

⁶ Mistry, Rohinton. *A Fine Balance*. (New York: Vintage, 1997).

⁷ Vijayan, O.V. *Selected Fiction: The Legends of Khasak, The Saga of Dharamapuri, The Infinity of Grace, Stories*. (New Delhi: Penguin, 1998)

⁸ Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. (New York: Avon Books, 1982)

instant of India's arrival at Emergency... there were gasps; and, across the country silence and fears." The child is born mute. Tuberculosis and the Emergency make him a "child of ears and silence".⁹ This child comes to symbolize a new India, an India born out of the Emergency, one that was afflicted with a disease of the self that threatened to take over its very spirit. There is a difference, as the protagonist Saleem himself states, between his own self and his son, both children of midnight. The innocence and euphoria of Saleem, the child of freedom is now replaced by his son's wisdom and cautiousness of having seen and heard everything. The only cries that Aadam Sinai makes are those of silence, a silence imposed by the censoring of an ideal, an innocence that could never find its way back into India. The whole phantasmagoria of sound and hysteria that Rushdie creates through India's history comes to rest in this child whose silence is the only testimony of the tyranny that India lived through. And it is this silence that is the legacy of the Emergency for those who lived through it.

While the other texts are all written by either novelists or journalists and other such experts in the field of politics or economics, John Oliver Perry's edited book *Voices of Emergency*¹⁰ is a pan-India anthology consisting of poems from not just established poets but people from different walks of life and regions of India. So, not only are they representative of the nation as a whole, but since they were translated from different Indian languages they also make an interesting study of Emergency literature in translation. It can be said that since these are voices from across India, the emotions they depict are equally diverse as are the images of the Emergency that they convey. An example of the fear that pervaded the minds of the people can be seen in Jimmy Avasia's 'Emerging'¹¹,

One day we woke,
Free to do as they wanted.
... on the way to an answer
they selected a truth
but all suggestion of question
died en route.

The poem has a rather ominous tone especially in its reference to 'they', the government and those in power who dictated what the people were 'free to do now'. It is ironic indeed that freedom came at the whims of those in power and while 'they' chose the 'truth', the explanation that 'they' wanted to propagate, a blind compliance and acceptability of that truth was required from the people, one which would not brook any questions or doubts. The poem is chilling in its reference to the menacing 'they', the state and those in power. People are gagged, their voices suppressed; there can be no queries, no questions.

What emerges from a study of this literature is that there were few who actually voiced their dissent during the Emergency. 'Protest' during the Emergency could be seen through the fight that certain newspapers and independent journals like the *Indian Express*, *The Statesman*, *Seminar*

⁹ Rushdie, Salman, 500.

¹⁰ Perry, J.O., ed. *Voices of Emergency: An All India Anthology of Protest Poetry of the 1975-77 Emergency*. (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1983)

¹¹ Avasia, Jimmy. 'Emerging'. *Voices of Emergency: An All India Anthology of Protest Poetry of the 1975-77 Emergency*. Edited by John Oliver Perry (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1983), 67.

and *Mainstream* put up against the government's draconian censorship rules. Protest was also voiced and seen through the activities of students and the underground movement but this movement involved only the politically active and not the general masses. The awakening of the Indian public to their rights was not by any political party but through their own realization of the fact that even a democratic government could quash their rights. Despite the fact that the generic term 'protest', as applied to the literature emerging during and after the Emergency, is problematic, first on account of the time during which it was written and secondly its rather limited perspective wherein the event is reduced to an Indira and Sanjay Gandhi affair, it is still a marker of the trauma, anguish, shock, frustration, betrayal and anger that the people felt with respect to the event. The study of this literature is relevant not only for understanding the Emergency, but in exploring the problems within such a category of literature as well. The location and identity of the author, the time lag, the political affiliations, are just some of the issues which affect the representation of the Emergency. Apart from this, the generic divide between the literature as fiction and nonfiction also makes it difficult to arrive at any rigid generalisations, thereby necessitating a more nuanced study of the texts based on the event.

Most of the perceptions of the Emergency also suffer from a pull of contraries, whether it was good or bad, whether what we see on the surface is the truth or whether the sub text of the Emergency is the real truth. Was Indira right, or was JP wrong? The questions are numerous. Emergency literature is not just an account of the event recreated in fiction or non-fiction, but more importantly a challenge to the forces of history and politics, as it recreates the Emergency in a different image altogether. However, it is not the volume of work that counts; the important thing is that it exists, graphic and vivid testimonies and stories of the horror and the pain countless people underwent, though not all found voice to put their experiences into words. The Emergency is still waiting a complete catharsis which might take time in coming since it is still recent in terms of history. However, its impact over the political scene can be observed even today. Even today texts like the graphic novel *Delhi Calm* by Vishwajyoti Ghosh¹² are emerging on the emergency making us aware that the event still awaits a closure in public and national memory.

¹² Ghosh, Viswajyoti. *Delhi Calm* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2010)