

India's 'darkest hour'

An excellent collection of essays on the Emergency tries to capture the deep impact, or the lack of it, on the collective psyche of the people

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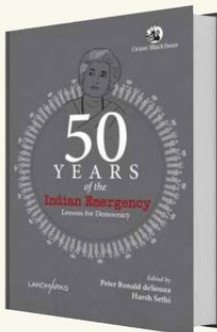
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The Emergency, during Indira Gandhi's prime ministership from June 1975 to March 1977, is rightly called "the darkest hour" in the history of free India. This was a phase when civil, political rights and liberties of people were brutally suppressed. Arbitrary and mass arrest of political rivals, press censorship, and the functioning of a secret police system are some of the well-known features of the period.

Critics of the regime were subjected to extreme violence. In some parts of north India, there were forced sterilisation drives and bulldozing of slums. Yet, it is simplistic to reduce the clamping of the Emergency only to Indira Gandhi's authoritarian ways. She did, of course, hurry through the process by not observing even the formality of taking the approval of her own Cabinet before imposing Emergency. It was promulgated after the Allahabad High Court held the Prime Minister's election to the Lok Sabha in 1971 null and void, and a vacation bench of the Supreme Court, while staying the High Court's verdict, allowed Indira Gandhi to continue as PM "but with weakened authority."

Emergence of JP

The Emergency was, in fact, the culmination of a number of events: the emergence of Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) as the credible face of



50 Years of the Indian Emergency:

Lessons for Democracy

Edited by Peter Ronald deSouza,

Harish Sethi

Oriant BlackSwan

₹1,025

anti-Indira Gandhi political forces coupled with the Nav Nirman (social reconstruction) movement and JP's call for "total revolution"; a successful U.S.-inspired coup, leading to the death of Chile's president Salvador Allende in September 1973, the Yom Kippur Arab-Israeli War next month, the subsequent "oil shock" from Arab countries, assassinations of Railway Minister L.N. Mishra in January 1975 and Bangladesh's founding leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman seven months later. All these and many



India Gandhi addressing the crowd at Red Fort, New Delhi, ahead of the 1971 General Elections.
(GETTY IMAGES)

more aspects have been captured in *50 Years of the Indian Emergency: Lessons for Democracy*, an excellent collection of essays, edited by Peter Ronald deSouza and Harish Sethi. They have approached the subject from angles that are often left out while dealing with the Emergency.

'Black' days in poetry

Rukmini Bhaya Nair gives an overview of how the "black" days have been reflected through the imagination of poets of different Indian languages. It is an article that readers would not generally expect from a book that deals with the traumatic period. Her account of the works from 13 languages, including those from the south, dispels the popular notion that the 21 months of Emergency left the southern States undisturbed.

Kalpna Kannabiran's take on

Andhra Pradesh, including the findings of a fact-finding committee, led by former Chief Justice (1957-1969) of the Bombay High Court V.M. Tarkunde, is gripping. She includes the account by a mother of one of the four men who were killed in an "encounter" near Pakala lake on October 31, 1976. The victims were tortured, their fingers

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chopped off before being hit by bullets.

Even if we disagree with Kannabiran's assessment that popular consensus/public unawareness during the Emergency in the State could not adequately explain the Congress' landslide victory in the 1977 Lok Sabha polls in the southern State – or for that matter, the entire south – her version will be revealing to those born in the last 50 years. Mahmood Farooqui's piece is another convincing account of the sufferings of victims of the Emergency which talks about how the Kannada actor-activist Snehalata Reddy, lodged at the Bangalore Central Jail, was tortured psychologically before she died within days of her release.

Farooqui, who is essentially a litterateur, captured the pain of inmates of Tihar jail in New Delhi.

His nuanced suggestion for the adoption of payment of reparations by convicts under a law of torts, instead of punitive incarceration, requires serious consideration of the authorities.

The socialist couple, Madhu Dandavate and Pramila Dandavate, were arrested within a month of the imposition of Emergency. While Madhu Dandavate was lodged in the Bangalore jail, Pramila was sent to Yerwada jail in Pune. Separated by about 800 km, the two apparently wrote nearly 200 letters to each other.

Gyan Prakash's article is revelatory about the erudite exchange between the two. They discussed everyone from Marx to Gandhi, literary works of Rabindranath Tagore and Kusumagraj. Errol D'Souza's essay on the economic factors that worked behind the Emergency gives an objective view. Freedom enjoyed by Scheduled Castes (SC) was the unintended beneficial consequence of the Emergency, as the SCs were till then in a "normal state of unfreedom" – this angle has been brought out in a thought-provoking essay by Gopal Guru.

Minor quibbles

In an otherwise scholarly work, the book does not offer any great insight about Indira Gandhi's spectacular return to power in 1980, even though many articles carried in the publication dwell upon several post-Emergency events quite elaborately. It remains a puzzle whether the people, despite experiencing the ugliest face of the state only a few years earlier, regarded political stability alone as the governing factor in their voting preferences. It appears that their proclivity for an individual-centric system, instead of a sound, impersonal and rule-based order, is quite deep.

Leaving aside this aspect and a few minor quibbles, the book is a timely wake-up call about the relevance of a past when institutions chosen to safeguard democracy miserably let down the people.