



# ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXIII / 2022

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## **Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises**

**Edited by**  
**Michelguglielmo Torri**  
**Filippo Boni**  
**Diego Maiorano**

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A large, intricate mandala pattern in a light orange color, partially visible in the bottom right corner of the cover. It features concentric circles of geometric and floral motifs.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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## INDIA'S FIRST DICTATORSHIP: THE EMERGENCY, 1975-77

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Christophe Jaffrelot & Pratinav Anil, *India's First Dictatorship: The Emergency, 1975-77*, London: C. Hurst & Co., 2020, 508 pp. (ISBN: 9781787384026).

Historians working on South Asia have long regarded the end of British rule in the Indian subcontinent as a veritable boundary for their research. This caesura has been rapidly dismantled in the last decade as newer archives have opened up and researchers have incorporated multiple source accounts to piece together the experiences of postcoloniality in the second half of the twentieth century in South Asia. Situated within this emerging scholarship, Christophe Jaffrelot and Pratinav Anil's *India's First Dictatorship: The Emergency, 1975-77* persuasively imagines the afterlives of colonialism and India's myriad experiments with democratic ideas.

The book is divided into 3 thematic sections which together contain 10 chapters along with an introduction and conclusion. Part 1, comprising five chapters, lays out the theoretical framework under which the authors categorize the period of Emergency and details the specific characteristics of the Emergency regime. Drawing on Juan Linz's typology of the various forms of authoritarianism, Jaffrelot and Anil characterize the Emergency as «organic statist». Such a variant of political governance involves a delicate interplay between political authoritarianism and existing social hierarchies, and the two work in tandem to reinforce each other. Typically, organic statist regimes lack a distinct ideology of rule, and they foster an ethic of depoliticization among the population. A unique feature of Indira Gandhi's Emergency regime was that Gandhi was averse to exercising outright absolutism and hence at least in appearance she operated within the restraints put forth by Indian parliamentary and juridical structures. In this sense, the authors term the 21 months of Emergency rule as a *constitutional democracy* since it functioned within the framework of the Indian constitution (17).

The Emergency was imposed in June 1975 in the aftermath of a series of economic crises in the preceding years which had resulted in rising inflation and a crisis in agriculture across the country. The first three chapters of Part 1 detail the ways in which Indira Gandhi responded to accusations of malfeasance and administrative incompetence by systematically curbing a range of individual rights, clamping down on political dissidents through mass incarceration, and bending the judiciary and the media through means fair and foul. The complicity of the Indian bureaucracy, the police, and of the state radio and television was crucial in this process as socialist

propaganda and the centrality of Indira Gandhi to the national consciousness were systematically established. The last two chapters of Part 1 examine the spatial and temporal dimensions of the period of Emergency. In chapter 4 Jaffrelot and Anil argue that there was a distinct temporal dimension to the Emergency, wherein they draw a distinction between the initial months of Indira Gandhi's rule and the takeover of the regime by her son Sanjay Gandhi in the latter part. The transition of informal power from Indira to Sanjay marked the move towards a full-fledged state-sponsored targeting of specific sections of the society. Sanjay notoriously focussed on two specific domains, namely, family planning and urban gentrification. Mandatory sterilisation programmes run by Sanjay's cronies and massive evictions of the urban poor, especially in and around Delhi, became the worst instances of state violence in postcolonial India. Indira being cast aside from policy-making signalled the transformation of an ostensible socialist authoritarian state into a full-fledged *sultanist* regime run by the son. Sanjay's rise to power also offered opportunities for a number of younger Congress politicians to find a role on the national stage. The likes of Pranab Mukherjee, Kamal Nath, Ambika Soni and Ghulam Nabi Azad among others cut their teeth during the Emergency and went on to have prominent roles within the Congress party and national politics. The impact of Emergency was also not uniform across the breadth of the country. The force of the repressive regime was felt more severely in those states where the Congress was also in rule. Further, there was a clear divide between north and south India in the extent to which government-sponsored programmes could be implemented. Chapter 5 lays out the differing degrees of impact across the country, with northern India bearing the brunt of state violence.

The middle section of the book examines the immediate causes leading up to the proclamation of Emergency. Chapter 6 in this section critically engages with both the JP movement and the Allahabad judgement—two factors that have conventionally been understood as the catalyst to Indira Gandhi's political posturing and her grab of absolute power. One of the central arguments of the book—which is persuasively presented in this chapter—is that the functioning of Emergency rule, while drawing on Indira Gandhi's force of personality, was a consequence of longer-term socio-economic factors and continued friction between the executive and the judiciary. The severe economic crisis in the early 1970s as well as allegations of widespread corruption in government administration had provided the push for the opposition parties to rally around veteran leader (and self-proclaimed Gandhian) Jayaprakash Narayan's call for a «total revolution». Narayan's charisma and oratory galvanised the opposition against Indira Gandhi's regime and helped him attain a pan-India following. But his fight turned out to be «more about power and morality» and thus lacked any distinct ideology (232). Perhaps the lasting legacy of the JP movement was the legitimacy it accorded to the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and

the Jan Sangh. Alongside the political unrest brought about by the JP movement, the other immediate cause was a judgment passed by a high court in Allahabad in 1975. The case involved the election of Indira Gandhi in the general elections of 1971 that was challenged by Raj Narain, Gandhi's political opponent at the election. The Allahabad high court found Indira Gandhi guilty of electoral malpractices and barred her from contesting elections for the next six years. Rendered ineffectual by the judgement, and with the opposition seeking her resignation, Indira Gandhi chose to declare a state of emergency and assume absolute power. Jaffrelot and Anil demonstrate that the standoff between Indira Gandhi and the judiciary was part of a longstanding tussle that had been brewing since the late 1960s. These juridical battles were primarily over the role of the judiciary as a watchdog over the executive and as the custodian of the fundamental rights of the Indian people.

Chapter 7 examines two key factors that enabled the fostering of authoritarianism in the long run. The authors highlight the increased centralisation of power within the Congress party, with a gradual strengthening of Indira Gandhi's hold on the functioning of the party. This centralisation of power in the hands of a single individual was part of a corresponding gradual deinstitutionalisation of the Indian National Congress, a process that had begun with the split within the party in the late 1960s. Chapter 8, the final chapter of Part 2, elaborates on the diverse groups who supported the Emergency. From the Communist Party of India to the Marathi-nationalist Shiv Sena, from most of the large corporate houses to multiple trade unions, the Emergency received endorsement from diverse fronts. The Indian middle class as well as the bureaucracy gave its silent approval and remained willing spectators to the unfolding drama. The coming together of such a heterogenous spectrum of actors was in part due to the lack of any ideology espoused by the Emergency regime. Further, as the authors demonstrate, Indira Gandhi astutely echoed the concerns of whichever group she interacted with, at once standing for everything and nothing.

The last section, titled «Resistance and Endgame», comprises two chapters which detail the accounts of those who opposed the Emergency and the reasons for the eventual calling off of the 21-month experiment by Indira Gandhi. In many popular accounts, the resistance to the Emergency regime has taken on a near-hagiographic status. Such a characterization fits in with the current ascendancy of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), as it was the RSS and the Jan Sangh (the previous avatar of the BJP) which are imagined as the heroes of the counter Emergency struggle. Jaffrelot and Anil, instead, sketch the chaos and confusion that riddled the meagre efforts to oppose Indira Gandhi's diktats in this period. By neutering the media, putting many of the opposition party members in jails, and by laying down cudgels against the judiciary, Indira Gandhi had effectively stymied most efforts to challenge the state. The final chapter of the book addresses the

dilemma raised by the preceding chapter: if the powers of the state were unchallenged, and dissent effectively trampled, why then was the state of Emergency called off? As with the reasons for the imposition of Emergency, the circumstances leading to the scrapping of the Emergency regulations were a combination of individual caprice and external variables. The curbs put on the media and on journalists was applied to both Indian and foreign broadsheets, which meant that the flow of information could not be regulated as desired by Gandhi. Arguably the pressing motivations came from within: Sanjay's band of henchmen and their brazen violation of individual rights sought to shift the power base from Indira Gandhi to her son, something the matriarch was loath to allow. More significantly, calling off the Emergency and announcing general elections reflected more on Indira Gandhi's deluded belief in her own invincibility on the election battlefield. As the resounding defeat of the Congress party in the 1977 elections showed, she had misread the mood of the public. The victory of the Janata Party under Morarji Desai meant a return to normalcy, but the impact of the Emergency period lingered. The Justice Shah Commission instituted by the Desai government to deliberate on the Emergency found that Indira Gandhi had violated multiple constitutional norms while infringing on the rights of individuals across a broad socio-political spectrum. That the findings of the Shah Commission were considered inadmissible and were pushed under the carpet after Indira Gandhi's return to power in 1980 is perhaps the most apposite reflection on the dysfunctional state of democratic practice in India.

The legacy of the Emergency period has been analysed variedly by political commentators both in the immediate aftermath and in the years since. Most such accounts either see the period as a state of exception before the country returned to the norm, or as a turning point after which the practice of democracy in India irrevocably changed. In the conclusion, the authors argue that the logics of governance put forth during the Emergency, the broad indifference and/or support that it drew from the various sections, as well as the manner in which independent regulatory bodies and the media proved ineffective are all part of the very story of the functioning of democracy in postcolonial India. The story of the Emergency period as sketched by Jaffrelot and Anil is thus about the travails of institutionalizing norms of liberal democracy in a society structured by social hierarchies of caste, region and religious differences.

Conventional accounts of the Emergency have characterized it as stemming from Indira Gandhi's authoritarian impulses and her urge to centralize governance. In addition to Gandhi's personality traits which ostensibly favoured the hijacking of power, the immediate causes which triggered Gandhi's move was the rising tide of the JP Movement and the judgement of the Allahabad High Court which rendered Gandhi's 1971 election invalid. *India's First Dictatorship* does an admirable job of widening the socio-po-

litical lens within which these two immediate triggers can be better contextualized. At a political level, the Emergency further legitimised the RSS and laid the foundations for the BJP and its brand of Hindutva politics to gain a broad appeal and acceptance. At the level of the working of the economy, the enticements of socialism were cast away both by the governments that followed as well as by the general population. Indira Gandhi's return to power in 1980 was accompanied by a gradual relaxation of the hold of the state on businesses. The economic reforms of 1991 which opened up the Indian markets to foreign investment can thus be viewed as emerging from the morass of the Emergency period.

One of the more provocative stances put forth by the book lies in its very title. Jaffrelot and Anil characterize the Emergency period as being independent India's *first* brush with dictatorship. The authors leave it to the reader to gauge whether this is meant as a provocation or as a prognostication. Contemporary India hurtles towards instituting a Hindu majoritarian state with the tacit or explicit support of the electorate, the institutional watchdogs, and the media. Viewed in this light, the continued functioning of democratic norms—including state-centre relationship, the independence of regulatory bodies such as the Election Commission, and the safeguarding of individual and minority rights—have been under incessant threat. It is difficult to engage with the Emergency period without inadvertently considering the parallels with politics in contemporary India (the writers allude to this as well). The open-ended nature of the book's title thus offers the reader many an opportunity to draw parallels as well as engage in hypothesizing democracy's future in the country. *India's First Dictatorship* is as much about the practice and workings of democracy in postcolonial India as it is a detailed exegesis of a specific (exceptional) moment in the country's history. By contextualizing this period within a wider socio-economic canvas and in seeing the roots of the political crisis as part of a longer tussle between the state and judiciary, the authors nudge the story of Emergency away from the solitary, shadowy figure of Indira Gandhi. What emerges in its stead is a nuanced portrayal of the early decades of independent India, the material realities of the Indian population in which an authoritarian regime found broad acceptance, and the possibilities and limits of instituting democratic norms as part of the everyday ethos of a postcolonial society. Written in an engaging style and buttressed by extensive archival sources and oral interviews, the book offers a definitive account of the Emergency period and offers insights that will be of interest to a wide range of historians and social scientists working on South Asia.