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Gyan Prakash. *Emergency Chronicles: Indira Gandhi and Democracy's Turning Point.*
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Gyan Prakash offers a detailed and devastating portrait of India's tryst with tyranny in *Emergency Chronicles*, a sequence of stories hinging on Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's mid-1970's suspension of democracy. Prakash recasts the roughly two-year episode, which has long been siloed as a unique, if terrifying, disjuncture in India's postcolonial history, as part of a longer narrative, with antecedents in the colonial state of course, but jarringly with roots even in the ideals of India's Constitution and the debates that went into its crafting, as well as in policies that were carried out in the name of progress even under so heralded an administration as that of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru (Mrs. Gandhi's father). If that past builds to and coheres with the present of Indira and her nefarious younger child Sanjay, so too does the past of Mother and Son extend into and undergird our present, when authoritarian populism is again ascendant and respect for rights in decline.

Thus, even as it is narrowly concerned with affairs in the subcontinent, it is at the same time an international tale with global significance. This is to say that this is a book that matters.

Prakash deploys a wide array of sources in order to look from multiple angles at India's 21-month-long Emergency, when Prime Minister Gandhi authorized unilateral actions by her government (167) at the cost of constitutionally-guaranteed individual liberties. He forensically examines films, short stories and longer literature, constitutional history, police reports, artwork, and oral accounts to cull many shards of new evidence. Then, with keen analysis, he pieces it all together to reveal a clear picture of a period that has long remained a puzzling mystery.

Historians trying to examine India's post-1947 life have long been hampered by a lack of access to relevant archival materials. This has begun to change in recent years as increasing numbers of repositories have become accessible. Nonetheless, many key records, like Mrs. Gandhi's papers, remain stubbornly closed to public access (130). To circumvent this kind of roadblock, Prakash hit the pavement with impressive gumshoe work, sleuthing out secrets everywhere.

Over 9 chapters, a prologue and epilogue, Prakash vividly takes us on a tour of an acclaimed academy campus (Jawaharlal Nehru University), walks us through the corridors of the Constituent Assembly and into its debating chambers, and brings us from there to his central arena, where we are witness to the rise of Indira Gandhi and a range of her foils and nemeses, including ‘Total Revolutionary’ Jayaprakash Narayan (JP), Bihar politicians Laloo Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar, Marathi Maoist defender and right-wing stalwart Bal Thackeray and his Shiv Sena, and others.

Strikingly, Prakash is able to maintain a high political narrative while simultaneously bringing everyday people and seemingly marginal matters into the picture as well. And so we keep an eye on Prabir Purkayastha, a regular college student, throughout the book, beginning with his mistaken arrest at the outset (14). We stroll through Delhi’s Walled City and embrace the life of its Muslim denizens (249). We sigh at the sweet romance of imprisoned socialists Pramila and Madhu Dandavate (316). We also get a whirlwind tutorial on India’s automobile industry, a digression that is pertinent in its eventual culmination in Sanjay Gandhi’s apparently fraudulent efforts to swindle investors and dependents out of money to shore up his pipe-dream of a small car venture, Maruti (205).

But while Sanjay may have been dastardly and Indira flawed, Prakash argues that what they were able to do stemmed less from their personalities and more from key institutional elements of the Indian state and the postcolonial imagination, and ultimately, the failure of India’s Founding Figures to deliver what had truly been needed: widespread and fundamental land reform and the targeted dismantling of the country’s feudal hierarchy. Nehru and even Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Dalit champion and the chair of the Constitutional Drafting Committee, are called out for their mistakes. Prakash in essence charges postcolonial elites with envisioning the independent state as highly centralized and pedagogic—it had to teach the population how to live as modern, democratic citizens and needed authority to accomplish this (26, 53). This effort to impel was inherently coercive, and it is this underlying power to compel that Prakash sees as growing and spreading cancer-like, until it consumed the Indian state completely from within. The Emergency merely removed some of the last remaining impediments of the coercive state, so that it was able to carry out policies with much more ‘efficiency,’ a euphemism for brutality. And so Nehru-era family planning initiatives first morphed into population control programs with the oversight of the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, before they found their full flowering under the Emergency as grotesque sterilization drives organized at the behest of Sanjay and facilitated by many figures like the colorful Indian socialite Rukhsana Sultana (251, 264, 279, 294).

The basis of much of Prakash’s argument is the claim that India’s constitutional founders imported the country’s basic legal infrastructure from its colonial predecessor, and that it was thus at heart cruel and unforgiving, more about the iron fist than the uplifting hand. Aside from accepting most of the 1935 Government of India Act (the proto-constitution the British had forced on India despite strong opposition), the “basic structure of the judiciary and the civil administration remained the same. The colonial-era Indian Penal Code of 1860 was [also] retained,” including its infamous anti-sedition Section 124A (59). This was all made manifestly worse when the founders eliminated a clause on due process in the constitution, leaving citizens with no recourse if faced with an aggressive, repressive state unwilling to check its own worst impulses (62-63, 175).

Though they did borrow freely from colonial instruments, the founders also engaged in long and substantive debates while drafting the constitution, and drew specific language from many countries. In the case of due process, for instance, the founders opted for procedural due process over substantive due process, rather than the elimination of the legal requirement altogether. The language used in India’s clause came directly from

the newly created constitution of Japan, and was chosen after the framers received a draft critique from U.S. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter.¹

The point remains the same. The Emergency was a legal mechanism built into the Indian state from its inception, within a larger framework of supportive mechanisms. Once it was declared, all bulwarks against a runaway government, like inconvenient Fundamental Rights, could easily be washed away. The Indian state simply had to claim it was following proper procedures while carrying out any nefarious agenda it wished. Those that operated under this cover wielded what Prakash terms “shadow power” (188-204).

But the founders were making difficult choices under strained, and complex circumstances. The subcontinent had to pioneer the process of decolonization. Its leaders were tasked with building a new state (states, since this was also going on in neighboring Pakistan) and formulating rules and regulations of self-governance, and with assuming responsibility for the welfare of millions of people crushed by poverty, inequity, and discrimination (40-52). And all of this had to be accomplished in an increasingly polarized world driven by the politics of the Cold War. Every choice they made had to strike a balance between idealism and pragmatism. The founders, who ranged across the ideological spectrum, were driven overall by a progressive outlook—a general consensus that people’s basic needs had to be met by an activist state—and so ultimately based their decisions on what could best help them to achieve their overall goals.

Emergency Chronicles seems to suggest that there is a straight line from the founders’ ideals and specific progressive victories (like parliamentary sovereignty and procedural due process) to the authoritarian populism of the Emergency. Indeed, the book seems to claim that there is an unavoidable teleology between pedagogy and coercion, even if figures like Nehru were at pains to ensure a distinction between them. Does this impugn the progressive impulse?

Prakash’s answer is a three-fold no. The problem lay not in the Constituent Assembly’s impulses or policy choices, but rather in the failure of the founders to fully dismantle the disciplinary elements of colonial law which had specifically been designed to police the bodies of colonial subjects. The transition from such subjecthood to citizenship was never properly accomplished. Additionally, land reforms undoubtedly would have helped break the hold of an antediluvian hereditary power structure and helped to democratize Indian society further and more effectively.

Prakash claims that “radical social reforms” would also have been necessary for the Indian state to have been put on the right path (136, 272). Perhaps, but what these are, or could have been, or how they might have differed from actual decisions that were taken is never really fleshed out, nor is how such radical reforms could be exempt from coercive characteristics. The absence of such explanations makes it difficult to assess the merits of this particular assertion.

¹ Manu Bhagavan, “The Hand and the Fist: Human Rights and State Power in India,” in Atul K. Thakur, *India Now and in Transition* (Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2017), 141-152. For further details on India’s constitution and its history, see Sujit Choudhury, Madhav Khosla, and Pratap Bhanu Mehta, *The Oxford Handbook of the Indian Constitution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

So where does that leave things now, especially when our present is so intertwined with this past? Is it again time to call for land reform? To demand the repeal of colonial-era laws that are harmful to individual liberty? Is it too late? Are there other alternatives? Prakash rightly leaves us pondering these critical questions.

Emergency Chronicles masterfully and artistically reveals India's slow descent into madness. In an absorbing and thought-provoking way, it sheds light on one of the country's darkest periods and simultaneously illuminates our current circumstances, leaving us with worrisome portents for the future. There are many lessons here to be learned.

Manu Bhagavan is Professor of History and Human Rights at Hunter College and the Graduate Center-CUNY. He is the author of *The Peacemakers* (2012, 2013) and *Sovereign Spheres* (2003), and the editor or co-editor of 4 other books. His latest edited volume, *India and the Cold War*, will be released in late summer 2019 from UNC Press and Penguin India. He is currently working on a biography of Madam Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, the first woman in the world to become a celebrity diplomat. His *Quartz* essay on the rise of global authoritarianism went viral internationally and was translated into German as the cover article of the May 2016 *Berliner Republik* magazine. He is the recipient of a 2006 Fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies and regularly appears in the media to comment on global affairs.

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