

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

Indira Gandhi and the making of Emergency

The structural transformation of Indian politics since 1967 that shifted power towards the executive, leading to a collective jettisoning of the rules of the game by the Indian political elite, and accentuated by the global conjuncture, fastened the lurch towards authoritarian rule

Almost 50 years to date, on June 12, 1975, Justice Jagmohan Lal Sinha of the Allahabad High Court delivered a judgement that came as a thunderclap. Justice Sinha held Prime Minister Indira Gandhi guilty of corrupt practices during the 1971 general elections, voiding her membership of Parliament and barring her from holding elective office for six years. Thirteen days later, Indira Gandhi got President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed to issue a proclamation under Article 352 of the constitution declaring an internal Emergency. This enabled her to inaugurate a spell of avowedly authoritarian rule, incarcerating her political opponents, muzzling the press, casting aside the fundamental rights, and mauling the Constitution.

Five decades on, the Emergency continues to haunt Indian democracy as a *memento mori* (reminder of one's mortality). This is hardly surprising, for many leaders who bestride contemporary politics — from Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin — were shaped in the crucible of the Emergency. The Union government has declared its anniversary on 25 June as "Sam-

vidhan Hatya Divas". Public debates on the Emergency also tend to generate more heat than light. These focus all but exclusively on Indira Gandhi's decision to impose the Emergency. Was it solely to ensure her continuance in office or was it principally a response to the Opposition's drive to unseat her in the wake of the high court's verdict? How credible was her claim that there was a grave internal threat abetted by external powers?

Inasmuch as Indira Gandhi was responsible for imposing the Emergency, these questions will continue to be probed. Yet understanding her concerns and intentions is not the same thing as causally explaining the onset of the Emergency. As I argue in my new book, such an explanation must bring together changes and developments at the levels of structure, conjuncture and event.

Start at the structural or systemic level. Political systems should be understood not merely as agglomerations of leaders, parties or social groups, but with reference to two system-wide components that influence all actors. The first is the institutional arrangement of political actors according to their differing functions and relative power. In the Indian case, this is the functional separation of the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. The second component is the constituent rules — procedures, principles, norms, understandings — that regulate political competition: The "rules of the game" of parliamentary democracy. The Indian political system underwent a significant transformation between 1967 and 1975. This transformation occurred on both systemic dimensions. Importantly, this transformation preceded the Emergency.

The years between 1967 and 1973 witnessed a dramatic shift in relative power towards the executive, especially the office of the prime minister. This began with the Congress party's poor showing in the general elections of 1967 — an event that catalysed a power struggle within the party, culminating in Indira Gandhi's move to split the Congress in 1969. This left the prime minister in stronger control of her party. Soon, Indira Gandhi gambled in calling for elections a year ahead of schedule. And her party won a stunning victory in March 1971. This was followed by India's military triumph over Pakistan later that year. This, in turn, propelled the new Congress to a dramatic win in the state elections of 1972. None of these could have been predicted, but

cumulatively they cemented Indira Gandhi's hold over her party. The parliamentary party ceased to operate as a subtle check on the executive. On the contrary, the party was now beholden to the prime minister for its political survival.

The political opposition had coalesced against the Congress ahead of the 1967 elections and had reaped the dividends of the first-past-the post system. Yet their Grand Alliance in 1971 proved spectacularly ineffective and unravelled after their abysmal performance. However, the opposition parties' decision to go alone in the state assembly elections of 1972 also failed to revive their fortunes. The political opposition was now a blasted heath and the parliament's position turned merely topographical.

This extraordinary strengthening of executive power enabled Indira Gandhi to challenge the functions and powers of the judiciary, culminating in the assertion of prime ministerial



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authority by the supersession of judges and the appointment of a pliant chief justice in the Supreme Court in April 1973. A tame Supreme Court would go on to endorse the executive's actions during the Emergency.

These dramatic power shifts were accompanied by changes in the collective beliefs and expectations of political actors about the rules of the game of parliamentary democracy. As the game grew increasingly competitive from 1967 onwards, its rules, procedures, and norms were frequently cast aside in pursuit of power. Horse-trading of legislators, shifting party allegiances, weak and unstable governments, misuse of constitutional powers to undermine governments and dissolve legislatures — all became accepted features of the Indian political landscape.

This dimension of systemic change was accelerated by the global conjuncture; processes that played out concurrently and impinged decisively on India. In particular, the collapse of the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates and the oil shock triggered by the Arab-Israeli war of 1973 touched off a tidal wave of global inflation. The Indian economy experienced its most serious bout of inflation

in the 20th century. Massive popular protests in Gujarat, Bihar, and elsewhere were a direct consequence of this economic crisis. The student movement's success in ejecting the Congress government in Gujarat and the upsurge in Bihar under Jayaprakash Narayan led the main opposition parties to regard extra-parliamentary mass agitation as the political route to weaken the Congress party, given their inability to humble it in the hustings.

This shift in beliefs and expectations occurred across the political spectrum. In April 1974, LK Advani told the Jana Sangh's general council that "dethroning an elected government by extra-constitutional means had acquired legitimacy". The Socialist Party adopted a resolution later that year: "Since the capacity of the parliamentary system to achieve reform and renewal from within is getting severely limited, extra-constitutional action and popular initiative become absolutely necessary." EMS Namboodiripad of the CPI(M) wrote that "they do not accept the position that every issue must be solved only through constitutional means". Above all, the prime minister herself had ceased to believe in the intrinsic

value of democracy. As she wrote to Yehudi Menuhin soon after imposing the Emergency, "Democracy is not an end. It is merely a system by which one proceeds towards the goal. Hence democracy cannot be more important than the progress, unity or survival of the country."

Against the background of this systemic change and conjunctural crisis came the events of 12 June 1975 that threatened the prime minister's continuation in office. The lurch towards authoritarian rule was now unavoidable in the sense that the conditions needed to prevent it were no longer obtainable.

Indira Gandhi was, of course, culpable for the decision to impose the Emergency. But its onset was caused by this larger structural transformation of Indian politics. This was, in turn, the outcome of a collective jettisoning of the rules of the game by the Indian political elite. This perspective on the origins of the Emergency when juxtaposed with its disastrous course and its turbulent aftermath invites a historical verdict in the vein of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet: All are punished.

Srinath Raghavan is the author of *Indira Gandhi and the Years that Transformed India*. The views expressed are personal.

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



Valmik Thapar: Cousin, critic, and wise counsel

I have to admit I was surprised. I knew he was a celebrity. On the subject of tigers, he was a world authority. His 40 books and his BBC series, *Land of the Tiger*, were clear testimony. But the newspaper coverage of his death suggested a level of admiration and respect I had not anticipated. It proved he was considered a truly special person — in many ways, an icon.

Thus, Valmik Thapar's death revealed a legacy and a reputation his family had probably not appreciated. Perhaps even understood. Now, belatedly, we have realised the enormous impact he had as a conservationist and as an authority on tigers. He was the star of the present generation of our family.

In many ways, Valu, as we knew him, was like the tigers he loved. He was powerful and gruff. He was a man of few words but capable of large warm gestures. And his appearance was striking. Big and broad, with a most beguiling

smile and large twinkling eyes. Valu's laugh could bring everything to a sudden halt before the room spontaneously laughed with him.

Though I have known him all my life, I really got to know him in my 20s. I was of the age when you think you know more than you do.

On a holiday in India with a dear friend, Claire Winterschladen, Valu suggested we visit Ranthambore. "If you haven't seen a tiger, you haven't lived", he teased and taunted us. "I'll take you there and you'll have the time of your lives."

He was right. By day, we drove in jeeps, Valu often at the wheel, following tiger pug marks and sighting several of them — often just a few feet away.

At night, by a bonfire on the banks of a lake, we drank rum and listened to his tales. Valu's stories of tigers and the jungle, told with his inordinate sense of drama, were riveting.

But what I didn't realise — although

clearly Valu knew — is what those days in Ranthambore would mean. It was my first holiday in a jungle. The first time I'd vacationed with a girlfriend. The first time there was no parental authority or guardian to watch over and ensure I didn't step out of line. But Valu knew this would be the case. That's why he was so keen we visit Ranthambore. He was doing his bit to help a cousin grow up!

In later years, when I was a journalist, he would often invite me to dinner and open my eyes to hidden aspects of stories I was following or to interpretations I had not thought about. Whenever he began a sentence with the words "have you thought of this", I knew I had not.

At first, I didn't realise that he was gently but cleverly guiding me. He did it unobtrusively. Sometimes, he would invite people to educate me. On other occasions, he would call to comment on an interview I'd done.

Once or twice, he would alert me to a story in a newspaper he thought I may have overlooked.

On each occasion his advice was invaluable. He wasn't a politician, but he had an unerring feel for what would attract attention. He instinctively knew what would excite curiosity and could easily distinguish it from what was of interest only to the elites of Delhi's drawing rooms.

But Valu was also my fairest critic. Others may have chafed at his comments, but I knew he had watched what I'd done and

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thought carefully before speaking. The one lesson I immediately accepted — but never fully mastered — was his advice not to let my voice rise when I'm speaking. "There's no need to let your excitement show", he said. "The content of what you say should be sufficient to capture the audience's attention. Keep your voice at an even pitch."

I rarely did. Now, every time I can't control my vocal chords and my voice rises up the register, I will remember Valu's sage advice. And that means I will be remembering him a lot!

Karan Thapar is the author of *Devil's Advocate: The Untold Story*. The views expressed are personal

{ ANOTHER DAY }

Namita Bhandare



Marriage, and space for women to say No

A conniving wife (allegedly). Splashy wedding videos (visibly). Picturesque honeymoon (unarguably). And then, the plot twist, murder. The exclamation marks just insert themselves.

There is no escaping this "Honeymoon *Hathayakaand*" in the mainstream press, TV news and social media. So much of what is being recorded is speculation with a large side of moralising — women are going too far, laws "favouring" women must be repealed and, even, take the family along on your honeymoon.

The police investigation into the death of 30-year-old Raja Raghuvanshi whose body was found in Sohra, the former and famous Cherrapunji, on June 2 is underway. Married on May 11, his 25-year-old wife Sonam has been arrested with four other men, including one said to be her boyfriend, allegedly for a hit job on the new husband.

Tucked away behind the screaming headlines is a story of love, longing, and marriage in modern India.

It's a story where marriage remains central to our lives. Even as daughters are being educated, the families consider it their foremost duty to see them properly married. And that means marrying in conformity with caste endogamy and family preferences. A 2018 survey found 93% of Indians chose arranged marriages against just 3% who marry for love. If you slice the data in terms of age, then amongst over-80s, 94% had had arranged marriages; amongst those in their 20s, it was 90%. In other words, over two generations, young Indians are still marrying the way their grandparents did.

Sonam's choice of a partner, reportedly, was a man not just three years younger but of a different, lower caste. To marry him would amount to dishonouring her family

and the clan. Moreover, we are told that he was an employee in her father's business establishment and so, there was a class difference too.

Four months ago, Sonam met Raja in an arranged marriage set up where details such as caste, class, and income come with a family-vetted stamp. Couples, invariably referred to as the boy and girl rather than the adults they actually are, are given the fig leaf of choice through a personal meeting.

Why on earth did Sonam agree? We know very little of what was going on inside her head. And, most emphatically, nothing justifies the taking of an innocent life. Social circumstances cannot justify a choice between killing and saying no.

But in a country that in 2021 reported 33 murders in the name of honour, many women don't have the freedom to say No — No to a man picked by their fathers. No to walking out of unhappy marriages, and No to marriage itself.

Ask why this crime is receiving the sort of coverage it is, and the answer is evident. When 140 women and girls globally are murdered every day by their intimate partners, it is not news. It's just another day in the life of a world where gender-based violence is normalised. But when the gender roles are reversed, you have an aberration and the patriarchy responds by asking: Are women going too far?

With the investigation far from over, the mob is already baying for Sonam's head — and this includes her brother who has declared her "100% guilty". "I will make sure she is punished," he is reported to have told Raja's family. It shouldn't come as a surprise that the men in Sonam's life would want to continue controlling it.

Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal.

Constitution represents our civilisational ethos

These days it has become fashionable for political leaders to swear by the Constitution, and even flaunt a copy of it in public rallies. Yet few are fully aware of the drama and sweat that went into its making.

The Constitution was a product of three years of intense and cerebral deliberations of the Constituent Assembly (CA), from August 1946 to January 26, 1950, when it was signed by each member and formally adopted. We celebrate that day as Republic Day.

But there is a long history preceding the convening of the CA. The idea was first mooted by VK Krishna Menon (later the country's defence minister) as far back as 1933. In 1936, at its Lucknow session, the Congress party formally asked for it. When there was no immediate response from the British, C. Rajagopalachari strongly reiterated the appeal. The British accepted it in August 1940.

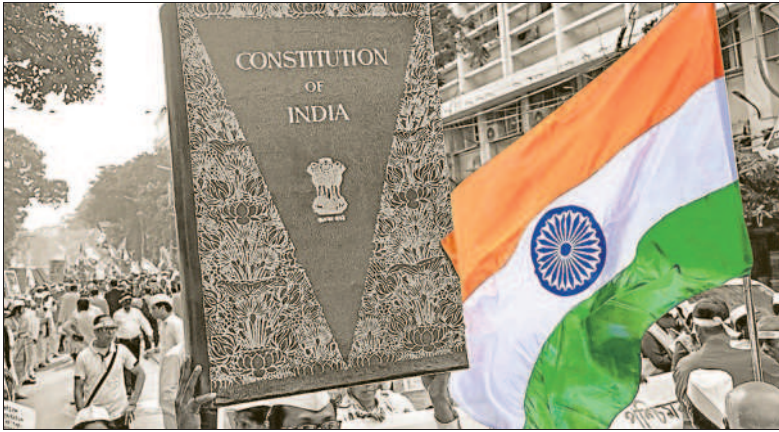
Finally, under the British Cabinet Mission Plan, elections to the CA were held in July 1946. Not many know that these elections were not held under universal suffrage. The nominees were elected by the Provincial Assemblies by a single transferable vote system of proportional representation. To this were added the elected nominees of 93 princely states, and one each from the chief commissionerships of Delhi, Ajmer-Merwara, Coorg and Baluchistan. The elections were completed by August 16, 1946. Congress representatives

had the lion's share of 69%. The Muslim League won 73 seats. On the announcement of a separate Indian state, the League boycotted the CA, but 28 of its 73 members chose to ignore the boycott.

In its final configuration, the CA consisted of 299 members. Although not directly elected, they represented an entire spectrum of views — conservatives, progressives, Marxists, and all beliefs, including Hindu revivalists and Islamic votaries. Historian Granville Austin has described the CA as "India in microcosm".

Rajendra Prasad, later the first President of India, was elected as the chairperson. Harendra Coomarr Mookherjee, a Christian and former vice-chancellor of Calcutta University, was elected vice-president. BR Ambedkar was the chairperson of the drafting committee. He was ably assisted by jurist BN Rau, who as Constitutional advisor, prepared the first draft. The CA had 114 sittings spread over two years, 11 months and 18 days.

Spirited debates took place on several issues: Universal suffrage, which some thought was premature, until Jawaharlal Nehru put an end to the debate by saying, "the voice of a peasant is as precious as that of a professor"; the integration into the Union of princely states, ably steered by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel; federalism, and the use of emergency powers by the Centre, but only in "extraordinary circumstances"; language and linguistic



Much pan-Indian thought went into the preparation of the Constitution.

AFP

states; fundamental rights versus directive principles; and reservations and social justice. Ambedkar's insistence on reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes faced some opposition, but his will prevailed when he bluntly said that if this is not done, "those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of democracy". There were voices wanting Hindu heritage to be especially acknowledged, but after prolonged debate, the consensus was that the Republic will treat all religions equally.

On November 26, 1949, the Constitution was passed, the longest of its kind in the world, with 395 Articles, eight Schedules, and 22 Sections, a remarkable tribute to its creators.

As I studied its making, two often ignored facts struck me. First, there were 17 feisty women in the CA, including G Durgabai, Sucheta Kriplani, Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, and Kamala Chaudhri. They formed a distinctive voice, and have been referred to as the

"Mothers of the Constitution". Second, I was surprised at how preponderant the best minds of South India were. For instance, in the six-member drafting committee chaired by Ambedkar, save KM Munshi, the others were south Indian scholars: Alladi Krishnaswamy Iyer, Gopala Swamy Ayyangar, N. Madhava Rao and TT Krishnamachari. The house committee chairman was Pattabhi Sitaramayya. The second vice-president of the CA, elected later, was VT Krishnamachari. And, of course, the Constitutional advisor was BN Rau.

So, next time when political leaders brandish the Constitution, they should be aware of how much pan-Indian thought went into its preparation. Its courageous Preamble represents the soul of a nation, and the entire document our civilisational ethos.

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{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Cong's own goals

This is with reference to 'By censoring Tharoor, Congress lost the plot' by Karan Thapar (June 8). The Congress party's surly reaction to Shashi Tharoor's spectacular success in putting across India's case against Pakistan-backed terror, in the context of the Pahalgam attack and aftermath, betrays the party's pettiness.

Ranjana Manchanda

Wildlife crusader non pareil

This is with reference to 'A life in service of the wild and wildlife' by Jaisai Singh (June 8). I feel that with Valmik Thapar's passing, India has indeed lost its foremost crusader for wildlife. His word on tiger conservation was considered the gospel truth.

Gurnoor Grewal

Empowering coastal women

This is with reference to 'Seaweed farming: A path to empowering women' by Lalita Panicker (June 8). Seaweed is much in demand not only in our country but globally as well. Coastal women cultivating seaweed can become self-reliant.

Abhilasha Gupta

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India's new Test captain, Shubman Gill will lead the five-Test series in England starting June 20

BCCI/X

New World Test Championship cycle brings new challenges

RINGSIDE
VIEW

Tushar Bhaduri

THE UPCOMING TEST series between England and India will be a contest between two teams in transition. The recent retirements in the visitors' camp are well documented, but Ben Stokes and his charges will be fielding a largely unheralded side, especially on the bowling side.

That's what makes the five Tests, beginning with the game in Leeds on June 20, an intriguing prospect — a batting line-up short on experience against an attack missing some of its biggest names. James Anderson's name will be on the trophy at stake over the English summer, not in the hosts' line-up. Stuart Broad will not be there either while Jofra Archer will be missing at least the first Test.

When the decision-makers in Indian cricket chose Shubman Gill as Rohit Sharma's successor, they would have had the option of Rishabh Pant, KL Rahul or promoting incumbent vice-captain Jasprit Bumrah. But the pace spearhead needs to have his workload managed and can't play every game, and the others haven't made heads turn with their captaincy in the opportunities they have got. Most of the regular India stars hardly play any domestic cricket but with nine of the 10 IPL teams led by Indians, there should have been more options. Gill's ascension is a decision made more on hope than past record, and the selectors would like to see him grow into the job. But as of now, it may be head coach Gautam Gambhir calling the shots to a large extent, with the team bereft of a lot of star power. It remains to be seen how well this coach-captain combination works, but it will only be fair that Gill is given some time to learn the ropes.

The upcoming few weeks are quite crucial for England as well. Any series between the Big Three — India, England, Australia — is a marquee event with a full five-Test treatment. If results are the sole yardstick, the Bazballers' bark is more potent than the bite. It's been three years since Brendon McCullum became their Test coach, and hype and a positive narrative seem to be driving the engine.

The start to McCullum's stint was promising enough — though anything would have been an improvement over a record of one win in 17 Tests — but as he had taken over in the middle of a World Test Championship (WTC) cycle, they never challenged for a spot in the final.

Underwhelming

But even in the 2023-25 cycle, England have, more often than not, flattered to deceive. They won three of the six series played — two home and one in New Zealand — and were often docked points for slow over rates. They lost a Test to Sri Lanka at The Oval, and failed to win the Ashes on home soil.

Moreover, their batsmen were found wanting whenever pitches were anything other than batting beauties. They dominated Pakistan in the first Test at Multan last October with Harry Brook scoring a triple century, but when the subsequent surfaces were tailored for

the home spinners, England's mantra of 'see ball, hit ball' was found to be wholly inadequate. Years of treating spin as an afterthought in domestic cricket has meant that it will take time for them to develop pedigree in that department. Now with their legendary pacers retired and a lot of the current lot struggling with injury, their bowling attack is sporting an uncertain look.

On the batting front, Joe Root is among the greatest Test batsmen of the current era, but most of the others in the line-up seem to go to the middle for a good time, and not necessarily a long time. They make hay when the pitch is flat, but struggle big time when there is something in it for the bowlers. Brook, Ben Duckett, Zak Crawley and Ollie Pope are known more for flamboyance than the number of runs they score. In such a scenario, skipper Stokes — who has had knee problems of late — may have to shoulder a great deal of burden, both with bat and ball.

Among the Indians, the skipper has also historically found it difficult to handle deliveries moving into him, while Yashasvi Jaiswal — who has had quite an initiation to Test cricket — has failed to find his feet in the couple of tour matches against local sides.

Rahul looks a million dollars when on song, but his Test average of just over 33 is one of the mysteries of contemporary cricket. His cause hasn't been helped by being shunted up and down the batting order, as per requirement. With Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma no longer around, Rahul will need to take on a more senior role. Sai Sudharsan and Abhimanyu Easwaran will hope to take advantage of the vacant slots and make their Test debuts, while Pant may no longer afford to carry on in his happy-go-lucky approach evident in Australia. Comeback man Karun Nair will hope to maintain his rich vein of form, while Nitish Kumar Reddy will like to show that his exploits in Australia were signs of genuine Test-match class.

Other concerns

But even if the batting side of things functions smoothly, winning a Test invariably requires taking 20 wickets. Here too, India are not without problems. There's a Ravichandran Ashwin-sized hole in the side. The champion off-spinner had the ability to rise above the conditions and hence, could be expected to provide a wicket-taking threat even on pitches not considered friendly to tweakers. In his absence, left-arm wrist-spinner Kuldeep Yadav will have to don that role.

Poor fitness has prevented Mohammed Shami from making the trip to England and with Bumrah certain not to play all five Tests, the support cast of Mohammed Siraj, Prasidh Krishna, Arshdeep Singh, Shardul Thakur and Akash Deep will have to do the hard yards, not just in keeping an end tight, but also contributing to the wickets column. The start of a new WTC cycle is a stage for all teams to take fresh guard. After two consecutive disappointments in the final, India couldn't even make it that far this time. And England has never really been in contention in any of the three cycles. These are two teams that play more Tests than most so, in theory, their players should be more attuned to the rhythms of the longest form.

However, it doesn't always work in practice, as the exploits of New Zealand and South Africa have shown.

ACROSS THE
AISLE

P Chidambaram

By all accounts, every power is concentrated in the hands of Mr Narendra Modi. He may deserve to claim sole credit for the government's achievements; he should also bear sole responsibility for its failures

THERE IS NEVER one correct point of view. Albert Einstein's theory of general relativity was questioned by eminent scientists, among them Jayant Narlikar. As long as there is no ill-motive, every point of view has some truth and must be respected — a quality that the present government has not cultivated in the last 11 years.

Mr Narendra Modi has just completed 11 years in office, making him the third longest-serving prime minister of India. That is a testimony to his tenacity and ability to win elections for his party.

There are pluses and minuses in every government, and the NDA government is no exception. Mr Modi's government relies on metrics: in a developing country, the usual economic metrics can only *add* to the stock. If schools are built or roads are constructed, it will *add* to the stock of schools (in number) or roads (in kilometres). However, the people's standards for assessing a government's work are different: they are based on an unquantifiable metric called 'good governance'. Under good governance, the country is seen as a *better* (for all), *stronger* and *fairer* place and the individual is satisfied that his family's life will become even better. The quality of governance cannot be fully discerned in quantitative metrics.

In my assessment, India is not better for all or stronger or fairer place today than what it was in 2014. Besides, while the lives of millions have become better, the lives of many more millions are blighted by uncertainty, poverty, unemployment and fear.

Is India better for all?

Economic reforms and liberalisation were launched with the objective of raising India's growth rate. In the 10 years under UPA (2004-2014), the aver-



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with members of Operation Sindoor global outreach delegation, in New Delhi

PMO/ANI

Eleven years: A critique

age GDP growth rate was 7.46% (old series) and 6.7% (new series). After 2014-15, and especially after 2019-20, the official data point to a slowing down of the growth rate. 2024-25 too has witnessed modest growth. The compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of real GDP since 2014-15 was 6.1%; since 2019-20, the CAGR has fallen to 5.1%. Agriculture, industry and manufacturing have recorded a deceleration and are under 5%. It is only 'services' that has grown at 5.4%.

The key to a better life of the vast population is the *per capita* income of the people, not the size of the nominal GDP. Under the UPA government, the *per capita* income more than doubled in 10 years; it actually increased 2.64 times from \$543 to \$1,438. Under the NDA government's first 10 years, it increased by only 1.89 times from \$1,438 to \$2,711, and it doubled to \$2,878 only in the 11th year. At this level, India ranks 136 out of 196 countries. India has missed by a wide margin the target of growing at 8% for a sustained period of 20 years in order to reach the threshold of a developed country (*per capita* of \$14,000).

Is India a fairer place?

Apart from the growing inequality among the rich/uber-rich (the top 20%) and the very poor (the bottom 20%),

there is a pervasive sense of fear and insecurity. Besides, there is abundant evidence of assertive majoritarianism, growing communal and caste strife, virulent hate speeches and writing, unashamed crony capitalism, collapse of the criminal justice system, severe fractures in the federal structure, and creeping authoritarianism. Two examples will suffice: (1) the weaponisation of laws from Income-tax Act to Prevention of Money Laundering Act to achieve political ends and (2) the callousness of investing ₹1,08,000 crore on a bullet train project between Ahmedabad and Mumbai when 29,970 persons died and 30,214 were injured between 2014 and 2025 in the fund-starved Mumbai suburban train network.

Is India a stronger country?

I refer to 'strong' in the sense of unity, friendly and cooperative relations with neighbouring countries, secure borders, capable armed forces, cordial diplomatic and trade relations with countries of the world, and a honourable standing in international organisations. After the terrorist attack in Pahalgam and Operation Sindoor, the weaknesses were exposed. India did not send delegations to the neighbours such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Afghanistan, Maldives or Mauritius; nor did these

countries speak publicly. Many countries condemned the terrorist attack but no country condemned Pakistan as a sponsor of terrorism. India's presumed advantage over Pakistan in a conventional war has come under a cloud. Despite the foundational agreements and QUAD, the United States imposed tariffs on Indian goods and hyphenated India and Pakistan. Despite being one of only 25 members of the IMF Executive Board and of the World Bank Board of Directors, both bodies voted large loans to Pakistan *after* Operation Sindoor. India fought the four-day war using mainly French, Russian and Israeli military hardware. India may be strong but not as strong as we believed.

By all accounts, every power is concentrated in the hands of Mr Narendra Modi. He may deserve to claim sole credit for the government's achievements; he should also bear sole responsibility for its failures.

When I ask myself 'Am I proud to be an Indian?', the answer is *yes*. When I ask myself 'Am I happy with the way India is governed?', the answer is *no*. I look forward to the day when India will become a better (for all), stronger and fairer country.

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INSIDE
TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR

Emergency tactics

This June marks the 50th anniversary of the Emergency, a black mark in India's history when Indira Gandhi used sledge hammer tactics to silence the media. Even before the Emergency proclamation was signed, electricity supply to Delhi newspapers was shut off. Censorship was imposed and guidelines were so rigid that not a line on the mass arrests of Opposition politicians, censorship and shutting down of publications could be carried. When *The Indian Express* displayed a blank space in its editorial column to convey subtly to the readers the ugly reality behind the scenes, the censor decreed that in future, no blank spaces or quotes of famous personalities would be permitted in editorials.

Nothing could be published on Parliament, except statements on behalf of the government, and the name and affiliation of the MPs who spoke. I&B Minister V C Shukla had police inducted into the Central Information Service to keep a close watch on journalists. Foreign correspondents were told to either sign a document

to adhere to the government's media guidelines or leave. *National Herald* editor Chalapathi Rao, after a meeting with Shukla and his fellow editors, remarked to Sharda Prasad, Indira's media adviser, "I have not seen such a performance of toadies even at the height of the British Raj."

Emergency encore?

A question often posed is, can India have an Emergency-style repression of the media again? A total blackout of news, as happened between 1975 and 1977, is no longer possible since sources of information dissemination have multiplied. During the Emergency, there was only one government controlled TV channel, Doordarshan, and a few hundred newspapers. Fifty years on, the print media is just one segment in the huge spectrum of news operations. There are over 400 privately owned TV news channels. The Internet is crowded with messages from bloggers and vloggers on YouTube, Twitter, Facebook *et al*. The WhatsApp universe is available to anyone with a cell phone. Today, no matter how powerful a government and the number of media advisers, spokespersons and trolls — the equivalent of yesteryear censors — the narrative cannot be controlled if the facts do not match up. Even during the Emergency, news spread by word of mouth. But that has not deterred governments from attempting to control news dissemination, although the methods employed are more subtle

and sophisticated, not in-your-face as with the Emergency.

Weak Govt, strong press

In my long years as a journalist, I have discovered one rule of thumb, that the more powerful the leader, the more ruthless he or she is likely to be in suppressing uncomfortable facts. For instance, towards the end of Rajiv Gandhi's tenure, I worked for a newspaper started by a major business house which was wound up practically overnight, ostensibly sold to a vernacular newspaper chain, because the coterie around the PM decreed that the daily had crossed the line in its investigative reporting. When governments are weak, particularly when they survive through shaky coalitions, which was largely the case between the regimes of PM Narasimha Rao, from 1991, to PM Manmohan Singh, ending in 2014, the media was particularly spunky. Incidentally, while the mild-mannered Singh as PM was often targeted by journalists, most of them refrained from offending the Congress's first family. There have been *godi* media in all regimes.

True rating system

Today we have the most powerful PM since Indira. If the yearly listing of Reporters without Borders is to be taken seriously, India has been pegged

a lowly 151 on the World Press Freedom Index, down from the 80th spot in 2014. The opaque methodology of rating is highly suspect. It is based on subjective opinions of anonymous individuals, many with a deep suspicion of the BJP's Hindutva nationalist agenda. Can India, with its plurality of opinions, news outlets and cacophony of critical voices even in the midst of a war, really rank lower than countries like Qatar, Rwanda and Congo?

My own methodology to assess the index of media independence is based on three factors. The media should be financially stable and not dependent on government largesse. It should not be a stakeholder in business interests which could conflict with its role as a purveyor of truth. (It is therefore troubling that India's two richest men, Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani, have expanding media empires.) The chill factor is another impediment to a free press. The media sometimes self-censors for fear of reprisal from the state which has been known to book journalists under non-applicable laws. The third indicator for a healthy press is the degree of the government's accessibility to the media. We may be better positioned today as regards media freedom than during the Emergency, but is that good enough? Do we fully reflect Tagore's immortal poem, "Where the mind is without fear..."

