

Of Emergency, Democracy and Cohabitation

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Abstract: This article seeks, at a more obvious plane, to examine the ambivalent attitude of a section of the Hindu nationalist party, the RSS towards Mrs Gandhi and her brand of politics during Emergency (1975-77). In this instance, Mrs Gandhi's own personality seems to acquire an explanatory significance for understanding the RSS ambivalence that, in contrast to its opposition, consisted in covert attempts to collaborate with her. At another level, albeit somewhat tangentially, the study also attempts to show that this brand of politics and the admiration that it ostensibly evoked in some circles reflect certain socio-political forces in independent India that are inimical to a democratic ethos.

Key words: National Emergency • Democracy • Cohabitation • Political ideology • Revolving door politics

INTRODUCTION

Today, more than thirty years later, the internal Emergency remains a dark interregnum in the history of democratic India. Far from being relegated to the « dustbin of history » its specter continues to haunt many political leaders while defying the comprehension of large segments of academics, bureaucrats and the general public.

This article seeks, at a more obvious plane, to examine the ambivalent attitude among sections of the Opposition leaders towards the late Prime Minister and her brand of politics. At another level, albeit somewhat tangentially, the study also attempts to show that this brand of politics and the admiration it ostensibly evoked reflect certain socio-political forces in independent India that are inimical to a democratic ethos. Paradoxically however, the Emergency marks a unique moment in the political history of Independent India - a time when the Left and the Right came together with the Socialists across opposing ideological spectrum. Perhaps their cohabitation in jail helped consolidate the unlikely alliance between the Left and the Right and the Right and the Muslims. As recalled by RSS functionary Chandrasekhar Bhandari, "The Emergency was against democracy. We had to fight it. Though there were political differences with many sections, the Emergency provided a ground to come together. RSS workers stood as guarantee for Muslim prisoners who went on parole. We even provided maintenance for their families because they suffered as

much as Hindu families did. We organized blood donation camps. Human relationships are different. We do not oppose a Muslim just because he or she is a Muslim. The fight was against the Government and for democracy. There was good will about the RSS then." [1].

The Emergency: The immediate cause behind the decision to impose Emergency was the judgment given on June 12 1975 by the Allahabad High Court, which found the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi guilty of electoral malpractice thereby declaring her 1971 parliamentary election in Rae Bareilly null and void. The judgment did not oblige her to resign as Prime Minister. She had the option to appeal to the Supreme Court - which actually granted her interim relief - and await the apex court's final verdict. She chose, instead, to impose the Emergency. The justification she used for this drastic measure was the clamor raised by Opposition parties with Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) as their mentor that she step down as Prime Minister forthwith. The consummate politician that she was, Mrs Gandhi represented the Opposition move as a fascist design to employ street politics in order to topple her democratically elected constitutional government. The Emergency, she declared, was the only way to deal with this serious threat to national security. Democratic rights were suspended and pre-censorship of the press was introduced. The midnight declaration of Emergency on 25 June 1975 was accompanied by the arrest of all the prominent and even middle ranking Opposition leaders as also thousands of RSS workers.

RSS Role in The Anti-Emergency Struggle: According to the Shah Commission's Report, of the 145,000 people put behind bars, more than 60 per cent were RSS workers. For the RSS, by now, had emerged as the mainstay of the opposition party. "Its membership jumped according to its own statistics, from 2,75,000 in 1960-61 to two million in 1973. Even if that figure were divided two, it remained a substantial force, with far greater discipline and cohesiveness than most of its rivals, including those on the Left. It is therefore, not too difficult to grasp how it became the organizational mainstay of the JP movement" [2]. It is estimated that about 25,000 RSS activists were detained at the time under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) within the first few weeks and an equal number held under the Defence of India Act (DIR). The RSS Sarsanghachalak, Bala Saheb Deoras, was arrested at Nagpur on 30th June 1975. Besides arresting the Sarsanghachalak, the government also imprisoned the Sanghchalaks at the State and local levels. However, many of the Pracharaks managed to evade arrest and they became actively involved in the underground resistance movement. directed against the Emergency regime.

Dual Role of RSS in the Anti-Emergency Struggle: However, this was not all that happened. Paradoxically, the RSS also offered to extend its cooperation to the Prime Minister in order to make the Emergency even more effective. One of the most controversial aspects of the RSS role during Emergency was the offer of support to the Government by its leadership even while thousands of its swayamsevaks were actively engaged in opposing the Emergency. It is alleged that RSS chief, Balasaheb Deoras, wrote fairly ingratiating letters to Mrs Gandhi promising support to the government's 20-point programme if the ban on the organization were lifted and the RSS men released from prisons.

This is borne out by Tapan Basu, Pradip Dutta and Sumit Sarkar in «Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags» [3]. According to them, the RSS attitude under the Emergency revealed a curious duality reminiscent of the 1948-49 days». While the RSS was banned and Sangh Supremo Balasaheb Deoras was put behind bars, he like Golwalkar in 1948-49« ... quickly opened channels of communication with the Emergency regime, writing fairly ingratiating letters to Indira Gandhi in August and November 1975 that promised cooperation for lifting the ban (on RSS)». Bapurao Moghe, in an article in the RSS newspaper Panchajanya of 24 July 1977, also acknowledges that such letters were written. Lawyer and political commentator, A.G Noorani, in his book, The RSS and the BJP says that

these letters «[w]ere placed on the table of the Maharashtra Government on October 18, 1977». Noorani adds, «He [Deoras] wrote to the Prime Minister, first, on August 22 congratulating her on her speech on Independence Day («balanced and befitting to the occasion») and begged her to lift the ban on the RSS. He next congratulated her «as five judges of the Supreme Court have upheld the validity of your election (November 11, 1975). In his letter, Deoras is reported to have pleaded for the release of RSS detainees and the lifting of the ban on his organization. He also sought to convince the prime minister that RSS «has no connection with the movements »in Bihar and Gujarat Deoras invariably ended these letters by offering the services of «lakhs of RSS volunteers ...».

Mrs Gandhi, however, continued to be unimpressed. Deoras subsequently shot off another desperate letter on 16 July 1976 in which he congratulated her on her «... efforts to improve relations with Pakistan and China and also declared that she had misleading information about his organization». What remains to be investigated here is whether some sort of agreement was indeed reached between Balasaheb Deoras and Mrs Gandhi through the efforts of certain individuals such as Acharya Vinobha Bhave. Whatever the outcome of such an investigation, one fact is undeniable – RSS workers were given instructions from the top that they give an undertaking of «good behavior» to secure their release from jail. The undertaking in effect said, «Shri -detenu... agrees on affidavit that in case of my release I shall not do anything which is detrimental to internal security and public peace ... I shall not do anything prejudicial to the present Emergency» (Sang-hachi Dhongbaji, Baba Adhav, 1977). According to Baba Adhav, Deoras had himself acknowledged at a press conference in New Delhi that he had written two letters to Mrs Gandhi [4] Madhu Limaye, a towering figure of the Indian socialist movement who spent the entire Emergency (19 months) in jail - in fact three different jails which happened to be in RSS areas - also knew of the letters of apology by RSS detenus [4]. In these letters, the RSS chief showed concern for his organization alone and made no clemency petition on behalf of the other detainees.

The RSS, to this Day, However, Maintains a Studied Silence on the Emergency Period: The question is - given the RSS ideological viewpoint and its fight for democracy, was the alleged offer of collaboration not contradictory? Although the RSS apologies of the time were widely documented, it is difficult to establish their veracity due

to the absence of primary documentation (private letters, diaries, personal interviews etc). In any study of this kind, a scholar is unlikely to obtain archival materials, which latter-day historians invariably acquire. It is also difficult in this instance to attempt any reliable behavior analysis of participants and spectators as many of them over the years seem to have acquired diametrically opposite viewpoints. The present study, in view of the combined constraints of time and material, relies mainly on secondary sources to assess some of the factors that defined the controversial relationship between Mrs Gandhi and the RSS leadership, which, as I have stated earlier, reposed on admiration. I propose to elucidate here the following hypothesis: Given its ideological orientation and its relationship with certain sections and trends within the Indian National Congress in the years preceding and following Independence, the RSS and the Hindutva combine, by extension, had developed a love-hate relationship with the heiress to the Congress legacy, Mrs Indira Gandhi. In this instance, Mrs Gandhi's own personality seems to acquire an explanatory significance for understanding the RSS ambivalence that, in contrast to its overt opposition, consisted in reported attempts to collaborate with her. The RSS could never feel anything similar for her father with his socialist secular views. He, «the English-minded PM», continues, even to this day, to be viewed as the one «responsible for all the ills facing the country.»

While pursuing the above hypothesis, I will not lose sight of the fact that collaborations or offers of collaboration need not be taken at their face value. The very fact that Mrs Gandhi spurned the offer with contempt indicates, besides other possibilities, her reluctance to take it as genuine. Her reluctance apart, as also the Hindutva combine's admiration for Mrs Gandhi, it seems reasonable to believe that the offer could have been inspired by pragmatic considerations, as in the instance of the Syndicate, which had attempted to manipulate Mrs Gandhi in the early days of her leadership. In this context, I would also like to study the collaboration between the RSS-BJS on the one hand and the leftist centrist oppositional parties on the other, which, unlike the alleged offer of collaboration, actually materialized to some extent as shown by the formation of the ideologically mismatched Janata Party..

On January 18 1977, the Prime Minister, following her announcement that Lok Sabha elections would be held in March, had relaxed the rules of Emergency, lifted press censorship, permitted public meetings and released from jail tens of thousands of members of the political

opposition. Two major and unexpected events immediately followed this announcement. The first was the merger of the four major Opposition parties into the Janata Party to oppose Mrs Gandhi. The second was the resignation from the Congress of the veteran leader, Jagjivan Ram and his formation of the Congress for Democracy (CFD). Several influential Congress leaders like HN Bahugana of Uttar Pradesh and Nandini Sathapaty of Orissa were quick to join "Babuji". At the same time, the RSS-affiliated political party, the Jana Sangh, overcoming its ideological distinctiveness, also joined forces with the Socialists, the disaffected Congressmen and the Left in their common battle against the Emergency regime. The CFD and the Janata Party together fought the electoral battle virtually as a single party.

Collaboration, I have stated above, is rarely, if ever, total. The one forged in response to the Emergency was no exception. To offer just one instance, even the common concern for democratic rights, which is what brought these ideologically disparate groups together sadly inspired no durable trust amongst them. The goodwill among the Party members soon disintegrated completely leading to its break-up and the return of Mrs Gandhi to power.

The 1971 Bangladesh War: The Bangladesh crisis exploded exactly twelve days after Mrs Indira Gandhi was sworn in as Prime Minister for the third time. Politically the war began in April 1971 soon after the repressive West Pakistan regime had pushed nearly fifteen million refugees out of erstwhile East Pakistan and into India. New Delhi did not even have a contingency plan to deal with the situation. But that is a different story. What matters is that Mrs Gandhi handled the crisis both diplomatically and militarily so brilliantly that she was elevated to the rank of Goddess Durga.. Henry Kissinger's caustic remark, - that she was a «cold-blooded practitioner of realpolitik» makes the point.

«The war of 1971», as cites Christophe. Jaffrelot, «marked a revealing stage in the government's evolution towards a form of nationalism which had been hitherto been the preserve of the Jana Sangh». » the reign of Indira Gandhi meant that two of the « main elements of the country's political identity » became « aggressive affirmation of Indianness » and «tough-minded pursuit of national interest which rejects nothing as ethically taboo» [7]. The Bangladesh liberation war remains a classic example where the political leadership of the day was not found wanting in vision or boldness. India's military

offensive was mounted in direct defiance of the United States and China's direct military and political pressures. Contrast this to the present day scenario and India's feeble even apologetic responses to Pakistan's unrestrained war of terrorism. Once again, this may explain why the Hindu nationalist party could be drawn, even thirty years later, to Mrs Gandhi's persona. In their eyes, it is perhaps her "most remarkable achievement" of "dismembering" Pakistan" that has ensured her an undying place amongst their pantheon of heroes. She, they believed like most of their countrymen, had belied the two-nation theory that had led to the Partition of India. How else does one explain the remark made by RSS Chief K.S Sudershan during a public rally in Lucknow on June 19, 2005? «The only leader who had an iron will was the late Indira Gandhi, though she often used it for her personal gains. When Pakistan mounted an offensive in 1971, she went ahead and split Pakistan into two. Though she later also imposed the Emergency, Indira Gandhi was a leader of guts»[5] Asked by PTI why the Sarsanghachalak had singled Indira Gandhi out over its own leaders, its swayamsevak, Kishore was quick to retort, «There was only one Prime Minister who divided Pakistan. Only another Prime Minister who eliminates Pakistan can be greater than her» [6]. Recall that the RSS in 1971 had responded with exemplary promptness to the call launched by Mrs Gandhi to sink political differences and to meet the Pakistani challenge as one.¹ Following military victory over Pakistan, the Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha of the RSS was quick to praise « the unparalleled heroism and acumen of the armed forces and the firm leadership of the Prime Minister ».²

Hence the tacit offer of collaboration, although no doubt opportunistic reposed to a large extent on unstinted admiration. Had Mrs Gandhi been inclined to accept it, the story today might have been a very different one.

The Congress Legacy: Even before the emergence of Mrs Gandhi on the national scene, the Indian National Congress, the secular nationalist party founded in 1885 had its share of what can at best be described as a reservoir of «Hindu consciousness». In response to the creation of the Muslim League in 1906, within months, provincial Hindu Sabhas were founded in Punjab and then in other provinces. As the testimony of leading Congressman Motilal Nehru, Congress President in 1919 and 1928 writing to his son, Jawaharlal Nehru about the

Congress Session held in the last week of December 1910 confirms that the All India Hindu Sabha was indeed a forum of Congressmen, "Another new feature of the Congress week has been that it has given birth to an All- India Hindu Sabha, which in my opinion will not only minimize all chance of the Hindu-Mohammedan Committee doing any good but sap the foundation of the Congress itself. I opposed the foundation of this Sabha as strongly as I could and had the satisfaction of bringing around to my view men like B N Bose and S N Banerjee but the great majority of the so-called leaders in Upper India especially those of the Punjab, all worked themselves to a high pitch and could not be made to listen to reason. Bombay, Madras and Central India were not even consulted and yet the name given to the new organization is the All India Hindu Sabha. I have refused to join it" [8]. However, despite the HMS's apparent dismay at what it perceived to be a compromise policy of the Indian National Congress vis-à-vis the Muslims, its opposition could never be very effective with leading HMS men also being Congress office-bearers.

The Lucknow Pact of 1916 between the Congress and the Muslim League saw for the first time, separate representation for Muslims in elected Assemblies. At the same time, Gandhiji linked the Khilafat movement with "non-cooperation". This was met with strong resistance amongst many members of the Congress, especially those from Central Province and Maharashtra. The founder of the RSS, Dr. Hedgewar, also belonged to this group. Although he actively participated in the non-cooperation movement launched by Gandhiji, the outbreak of a series of Hindu-Muslim riots (1921-24) eventually led him to found the more radical RSS in 1925.

The impasse over the Nehru Committee Report (1928) signaling the collapse of the rapprochement they had worked out in 1916, the Congress and the Muslim League began now to move in irrevocably oppositional ways. This, it is possible to argue in retrospect, facilitated a kind of coming together of what one might describe as «Hindu elements » within the Congress since many of its eminent members were also committed Hindu Nationalists. Hence, although the main thrust of the Indian National Congress, since its inception, had been to struggle for a democratic, secular India at the formal level as represented by the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru, communal elements were known to apply pressure from within to act as opposite and parallel of Muslim communalism as represented by the Muslim League.

¹Organiser, XXV (II), 23 October, 1971

²Organiser XXV (35), 8 April, 1972

There was a noticeable predilection to accommodate these elements by some of the Congress members, who, even though they did not openly espouse or support right wing radicalism, had a soft corner or even resemblances with it. In this instance, the role played by certain prominent Congress leaders whether in the demand for the renovation of the Somnath temple or providing a national platform for the traditional Ganesh Chaturthi festival, may be cited. Pandit Nehru, sensing the growing undercurrents of communalism, is known to have expressed his anguish in the following words: «The fact is that Uttar Pradesh has become an unfamiliar place for me. Now I find myself a misfit here. UP Congress Committee with which I am associated for the past 35 years, is now working in such a way that it surprises me because its voice now is not the voice of Congress but a voice which I have opposed all my life. Purushottam Das Tandon, for whom I have very great respect, is now making speeches, which are against the fundamental principles of Congress. It is a great pity that communalism has gripped the minds of those great leaders who were called the pillars of Congress»[9] However, when Hindu idols mysteriously appeared inside the Ayodhya mosque one night in December 1949, Nehru initially instructed veteran Congress leader and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, GB Pant, to remove the idols forthwith. The latter promised to comply but kept shilly-shallying. He was perhaps afraid to anger the powerful Hindu lobby in UP, particularly in view of the forthcoming general elections. The same consideration may have weighed with Nehru also and this may explain why he began behaving in the way industrialist GD Birla had described him way back in 1936: « ... like a typical English democrat... out for giving expression to his ideology, but he realizes that action is impossible and so does not press for it... » [10].

Taking full advantage of the situation, the Hindu lobby, in January 1950 sought injunction against any step to remove the idols from within the mosque. The matter became sub-judice, the idols remained where they had made their mysterious appearance and the mosque was put under lock and key. On January 18, 1950, the first title suit was filed by Gopal Singh Visharad asking for the right to worship the idols installed inside. The court restrained the removal of the idols and allowed the worship to continue.

The whole incident took place at a time when the BJS (precursor to the present-day BJP) was yet to be formed and the Indian National Congress enjoyed practically unchallenged sway both at the Centre and State level.

In the long-term however, this strategy otherwise known in the Indian political discourse as playing the “Hindu card” would work to the benefit, not of the Congress but of the BJP [11].

To stress the role of the Congress here is not to condone the fundamentalism of the Hindu nationalist party. Highlighting the «Hindu» presence within the Congress and its ambivalence, however, serves to explain as to why the RSS leaders could at all feel drawn to their political “bete noire”.

CONCLUSION

The electoral verdict of 1977 is often and at one level, rightly presented as evidence of the strength of Indian democracy. This, I submit, is but a partial view. The totality of the Indian reality can only be appreciated by taking equally seriously that other, paradoxical and ominous aspect which reveals the depth and the spread of the acceptance of Emergency.

I should like to conclude with a counterfactual reflection. Maybe the reflection is only tangentially counterfactual, in that it follows inferentially from what happened during the Emergency days and is sustained by present developments in Indian party politics. As the dominant political party in India - despite the post Emergency rout - the Congress represented a sizable spectrum of the larger society. Add to this the social spectra represented by the radically opposed Indian Left and the Hindu Right (including the Shiv Sena). Adding together the Congress, as the dominant political Centre, its actual supporters on the Left and its spurned supporters on the Right, what a mind-boggling percentage of the Indian society, as reflected in its politics, was willing, albeit for conflicting reasons, to favor anti-democracy.

The growing blurring of political and ideological distinctions in India since 1977, especially during the last couple of years, lends greater credence to the above reflection. Revolving door politics has become the hallmark of Indian democracy. To cite but one example, in 1996, Shankar Singh Vaghela, an RSS man for thirty years defected from his party to form a non-BJP state government with Congress support [12].

It will be difficult to show this and many other such instances as aberrant, freak developments. They actually represent a trend. In which case, the after-life of Emergency may, at a deeper level, not appear as reassuring as is generally assumed.

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