

A creeping emergency

- The Gujarat brand of established fear now haunts India

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As a defining moment, the twenty fifth of June of 1975 has more than secured its position on the timeline of Indian history. While the Congress prays hard to just forget the ignominy of Emergency, the prime beneficiaries of this tragic phase, namely the Yadav-led socialist parties, are burping after feasting on power for several decades. As the most fearless and uncompromising opposition to India's Emergency, the Akali Dal earned lucrative political rewards, but the most interesting contender is the ruling party. It is hell-bent on appropriating all credit for everything remarkable, whether in the past or at present. It uses its proven skills in creative engineering of collective memory to craft an alternative narrative with selective use of historical facts. True, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh did fill jails with its *swayamsevaks* during the Emergency and also took good care of their families as none else could, but we need to clear the air on the oft-repeated charge that the *sangh's* supremo, Balasaheb Deoras, had tried desperately to meet Indira for a deal. The records that the Intelligence Bureau chief, T.V. Rajeswar, and others have referred to need to come out.

India is the only third-world nation in that vast swathe from Morocco to the Philippines that has successfully kept its army within barracks. But one really wonders how long we can, with the unprecedented idolizing of the military's heightened role in Kashmir where the crisis gets aggravated with each passing day. And, the undeclared war with Pakistan keeps up the desired jingoism to foment fierce nationalism. The whole of the free world, except die-hard *sangh* supporters, seriously feels that the genie of authoritarianism may have escaped from the bottle that we sealed in 1977. The mindset is so eerily similar although the strategy is now more 'mature'. On November 8 last year, the prime minister did not require to formally invoke any 'financial emergency' under Article 360 when he declared unilaterally that 86 per cent of our currency was worthless. Crores of Indians lost billions of productive hours in queuing before ATMs and banks and the after-effects are still visible, as cash-strapped farmers are shot dead in Madhya Pradesh. Even after the elections in UP were won on this self-righteous crusade against black money, no one really knows how much of the ill-gotten wealth was really unearthed, to justify the death of a hundred hapless citizens during the demonetization exercise. It established the new rules of the game that desired results can still be obtained without going through formal legal declarations that invite unnecessary furore from a pampered democracy. In fact, the ongoing methodical leash on civil liberties and free thought is less messy than Sanjay Gandhi's tantrums.

The holy cow was a master-stroke that ignites passions and justifies the systematic and repetitive lynching of members of the minority community, thereby bludgeoning the 67-year-old established practice of plurality. Once this principle of outsourcing violence without retribution made its gash on the body polity, the next logical step of murder-at-will followed, as young Junaid learnt through his tragic death on a Delhi-Mathura train. It is no more safe to look like like a 'typical' member of the minority community or to profess the hated creed of secularism. The narrative of the times screams that since the nation has reposed its faith in the 'great leader' and successive elections have reinforced his mandate, any doubts on the absolute infallibility of his reign are either anti-national or evidence of other grievous inadequacies. Even though no sensible person can condone proven subversion if any, the fact is that JNU's genetic restlessness became a red rag to the storm-troopers of ultra-nationalism. Those who hardly participated in the freedom struggle and are reported to have had severe reservations about our tricolour in 1947-1948 now ensure that every Indian proves his nationalist credentials in public or faces their wrath. The boss of a trusted national media is amazed at the 'debate over freedom of expression' and declared it is the "schizophrenia" of the unseated elite within the national capital city.

Unfortunately, he scored a self-goal when he declared that it is "fed by social media and some media outlets". It is tragic to see how unsuspecting millions are fed with unending streams of anti-minority hate-news and venomous post-truth lies on WhatsApp each day

and the alacrity with which internet 'troll' devils have forcefully evicted liberals from Twitter with intolerable abuses. Swati Chaturvedi laid bare the nexus between the ruling party's social-media wing and troll brigades that 'manufacture followers' in lakhs. From a recent shuddering experience on Twitter, one deciphers even traces of linkages with professional intelligence agencies, as items that are not in the public domain are also fed to trolls. Never before has India seen such steamrolling of free opinion through layers of systematic terror.

The next strategy tamed the same free press that tore down the earlier regime through every event, from Anna Hazare to Nirbhaya. So dramatic has been the domestication of Indian journalism that we can count the fearless few on our fingers. Three tactics must have worked: the adroit management of barons, the silent takeover of media houses by friendly capitalists and, of course, crude storm-troopers who symbolize the totally-intolerant right-wing from the dreadful 1930s. Sadly, the so-called 'reasonable rightist' journalists have also become miserly with facts, after they were loaded with favours. There is now no need for the faltering constitutionalism of Rajiv Gandhi, who had sought to control mails and 'defamation' through laws that were then drowned under protests. One can get better results at present without even touching the law-book.

Even Indira Gandhi's paranoid FCRA of 1975 has come home to roost as thousands of non-governmental organizations are debarred from seeking foreign contributions to survive and their domestic supporters are terrorized by bullies. Thus, while the organizations of relentless crusaders like Indira Jaising and Teesta Setalvad are starved, big donations from rich overseas supporters of *Hindutva* to the obvious party are fully legitimized. Like Indira Gandhi, personal loyalty matters most and Narendra Modi confabulates endlessly with hand-picked, but squirming, bureaucrats, who are terrified of his hire and fire rule, while his ministers shiver in their darkness. The Prime Minister's Office has gained more control than it ever had during the Emergency era, proving thereby that similar mindsets require similar hegemonic structures. The sad victim, however, is the Constitution's cabinet system, and the old demand for a 'presidential system' is voiced periodically: the last being from Modi's trusted bureaucrat-factotum. Indira Gandhi created fear in instalments, while Modi just replicated his successful Gujarat brand of established fear smoothly over the entire nation.

Such fear and the 'one leader' syndrome do not augur well in a democracy. One can tolerate the hogging of all credit for completing projects of the earlier government, like the Kochi Metro or the longest road tunnel in Kashmir, but the mind-boggling populism and orchestrated hero-worship are quite scary. He is certainly not the first prime minister who appears petty, but liberals feel that some of those bear hugs with which he embarrasses every foreign dignitary could do better in India. We need an assurance, for all democracies die without dissent.