Lessons Learned in India: Indira Gandhi sees Power in Democracy

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ABSTRACT

On June 25th, 1975, a national state of emergency was declared in India, effectively ending its democracy. Then, a mere 21 months later, the emergency was lifted, open elections were held, and a democratic government was once again in place. Unique to this democratization, the ruling authoritarian dictator was a woman, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who was singularly responsible for the short-lived emergency as well as the subsequent democratization. In this paper, Indira Gandhi's role in India's democratization is evaluated in a historical and biographical context, so as to identify three major factors that influenced her decision to democratize and also to argue that such factors attributed to the resurrection of Indira Gandhi's personal commitment to democracy. These factors include her faltering confidence in those who had originally advised the state of emergency, her dwindling political legitimacy within India and abroad, and the constant reminder that the emergency she perpetuated had effectively destroyed everything she, her family, and her personal heroes had fought their entire lives to achieve. Cumulatively, these influences led Indira Gandhi to call on the powers of democracy once again, decisively turning the page on India's brief, though tragic, fling with authoritarianism.

Among the many third wave transitions to democracy, the democratization of India is especially interesting, for a host of reasons. Not only was India's authoritarian government ruled by one of the few, if not the only, female dictators of the 20th Century, but it was also one of the few states that held a longstanding, uninterrupted tradition of democracy prior to its fling with authoritarianism (Huntington 19), and countered the third wave economic model that positively correlates fiscal stability with successful democratization. In 1975, India's "democracy was suspended ... by [a] democratically elected chief [executive]" (Huntington 42), Indira Gandhi, via a virtually nonviolent executive coup, and was replaced with an authoritarian regime that survived a mere, albeit dramatic, 21 months. In *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Samuel Huntington sternly downplays the role of "people power," or the actions of the masses in democratization (Huntington 205), and argues instead that "the beliefs and actions" of political elites or leaders are "the most immediate and significant explanatory variable" (Huntington 35) of third wave democratizations. In India's case, Huntington's argument fits perfectly. On January 19th, 1977, without consulting her family or even her closest advisors, Indira Gandhi ended her authoritarian rule and called for general, democratic elections to be held, only 19 months after first proclaiming a state of emergency and embracing authoritarianism. In this paper, it will be argued that India's 1977 transition to democracy was brought about by Indira Gandhi, India's most powerful political leader at the time, and her commitment to democracy. To argue this, and to blatantly disagree with Huntington's negation of Indira's commitment to democracy, several factors that likely contributed to Indira Gandhi's decision to democratize will be discussed, including her faltering confidence in those who had originally advised the state of emergency, her dwindling political legitimacy within India and abroad, and the constant reminder that the emergency she perpetuated had effectively destroyed everything she, her family, and her personal heroes had fought their entire lives to achieve.

To begin, however, a historical account of Indira Gandhi's biography should be given, so as to set the stage for the events that transpired after she called for the emergency, on June 26th, 1975

Indira Gandhi, who holds no blood-relation to Mohandas Gandhi, was born on November the 19th, 1917, to Jawaharlal Nehru, a democratic socialist, political protégé of Mohandas Gandhi, and the future first Prime Minister of Independent India. Given her political heritage, she was immersed in politics from her infancy and became quite politically active even in childhood. In fact, at twelve years old, when denied membership to the Congress party due to her age, she "reacted angrily and formed an organization of her own … [called] *Vanar Sena* or Monkey Brigade, [which was] modeled on the legendary monkey army … of the epic *Ramayana*" (Malhotra 41). Indira's Monkey Brigade served the Congress party as it could, "putting up posters, writing notices, addressing envelopes, getting messages past unsuspecting policemen and, in short, acting, in Indira's words, 'not unlike monkeys'" (Malhotra 41). By the time she reached the age of 24, Indira Nehru became involved in the Quit India political movement against the British, and married her friend, Feroze Gandhi, on March 26, 1942, assuming his last name. During her involvement in Quit India, she became aware that the police meant to arrest her, yet she made no attempts to avoid this end, and one day, as she was "addressing a public meeting … the police pounced on her" (Malhotra 53). After being released from prison, Indira remained close to her father and his dealings in government, often serving as his personal liaison, and, in 1955, became a member of the very influential policy-making body, the Congress Working Committee (Malhotra 61). Four years later, unopposed, she was elected Congress President, while her father remained in office as Prime Minister, though she resigned after only a year of her two-year term due to failing health (Malhotra 61). Shortly thereafter, her husband of 18 years, Feroze, fell ill as well, and passed away in September of 1960. Indira's father's health was next to decline. After experiencing a stroke in 1964, Jawaharlal needed Indira at his side at all times, which strengthened her sway on government affairs even more (Malhotra 77). By May 27th, 1964, however, four years after the loss of her husband, the other man in her life, Jawaharlal Nehru, was dead.

Indira Gandhi was widely expected to become India's Prime Minister, but Jawaharlal Nehru had been "appalled by the very thought of dynastic succession … [and claimed that] "the concept … [was] altogether foreign to a parliamentary democracy … besides being repulsive to [his] own mind'" (Malhotra 81). As such, a man named Lal Shastri was elected Prime Minister, and though many were surprised that Indira was not to succeed her father, Shastri appointed her to his cabinet (Malhotra 82). Despite her subordinate position, Indira began usurping Lal's authority, or was, in his words, constantly "jumping over" his head (Malhotra 84). When asked about this, Indira "flared up," explaining "that she did not look upon herself as a 'mere minister for information and broadcasting,' but as one of the leaders of the country," and asked, "'Do you think this government can survive if I resign today,'" (Malhotra 84)? Answering her own question, she responded, "I am telling you it won't," and added that she had "jumped over the prime minister's head and … would do it again whenever the need arises'" (Malhotra 84). This is an early and *eerily* brazen illustration of Indira's overblown, messianic self image, which clearly serves to justify her aversion of political norms in order to fulfill deeds she believes only she can perform. As she viewed attacks upon herself as attacks upon India and vice versa, while also believing that she alone could save India, it is not surprising that she would later declare a state of emergency when her rule of India became threatened. In 1966, however, Indira no longer needed to spar with Shastri, as he died mid-term and she was elected India's first female Prime Minister eight days later, on January 19th, 1966. Yet, with her new role, she became more involved in international affairs, as well as domestic, and this increase in interpersonal interaction and personal responsibility fortified and expanded her paranoia and mistrust of others. For example, when convinced by some of her own personal advisors, the United States, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund to devalue the rupee by 35%, Indira was slammed with political opposition and outrage on all sides (Malhotra 99), and because of this, coupled with an unfulfilled promise of American aid, Indira "came to believe that she could 'trust no one' because everyone,

no matter how close or beholden to her, was 'capable of betraying her'" (Malhotra 100). This sort of mistrust was endemic of Indira, and many questioned her actions, or inactions, within this framework. Richard Kozicki wrote, in *The Demise of Indian Democracy*, that as "no one has been designated as Deputy Prime Minister since Mrs. Gandhi managed to squeeze out Morarji Desaiin in 1969 … apparently she does not repose that degree of trust in any member of her Cabinet, even Vma Shankar Dikshit, an old family friend" (357). Thus, Indira isolated herself in decision making and placed a large, and largley unwarranted, degree of trust in her family, particularly in her favored son, Sanjay, who was soon to stir up a political firestorm.

Sanjay's first major controversy occurred in 1969. An open bidding war had begun for a highly coveted manufacturing license that authorized the production of an Indian automobile, which could be produced entirely with Indian-made parts (Malhotra 150). However, it was only Sanjay who ultimately acquired the license, permitting him to produce 50,000 cars a year. Having been "a dropout [of] the Doon School, an elite [automotive] institution in the Himalayan foothills," and having also failed a course offered by Rolls-Royce in England, Sanjay was clearly not the most experienced bidder for the task at hand, and this display of nepotism drew much public criticism (Malhotra 150). This was a particularly inconvenient time for this to happen, as outrage began to accumulate in response to Indira's untraditional and politically-motivated appointment of a Chief Justice to the Supreme Court (Malhotra 153), and her inability to effectively address the ensuing "economic crisis" and widespread famine (Malhotra 158). Indeed, in the midst of all this commotion, Indira's political opponents grew in numbers and in strength as the election drew near, and on June 12th, 1975, the votes from the previous day were counted proclaiming Indira the loser (Malhotra 165). However, the news of her electoral defeat, though significant, was overshadowed by another important development that day. Since the 1971 elections, there had been a largely-ignored case moving through the Allahabad High Court concerning Indira's alleged "corrupt electoral practices," and on the very same day her party had been voted out of power, the court's verdict "not only set aside her election … in 1971, but also debarred her from elective office for six years" (Malhotra 164). This ruling could have been appealed to a higher court in which Indira had greater influence, but that would have taken time, and Indira would have had to effectively stand down from power in the meantime (Malhotra 165).

In light of these events, Indira's home became a place of "hectic consultations," and though "almost all her cabinet colleagues had trooped there … Indira … was listening only to a handful of confidants" (Malhotra 165). The possibility of a "temporary withdrawal from office" was kept on the table, but "it became abundantly clear that she never had any intention of laying down office even for a minute," as she later suggested when claiming that "the country was 'in peril from both internal and external enemies' and that there was 'no one else' around who could cope with the 'grave threat'" (Malhotra 166). This again illustrates how "her faith in her indispensability was never shaken" (Malhotra 166), and her messianic, or "her early Joan of Arc" (Morris-Jones 22), self image was driving her desire for power. To the few of Indira's friends who felt stepping down temporarily was preferable, "hordes" of advisors, in the aim of securing their own power in government and simultaneously proving their loyalty to Indira, vowed that this "should not even be contemplated" (Malhotra 166). Ultimately, however, "it was … Sanjay who put an end to the 'nonsensical' talk of his mother's temporary withdrawal from office" (Malhotra 167). Having "become one of her influential advisors" after his involvement in acquiring the car-manufacturing license, he arguably "had the most to gain" in her retaining power, as well as the most to lose if she stepped down, and in only "a matter of months, he would become the second most powerful person in India" (Malhotra 167). With Sanjay's counsel and consent, Indira informed the President that she was to proclaim an internal state of emergency, and at the moment Indira's political opposition was celebrating her end as Prime Minister, the President signed her proclamation into law (Malhotra 168). Leaders of Indira's opposition were

immediately arrested, followed by the mass arrests of thousands of others (Malhotra 169). Power-outages were forced upon major newspapers and media outlets so as to bar them from reporting until they conformed to strict government censorship, and Indira Gandhi addressed the nation with the cold statement, "There is no need to panic" (Malhotra 169). Though much of the public was outraged by this turn of events, in some ways, the emergency was actually "rather popular with the people at large, in the initial months at least," for, aligned with the constant praise of Indira's propaganda machine, "the return of normal and orderly life, after relentless disruption by strikes, protest marches, sit-ins and clashes with the police, was applauded by most people" (Malhotra 173).

Given this historical context, it is curious to wonder what might have become of Indira's authoritarian rule, had Sanjay not so extensively participated in it, for, as is about to be shown, his misdeeds and political blunders likely contributed significantly to Indira's ultimate decision to democratize. Sanjay was "a brash and extremely tactless young man, [who] often treated his mother's colleagues and other elders churlishly" (Malhotra 177). In accord with his public demeanor, he "displayed a remarkable knack of attracting 'dropouts, drifters, and roughnecks,'" who formed what was essentially a gang of impoverished hooligans, who were loyal only to him (Malhotra 177). Sanjay's group of followers quickly earned a reputation for lawlessness, and as public outcry against the emergency began to surge, and some of the nearly 140,000 Indians jailed without trial began to die, his own misdeeds made everything even worse (Malhotra 178). His two most notable transgressions arose from his "passionate devotion to the cult of contraception" and his "craze of beautifying" the cities of India by forcibly removing slums and the families within them (Malhotra 179). In "Delhi's Turkman Gate, a historic landmark in the Indian Capital, ... [mostly poor, Muslim families] watched angrily but silently [as] centuries-old shops, ... including some of the legendary stalls, ... were knocked down," and "demolition squads arrived to raze to the ground the slums which were home to ... tens of thousands of people" (Malhotra 179). When the people resisted, six civilians were shot and killed by the police, yet the operation was not halted, and after their homes were "reduced to rubble," the remaining families were forcefully relocated to an area "about twenty miles from their places of work" (Malhotra 180). The leader of Kashmir, Sheikh Abdullah, who was visiting Delhi during the forced demolition, "was disgusted by what he saw," and though he and India's president, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, voiced their outrage to Indira, she brushed aside their objections of "her beloved son" (Malhotra 180). This atrocity was not long to remain outdone, however, for Sanjay's policy aimed at regulating India's population was one of forced sterilization. To this end, in select neighborhoods, men were "dragged out of cinema halls or bus queues ... taken to the operating table," and sterilized (Malhotra 181). On a broader scale, government employees' salaries became contingent on fulfilling civilian vasectomy quotas (Malhotra 181). This meant that "policemen, municipal inspectors, doctors, nurses, teachers and so on," so as not to forfeit their incomes, were forced to "motivate" civilians to submit to sterilizations, which particularly hurt the "poor ... Harijans, Muslims, and others who had [ironically] been Indira's traditional vote banks" (Malhotra 181). Aside from these blatant examples of injustice and political carelessness, Sanjay had also proven to be poorly skilled on the front of political diplomacy, and the corresponding art of manipulating public relations via interviews. Sitting in with *Surge* magazine, Sanjay, in complete contrast to his mother's socialistic approach, publically endorsed capitalistic free enterprise and insulted the Communist parties of India, who had long (though not always) been supporters of Indira, by stating that, "if you take all the people in the Communist party ... I don't think you will find a richer or more corrupt people anywhere" (Guha 507). To this, Indira "sent a panic-stricken note to her secretary," admitting that "Sanjay's comments were 'exceedingly stupid' ... [and] would 'not only grievously hurt those who have helped us,' but create 'serious problems with the entire Socialist Bloc'" (Guha 507). Ultimately, despite that Indira had trusted and relied upon Sanjay unconditionally throughout her career before the

emergency, once he was given more authority he quickly became unreliable, constantly laying political fiascos upon her. Thus, with Sanjay's increasingly visible political incompetence continuously threatening her legitimacy, it became correspondingly apparent to Indira that the faith she had once placed in his political judgments may have been seriously ill-founded.

Sanjay's blunders were not the only thorn in Indira's side, however, as her portrayal in the international press had become exceedingly critical, and thereby yet another significant factor urging her to reconsider the emergency. Coupled with the many pleas of her longtime friends to end the emergency, it was quite evident that she was rapidly losing international and domestic political legitimacy, and she began to realize that democratizing might be the best way to salvage it. As her father before her, Indira had once proudly welcomed the political advantages of courting the support of "intellectuals, scientists, artists, authors, poets, film-makers, and so on" (Malhotra 174). However, due to the emergency, "this situation changed radically," and even those who did not overtly oppose her would no longer publically speak in her defense (Malhotra 175), which was particularly harmful, as it was precisely this time that Indira most *needed* defending. Instead, two of Jawaharlal Nehru's friends from Britain began openly criticizing Indira in the international press. In *Time* magazine, Fenner Brockway wrote that he "deplored the conversion of 'the world's greatest democracy' into a 'repressive dictatorship' … [and] appealed to Mrs. Gandhi 'in memory of the principles of her distinguished father, to end these denials of freedom and liberty,'" while John Grigg, of the *Spectator*, wrote that "Nehru's tryst with destiny seems to have been turned into a tryst with despotism—and by his own daughter" (Guha 516). Later in the article, Grigg asks Indira "to free herself from her son's influence and return to the values of her father's generation … 'at whatever cost in power, 'face,' and mother-love, … [for] to do so, 'would be the hardest act of her career, but … also … the bravest and best'" (Guha 516). If these words were not enough, Indira was also confronted by many of her own personal friends as well. Inder Malhotra, a longtime acquaintance of Indira, warned that something might "rob [Indira] of legitimacy in a trice" (Malhotra 171), and explained that the "moral authority of her government had suffered grievously" (Malhotra 175). Dorothy Norman, an even closer friend, to whom Indira had "poured out her heart" (Malhotra 69) throughout the years, "wrote Indira an impassioned letter asking her to rescind her decision," though, like many other "frantic messages sent through 'common friends,'" to this day, Dorothy's letter "[remains] unanswered" (Malhotra 176). It is unclear how many, if any, international articles Indira was personally aware of, or how she ultimately reacted to her friends' confrontational letters. However, it is unlikely that one so interested in preserving political power would ignore her global image, or could somehow overlook the fact that "throughout the period of the emergency, she was in no position to show her face anywhere except in Moscow," resulting in the cancellation of her trip to the UN Conference on Women, which "was to have been a high point in [her] career" (Malhotra 176). Clearly, the ability to effectively perform as an international stateswoman was not being served by the emergency, nor was it serving the personal relationships she had been tending her entire life. As such, Indira's crumbling support and growing opposition, especially among her longtime allies, is likely to have provided Indira with a particularly potent personal incentive to democratize.

Cumulatively, it seems extremely unlikely that all of these events barraging Indira Gandhi's conscience could have left hidden the blatant fact that she, in proclaiming the state of emergency, had singlehandedly torn down and destroyed all that she, her family, and her personal heroes had fought so diligently to achieve and preserve. This message was clearly stated in almost all of the pleas she had received from her friends, including those in the press, and, albeit inadvertently and from the grave, from her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, as well. When Jawaharlal Nehru was in a British jail during the 1930s, he wrote a series of letters to Indira, which "unfolded the … progress of the human animal toward greater sociability and freedom" (Guha 518). "'The growth

of fascism during the last five years and its attack on every democratic principle and conception of freedom and civilization,' Jawaharlal wrote to Indira, 'have made the defense of democracy the vital question today,' ... [and] unfortunately, 'democracy and freedom are in grave peril ..., and the peril is all the greater because their so-called friends stab them in the back" (Guha 518). Presumably, her guilt at remembering these words may have only been equaled by thoughts of her "Papu," Mohandas Gandhi, and what he might have to say to her if he were still alive. Despite the many cases of Indira's callousness, and her seemingly unquenchable desire to rule no matter the costs, there is evidence, anecdotal though it may be, that she did experience regret, sorrow, guilt, and fear in regard to her rule of India. When Indira's cousin, Fory Nehru, "spoke to Indira at length about what she had seen and heard about the excesses of the emergency, ... Indira held her head in her hands and said thrice: 'What should I do'" (Malhotra 193)? One of the worst excesses of the emergency was the torture of prisoners (Malhotra 178), though such torture was hardly unique to the emergency, as Indira's police had previously tortured Naxalite revolutionaries in 1970-71 as well (Guha R. 48). Still, with the massive increase of prisoners and the heightened state authority, it is likely that there was an accompanying increase in torture as well. Indira also broke down and wept during a meeting with a "great sage and savant" named Jiddu Krishnamurti, who had rebuked her for her proclamation of the state of emergency, confessing to him "that she was 'riding a tiger' and did not know how to dismount" (Malhotra 193). Having given her life for the advancement of democracy and witnessed her family and friends do the same, it is unlikely that she failed to recognize her role in reversing what they had accomplished, as it is unlikely that she ignored this reality when making her final decision to democratize.

At this point, the three influential factors contributing to Indira's recommitment to democracy have been argued. However, Huntington's contrary stance on this issue still needs to be directly addressed. The pertinent passage from Huntington's *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, is as follows:

> One serious impediment to democratization was the absence or weakness of real commitment to democratic values among political leaders in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Political leaders out of office have good reason to advocate democracy. The test of their democratic commitment comes when they are in office. In Latin America democratic regimes were normally overthrown by military coups d'état. This also, of course, happened in Asia and the Middle East. In those regions, however, elected leaders themselves were also responsible for ending democracy: Syngman Rhee and Park Chung Hee in Korea; Adnan Menderes in Turkey; Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines; Lee Kwan Yew in Singapore; Indira Gandhi in India; Sukarno in Indonesia. These leaders won power through the electoral system and then used their power to undermine that system. They had little commitment to democratic values and practices. (297)

There is little doubt that Indira Gandhi did, indeed, put her desire for continued political power above the ideals of democracy when she proclaimed the state of emergency in 1975. To satisfy her messianic self image, it was her commitment to power, and not to democracy, that led to her very short-lived role as India's dictator. However, it was *also* her commitment to power that led her to democratization, and herein lays the confusion, for there need not be a disparity between a commitment to political power and a commitment to democracy. In fact, in this case, it is *exactly* her belief in democratic power that led her to democratize. As she was committed to political power (Y), and came, yet again, to believe that such power would best be derived and sustained via democracy (X), she was therefore "committed to democracy," as democracy seemed to best support her political power. In other words, as she was committed to Y, and believed the formulation, "if X, then Y," she was thereby as committed to X as she was committed to Y, at

that time. This, admittedly, is rather convoluted, but it holds true nonetheless. Also, Huntington's generalization seems to run into the age-old problem that one reaches when trying to answer the question, "How many times must one lie, before becoming a 'liar?'" Some may hold the position that only once is necessary for such qualification, but if this were true, the term would serve little practical purpose, as it would apply to everyone and consequently hold no distinguishing properties. Instead, it is usually held that a longstanding pattern need emerge before a general label is warranted. In respect to Indira, though it is true that she suspended democracy for 21 months in an act of desperation, it is also true that she spent her entire lifetime up to that point working toward and defending democracy, eventually amended her own mistake (on one level, at least), and continued to be involved in the democratic process thereafter, until the day of her assassination. As such, it seems shortsighted, in the grand scheme of things, to assert that Indira ultimately had *little* or *no* commitment to democracy. Rather, it appears that she temporarily "[abandoned] those norms ... to take recourse to direct action" (Dutt 1125), and, given her commitment to political power, and the influential factors discussed above, returned to her commitment to democracy shortly before India's democratization. Thus, at the precise moment of democratization, it was indeed her commitment to democracy that brought the end to her authoritarian regime.

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