CHAPTER: 5
Multiple Voices: Reading Emergency Protest Poetry

Let's see when our sealed lips will open:
It has been ages since I heard my own voice.

(Narinder Vashisht, in Perry, 82)

While there are important texts in fiction which have been discussed in the preceding chapters, there are equally important and ‘fertile’ voices of protest, anger and criticism, which have expressed themselves through poetry. John Oliver Perry’s all-India anthology of protest poetry titled *Voices of Emergency* (1984) is a collection of poems from fifteen Indian languages translated into English, which deal with not just the Emergency and the myriad feelings it evoked from the people but also pertinent social issues, which though not an outcome of the Emergency, were certainly aggravated during the period. Perry’s main motive in constituting this anthology, along with a sense of ‘esthetic responsibility’ (xiii), is in exposing the Emergency itself which witnessed enormous and blatant violations of human rights. Consisting of nearly three hundred poems, the anthology is highly valuable in terms of the many emotions and experiences of the Emergency that it portrays.

A highly problematic event in itself, the Emergency consequently gave rise to equally complex emotions. Anger, disgust, revulsion, guilt, revenge – these are just a few of the emotions that one can glimpse in these poems. According to Perry, ‘Embodying a felt evil situation in such cohesive particular images is precisely one main function and most striking technique of poetry’ (xix). These images can be very powerful in creating the subjective response to a particular event and which is why, despite the lack of poetic or aesthetic sophistication in some of these poems due to gaps in translation or otherwise, he chose to include them since they express responses towards the Emergency.

This anthology, while not necessarily definitive, is the best that one has in the area of Emergency or protest poetry. As the editor Perry says, ‘it is the most broadly representative nation-wide assemblage of the protest poetry of 1975-77’ (xv). It is, as he says, ‘New India’s politico-aesthetic responses to its cultural crisis’ and shows that ‘not all the poets and intellectuals of India were silenced’ (xiv, xi). This ‘politico-aesthetic’ response of the people is important because it was for the first time that they ‘reacted’, even if slowly, to a political crisis which had no outside force to identify as the enemy, except for the self. The poems in
this anthology also seek to link this political crisis with the larger problems that still assail India—unemployment, poverty, underdevelopment, corruption and political opportunism.

At this point it would be necessary to dwell upon the term ‘protest’ also which is a problematic term. What really constitutes protest? Popular imagination would construe masses of people thronging the roads, waving placards and shouting slogans as protest. Violence is also a popular and dominant manifestation of protest. However, that would just constitute the overt expression of protest—a rather clichéd and stereotypical form of protest, one that can be easily quashed by superior force. Protest can also be a restrained one as in the case of Gandhi’s ahimsa. Whatever the form, it is a dominant feature of any democracy and yet it is also the first casualty of tyranny or dictatorship. The government’s justification for the Emergency was to contain the apparent ‘threat’ that the popular protest movement JPM posed to the national security. During the Emergency there was virtually no protest on the part of the people since dissenters were quickly locked up under MISA and later in an ironical twist that marks the destiny of many a nation, it was a silent protest on the part of the Indian electorate that brought democracy back. In literature, it can be highly vocal, subtly or overtly allusive, factual, constructive, jingoistic, hysterical, subjective, violent, and sometimes also quite directionless. ‘Protest’ would also entail that it take place during the period of repression as an objection to the suppression taking place since a post-facto protest would fall more in the realm of a commentary rather than protest. However, while this anthology manages to contain within itself all these different expressions and forms of protest, yet a lot of poems in this anthology also suffer from cases of post-facto protest or in other cases not quite authentic ‘resistance poems’ (Tarlo, 33).

Much has been written about the reaction of the Indian public towards the Emergency. Despite the protests and calls for ‘Total Revolution’ prior to the Emergency, which some feel was the reason for the Emergency, there was hardly even a whimper of protest against it when it was declared. Indira Gandhi herself was surprised at the ease with which the whole exercise was carried out. While the opposition voiced political dissent against the government, from the masses of India there was not even a murmur. ‘There was not even a spark, leave aside a conflagration’, said the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi (Perry, xxiv). The reason could have been a willing acceptance on the part of a populace which has proved over the years to be not roused easily to public action. Most of the time the chaos in the nation can be attributed to an inertia present in us, the people, whereby we do not really react till the danger threatens our immediate selves, which is precisely what happened during
the Emergency too. As Nayantara Sahgal wryly notes in the novel *Rich Like Us* there was a refusal, an indifference, towards the events happening in the country during the Emergency, while the events started encroaching insidiously upon the personal space of the self also. The Emergency started off with a bang since it was taken to be a temporary measure and was accordingly accepted by the people. However it soon turned into a perfect dystopia which brought in its wake a silent, sullen rebellion from the people. The lack of protest against the Emergency which evoked much criticism is also due to the fact that it was primarily the under privileged sections of society which were affected for the most part by the Emergency excesses like the Family Planning scheme, leaving aside many who did not feel the need to protest till the repressive character of the event started pervading their lives as well.

Whether the anger and disappointment were short lived or not, that it was expressed, even if much later, in itself makes it a vital part of the study of the event of Emergency. David Selbourne remarks in the Foreword that, ‘It is a measure of their authenticity that poems born in stress should always bear the same birthmarks. These are truly Emergency voices’ (ix). Whether all these poems are really ‘Emergency voices’ is debatable since a lot of the poems in this anthology deal with problematic aspects and conditions of a more general nature that assail the nation other than the Emergency. The Emergency was no doubt brought about due to certain structural problems which did not see any long term resolution despite a very vigorous economic programme set up during the period for countering these problems. The editor states that ‘what some Emergency poems are reacting against are not necessarily social or personal conditions specifically brought on by the Emergency rather they were conditions only intensified during the Emergency’ (xvi). However on closer reading one cannot really include most such poems amongst the specifically Emergency poems since they speak of very general issues that were and still have been a part of the Indian social system. The frustration of the people is understandable in the unyielding nature of these problems; however there is a huge difference in the nature of the Emergency and these problems, which require a separate analysis. No doubt all this is ‘protest’ if viewed as a protest against social issues and the state of affairs in India, and the Emergency as a part of that social malaise.

The Emergency had as Selbourne says, ‘elements of farce in it’ (vii). That this farce, short lived as it was, affected a certain section of the Indian public, and has been conveniently forgotten, only highlights the farcical nature of this event. It was taken seriously only briefly in the immediate aftermath of the Emergency, and relegated to the backburner once the ‘villains’ of the Emergency were promptly elected back to power. The ‘web of criminalized
authority and decision making" (viii) spawned by Indira Gandhi and Sanjay Gandhi and the petty sycophants surrounding them deeply impacted the entire system of governance in India from 1975-77 thereby bringing the fundamental flaws of the bureaucracy and the Indian law enforcement bodies glaringly out in the open. It was chaos and unfortunately, while some of the victims were privy to the madness, most others were not even aware of it till the very end.

Protest then in terms of the Emergency requires a more detailed definition both in terms of its expression in literature as also its manifestation in reality since there are serious issues considering the excesses and the violence – physical and constitutional – exerted during the Emergency, these poems would then emerge as an important part of the study of the Emergency as a complex, isolated and neglected event in Indian history.

John Oliver Perry defines the anthology as a marker of the protest of the people and a testimony that not all were silenced (xiv). According to him, ‘but for a few exceptions, the anthology as a whole expresses intense awareness of common experience under an oppressive regime which ultimately surfaced as a positive democratic force in the March elections of 1977. What the poetry records, therefore is a national impulse which we can hope will be equally well and widely served should ever another such situation occur’ (xxix). It would be difficult to say that there exists a ‘common experience’ of the Emergency because not every section of society was affected in the same way by the event as is borne out by the fiction written on the Emergency. Different people and classes felt differently about it, simply because while it was a nightmare for some, others felt it was beneficial and necessary for the country while still others did not feel it to be anything out of the ordinary as it did not affect the routine of their lives. So the very first question that opens itself for debate is whether it was really a pan-Indian experience marked by trauma? Regardless of this anomaly, the anthology provides a glimpse into the feelings of the few who did feel the repressive atmosphere of the Emergency as a denial of their basic rights.

Being an anthology of Emergency poems, the dominant theme is naturally the Emergency. However, within this broad category, there are certain aspects of the Emergency that the poets have touched upon and these form the various perceptions that people had about the Emergency. While the oppressive, nightmarish aspect of the Emergency is a recurring theme not just in the poetry but also the fiction based on the Emergency, juxtaposed against this is also the theme of hope, of emerging victorious some day from this dark tyranny. Then there is also violence – mental and physical – as perpetrated on the masses by the state and counter-violence through which the poets see the masses striking back at the
state and thereby reclaiming their rights. In Paniker’s view these ‘images of horror suggest a self-transformation by active revolt or rejection’ (iii). Whether this desire for change was sustained post the Emergency is a matter of debate; however, these poems do convey to some extent the spirit of resistance and protest against the repression that India was subjected to during the Emergency. As stated earlier, the poems also include references to certain social and economic conditions that were a part of India even before but were intensified during the Emergency (xvi). So there are poems related to caste, poverty, political apathy, as also Naxalism, which got intensified during the Emergency. These poems form the ‘nation’s own underground feelings’ (xv) represented in a literary manner and while they did not ‘inform an ignorant populace or arouse its underlying passions’ (xv), yet one can see in them a protest against the strangulation of a country’s ideals. These are voices that enunciate ‘immediate personal feelings about public political events’ (xiii).

Some poems tend towards being hysterical harangues against the state and more prominently against Indira Gandhi. Perry points out, ‘it is naïve to attack Emergency excesses as if they were entirely attributable to one person, a witch-goddess or supremely vicious tyrant’ (xix). This reduction of the Emergency as an Indira phenomenon has occluded a wider analysis of the event and given birth to a lot of misperceptions as well an ignorance about the event’s long term impact on the nation. So, while it is natural on the part of the people to posit her as a ‘witch’ or an ogress, it is obviously not a very objective way of understanding the event since it was not just one person’s doing but the collusion of an entire system.

Apart from a trenchant criticism of the Emergency in the poems we also witness in the words of Paniker ‘a spectacle of intense self-discovery on the part of Indian poets’ (li). Paniker likens the event to a ‘shock treatment’ which helped in exposing the ‘hollowness behind all our protestations and protests which were automatically assumed to be signs of vitality’ (lii) thereby necessitating the rise of a new poetics. One of the gains of the Emergency is the return of the Indian poet to the ‘roots of a truly popular and national or regional of folk culture’ (lii). The anthology, according to him, is thus ‘not so much the poetry of the Emergency as the emergence of poetry itself out of the disorientation of nationalistic idealism’ (lii). The Emergency shattered the high brow idealism of the independence movement and revealed the contemporary moral turpitude present in the system, and since this could not be expressed in the earlier modes of writing, it required changes of syntax and points of reference as well. Poetry, which had been rendered hollow by post-Independence jingoism, was revived during and after the Emergency through an
exploration of the "cultural potentials" in the various languages of the people’ (iii). Unlike
the earlier glorification of the nation, which for the most part dominated literature prior to the
Emergency, these poems reveal a darkness and an awareness that there was an alternate
discourse to nationalism as well which was not as unified and had certain grey areas as well.
Moreover, one also sees the demystification of the leaders who were earlier glorified in
literature and public imagination. This period was not only a great watershed in terms of
poetry but also led to the realization on the part of the people and the government of the fact
that India was not simply a nation of poor illiterates who could be subjected to whatever the
politicians willed. There was a change, and the poetry of this period marks that change, not
very pronouncedly, but significantly nonetheless. As Selbourne says, ‘There is an all-too­
familiar sense of darkness, of eclipse, of a curfew imposed on life itself; but also of waiting,
in however sombre a silence, for the dawn, for light, for renewal’ (viii).

While there are nearly three hundred poems in this anthology I have chosen those
most broadly representative of the Emergency and its various aspects and represent the
different facets of the ‘literature of the Emergency’. From genuine outcry against tyranny to
shallow polemical rants against a visible public figure are features that can be traced through
the entire literature based on the Emergency, whether fictional or non-fictional.

I

‘Birthmarks’

There are various themes as mentioned above which come to the surface on reading this
anthology. I have clubbed together poems which represent a certain aspect of the Emergency,
as, this way, it becomes much easier to analyse the overall themes of the poems as well as in
comparing them subsequently. The first category, and understandably the most important
one, is that of poems that depict the Emergency itself. The Emergency, as evinced through
these poems, is marked by its excessively repressive atmosphere, which involved censorship,
physical and mental violence, along with a constant fear of being under the eyes of the State.
The whole situation comes across as being rather Orwellian where everyone has to follow
government propaganda and where any kind of dissent is simply impossible. As Jimmy
Avasia remarks in his poem ‘Emerging’ (67),
One day we woke,
Free to do as they wanted.
... on the way to an answer
they selected a truth
but all suggestion of question
died en route.

The poem has a rather ominous tone especially in its reference to ‘they’, the government and those in power who dictated what the people were ‘free to do now’. It is ironic indeed that freedom came at the whims of those in power and while ‘they’ chose the ‘truth’, the explanation that ‘they’ wanted to propagate, a blind compliance and acceptability of that truth was required from the people, one which would not brook any questions or doubts. The poem is chilling in its reference to the menacing ‘they’, the state and those in power. People are gagged, their voices suppressed; there can be no queries, no questions.

This atmosphere of repression is conveyed in the poem ‘Pilgrimage of the Deaf-Mutes’ (160) by Dilip Chitre. A highly allusive poem, full of mythological and spiritual overtones wherein the pilgrimage of the poet saints of Maharashtra to the shrine of their Lord Vithala is used for symbolizing the deaf mute masses of India who chose not to speak and remained deaf to whatever was happening during the Emergency. There is no salvation that they can hope for from their gods, as even the gods have chosen to remain silent.

But the Lord who has continued to stand
On a single brick pedestal for twenty-eight ages
Remained exactly still
Without an answer.

The poem evinces a barren, spiritually devoid place, where only zombies, the deaf mutes, reside. There are ‘vast plains of silence’, and a wordless universe where all sound, all voices, all expression or questions have been lost. But there is a latent violence in this universe waiting to let itself loose as

... through their wordless universe
Burst letters in splinters.

In such a universe where no sound exists, Chitre asks to be the poet of the deaf mutes because resistance seems futile in a world where even the gods have ceased to speak. He asks to be
'stripped' of all words and grammar so that he might be rendered "fluently speechless" and no song save the stunned silence of the deaf mutes be on his lips.

Lord of the deaf-mutes
Give me only deaf-mutes for readers
Make me the epic deaf-mute
Poet of deaf-mutes alone
Do not tempt me with cadences and rhythms
Rob me of all my dictionaries
Strip me of grammar
...
And give me that singular deafness
That I may screw the heavens.

It is a very poignant poem as it enunciates a poet’s cry against repression and the loss of freedom and thought that took place during the Emergency. No words, no spirit left to form the rebellion. The only protest that the poet and many like him can enunciate is through their silence. As the editor’s note points out, the poem escaped censorship on account of its allusiveness but a lot of people read it for what it was, a poet’s cry against tyranny.

While this poem is full of images that convey a spiritual horror at the trauma of the Emergency, certain other poems deal with the contemporary, everyday aspect of the Emergency and how it affected the psyche of the people. The poem ‘First a Shock’ (74) by Ved Vatuk follows a chronological account of the Emergency and how it created a fear psychosis amongst people. There was shock to begin with, but after the initial murmurs, there was a ‘long, long silence’. Censorship was a complete ban on ‘truth’ and while Indians were not allowed access to what was really happening, the rest of the world was not allowed to know either what was happening within India:

Truth shall not enter
(Nor leave)
This land.
And as for
His non-violence
Our jawans have it
Under firm control.

22-7-75
There is a direct reference to JP and his Satyagraha movement which was inspired by Gandhi. The movement was declared dangerous to national interest and most of its members arrested. There is a direct reference to Indira Gandhi’s destruction of democracy by usurping the image of Mother India for herself:

She buried Mother India
Alive
While her gangsters
Beat the drums
In her praise

25-7-75

The poet also brings out comparisons between Indira and her father:

Roll back time
I want to see
If these are
The kind of things
Your father
Fought for.

25-7-75

In the poem, those who had the courage to rise against the authorities are killed while the new generations die an even worse death spiritually by being brain washed with the lies that the government feeds them with.

Dictators
They are killing
My brothers
With bullets
They will kill
My children
With lies.

31-7-75

The dominant theme in all such poems is that of a dystopia which is portrayed in S. Balu Rao’s poem ‘This Many Splendoured Freedom’ (213). It describes how the whole Emergency propaganda was glorified and drilled into the minds of the people through the ‘self-same mask in the Daily News’ and the ‘thousand hoardings’ of Indira Gandhi’s dictums:
To have your ears dinned in every printed word with lessons on how to be a patriot and an honest Indian.

It is a very bitter and scathing poem that lashes out at the Emergency not in polemical terms, but in very controlled, very measured tones. It protests against a government that imprisoned thousands of people under the infamous MISA law:

To be asked to believe that in order that you could be free a hundred thousand others had to be jailed.

The Congress government offered precisely this rationale for imprisoning the leaders and other people who were protesting against the Emergency. The poet talks about the constant fear that pervaded the lives of the people. Listening to BBC could be considered tantamount to national betrayal since the BBC allowed news and information banned by the Indian government to be broadcast. The constant shadowing by government agents, the fear of the policeman and even the fear of being associated with anyone who had been arrested by the government was a very palpable one for the common man.

To stop visiting your cousin from the very day her husband was taken away
To avoid all discussion on price-rise at dinner suspecting in your unemployed son an informer

This sense of paranoia and mistrust was a part of the psychological terror induced by the government and as the poem depicts, it created an atmosphere of suspicion which included not just one’s relatives but one’s own self as well. This fear can be dismissed as being exaggerated and based on rumours than actual facts, but the very fact that it was strong enough to find its way in so many works makes it credible:

... above all, to be afraid of your own shadow
– Ah, This Freedom, the Many-splendoured Freedom!

The government had justified the Emergency for safeguarding people from ‘fascist’ forces such as the JPM. This freedom which masked the rule of a tyranny was ‘many splendoured’ indeed. Those who understood what lay behind the Emergency’s ‘discipline and progress’ mask, knew that it was more than just trains running on time. The whole atmosphere as enunciated through this poem is almost reminiscent of the Cold War era where people who were against the government would be swiftly silenced. While nineteen months may appear a short period now, for those who went through it, it seems to be a long wait for freedom.
Another satirical, though not as sophisticated a poem is ‘Worry’ (270) by Ramesh Panase, which reprimands the people for making unreasonable demands such as food or a raise in salaries or even lifting the Emergency and distracting the government from its other higher aims. So while ‘loyal citizens’ scream from ‘hunger’, the government is busy saving the country from ‘threats from abroad’ or is ‘on its way to the nuclear age’ or it is even ‘raising flags on outer planets’. The poem is a reflection on the political, social and economic situation of the country during the 1970s. The scenario is typically that of a developing nation where defence and space research is accorded primacy over other more important concerns such as poverty and hunger amongst the masses. There is anger against such policies that make the nation a nuclear power but in the process make it lose sight of other issues. As the last lines of the poem remark,

You bother about hunger!
Your government is worried about bigger things.

These lines convey the idea that the ‘government’ was not just powerful but also considered itself to be the best and the only authority on what is good for the masses. For one which had to not only shake off the colonial baggage, but also deal with development and democratic governance, the government more or less fell into the trap of assuming an authoritarian outlook. It becomes a vicious circle, wherein the general populace is considered too ignorant to know what is good for it and the State as a result becomes the sole arbiter of deciding everything for the nation, even if the priorities of the state and the people differ radically. Even after the Emergency was lifted, this presumption on the part of the government that the Indian populace was not politically aware or intelligent enough, cost it their votes. If the government was concerned with ‘bigger things’, the mandate of the people proved that they were more concerned about their fundamental rights and basic issues of living.

The next poem, titled ‘Naming the Baby’ (140) by Prasanna Patsani, makes use of very graphic images for describing the Emergency as a monstrous baby that emerges from an ‘evil woman’. The poem is full of images that describe the horror that comes with the birth of this ‘monstrous child’. The normal flow of the nation was disturbed with the imposition of the Emergency and this aberration was viewed as a monstrous, evil thing which symbolized the perversion of the entire natural order. The personification of the Emergency as a hideous baby and its imposition as a monstrous birth, depict its unpopularity, as also show how Indira Gandhi came to be popularly viewed as a power hungry woman:
How grotesque the child's face
Why did the evil woman give birth to it ...

While the image is quite extreme, but for many people since she was the one who imposed it, she remained the arch villain of the piece. While the beginning of the Emergency was met with approval from the masses, by the year 1976, the whole scenario had changed. What was supposed to be a temporary measure turned into a grotesque reality for people and the ugly side of the government machinery came to the fore. The 'birth' proved monstrous indeed for the nation which suddenly saw large scale arrests, police brutalities and an atmosphere of fear and terror. As the poet remarks in the last lines of the poem,

But what should the child's name be?
And I answered without fear: Call it 1976.

As is the case with a lot of political commentaries as also the literature based on the Emergency, many poems also link the event with fascism. Considering that trains ran on time just as they did in Mussolini's Italy, it might not seem a far-fetched comparison for those who lived through the Emergency. While Arun Shourie remarked that this was probably the 'mildest dictatorship' ever (Shourie, 1978, 45), yet even so, judging by the poetry and the literature inspired by it, it seems that even the mildest of dictatorships could be highly repressive and have an impact upon a nation as in the case of the Emergency. It is difficult to say that India was 'a nation that has a tradition of democracy' which is why it protested against the suspension of democracy because India never experienced democracy till the year 1947. However despite this anomaly, the fact that such an event could raise a protest big or small, vocal or silent, speaks for the political awakening of India's masses.

Representing the Emergency would also involve a discussion on its excesses which finds a reference in many poems as well. As stated in earlier chapters, some of the dominantly repressive and dictatorial features of the Emergency were the arrests under MISA, the censorship that was imposed upon newspapers, the sterilization and beautification drives and these were what constituted the main reasons for the loss of the Congress party in the 1977 general elections. Censorship was the main reason why the Indira Gandhi government could not judge the pulse of the nation. The government was so caught up in its own fabrications that it lost track of the truth. There was protest against this kind of censorship and pre-censorship, which commanded newspapers to publish only reports favourable to the government. Even a brief look at these censorship guidelines makes it clear
that the government was on an all-out no controversies or, for that matter, no-news mission and simply fed the masses with its own versions of the truth. It is no surprise then that when things came to such a head that the words of Nehru, Gandhi or Tagore came to be considered seditious by the government, there was an outcry from the people against censorship. There was a complete clampdown on expressing one’s opinions freely and this loss of freedom is one of the dominant protest themes in these poems. This censorship was also linked to repression as it more or less sought to further the same in effect.

M. Gopalkrishna Adiga’s poem ‘Water for your Fields’ (252) is one such satire on the government’s propaganda which advised people to follow the path of utter subservience and servility and that too on ‘all fours’.

\[
\begin{align*}
  \text{don’t ever raise your eyebrows} \\
  \text{all signs of fascism} \\
  \text{symptoms of the faithless} \\
  \text{just obey} \\
  \text{and dance to the tunes of habit.} \\
  \ldots \\
  \text{this lesson of the broken backbone} \\
  \text{I blare out broadcast} \\
  \text{Do not heed the blabber} \\
  \text{Of the enemies of the people} \\
  \text{To stand up on your two legs} \\
  \text{But seek the wisdom} \\
  \text{Of walking on all fours} \\
  \text{An obedience to law} \\
  \text{The safest way not to fall.}
\end{align*}
\]

There is anger amidst all the sarcasm where the poet states that crawling in the face of government dictums is now a habit with them. The imposition of the Emergency brooked no dissent from the people and even the subsequent censorship hardly raised any protest from journalists save a few. This subservience and grovelling of the people is depicted through the image of the ‘broken backbone’. The spinelessness of the Indian people in asserting themselves and crawling on all fours like servile animals instead of walking erect as self-respecting humans provoked harsh self-criticism later. While the government had reduced the
law to a mockery, it ironically demanded an ‘Obedience to law’ from the people with any other reaction leading one straight to jail. In such a situation, the poet decides that the best and only thing to do was to lie in the ‘easiest, the happiest and the safest’ yoga position of the ‘Posture of the Corpse – Savasan, the Yoga of the Dead’ since their existence had been reduced to virtually this state of passive compliance.

Another poem ‘Close it Tight’ by Saamu (31) deals with the campaign on the part of the government to crush all those who were trying to restore some semblance of democracy by voicing protest, since this went against the government:

However
Rumour mongers are traitors
People who dared to speak against the government were branded traitors and locked up in jail. A ‘repeated mantra’ of not listening to such falsities promoted by ‘enemies of the state’ was drilled into the masses through hoardings and posters depicting the same all over the country. The common man was completely terrorized and feared that even listening to dissent could land him/her in the clutches of the dreaded MISA. While the AIR blared out government propaganda, other stations like BBC continued to give reports of the actual goings on within India. In those days it was the voice of the outside world, a voice of dissent but the poet who does not want to be labelled as a traitor

ran home fast
Put it in a trunk
And closed it tight
My radio.

Truth is closed up and shut in a trunk, to be taken out at some later day because surviving through the times was much more important than allegiance towards the truth. This shows the fear psychosis that the government had successfully been able to instill in the minds of the people. As another poem ‘They and I’ by Kirit Purohit (210) remarks,

They have gagged me
And they wanted me to speak
...
The state in the guise of discipline
Keeps continuous watch on me
And the entire nation
Celebrates the advent of the era of peace.
Again the 'State' and its representatives appear as the ominous 'they' while the citizen is the hapless 'I' who is gagged and yet expected to laud praises and speak what the authorities want to hear. The most palpable fear for the middle classes was that of getting caught in the clogs of government machinery. While there is still some amount of political accountability today, India in the 70s and 80s saw a much more oppressive attitude on the part of the government. The Emergency undoubtedly marks a high point in this kind of muscle flexing by the government and it is amply displayed in the fear that pervades this poem. The 'State' the 'Big Brother' keeps a watch over every citizen and rams celebrations for the dawn of the 'era of peace' down the throat of the hapless people in the name of democracy. The government propagated high sounding mottos such as 'Era of Discipline' to impress upon the people that the government meant business and was cracking the whip on a nation characterized by indiscipline. The official line was that the government had restored order and brought India back on the path of democracy, at least their version of a democratic state, from the unrest and chaos that the enemies of the State (read JP and the other protestors) had created. So while the nation was actually caught up in what resembled a family run dictatorship, the government proudly proclaimed that whatever it was doing was for democracy and the people, and so they should obey the government and its dictates since they were in the larger interests of the people.

Drums are beaten
And full throated songs in praise
Of democracy fill the air

Not being used to all this 'freedom'
I, ignorant, impotent, helpless
Unable to hold my head high
See what passes with bowed head
And they think I'm offering
Thankful greeting!

It is ironic that it was only during the Emergency when democracy was eclipsed that there was something similar to a 'festival of democracy'. What was hitherto a given, a way of life was now being projected as the munificence of a government eager to justify its actions. The people are not used to this sort of 'freedom' either; a freedom that comes with severe restrictions, the violation of which invited violent reprisal. After having fought and won
freedom from the British to be given 'freedom' again in an independent and democratic nation was indeed something that people found hard to understand and accept. The words 'ignorant', 'impotent', 'helpless' highlight the plight of the people in the face of the excesses through repressive measures like censorship, the sterilization drives and mass arrests. This submissiveness and silence on the part of the people was taken as support by a government unaware of its own follies. The 'bowed head' depicts the breaking of the people's spirit as they could neither accept nor agree with the state of affairs, nor voice a vocal protest. 'They' remained powerful and crushed the 'I'. A very real fear amongst the people was that this would be the way things would carry on from now on.

The spirit of democracy lies in the right to dissent, to question. To kill it at the grassroots, is to snuff out the very essence of democracy. The poet Mukund Somani envisages a scenario where the future generations would be 'programmed citizens' who never question the government. Since no one at that point thought that Indira Gandhi would lift the Emergency or call for elections, everybody feared that the Emergency would go on forever.

But they don't teach any longer
In our kids' grammar the interrogative mode
Even now they parade at dead of night
We too are used to it
We must get used to it...

(26 June and Yet a Memory, Mukund Somani, 235)

One might remark that these poems show a pessimistic and defeatist attitude, however given the circumstances at that point of time, one cannot blame the masses for reacting as they did. People were at times thrown indefinitely in jail and tortured on account of the slightest suspicion or remote association with dissenters. Therefore protest was not even an option for most people. There is a sense of trauma that is evinced in these poems which arises from:

... the horrors of
today-those horrors whose trauma will
pass from generation to generation.

(Cessation of a Poet, Chandrasen Momaya, 25)

This trauma was unlike that of the Partition holocaust which witnessed people driven to bloodshed under a frenzy they could not control. The 'horrors' and 'trauma' of the Emergency were deliberate and state controlled. This is not to say that there were state
organized pogroms against the people but rather the state’s enforcement of its hardline policies through equally harsh and forceful ways which resulted in such a ‘trauma’. Given the fact that the Emergency is hardly accorded a place save a few token paragraphs in the annals of Indian history, the poet’s claim that the ‘trauma will pass from generation to generation’ does not hold ground. The present is witness to the fact that the horrors of the Emergency were pushed away from public memory with the betrayal of the people by the failure of the Janata government. The poet, having witnessed this history in the making, has

...ceased to be a poet
and become a testimony
to voices that are choked
and shrieks that rent the air.

(Momaya, 25)

Gagged and ‘choked’ voices, which can no longer speak but testify to the unsaid violence that the Emergency brought with it fill the air. His function as a poet having ceased in the face of so much horror, the poet has become a living testimony to all that has happened.

A more sarcastic take on the Emergency and its repressive aspect is to be found in ‘Two Poems’ by Patila Shivasherana Jawali (236). The first, titled ‘Law Men’, remarks as to how almost every legislator

Looks
To me like
The PM’s soldier.

It is a sharp satire on the trademark sycophancy exhibited by politicians during the Emergency. Nobody could stand up against Indira Gandhi or Sanjay Gandhi not because they could not but because they did not want to. The use of the word ‘soldier’ points to how the ministers did as commanded by the Prime Minister without even stopping to question why. The second poem ‘Censored’ is scathing in its attack on the denigration of Indian democracy by such unscrupulous politics.

Someone has cut off
The 15th of one month
And the 26th of another
(engraved in gold so dearly)
from the calendar
hung high on the wall.

Pictures on the calendar

Of Mother India and Mahatma Gandhi

Are still there

hanging.

15th August and 26th January are India's Independence and Republic Day respectively. Two glorious days for India and while most people had hoped that some respite would be granted from the Emergency on either of these days, it never happened. As sheer tokenism, pictures of Mother India and Gandhi are left 'hanging' on the calendar. It is interesting to note that Indira Gandhi had appropriated the image of Mother India for her own political ends and had won great favour with the masses with this ploy prior to the Emergency. While Mother India was replaced by Mother Indira, Gandhi and his principles were also conveniently forgotten. His speeches were not allowed to be published in the papers and even Satyagraha a Gandhian tool of protest was considered anti-establishment by the government.

Everything was censored and struck off so much so that the common man refused to read the papers in such an atmosphere of lies and conspiracies. The poem 'Emergency: Newspapers' (65) shows how Baijnath Babu a municipal primary school teacher representing the educated middle class, gives up reading the newspaper, which was a daily habit with him.

Reading the Newspaper has been a

Daily habit with him

Like eating his daily bread

He now, feels suffocated

Even the newspapermen don't read the newspapers anymore.

The rest of the journalists are either

Silent or enjoying themselves

Or singing the praises like court singers

What has come over Baijnath Babu?

He cannot live without newspaper

He is living without newspaper.

The sham that the government was indulging in through censorship was not lost upon the people. Knowing that the newspapers did not contain the truth but only government
propaganda even the common man had turned away from it. There is also a criticism of journalists, some of whom were forced into silence, whereas others chose the easy path of groveling before the ruling power and lauding praises upon it. With such sycophancy and hypocrisy before him, Baijnath Babu prefers not knowing anything at all to reading lies and manipulations in the papers. In a nation where despite its high incidences of poverty and illiteracy, newspapers are an integral part of the lives of the people, urban and rural, Baijnath Babu’s giving up of the newspaper is symbolic of the disillusionment that the people felt with the government and its oppressive policies.

While all the above mentioned poems present the repression and censorship that was active during the Emergency from the perspective of a beleaguered populace, the poem ‘Tree of Tongues’ by K. Satchidanand (231) deals with these aspects a little differently. The poem does not offer another harassed and defeatist attitude in the face of the Emergency, but chooses to fight back against oppression. There are references to Indira Gandhi as the ‘mother of all, the good goddess’, who

Made the announcement from her fortress
Let all tongues within the fold
Be bundled up and sacrificed.

The above quoted lines are an obvious reference to the proclamation of the Emergency and the subsequent censorship that was imposed on the press. In the poem the people, the ‘great uncle, nephew, boy, enemy’, who could have spoken against the tyranny of the ‘good goddess’, have their tongues cut off as punishment. The poem draws a lot from Malayalam folklore and legends which emphasizes Paniker’s point of the poet’s going back to folk rhythms for creating new models of poetry through which to represent this unique situation. Some of the images conveyed in the poem are quite surreal which also reinforce the allegorical image of the Emergency being a nightmare. In a country plagued by miseries, the ‘good goddess’ calls for the sacrifice of all tongues for the sake of democracy. And she goes about censoring off everything and everyone, but

One of the tongues put out a sprout
It grew long and long it grew.

Even if all voices are silenced, this tyranny causes a small voice, a new rebellion to be born somewhere. While Indira Gandhi and her caucus are able to silence most of their detractors by the use of force, there was a stirring somewhere despite all the censorship and repression:
From the bottom rock
A tap root did sprout
The tender leaf, the slender leaf
Like Unniyarcha’s rolled up sword,
The little leaf, the fluffy leaf
Like the shield of Kannappan,
The third leaf, a green leaf
Like the hand of Karimpandi.

This small tap root, that is the harbinger of a new force to counter despotism, sprouts numerous leaves which are described through comparisons with heroic folk legends such as Unniyarcha’s sword; Kannappan’s shield and the hand of Karimpandi. One small voice, one small ray of hope is joined by a lot of others and together they form a tree of tongues with

Fold after fold of crimson leaves
Like the tongues dripping with blood.

From the blood and misery of the people, there emerges a new order to challenge the oppressor, and ‘The mother of all is aghast with rage’. Taking her sword she strikes at the ‘root of the tree’ from where blood gushes out, the blood of the people. But this time instead of silence and darkness,

A thousand leaves of tongues unfurled
The hidden truths gleamed on each leaf
And the tree of tongues spread out wide.

No longer would people remain silent! Protest has a humble beginning as it does in the poem, starting as a small root that grows into a tree, far bigger and greater in its strength than the might of the sword of the great goddess, spreading out far and wide enveloping the entire nation resulting in the rejection of authoritarianism. Truth, once bundled up and suppressed through censorship, finds release in the same way, as the unfurling of the tiny leaf in the poem signifies hope and a new beginning. The poem is a triumphant cry of victory over the darkness of tyranny and is also a warning against the obstruction of truth. Repression can be tolerated for a short while only, since the masses, no matter how helpless, cannot be crushed for long. The beginning might be as humble and lowly as the ‘tap root’ growing from the ‘bottom rock’ but it soon spirals into a towering force that can sweep away the tyrant. The use of folk and legendary figures adds intensity to the poem making the rise of people against tyranny much more heroic and vivid, as also bringing it closer to the common man.
Censorship was only one of the extreme and unpopular measures undertaken by the government during the Emergency, the others being forcible sterilization and city beautification drive, both pet projects of Sanjay Gandhi considered as the ‘heir apparent’ after Indira Gandhi. The then Congress President, Dev Kant Barooah had gone so far ahead in his sycophancy as to hail Sanjay Gandhi as ‘a Vivekananda, a second Shankracharya and an Akbar’ (Mankekar, 143). While most of his meteoric rise during the Emergency can be attributed to over-indulgence by his mother, a lot was the result of sycophancy and toadying by party members and industrialists who saw him as an easy target to earn favours from. He was also referred to as an ‘extra-constitutional’ source of authority and his arrogance and recklessness during the Emergency is legendary as it earned the displeasure of not just a lot of politicians but the masses as well. It is mainly due to the excesses committed on account of the sterilization or Family Planning campaigns along with the beautification drives that the Congress lost the 1977 elections. Both saw loss of life and destruction unsupported by government records but corroborated in the literature of the Emergency. The infamous Turkman Gate incident (referred to in the preceding chapters) is an example of the forcible razing of people’s houses near the Jama Masjid area in old Delhi. The sterilization drives had become such a virtual terror for the people. The worst sufferers were the lower sections of the society who were simply taken to Family Planning clinics and sterilized regardless of their age or marital status. The accounts of these incidents as given by later commentators of the Emergency sound rather freakish and unreal and it is hard to imagine today that such bizarre incidents could ever have happened. It is difficult for the poor to voice their grievances during normal times, and so one can imagine that it was well nigh impossible during a time of rigid censorship and no freedom of speech. For those affected, consisting of the poor and the illiterate, the worst was that they could not even understand what these operations (tubectomy and vasectomy) entailed. Most men were quite traumatized that this operation had perhaps ended all their virility and rendered them namard (unmanly). A humorous poem with double meanings titled ‘Joke in a Clinic’ by Sadanand Rege (110) speaks of a bachelor who comes running to have his vasectomy done since everyone in his locality has and he does not want to be held responsible for any pregnancies in his alley. Even those who willingly got their vasectomies done, did so under some constraint or the other. The common man was the one who was pushed the most in these rather aggressive campaigns. A more serious aspect is offered by the poem ‘In the Midst of Everything’ by Parmanand Shrivastava (106) where the poet says in a tone marked by self-deprecation:
After a day of tiring struggle  
We only talked theory, argued, discussed  
And watched the life we knew  
Being wrapped in blood.

The scene takes place outside a ‘busy Primary Health Center’ where people had gathered, some to watch news, others to get themselves sterilized. After their entire struggle there is only theory and discussion left, for nothing could be done save talking. The fact that these people are sitting outside the ‘Primary Health Clinic’, a potent symbol of the government’s repressive activities, shows their defeat and the futility of their arguments. They wait there

To catch her first bulletin  
The second bulletin  
And the third –

With no other news or means of knowing the truth, the people are left with no other choice than to listen to ‘her’ as the news bulletins fill the ears of the nation. The government news agencies were used for promoting government propaganda and news favourable to the government and the Emergency. There was absolutely no objectivity and it was the PM and the ‘son’ who would figure on the news channels. There is a certain sense of helplessness in the poem as the people want to struggle against repression, but have nothing except empty talks and, defeated, trudge back to hear ‘her’ at the end of the day.

A much darker poem that deals with the sterilization programme and its impact upon the people is ‘Gall Nut’ by K. Ayappa Paniker (78). The gall nut becomes a symbol for forcible sterilization which had induced not just a lot of fear amongst men but anger as well. Indira Gandhi is referred to as ‘mummy’ possibly because of her ‘Mother India’ image and also because like a dominating matriarch she had the whole nation under her control during those nineteen months:

Bite me not and beat me not, O hurt me not so hard  
I’ll gulp this gall nut of yours, O mummy  
I’ll gulp this gall nut of yours.

---

1 Gall nut ‘in ayurvedic medicine is used as a purgative and to control male potency for family planning.’ (editor’s note).
The narrator is willing to accept the gall nut, the forcible sterilization programme, and cries out not to be beaten any more, which can be taken to be a reference to the harassment that people had to undergo on this account. The repeated use of the words ‘I’ll gulp this gall nut of yours, O mummy’, creates an atmosphere of near hysteria where the poet is so scared of the reprisal that might come upon his refusal that he simply wants to gulp it down. He does not care whether it is good or bad, bitter or sour, he wants to gulp it down because it is a matter of survival for him and all the others who were the victims of this campaign. The ‘gall nut’ of the ‘hag’ becomes a stain, a curse, a source of horror; of ugliness for him because it takes away his ability to procreate which is considered to be the ‘essence of manliness’ in India. The brew has a rather gruesome effect on the poet’s physical self.

My hands have grown long, my feet are swollen
My ears are shriveled, eyes dimmed, cheeks blown.

However there is a change of tone in the subsequent stanzas where, once having swallowed the ‘gall nut’ or having been sterilized, the poet has nothing left to fear. ‘Mummy’ now becomes an ‘old hag’ and the concoction of gall nut is the brew of a witch, and he says,

But when at last I’m filled with this gall
Oh, I’ll put a little noose around your head, O mummy dear
And when you’re floored, you piggy you, and look this way
And that,
Don’t you ever come outdoors at all
Or then I’ll snatch away all your rings and bells.

After all that the government subjected the masses to, the final revenge was that of the people who exacted it by rejecting it in the elections. The poem is not only an instance of how deeply sterilization affected the people but also how Indira Gandhi was seen as its perpetrator. While one cannot absolve Indira Gandhi completely of the excesses that took place, yet it would not be fair to blame her for all that took place either, since the government machinery was equally to blame for it, failing as it did to recognize the limitations of any policy and the manner of its implementation. From the ministers who were eager to please Sanjay Gandhi with impressive figures of sterilization in their constituencies, to the government officials who were simply concerned with fulfilling their quotas so that their salaries might be released, everyone had an ulterior motive far removed from population control. And then were those also simply enjoyed bullying people around.
Taking up the issue of the beautification drives, the allegorical poem ‘Siddhartha Nagar’ by Daya Pawar (194) calls upon Siddhartha to protest against the demolitions taking place. The demolition of the town named ‘Siddhartha’ comes to stand for all the principles of right and wrong being razed to the ground.

O! Siddhartha!

This town bearing your name
Is facing the bulldozer
Of tyranny of power
In this century the twentieth.

While slums are undoubtedly a problem for every major city in India and the breeding grounds for diseases and crime, yet the method adopted by the Congress government to raze every slum overnight and forcibly evict the slum dwellers, was not quite the best solution for the problem. Emma Tarlo in her book *Unsettling Memories* (2003) deals with the accounts of people who were displaced on account of the demolition drives, with particular reference to the residents of Turkman Gate, an area around the Jama Masjid in old Delhi. This was an incident that could not be subdued even during the Emergency, and the poem evokes images that would have perhaps been witnessed not only at Turkman Gate but other places also which came under the axe of demolition. The ‘hut and hearth ... being torn asunder’, ‘showering stones’ and ‘the crumbling earth’;

The legacy of umpteen generations
Tumbled on the streets.

This was not just the demolition of ugly shanties, but the erasure of the memories and history of many people. There is no doubt that these shanties and illegal constructions did pose a severe problem as far as town planning was concerned, but the aggressive manner of the government and the utter disregard that they showed for the problems that people would face in dislocation, makes the protest justified. The desperate cries of appeal to the ‘Delhi wali Madam’ (Rukhsana Sultana) or ‘minister’ (Jagmohan) are of no use. The ‘eyesore’ is removed at last from in front of the more modern houses beyond. Instead of the traditional criminals such as the ‘Chambal Valley bandits’ there is a new generation of ‘urban white-collared inhumanity’ which terrorizes the people with its far more dangerous weapon of state authority and law. The slick city bureaucrats and officials bear no semblance to humanity and move about their work in an automated, cold, mannequin like manner. Even spirituality has
been usurped by power mongers who make a living in the name of Siddhartha. The poet cries out to Siddhartha to be with the common man when he ‘rises in unison in a violent rebellion’ against tyranny. The displacement of people in the name of beautification and the high handed manner, in which the whole exercise was conducted, fuelled anger amongst the masses against the government.

While these were excesses which took place at the social front, at the political front the excesses committed were in the form of arrests under the infamous MISA as well as tortures inflicted upon the prisoners. The infamous ‘midnight knock’ and the bundling off of the entire opposition in jails by the then government evoked protest not just from within India but abroad also. This also gave rise to a lot of antagonism amongst people. These arrests were uncalled for and clearly demonstrated the dictatorial nature of the government which explained these arrests to be necessary for maintaining law and order in the country. Even senior leaders like JP were not spared solitary confinement. The poem ‘The Guest’ by Chandrashekhar Patil (86) offers a political prisoner’s view from inside the jail. The poem has a gently mocking tone in its description of imprisonment during the Emergency:

Two cops ahead and two behind
The Big Gate opens with a creak
Gandhi and Nehru
Imprisoned in photo-frames
Cordially invite you with a smile
But you must talk less. The writing
On the wall by another Gandhi
Also invites you.

The principles and ideals of Gandhi and Nehru, long forgotten, were a source of embarrassment for the Congress government during the Emergency. However, tokenism and a display of symbols is something that India has never lacked in. So while a prisoner is being brought in, two prisoners are already there to greet him, Gandhi and Nehru from within the only places that they seem to have in the nation, their photo-frames. One cannot go to extremes and glorify them by saying that their principles are the only ones that a nation should work with; rather it was their vision of India as of those others who had fought for India’s freedom, that was the ideal. Sadly enough, it was the abasement or rather loss of that vision barely twenty-eight years after Independence that caused people sorrow and pain.
during the Emergency. There was however another Gandhi, another personage from the Nehru family who was to be followed and that is Sanjay Gandhi whose 'work more, talk less' dictum was plastered all over the country. In order to please the 'heir-apparent', as he was called, the government ministers and officials pulled all plugs and had his dictates put across as golden words to be heeded by one and all. The arrangement inside the cell is described as

A perfect

Independent, democratic set-up.

Solitary confinement, a highly independent and democratic set up with 'newspapers stripped of unnecessary news' as company. The walls are also 'bare and waiting' for the poet to express his anger and protest. The guest-house/jail is perfect and makes sure that its guest is well looked after Never short on hospitality sometimes 'military boots look after you'. And after the military boots/beatings, doctors are also brought in regularly to make sure that there hasn't been too serious a damage. Even in jail the government makes sure that its propaganda reaches out to the people and so 'The radio blares out the 20-point revolution' accompanied by 'parrot screeches' and 'beggars' cries. Beyond the walls of the prison, the world through a small window reminds the poet of the India symbolized by the ruins of Hampi. The poet's passion for his country and anguish at what it has become now rise up in his heart like the 'waters of Tungabhadra'. But unlike the Tungabhadra, there was no place where these passions could flow save the confines of one's own heart and the four walls that formed the prisoner's space. There is a feeling of controlled anger and helplessness as the poet is confined within this cell with no news, no communication and no way of reaching out, where all one can do is 'walk with clenched fists behind your butt'.

Most times no reasons were given for arrests since the Emergency was reason enough. Anybody, even family members as in the case of Lawrence Fernandes, brother of George Fernandes a wanted underground leader, or Snehlata Reddy, a South Indian actress, could be taken to prison. The constant fear of being taken away even on account of a casual acquaintance was ever present amongst those who knew of the arrests and tortures. As David Selbourne remarks in his Foreword to the book, 'in India since it is India, the forces of law and order have available to them the additional refinement of curry powder, for inserting into the rectum or vagina' (vii). While this might sound graphic, this was just one amongst the many different tortures that the police inflicted upon the prisoners. The dreaded aeroplane torture, making the victim lie naked on ice, or just brutally beating him was routine during the
Emergency as has been described in numerous accounts of the Emergency. What is always worse than all this as Selbourne says is that ‘In such circumstances, the administration of law and order tends always to fall into the hands, or fists, of the disorderly and the lawless.’ (vii). And it did so truly because apart from the legal constraints placed upon the people, the illegal and repressive measures adopted by the bureaucracy and state machinery largely defined the Emergency as a dark spot in India’s history. Democracy was indeed a dirty word during the Emergency, one that could be used by those in power but not meant for public consumption. A pithy but brilliant poem ‘Arrest’ by Badal (10) highlights this rather ironic situation.

Just a short while ago
I was arrested under MISA!
Because I was found
Exploring the garbage can
For democracy
Dumped by our rulers there.

The phrase ‘our rulers’ highlights the autocratic attitude adopted by the Indian government which had conveniently dumped democracy into garbage cans. Those who sought to find it and restore it were arrested under the MISA since it was a crime to search for democracy.

Apart from the arrests of politicians, a lot of students were also arrested since they were active in protests against the government. While political prisoners were sometimes given facilities commensurate or nearly so with their status as political prisoners, students were not only brutally tortured but many disappeared also under mysterious circumstances as in the case of Rajan which was discussed in detail in Chapter 3. The poem ‘Rajan Resurrected’ by Amrit Gangar (173) speaks through Rajan, who calls upon Kerala which mutely witnessed his tortures and death, to rise and turn its lush green into a ‘bloody red’, the red of rebellion, of revolution to overthrow tyranny.

I’m Rajan
Kerala

Where’s my burial?

Why didn’t you wail with me
Kerala
when they perpetrated on me
a variety of third degree
and I bid farewell to you
for ever
for ever
...
Rebel Kerala rebel

Let your lush become
Red
Bloody red
Kerala
Bloody red....

A second poem ‘Rabin, Rajan, Snehalata and Others’ by Chandra Kataky (171) is concerned
with people like Rabin Kalita, Snehalata Reddy and Rajan who though in different jails, died
either ‘during or after from Emergency imprisonment’ (editor’s note). The poet emphasizes
upon the innocence and fragility of birds that are hit by ‘poisonous arrows’ making them
symbols for the three innocent lines lost during the Emergency. These innocent birds which
sing through summer and autumn and await a ‘soothing pour’ from the clouds are shot down
by the ‘cruel hunter’.

Oh! hunter, cruel hunter!
How nastily you pursue your game!
The innocent fawn totters and dances
Just before the hunters,
The antelope, the deer and the hare
Rabin, Snehalata, and Rajan

Their release from oppression comes in the form of death, the price of freedom being blood.
The cases of Rajan and Snehalata received a lot of attention and were instances of how state
violence could be so excessive as to take away the lives of innocent people also. While facts
could be suppressed during the Emergency, it was not possible to deny these excesses once
the Emergency was revoked and censorship lifted. The fact that such brutalities were carried
out by the police with the complicity of the government machinery points to a blatant and
sadistic abuse of power at the grassroots level with sanction from above. These were classic
cases of power from the top of the pyramid, sanctioning the use of power at the base without
any accountability whatsoever.
While the Emergency and all its aspects found ample expression in not just poetry but fiction also, another important theme that forces itself through these poems is that of Gandhi – the Mahatma as also the ruling Gandhis, Indira and Sanjay. At the risk of disappointing Saleem Sinai, Indira’s nemesis in *Midnight’s Children*, one has to concede that the Gandhi surname has become an important part of Indian history whether it is reference to the original Gandhi or the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. The Gandhi surname touches the Indian psyche with reference to Gandhian principles at a very abstract level but at the more popular, political, and realistic level, Gandhi is the Gandhi family, nowhere related to the Mahatma. Gandhi has been reduced to a few ‘isms’ and ‘giris’ today for conveniently evoking him and his ideals without any understanding or commitment towards them. Even during the Emergency, while Indira Gandhi unleashed a ‘tinpot dictatorship’ on India, the opposition harked back to Gandhi’s principles and acted suitably morally outraged at the events that were taking place. That both sides the opposition as well as the government, were equally opportunistic is another story.

The following poems also repeatedly draw contrasts between Gandhi then and the Gandhis now. This is something peculiar to the Indian body politic; to go back to morals and ideologies, especially those of Gandhi when politically necessary, while for the most part, the state carries on as it always has, corrupt and inefficient. One does not make a case for the political system to follow these principles in toto, but simply to point out the hypocrisy rampant in India not just during the 1970s but even today. Another reason, as I pointed out earlier, could be the desire to revert back to a patriarchal system wherein the leader of the nation was the Mahatma, the ‘father of the nation’. This is also a rejection of the Mother India matriarchy that was being projected by Indira. One can state that her re-election in 1980 refutes this hypothesis; however her re-election was more on account of there being no alternative to the Janata Party which was in shambles.

The poem ‘On the Memorial for Martyrs’ by Savyasachi (152) makes a direct address to Gandhi and goes back to the days when Gandhi fought for India’s Independence. The poem evokes all those heroic images of freedom that are now a part of the nationalist discourse and then, goes on to contrast them with the present, that is India under the yoke of the Emergency:
But the dream that you and they saw has perhaps been realized
Now your country is free
And your children, your friends and brothers
Everyone is breathing the disciplined,
Democratic air of this free country-
Except for a few traitorous fascists
Who are under arrest
Believe me, it is your twenty-eighth Independence Day!

The air that people breathe today is ‘democratic’ and more importantly ‘disciplined’. There is none of the spontaneity that marked the post-independence days. ‘The fascists’ are under arrest as they rightly should be and the nation celebrates its 28th Independence Day in the shackles of an enforced discipline.

The constant ironic contrast between Gandhi and Gandhi is voiced again in the two poems — ‘The Rose Folk’ (181) and ‘Remember Gandhi’ (178). There is ‘peace, absolute peace’, and ‘it appears we’re really on the move’. But this peace and progress come at a high cost. This is a ‘land of hollow noise’ where ‘we must keep mum’. The fear psychosis induced by the government thrives on the subservience to the new order that it demands from the people as they’re told ‘not to raise our heads’. There are thus no evils in such a world purged of all vices by the unceasing and relentless rigours of censorship

No more rape, corruption nepotism
In the papers; the press is
purified “Information”.

A perfectly utopian dystopia! The tyrant envisions and is able to successfully create just such a world as s/he imagines. And no one dares break the illusion!

The poem ‘Remember Gandhi’ criticizes all aspects of the Emergency that were used to justify the government’s actions. The much touted fall in prices was also short-lived as they did rise eventually. Again the most stinging criticism comes in for the sterilization campaign which as stated earlier targeted the poor and the lower middle classes.

Stray dogs are castrated
So India’s population is down.
Going by the accounts available, people were sterilized with more or less the same crudity in thought and fashion as animals are in India. If the idea was to bring India's stray 'population' under control, the messiahs of family planning or population control felt that no quarter should be given to those who wantonly went on increasing India's population.

‘Government is god, work is worship': during the Emergency the slogan ‘Work is Worship’ was promoted to give the people the message that the government meant business and would not tolerate slackness. The regime thought that the people existed for it and therefore had to obey its dictums. It deluded itself into thinking that it was all powerful, invincible and controlled the lives of the people. So while the nation progressed under the weight of slogans heavier than democracy,

The tricolour stuck soggy to the pole
The Ashoka wheel stands still.

Symbols of India’s pride and freedom are pushed to the corners as they no longer have any meaning save those of tokenism. Propaganda blared out by AIR (All India Radio) fills the nation with its chorus amongst the disciplined ranks.

Shut your mouth and speak no evil
Just remember Gandhi – Yes, Gandhi.

Remember only ‘Gandhi’, not the Mahatma who is deified in India but the Gandhis who are building a ‘rose dynasty’. Both Indira and Sanjay captured popular imagination in different ways. A lot of people who spared no effort in cozying upto the Gandhis during the Emergency proved equally virulent in castigating these two after their loss in 1977, which has subsequently led to the lack of an objective and critical assessment of the two. An objective study of the events leading to the Emergency shows that while Indira and Sanjay Gandhi were most certainly the primary architects of the Emergency, the excesses that happened, took place at all levels. Apart from this, the opposition cannot be absolved of all that happened either. So to hold Indira Gandhi as the villain of the piece would not be fair. However since she was the public face of the Emergency, public perception saw her as such and so most of the poems also envision her in such negative images of female energy.

The very first poem of this anthology titled ‘Abattoir’ (Sharma, 3) portrays both Sanjay and Indira as ogres who appear as wicked creatures of the night to terrify the masses. These terrifying and graphic images of Indira and Sanjay are echoed in Rushdie’s and O.V.
Vijayan’s works too. The poem makes use of images such as ‘long-taloned hands’, ‘thousand cavernous mouths belching repeated volleys of sulphuric phrases’ which is an obvious reference to her speeches through which she sought hard to convince people of the Emergency. The imagery is that of a nation benumbed and hypnotized by a scheming, crafty ogress and her cohorts. Crowds are rendered as ‘deaf-mutes’ in an obvious reference to censorship. Indira Gandhi captured popular imagination during her tenure as Prime Minister prior to the Emergency, and was deified as a goddess. Therefore, when she declared the Emergency people did not react, let apart vociferously, because of their faith in her. However this was just one aspect of the lady as she soon transformed from a goddess into an ogress:

This dame –
Blessed with countless, crafted faces
Long arms
Is a great spell-binding being
She sweetly pronouncing this, announcing that,
Has rendered a simple folk into charming puppets.

Indira is portrayed as a shrewd politician who could manipulate the masses like ‘puppets’ through her persuasive speeches which is not very far from the truth. The poem is a criticism of the Indian populace also who are content to remain in a zombie like state of subservience.

Yet another poem, ‘Trip’ by Akrish (234), speaks of both Indira and Sanjay furiously riding a hobbyhorse and not listening to anybody by their side. The hobbyhorse of course is India and, as is documented, Indira and Sanjay carried on in a high handed manner during the Emergency, goaded as they were by the sycophants surrounding them.

Now listening to the dutiful and kind
Charmed by cheers weltering
From kith, kin and surrounding men
A whip in hand like a sceptre
Sitting in spite on this horse
Hurriedly rocking to and fro
Oh, mother-child, where do you go?

The poem makes use of the phrase ‘sceptre like whip’ to refer to their autocratic and tyrannical nature. There were no clear policy initiatives that were taken during the Emergency; it was totally directionless. Had there been any positive and constructive policy
initiatives that had been taken or implemented during the Emergency, it would not have seemed as repressive in retrospect since there was undoubtedly much that could have been achieved in more concrete terms as regards the nation’s progress during this period.

The poem ‘Black Queen’s Black Tale’ by Siddalingaiah (16) was a ‘popular ballad sung in chorus during Emergency’ (editor’s note, 16). It is a powerful poem which depicts in a fairy tale language the Black Deeds of Emergency with Indira as the Black Queen. The poet makes references to the mass arrests that took place as ‘the country lay huddled in jails’. The Black Queen riding on her Black Horse, the Emergency, coursed through the fields of India and ‘reaped the harvest of death’. Taking up Dev Kant Barooah the then Congress President’s sycophantic tribute, ‘Indira is India, and India Indira’, the poet says

O she was India
India was she
Between the Mother and Son
O where are we?

It is a lament for the nation and its people who were overpowered by the whims of both Mother and Son. The poem delves into images that are nightmarish in their intensity as it talks of the forcible sterilizations that took place during the Emergency. Indira Gandhi is portrayed as the merciless tyrant of the excesses that took place:

She slashed the pregnant mothers
And fed their foetuses to the dogs.

Oh the Black Queen of the Black Knife
The Black Tool of Vasectomy
She castrated the children of the poor
And the aged of the outcasts.

The whole nation is paralysed by the ‘Black Queen’ who uses her power to terrorise the masses into submission. Apart from being one of the main reasons for the unpopularity of the Emergency as also the reason why the Congress lost the elections, the sterilization campaign is also an aspect of the Emergency that has figured the most in literature and, more often than not, in the same nightmarish imagery. One can say that it horrified Indian sensibility that such a perverse use of power could be used so ruthlessly by a democratically elected government on its own people. This was something that not even the British had done. The poem points to
the victimization of the poor by the state under the sterilization programme. Some accounts also corroborate the poem's statement that the 'aged' of the outcasts were sterilized. Indira is seen wielding a 'black knife' making use of the 'Black Tool of Vasectomy' and carrying not just physical sterilization but a spiritual sterilization as well.

A relatively simple poem 'Come People' by an anonymous poet (33) speaks of a 'Queen' who had two sons, an obvious reference to Indira and her two sons, Rajiv and Sanjay Gandhi, both pampered and spoiled. The young prince and Queen

Both were self-willed and impetuous

... 

One day they decided to lock each open mouth
They jailed who dared to speak
Lathis, firing, censor, MISA
Like a chakka grinds them all.

Both mother and son are depicted as highly impetuous and authoritative who decide to curtail democracy on an impulse and impose censorship upon people, locking dissenters under MISA; using force whether required or not, grinding people as though in a grindstone. It is interesting to note that in all such poems Indira is portrayed as a Queen or Empress, not only because she assumed herself to be the only one who could rule India but also because, despite her ego-trip, she did tower over all the other leaders at that time, and was accorded the status of a queen, albeit a tyrannical one, in popular imagination. It can even be surmised that she was exalted as such by the sycophants around her because India has a tradition of personality cults and an especially strong fixation on the Gandhi family. This glorification also led to the rise of a deep seated insecurity amongst the opposition who could not throw Indira till she herself gave them an opportunity to do so. During the Emergency the metaphor of a queen was actually transmuted into reality as absolute power was abrogated by Mrs. Gandhi. Sanjay was also glorified as a 'crown prince' and hailed as the 'heir apparent' by sycophants making it appear as if monarchy had overtaken Indian democracy.

The poem 'Emergency Operation of the Indian Constitution' by Baikuntanath Patnaik (66) picks up the same issues as the others, making references to the loss of democracy, the imposition of censorship and the twenty point programme as also the 'trappings of power'. However, in this poem Indira is contrasted with two figures in history, Gandhi, 'a half-naked pauper', and Hitler. But,
In the heat of history, power melts
Like rotten snow.

No dictator has ever been able to hold on to power permanently whether it was Hitler, Idi Amin or even Indira, if we include her in this category. One cannot call Indira’s comparison with Hitler very accurate because Indira, in all fairness, was not really as bigoted as Hitler, though a lot of people have commented on her dictatorial tendencies. The many similarities between Indira’s and Hitler’s regimes have been brought out brilliantly by L.K. Advani in his book *A Prisoner’s Scrapbook*, as discussed in Chapter 2.

The poem ‘The Lady’ (Ismail, 15) makes a reference to Indira Gandhi as a child who was sufficiently inspired by the freedom struggle to have burnt her doll as her contribution to that struggle and yet the same lady now seemed to have forgotten the ideals that had once inspired such an act.

Willfully
She is burning to ashes
The motherland

For the sake of
Her darling
Living doll!

The ‘living doll’ is Sanjay for whose sake she was seen to be burning the nation. The policies initiated by him as also the misuse of power that he was indulging in was fast corroding all manner of accountability and order in the government. What disillusioned people the most was the blind love of Indira as a mother in allowing such undemocratic acts to take place.

A very interesting poem is ‘Madam, How’re You?’ (Ramjan A. Darga, 126) which does not use the sort of graphic or violent imagery that the other poems indulge in; instead the poet chooses to highlight a very different aspect of the Emergency. He starts the poem with a number of mundane questions which, he assures ‘Madam’, have nothing to do with politics. He also states that he has nothing to do with all those people who live on the margins of Madam’s life and do all those chores and services that one never notices and yet without whom our ordered existence would crumble down. There is a deep sarcasm inherent in the poem wherein the poet assures ‘Madam’ that he is not writing about politics or speaking of all such things because then
... I would be identifying with my kin
and politicizing what comes out of my pen
then would my poetry be no poetry but ...

Since no reference to anything political from any aspect could be made in literature during the Emergency, the poet asks if he should feign ignorance of all that is taking place till he reaches that 'pristine state' of natural ignorance. For the poet, not being able to express himself, is tantamount to a return to that savage existence devoid of any understanding or intelligence. In that animal state of mind alone can he rid himself of contemporary events. The poem is powerful in its simplicity despite its lack of overtly gruesome or graphic images of the Emergency or Indira Gandhi. The poet does not castigate those in power but simply states his dilemma as a poet who cannot be made to write poems of beauty, divorced from all that was happening around him, thereby making a critique of the adage 'Art for Art's sake'. His vocation as a poet is tied with his need to write about things that spring from reality, even if they be political in nature. In being asked to eschew anything of that nature, the poet asks Madam (Indira Gandhi), whether he can be allowed to speak the truth or should he just shut up: 'Then do tell me, madam, shall I speak or shut up?'

Sanjay Gandhi on the other hand is depicted in most poems and as the spoilt son of a doting mother. The poem 'Vision', by Bhavani Prasad Mishra (244) talks of Sanjay as the 'golden boy' who has risen sufficiently high to crush all those who oppose him:

What strength and skill!
As they fall
Listen how the press
Hails him golden boy!

There is a criticism of the Indian press which hailed him as the 'golden boy' and added much more than was required to his already swollen public image. Regardless of his lack of any formal position or achievements, he was hailed and glorified as the new leader by the press and pro-Emergency politicians because he was the closest to Indira Gandhi at that point of time. The poet comments upon both mother and son as being autocratic and driven by power:

Each leaf on the hill
Obeys her
Her boy's every wish
Granted –
He likes collecting
Money, power, praise
Mountains of stuff.

But though the ‘son’ might be in power and was ruthlessly exerting it upon the people the poet warns that such blatant misuse of power would have its reprisals also. The excesses perpetrated upon the people are raising a silent storm, and the poet is prophetic in his warning when he says that if these leaders stop their bestial behaviour, then the people might still forgive them, if not,

The people of this land
Will devour them.

Apart from the Gandhis, another important figure on the political scene at this point was JP, whose JPM had roused masses and posed a threat to Indira Gandhi because it was first and foremost a revolution against the evils assailing the Indian system and later it came to target Indira personally. JP, a Gandhian himself and a contemporary of Nehru, was seen by the masses as a saviour and as the Emergency progressively deteriorated into sheer tyranny, JP’s support base grew even stronger amongst the people. The poem ‘Diwali 1975’ by Nirankar Dev Sewak (52) voices the kind of love that people had for JP as their hope against dictatorship. That JP’s movement was itself full of flaws and was unable to survive beyond the initial years of the Janata government is discussed in the preceding chapters. Nonetheless, while Indira’s popularity fell, JP’s rose to tremendous heights. The poet here laments that people cannot celebrate Diwali this year because the ‘Prakash’, Hindi for light and part of JP’s name, is ‘imprisoned in a solitary cell’. And with all hope and light imprisoned in a solitary cell, every house also turns into a prison. The other two poems, both titled ‘To JP’, by Narayan Desai (222) and Vishnu Pandy (223) also speak of JP while he was in jail. The first poem states that JP was jailed because he had dared to speak the truth and challenge the government. The poet feels these to be dark days indeed when those who are corrupt can jail a person such as JP. The other poem comments on the levels of the ridiculous that the present government has fallen into, declaring everything to be unlawful and unconstitutional and in making amendments as and when it suited them to bend the constitution according to their whims. So much so that even JP’s lament of not being able to see the sky from the jail becomes a potential ‘reactionary and conspiratorial’ comment. And the poet says that if there be a need,
One more amendment
We'll pass unanimously
And with no opposition,
 Quite Constitutional, of course!

The Congress government had passed a number of amendments during this period and since most of the opposition was locked up under MISA, there was obviously no opposition to the government. The Emergency and all that took place was within constitutional purview and technically correct but it was not done in the spirit of the constitution since most of the amendments sought to make the position of the PM absolute and also conferred dictatorial powers unto him/her. Moreover all these legislations were passed in the absence of the opposition which is the constitutional safeguard against the government’s becoming absolute and authoritarian.

III

We the People

A study of the literature based on the Emergency would be totally lop-sided if it did not involve an analysis of the responses of the masses towards the Emergency or the lack of such reactions. This section therefore contains first and foremost the sycophancy that not only politicians but also the intelligentsia freely indulged in as also the self deprecation on the part of the people for having suffered such a state of affairs without protest. There is also the theme of heroic protest which was displayed by students and some valiant others who refused to be cowed down by authoritarianism.

On the other hand, there has been much criticism of the sycophancy and servility that was displayed by some sections of the Indian society also. While this was indulged in for the most part by politicians one also saw parts of the press and the intelligentsia bowing before the Emergency and supporting it regardless of the principles involved. A very brilliant poem that captures the political scenario of the time is ‘The New Great Indian Circus’ by Vasant Bapat (145) which refers to almost all the major people in power at that point if time. A highly satirical poem, it exposes the Indian political scene to be the circus that it was during the Emergency. The poem starts with the circus queen, indubitably Mrs. Gandhi, riding in on an Assamese rhino, none other than Dev Kant Barooah, the then Congress President.
In front, musicians of sorts on a goat’s bandwagon
Behind Russian bears in an orderly dance
   The whip cracked, the lion jumped onto the stool
   Fearing one more stripe on his manly back
   The Bengal tiger smiled under his moustache!
It’s always fun for tamed elephants
Saluting while they shit

The ‘Russian bears’ are the CPI who were supportive of the Emergency and danced to the tunes of the Prime Minister. There is a whip crack and the lion jumps onto the stool fearing reprisal for disobedience. The circus queen is a stickler for discipline which is why the tame elephants scared enough to shit, ‘salute’ her. The ‘Bengal Tiger’ S.S. Ray, then chief minister of West Bengal and very close to the Gandhis, smiles behind his moustache.

Colts with convenient pads on their eyes
Circle behind the bigger horses

While the older ones follow the circus queen’s whistle, the young ones follow behind with pads on their eyes symbolizing the blind obedience of the younger generations in following the paths laid down by the older generations. There is no fire of rebellion or hope from the younger generation either. The lone camel (JP) cries himself hoarse pleading for animals to stop the circus but his protest is rewarded with ‘a proper whack on his hump’. Any other sort of dissent, as shown by ‘a gorilla’, is repressed equally brutally as he ‘Got his balls squeezed for three hours’. The ‘menagerie’ performs as the circus queen commands them to:

   When she said “shut up”, the whole menagerie went silent
   As quick as she made a sign, the clowns rushed forward
   Another sign, they dashed themselves to the ground

Her order to ‘shut up’ is obeyed with instant silence, which is how Indira’s orders were acted upon with absolute concomitance by politicians or rather the ‘clowns’. It is actually sickening to note that India’s politicians performed like clowns and groveled into servility of the basest kind and lampooned themselves not just in front of the Indian masses, but the world over. The poet does not spare the media either as

   ... T.V. gave it loyal coverage
   everyone smiles on seeing it play
   In the whole world no bigger show.
The T.V. news agency the ‘Samachar’ fed the masses with government propaganda showing what the poet has just stated, ‘The New Great Indian Show’. The world’s biggest democracy was making a bizarre spectacle of itself and it was for the benefit of the whole world to see the show. There is a sense of disgust and shame inherent in the poem as the poet sees the ‘leaders of the nation’ performing like dumb animals in front of the circus queen. The poem does not target Indira Gandhi as much as it denounces the spineless politicians who could have averted such a crisis had they but shown the gumption to stand by their principles and not give in to petty interests. This kind of sycophancy, sadly enough, still exists among the Indian politicians and is the bane of Indian politics.

Another poem is ‘Sycophantic Wisdom’ by J.D. Sethi (207) which takes on the so called ‘critics and rebels of yesterday’ who are ‘bowing and scraping today’, their rebellious ideals and struggles forgotten with the turn of events. No more lives of hardship for them as they would rather lead an easy life devoid of any exertion:

They don’t know how, they claim, such changes
Came to them
Oh, such innocence in people of noble faith
and great conviction!

These changes would of course be hard to explain as would have been the case for such rebels of yesterday who turned to support the Emergency. So saturated was the air with sycophancy that nothing could be done without groveling or offering salaams first.

And our wise men thus reveal their blatant foolishness.

It exposes the Indian intelligentsia to be hollow and opportunistic, changing sides as and when required or convenient. No more radical cries or slogans, as survival demands ‘sycophantic wisdom’ and the Indian critic does just this thereby revealing his/her fundamental ‘foolishness’.

This theme is followed through in other poems also that are marked by self-deprecation as also a critique of India’s intellectuals and politicians. The poem ‘Confession of India’s Intellectuals’ (Shahreyar, 35) is a biting attack on the self for being cowardly and deserving of punishment. The poet begs to be flung down from the heavens and does not care if his body suffers or perishes but only requests that
The spinal cord not snap
And we don’t give up
The habit of crawling.

This habit of bending over seems to be deeply entrenched in the Indian psyche which keeps crawling before the rulers even while aware of its pusillanimity.

‘Toast’ (226) by Nissim Ezekiel is a poem stark in its simplicity and condemnation of the self. The poet and his company of friends raise toasts

To those in power
Beyond the law
And those in prison
With no recourse to it.

However while the party carries on with its cheerful toasts, somewhere the taste of cowardice mingles with that of the wine. Still there is no reason to complain since the people at the party and the poet have all assimilated the new creed of ‘silence’. The self stays the same burying itself under new creeds; it does so without complaints or discomfort though the conscience does prickle every now and then. Another drink to be had and again the same toast. The company cheerfully downs its drink aware that there are those fighting for their sake but still

Let others fight
For you know what.

The ‘you know what’ should not be mentioned lest it cast a pall of gloom over this cheerful company, or worse, bring the prison closer home. It is yet another instance of India’s modern intellectuals who enjoy haranguing over the troubles assailing the nation but when it comes to the crunch, prefer to leave all the fighting to the others. It is a bitterly sarcastic and self-deprecating poem that exposes the shallowness of the educated self and the cowardice within.

Another poem in a similar vein is ‘Where Were You When …’ by E.V. Ramakrishnan (260). The poem is also a critique of the old Indian habit of leaving one’s own battles for someone else to fight. It starts with the poet questioning his father ‘Where were you when they fought for freedom?’ The father tries to justify his lack of participation by saying that there were more pressing matters that engaged him at home. The circle comes back when the poet also prepares a similar answer in anticipation of his son’s question ‘where were you when …?’ with reference to the Emergency. The poet too was simply afraid like his father
before him even though he says that there was work in the college and moreover the prices were down, and so there was no real need to protest against the Emergency, an answer that would have perhaps found its echoes in many houses in India. The poet is aware that just as he understood his father's cowardice, his son will know of his too. Most people justified their lack of participation in protesting against the Emergency by citing their other everyday responsibilities which demanded their attention. One cannot censure such a decision either because fighting for ideals seems glorious when placed in history books, but can be a very exacting struggle in everyday life, and consequently not many were prepared to put their selves and their families as sacrifices at the altar of democracy. Both these poems show that while people were aware of the situation and how they should probably have fought against it, they are also painfully aware that heroism was difficult for the ordinary citizen bogged down as s/he was by the weight of responsibilities that can crush him/her. S/he is also terrorized by the powers of the authorities that can harass him or her. This fear of standing up against authority or tyranny carries on from one generation to the other till it becomes a national character. Things have changed marginally but we still need to go a long way. Similarly, the poem 'Why?' by G.K.G. Joshi (267) questions intellectuals and asks if they are

Buried deep under brochures
Suffocated with conferences?

The role of the intellectuals which has been limited in this poem to attending conferences and reading brochures may be a bit too judgmental but not too far removed from the truth either. The poet questions their lack of any response or outcry for all those being shot at in cities. The last line makes a strong statement as the poet questions

Or is their highbrow hypocrisy
Greater than trigger happy democracy?

The Emergency which was presented as a disciplined democracy had run amuck in the Indian state and the fact that it was a state controlled anarchy that was unleashed upon the people is an aspect which leads to much concern. It was a democracy that did not hesitate to shoot people at will and the intellectuals, far from protesting, were happy at just being intellectual.

Since these are multiple voices, one finds poems of determination and heroism also as opposed to the self-deprecatory note of the earlier poems. They voice a determination not to succumb to the forces that threatened to overturn India itself. It was indeed a difficult choice to make if one looks back now because of the repressive atmosphere which was intensified
by the judiciary’s helplessness also which made legal recourse also useless. There was no avenue open for the masses since everything had been shackled or appropriated by the government – the press silenced, the bureaucracy corrupted, the opposition jailed, and the judiciary bound. For the few who did take a stand, it is admirable indeed because, brief as it might have been, this was in some way an even harder struggle for freedom because one did not even know whom to trust amongst one’s fellowmen.

One poem named ‘One of your Creations’ by Akhtarul Imam (156) clearly blames the Congress government for treating the common man as a ‘rubber doll’ who was victimized and mistreated at will. But he also warns that there is a limit to oppression. The poet’s anger is a product of the conditions and the times that have been brought on by those in power:

I am bred
...
by the hell you have decorated
by this new age-its filthy product.

And it is this very Frankenstein’s monster that will spit all the poison that this age has stuffed him with, back onto the faces of the oppressors as they stretch him to his limits. It is a warning to those in power of the consequences of their sadistic acts.

‘Determination’, a poem by the former Prime Minister of India A.B. Vajpayee (46), when he was in prison in 1976 resounds with the spirit of protest that was present amongst those who refused to bend over. However it makes a very clichéd distinction between the forces of good and evil as represented by the protestors and the government respectively.

Truth against power
Justice against injustice.

The opposition was united against the Congress government, some because of their commitment towards principles and others simply because this was a good opportunity to finally overthrow Indira Gandhi. The fact that Vajpayee was amongst the committed few makes the fervour imbued in this poem believable. The poet asserts that the ‘obscene power’ of those ruling is ‘bestial’ and ‘without limits’ but he and his fellow compatriots are still carrying forward the torch of protest despite the odds, because while

The powers of darkness may challenge us
And we may break, but never bend.
The few who chose to take a stand did not indeed ‘bend’ and sought to record their protest in some way or the other as is evident from this poem written in prison.

The poem ‘White Paper’ (Nara, 203) refers to the censorship imposed on the press as also the curtailment of free expression of the masses. During censorship some papers such as The Indian Express and The Statesman sought to express their dissent and protest by running blank pages instead of censored portions. This was a highly effective method of registering protest, however one that irked the government also which is why the poet says that

White paper is more important than
What I now write.

because his own poetry is lost between words. He cannot express himself with the complete freedom that a white paper can in its emptiness, conveying nothing and yet everything. Ironically it is the words that he chooses to express himself with that hijack his poetry. Words can ‘hijack’ truth and distort it as the poet states in the lines to ‘truth hiding behind heavy headlines’. The more he writes, the more his poetry will break through spaces that keep growing between the rigidity and confinement of the words he uses. It is an ironic poem, which makes evident the moral dilemma that writers and artists faced. They sought covert ways of expressing their protest since an open confrontation could be quite risky at times. Nonetheless, blank spaces, which no censors could strike off, held a plethora of meanings and more weight than empty words stripped of all meaning.

A similar sentiment is echoed in the poem ‘In our Ranks’ by Hassan Naeem (104) wherein he holds his poems as valiant soldiers that carry ‘fire in their hands’. It is courage that flows as blood in his poems during the dark times that surround the poet. Finally the poem ‘Vow of the Sun of ’76’ by Narendra Bodke (249) which starts with the exhortation

Swear to me by the blood flowing through my pen
Swear to me by the burning discontent in thousands of eyes
Swear to me by the innocent faces of hungry emaciated children
Swear to me by that sun colored with the midnight’s blood
Swear friends that the mediating volcano
In your hearts must now erupt.

Such an exhortation makes it clear that the Emergency had a sufficient enough impact upon the people who could understand its implications. The poem urges the masses not let to the
discontent simmering in their hearts lie still any anymore. The poet recalls Gandhi and admits that while he was alive, his ideals also lived but as the nation progressed these were conveniently forgotten. And suddenly

All of us were in a huge prison
Someone barked an order and our mouths were shut.

The poet's concern regarding the direction in which the India is headed was a concern shared by many others as well. The 'land of the poet Tagore' had now fallen into a world ruled by bayonets and fear. Yet the poet exhorts his fellow compatriots to not let this terror overtake them. He urges them to let anger and anguish 'explode through a million mouths' as that is the only salvation, the only hope for this country today.

A silent, quiet hope of resurrection is echoed in the poem 'After the Storm' (I.K. Sharma, 7). The poet refers to not just the physical prison that he is imprisoned in but the psychological prison of an atmosphere of fear, crime and censorship. But while this darkness and silence envelopes the people, the poet has the conviction that

The gale at dawn will resurrect
And transform us all.

The poem speaks of hope and resurrection which will come with the dawn of a new day, transforming the people and rousing them out of their fear induced torpor. What pinched people the most was the rude clamping down of their freedom of speech. And this 'Sinewy silence composes dumb wounds'. These wounds had roused the people to express their anger through the most powerful weapon that they have in a democracy the right to vote.

These are thus the main themes that these poems explore. There are also some poems that seek to view problems not directly related to the Emergency, simply 'because poets and readers feel their expression is restrained' (Perry, xxxiv). According to Perry this creates the problem of differentiating between the 'personal' and the 'political'. While there are some poems in this anthology that do fall in the trap of using the political for the personal, it is important to note that not everyone was writing specifically for inclusion in an anthology of Emergency protest poetry. Moreover the personal and political are intertwined. One cannot be political without being personal because the political always has an effect on the personal. If censorship was a political act, it affected the personal too since the loss of freedom to express oneself is personal indeed and these feelings may then be 'embodied or conveyed
politically in the salient or contemporary terms, images and relationships’ (Perry, xxxiv). These are individual responses to an event that has not been studied sufficiently. There were mixed reactions by people towards this event since it was too short-lived, though while it lasted it seemed never-ending. Initially there was indifference, passive approval also; later however it was overtaken by a sense of darkness as the true face of the Emergency came to the fore. The fear that people experienced thus was very personal. So while one would expect protest poetry to be political one cannot expect it to be divorced from the personal either.

Most of these poems are translations of poems from all over India and so have a lot of features that one would expect to find in translations. A very common feature is the use of ‘hyperbole’ (Perry, xxv) and the use of ‘highly generalized images of darkness, caged birds, rampaging floods, horses, hordes, the extreme rhetoric of crisis’. These are images that at times seem quite shrill and exaggerated in their vehemence especially when they voice rather clichéd emotions and feelings. Then there is also a repetition of the almost mythological and Bollywood scenario of a classic fight between the Manichean opposites of good and evil which at times seems too simplistic and lacking in good literary value. The harangues against Indira while understandable leads to an essentialisation of the event in terms of one woman.

According to Perry it often ‘seems contradictory and self-defeating to attempt to match the cruelty and violence of the oppressor by using a combative or disruptive language, a tactic alien also to the strongest humane traditions of non-violent protest.’ (xxxvi) While Perry is right in stating that language must be reclaimed for the ‘people oppressed’ (ibid) yet his view that using the same ‘combative language defeats the purpose of the protest’ cannot be accepted. No country or community has been able to divorce itself from violence including India. Even though it boasts of non-violence, it is no stranger to violence. Also whether non-violence is a tradition or not bears looking into since I cannot help but see it as one more instance of generalization. Certainly the independence struggle was won on the basis of non-violence, yet one wonders whether those principles of non-violence are as deeply entrenched in the Indian psyche as we emphasise them to be. It is certainly not of much value in today’s India which is as aggressive and assertive as any other nation. Non-violence, one of the most powerful weapons of protest, is also probably the most exacting as it requires not just physical, but mental and spiritual discipline and strength. Not that the Indian masses do not have such strength, but my point is that the tradition itself is not as well grounded as it is constructed to be. Had it been so, the Emergency would not have been declared in the first place and secondly, none of the excesses that took place would have
taken place either. If people are subjected to violence, combating that violence through the poetry of violence cannot be held as a defeat of the purpose of poetry. To also hold that violence belongs to the oppressor alone is also to willingly accept one’s status a victim. In the Indian context while the Emergency is an example of how the government actually used force and violence against the masses, the use of such force in poetry is protest from a new India that refuses to turn the other cheek. It points to the truth that India cannot be taken as a nation of illiterates and practitioners of non-violence but a nation that can strike back even if it means taking a stand against one’s own government. Paniker’s view that ‘poems of mere anger or abuse proved to be weak and self-defeating’, and that what was required was ‘seeing the whole with humour and balance’ can be taken as a more balanced view (iii). It is true that most poems simply end up being mere castigations of those in power. Very few poems are actually motivated by a sense of purpose and understanding, and in such poems, whether it is violence or non-violence, one can fathom the feelings of the people. Poems which indulge in mere rhetoric are representative of a vast majority that simply chose to pick out the villain of the piece and criticize him/her. In fact, this is a flaw that most of the literature based on the Emergency suffers from. However given the fact that not many people could judge the event objectively, and more importantly in its entirety, such a popular view of the event is quite understandable. It was left to the experts who could comprehend the political as well as socio-economic ramifications of the event, to put forward a more nuanced view of the event.

Going back to the literary aspect of these poems, the “tone sounds exaggerated” by the editor’s own admission (Perry, xviii) and in many cases a lot of poems suffer from bad translations so much so that they lose their sense of meaning. The poem ‘The Black Ordinance’ by G.Nagaraj Mullur (15) translated from Kannada is an example of the worn out stereotypes that Indira Gandhi was portrayed in such as the “Durga of Delhi” who commands complete servility of the people. The last stanza of the poem however becomes something of a puzzle on account of translation when the poet says

Silence –
Has frozen into a song
That burns
In the dark bosoms of dark people.

Contradictory images that cannot quite carry the weight of the poem or convey its meaning. If silence has frozen into a song, why does it burn still? And if silence is frozen how has it been converted into a song?
Perry also discusses problems of bad poetry and quite interestingly states that a lot of these poems were the creations of the ‘hyper-educated literati’ who ‘created for themselves exciting experiences out of paranoid delusions of officially inspired injuries and insults ... publishing these claims after the Emergency was lifted’ (xxxi). This generalization brought about by the editor’s discussion with sections of the intelligentsia itself is quite a strong criticism of this very section, but one that cannot quite be rejected nor accepted in its entirety. While it is true that a lot of the literature in non-fiction and poetry was brought out after the Emergency, one cannot quite hold this against the literature itself as it is an expression of a felt experience, an important commentary on the event, regardless of its literary quality. Yet to use those experiences and put one’s own self in those experiences and then write about the Emergency while projecting the self as the victim would certainly account for bad literature. Critics see such a ‘hyper-educated literati’ as craving for ‘social-importance’ lest they be left out in the anti-Emergency denunciation or heroics. But one has to concede that not all such poems are based on pseudo experiences. Some of these poems do carry self-castigation as also a refusal to give into the dictums of the government. Such poems that carry a silent protest then become the most representative and powerful poems of the Emergency.

While the authenticity of these poems i.e. whether composed post-facto or during the Emergency, is somewhat debatable, yet their relevance cannot be undermined with respect to understanding the Emergency. These poems, regardless of their personal or political overtones, can be taken as the testimonies of the Indian masses. The inherent subjectivity and emotiveness of a poem, coupled with its ability to touch people, makes it an important representative of protest. As Perry says ‘India’s cultural history would be significantly misleading without the testimony of these poems’. These are, as Paniker says, not ‘mere footnotes to politics’ (liii), they go much beyond that and show how the political can never be divorced from the personal. The fact that the Emergency is a part of Indian history is willy-nilly accepted by us, but that it was intense enough to have inspired a poetic outburst, complete with all the diverse emotions it provoked, is something that is understood only through these poems. These are the voices of those who saw the Emergency as a very tangible threat to the larger existence of a nation and, by that respect, their own. The horror, the silent despair, the helplessness and the anger are all portrayed in these poems and these form our introduction to the Emergency.