The Indian Political Cartoon: Resisting Censorship During the Emergency, 1975-1977

Word Count: 8,010

Academic Year: 2022-2023

Introduction

By the time of its imposition in 1975, the Indian Emergency was the third instance in which such measures had been taken by the State in the protection of its country.[1] Paradoxically, this instance would also be the first and last of its kind. Argued on the basis of a generous interpretation of the reserve powers made available via Articles 352 and 360 of the Indian constitution, Congress President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed would declare a nationwide state of emergency on the night of the 25th of June 1975.[2] This would be an initiative allegedly modelled on the ideas of Siddhartha Shankar Ray, a close adviser to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, whose proposal saw that another emergency could be announced in response to 'internal disturbance', in spite of the previous measures of 1971 still remaining in place.[3] Indeed, the circumstances of war against Pakistan had provided ample justification for an emergency, but the concerns then had related to 'external' factors only.[4] Ray's own argument was that the two could coexist unproblematically.[5]

The grounds on which the Emergency was declared were unprecedented and controversial at the time of its imposition, and remain so today in review of the history of postcolonial India. However, it is not for this reason alone that this political crisis has been granted its infamy – arguably stemming more-so from what the State chose to do with its newfound powers, up until their relinquishment on 18th January 1977. The context that defined such "disturbances" requires rewinding almost two years from the point of the Emergency's declaration.[6] As detailed by Gyan Prakash, popular mobilisation had grown in 1973 out of the efforts of a

[1] Christophe Jaffrelot; Pratinav Anil, *India's First Dictatorship: the Emergency, 1975-1977* (United Kingdom: C. Hurst & Co., 2020), pp. 15-17.
[2] Ibid., pp. 15-17, 1-2.
[3] Ibid., pp. 1-2, 15-16.
[4] Ibid., pp. 15-16.
[5] Ibid., p. 16.
[6] Jaffrelot & Anil, *India's First Dictatorship*, p. 4; Gyan Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles: Indira Gandhi and Democracy's Turning Point* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 1.

renowned ‘Gandhian socialist’, Jayaprakash/“JP” Narayan – a figure whose reputation had stemmed from resistance to the British Raj alongside Jawaharlal Nehru.[7] What would become known as the Bihar, or JP, Movement was initially built on the support of India’s youth, quite notably its students, and was defined by its intentions to urge a ‘fundamental social and political transformation to extend democracy’ – an objective JP phrased as ‘Total Revolution’.[8] This was all in response to the environment of the early 1970s in India, to which the Congress government was a contributor amongst other factors.[9] In the domestic setting, Jaffrelot and Anil detail how ‘Narayan’s movement spoke to the disenchanted at a time of economic stagnation and pervasive corruption’, effectively channelling the frustrations of the many with those in power.[10] In the international context, grassroots mobilisation was experiencing a particularly pronounced upsurge as people confronted their respective leaders over the ‘conundrum of representation in democracy’.[11] Whether this was in civil unrest in Paris on May 1968, the ‘Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, the Cultural Revolution in China, the counterculture and anti-Vietnam War protests inside and outside the United States, or the left-wing insurrections in Latin America’, such dissent would indicate a general climate of worldwide social and political change.[12] As Prakash notes in the turns towards authoritarianism this took in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh, this also demonstrates that the situations faced, and resolutions made, by Indira Gandhi were not entirely ‘unique’ either.[13]

As the months passed by, the JP Movement would organise ‘mass rallies of hundreds of thousands’ whilst demanding Indira Gandhi’s resignation.[14] A gradual shift in the movement’s

[7] Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles*, p. 1.
[8] Ibid., p. 1.
[9] Ibid., p. 11.
[10] Jaffrelot & Anil, *India’s First Dictatorship*, p. 5.
[11] Ibid., pp. 6-7.
[12] Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles*, pp. 6-7.
[13] Ibid., p. 7.
[14] Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles*, p. 1; Jaffrelot & Anil, *India’s First Dictatorship*, p. 4.

focus towards the capital would occur in tandem with a growing support-base: 'ambiguous enough to accommodate a mosaic of concerns', the JP Movement would quickly encompass 'a variety of social groups both on the Left and Right, representing the growing resentment on the streets and in parliament', wherein opposition parties would also capitalise on 'an opportunity to unseat Indira, and lined up behind JP'.[15] However, tensions would most markedly rise come the 12th of June 1975. On this day, not only would Congress lose a considerable degree of its power in the Gujarat state elections to 'the Congress (O)-led coalition, the Janata Morcha', convened by the likes of Moraji Desai, L. K. Advani and Raj Narain, but its Prime Minister would be ruled against in a judgement made by Jag Mohan Lal Sinha, a justice at the Allahabad High Court.[16] This would relate to a petition submitted four years prior by Narain that had accused Indira Gandhi of 'corrupt practices' in elections in 1971 – the results of which 'barred her from contesting elections for six years', wherein 'being a member of parliament was one of the requirements of being prime minister'.[17] Acting under the genuine possibility of a forced resignation, Congress would rally support in Gandhi's favour.[18] The organisation of a 'largely rented crowd of 50,000 at the Boat Club in Delhi', a resolution 'proclaiming Mrs Gandhi "indispensable to the nation"', and attempts at preventing JP from 'leading a major rally at the Ramlila Grounds in the capital', were among the many efforts made by the Government in the lead up to the verdict on their appeal against the ruling.[19] However, Gandhi's vindication by Justice V. R. Krishna Iyer on the 24th of June did not entirely have the consequences hoped for by the Party.[20] On the very same day that the Emergency would be declared, the opposition would 'double down on extra-

[15] Jaffrelot & Anil, *India's First Dictatorship*, pp. 4-5; Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles*, p. 11.
[16] Jaffrelot & Anil, *India's First Dictatorship*, p. 6.
[17] Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles*, pp. 21-22; Jaffrelot & Anil, *India's First Dictatorship*, pp. 6-7.
[18] Jaffrelot & Anil, *India's First Dictatorship*, pp. 7-9.
[19] Ibid., pp. 13-14.
[20] Ibid., p. 14.

parliamentary action' – now 'united on the question of unseating Mrs Gandhi'.[21] A 'major rally at the Ramlila grounds' led by JP would issue a final set of aims: the resignations 'en masse' of state employees, to be followed by those of the armed forces 'to make common cause' with the Movement.[22] Within the space of a few hours, democracy in India would be constitutionally suspended.

The resultant regime would in effect be near-authoritarian in its capabilities and sensibilities, and though 'cloaked in a constitutional dress', as phrased by Prakash, its actions would scarcely convey the convictions of Indira Gandhi that such measures, in her own words, to 'negate the very functioning of democracy' had been 'in the name of democracy' in the first place.[23] Following declaration, as detailed by Jaffrelot and Anil, the arrests were made of all leaders of the major opposition to Congress, including the likes of Narayan, Desai, Advani, Narain, Jyotirmoy Basu, Piloo Mody, Chandra Sekhar, and Mohan Dharia.[24] Those within the 'middle and upper echelons of the six major opposition parties—Desai's Congress (O), the *Jana Sangh*, BLD [*Bharatiya Lok Dal*], SSP [Samyukta Socialist Party], CPI(M) [Communist Party of India (Marxist)], and DMK [*Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam*] – found themselves behind bars as well'.[25] Furthermore, in the hours before these arrests, the supply of electricity to the offices of the press were cut off, barring them from being able to report on the rapid turn of events.[26] This would presage a forthcoming imposition of prior restraint and censorship on the media more broadly, and the consequent arrests of activists who sought to oppose the regime.[27]

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[21] Ibid., p. 14.
[22] Ibid., p. 14.
[23] Jaffrelot & Anil, *India's First Dictatorship*, pp. 14-15; Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles*, p. 10; Jaffrelot & Anil, *India's First Dictatorship*, p. 23.
[24] Jaffrelot & Anil, *India's First Dictatorship*, p. 2.
[25] Ibid., p. 2.
[26] Ibid., p. 2.
[27] Jaffrelot & Anil, *India's First Dictatorship*, pp. 1, 3-4; Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles*, pp. 7-8.

It is perhaps from this, however, that the nature of the Emergency is most easily discernible. The true victims of the regime were in large part the people of India, and for all the action taken by the State in its disabling of political opposition, the fourth estate, the judiciary, the autonomy of state governments to the centre, and 'factions within the incumbent Congress party', the suspension of the 'rights of free speech and assembly' guaranteed under Article 19 of the Indian Constitution is arguably at the core of how deeply democracy was undermined in this endeavour.[28] Indeed, the twenty-point programme as implemented by Indira Gandhi, and its later addition of five further points by her son Sanjay Gandhi, would produce incredibly destructive consequences for vast numbers of the population, despite intentions underpinning them to tackle major issues facing the country.[29] In particular, the slum demolition and sterilisation programmes spearheaded by Sanjay's initiatives were markedly damaging, and form a large part of the infamous legacy the Emergency has come to acquire.[30]

These abuses of power engender significant amounts of scholarship on the Emergency – examining the spatial and temporal variations of lived experiences across India. Alongside this, more fundamental questions are also asked: what caused the Emergency to be declared? What caused it to be so suddenly lifted after a duration of twenty-one months? How should the regime be characterised? And how should it be seen in reflecting upon democracy's troubled trajectory in India since independence? This essay focusses more on democracy itself, and more specifically the right it bestows unto people to freedom of expression. Scholarship on the censorship of mass media during the Emergency is a topic interested in both how and to what extent such expression was silenced, and yet also the agency that was available to people – however small and variable.

[28] Jaffrelot & Anil, *India's First Dictatorship*, pp. 19, 1; Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles*, p. 1; Jaffrelot & Anil, *India's First Dictatorship*, p. 1.
[29] Jaffrelot & Anil, *India's First Dictatorship*, p. 18.
[30] Jaffrelot & Anil, *India's First Dictatorship*, p. 18; Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles*, pp. 7-8.

Perhaps due to its prevalence in various works narrating and interpreting the Emergency, discussions of censorship will quite often touch upon the plight of the press.[31] After all, as aforementioned with reference to Jaffrelot and Anil's account, the measures that were taken by the Congress Government in cutting off electricity supplies, in the lead up to arrests en masse of political opponents, serves as a crucial part of the story of the crisis: integral to a chronological rundown of events as demonstrated in the above text. Supurna Dasgupta also adds to this in referencing the extent to which 'truth' would become the true 'casualty' of the Emergency.[32] Wherein the news is arguably the most immediate source of truth in our day-to-day lives, it seems logical that the significant role of the press would result in it possessing a great deal of importance in writings on censorship. More logical still is that it would become a central focus of the policing practices of the state during the Emergency; in turn becoming a 'scarce commodity'.[33] However, one element within the press that may not present itself as of premier importance, but nevertheless is, would be that of the political cartoon.

A lethal combination of both word and image, the Indian political cartoon was an art form born out of resistance in the colonial era – a context well-acquainted with oppressive regimes of censorship mandated by the British Raj.[34] Tracing its inception in this setting of the early 20th century through to the imposition of the Emergency, this essay ultimately aims to test a specific hypothesis: that the political cartoon would have occupied a unique position during the Emergency as a form of democratic expression, due to certain qualities which can be interpreted as inherent to the art form. These such qualities would be based on assumptions about the political cartoon – seeing it as widely accessible as a consequence of its ability to communicate via the use of image and not just text, and by extension, successful in its

[31] Jaffrelot & Anil, *India's First Dictatorship*; Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles*.
[32] Supurna Dasgupta, 'The Nation and its Discontents: Depicting Dissent during the Emergency', *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, 2:2 (2016), pp. 23-52 (24).
[33] Ibid., p. 24.
[34] R. K. Laxman, 'Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak', *Daedalus*, 118:4 (1989), pp. 68-91 (69-77).

communications. As such, this hypothesis would speculate that the political cartoon may have been the *most* successful medium in conveying meaning to its readers, and thus in bypassing censorship as well – appearing to lack the limitations seemingly present in written media, given its inability to make use of visual nuances and subtleties. Based on this proposition that visual art may lack the limitations specifically present in written media due to its ability to employ the use of image in conjunction with text, it could therefore be argued that written news articles and opinion pieces might have suffered from censorship disproportionately, wherein there would seemingly be more avenues for freedom of artistic expression in the political cartoon. Not only would visual media then boast a more extensive viewership and means to creatively transmit ideas, but it would serve as a vital tool for voicing dissent in an environment hostile to all facets of democracy.

Ultimately, this essay will demonstrate that whilst its findings unfortunately prove the above hypothesis largely untrue – due to the reality of how censorship affected different media in different ways, wherein this art form would actually be said to have suffered more than standard newsprint – the Indian political cartoon was still able to retain some of the power it previously wielded in a democratic context, having been forced out of necessity to voice dissent in interesting and creative ways.[35] The organisation of this essay is as follows. First, an overview will be provided on the nature of media censorship during the Emergency, essentially building upon the aforementioned outline in order to better situate the struggles faced by the political cartoon in a more holistic picture of state-enforced oppression. The focus of the essay will then shift towards a comprehensive history of the art form in its next section – again, looking into the political cartoon's trajectory in India in more depth. Finally, it will close with an examination of the political cartoon's experience of the Emergency –

[35] E. P. Unny, 'The Indian Cartoon: An Overview', in *The Indian Media: Illusion, Delusion, and Reality: Essays in Honour of Prem Bhatia*, ed. by Asharani Mathur (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2006), p. 4 (of document); Laxman, 'Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak', p. 85; Dasgupta, 'The Nation and its Discontents'.

reviewing the work of a number of prominent artists from between 1975-1977 in relation to the scholarship on this topic, and personal commentaries of their own. Consequently, the overall viability of this essay's hypothesis will be considered in review of its overall findings in the conclusion.

Media Censorship During the Emergency: An Overview

In seeking to establish the nature of censorship over the course of the Emergency, the use of primary sources proves particularly useful – especially when one assesses official documentation published in the aftermath of the crisis. This is perhaps the case due to the inherently interrogative nature of these sources: a newly inaugurated Janata Party government led by Moraji Desai would seek to not only promise the renewal and restoration of democracy back to its true form, but would make inquiries into the two preceding years in order to identify and act on injustices committed under Indira Gandhi's government.[36] As such, the *Shah Commission Reports* (I-III, issued between March and August of 1978) and the *White Paper on Misuse of Mass Media During the Internal Emergency* (August 1977; hereafter "*White Paper*") remain crucial points of reference in any investigation into the nature of the excesses of this period. One further primary source, however, that serves as a particularly useful induction to these documents is that of a TV interview conducted by Thames Television between eminent presenter Jonathan Dimbleby, and Indira Gandhi herself – broadcast on 16th November 1978.[37] Spanning twenty-one minutes in length, Dimbleby's observations, comments and questions posed to Gandhi are sharp and provocative – touching upon topics ranging from the impacts of a 'coercive' sterilisation campaign to potential plans

[36] Thames TV, *Moraji Desai Interview, Prime Minister of India, India, 1977*, online video recording, YouTube, 27 April 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgJdfA_b5iI> [Accessed 26 April 2023].
[37] Thames TV, *Indira Gandhi Interview, TV Eye, 1978*, online video recording, YouTube, 20 July 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8aETK5pQR4> [Accessed 16 November 2022].

to stand for re-election (a contest she would later go on to win in 1980).[38] Asking for her response on whether it was 'necessary… to forbid newspapers' from reporting 'the speeches of MPs', Dimbleby initiates a four-minute-long conversation with Gandhi that revolves around the censorship question, and veers into discussion of the *Shah Commission* as well in doing so.[39] On the defensive, Gandhi offers various justifications in reply, stating that 'censorship was not properly managed' and that her government 'thought it would be for a very brief period and some code of conduct would be worked out'.[40] Furthering this rhetoric, she would continue in discussing pre-censorship, stating that 'the situation [in India] was more or less going out of control', and thus making such measures 'necessary' – adding: 'the newspapers are a part of a force which is there to obstruct the social and economic changes which we want to bring about'.[41] Dimbleby's suggestion in response that Gandhi was attempting to turn the press 'into a force to support' what she was doing, was rebutted promptly.[42] Perhaps the most important part of this segment is related to the *Shah Commission* directly, and as such has been transcribed below (JD: Jonathan Dimbleby; IG: Indira Gandhi):

JD: 'The Shah Commission said that the reasons for the measures taken against the media in general, and the press in particular, was to keep – and this is on the basis of the evidence put to him – was to keep the public in ignorance, to instil fear in them, thereby suppressing dissent in every form: individual, political, parliamentary, judicial. It was used as an instrument of news management aimed at thought controls'.

IG: 'Okay, if you want to give a lecture on the Shah Commission you needn't have me here, you can give it anyway – as other media are doing. We do not accept the Shah Commission's report, and the

[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Thames TV, *Indira Gandhi Interview*.
[42] Ibid.

people of India do not accept it. They have shown that he is quite irrelevant… How does Mr. Shah know what is happening in the political world? What are the forces at work which want to destroy a developing economy? Is a judge competent to decide that? Then why have democracy, why have elections? Why have political people in power?'.

JD: 'It was a commission of inquiry which a lot of democracies use'.

IG: 'No, it was not. It was a purely vindictive action by the present government. It's very interesting that of the cases referred to the Shah commission, they did not want to inquire into any cases except those against me, or those whom they considered my supporters'.[43]

The above exchange serves as a fantastic insight into the attitude of blunt defiance that was adopted by Gandhi in the aftermath of the Emergency, but also showcases an interesting framing of democracy as having been the principle force behind her motivations between 1975-1977 – an idea previously touched upon in the introduction. This rationale certainly can be seen as a large part of the way in which the State attempted to portray the Emergency – an observation further reinforced in a study conducted by Subin Paul, in examination of the *Indian Express*' reportage during the years of the crisis.[44] One such example of the official line on the Emergency and censorship would be in the fact that, as posited by Paul, the 'ruling government saw the opposition party and the press as prime agents of the "internal disturbance"' upon which the emergency powers had been justified – with the 'English-language press' in particular serving as a scapegoat for Congress.[45] Although this would be countered by a 'survey conducted before the Emergency' demonstrating that the 'English-language press displayed a wide divergence of opinion on major issues', such allegations would be issued in tandem with further obligations: requiring newspapers to 'frame the

[43] Ibid.
[44] Subin Paul, '"When India was Indira": *Indian Express*'s Coverage of the Emergency (1975-1977)', *Journalism History*, 42:4 (2017), pp. 201-211 (201).
[45] Ibid., p. 203.

Emergency as one promoting democracy and development', omit 'counter sources' to the official narrative, and publish advertisements that valorized the Gandhi regime and the twenty-point program'.[46] Indeed, one of the most striking 'charges [made] against the press was the failure to publish Gandhi's photograph often enough on the front page' – indicating in full force the massive amounts of construction and oppression that underpinned claims to be bolstering democracy.[47]

With that being said, much of Dimbleby's assertations are echoed in further findings of the study – describing methods adopted beyond censorship 'to control the press', such as the 'selective allocation of government advertising, increases in the cost of newsprint, mergers of news agencies, interruptions of postal and banking services, and fear-arousal techniques among newspaper publishers, journalists, and individual shareholders'.[48] The aforementioned *White Paper* (August 1977) is useful in this regard as well – offering an even broader perspective on the experiences of censorship. A thoroughly comprehensive document, the *White Paper* is particularly valuable in its summaries on the abuses of power enacted by the Government during the Emergency: providing major insights into not only how policies were laid out for the enrolment of censorship measures, but also how said measures were then executed. For instance, a meeting is detailed to have taken place on the 26th of July 1975, in which 'Smt. Indira Gandhi, herself laid down the broad policy in respect of media'; proposing that 'the Press Council be abolished, news agencies be fused into one, advertisement policy be reviewed, housing facilities given to journalists be withdrawn and foreign correspondents not willing to fall in line be deported'.[49] V. C. Shukla, 'appointed as the Minister of Information and Broadcasting in place of Shri I. K. Gujral' in the wake of the

[46] Paul, 'When India was Indira', pp. 203-206.
[47] Ibid., p. 206.
[48] Ibid., p. 203.
[49] *White Paper on Misuse of Mass Media During the Internal Emergency* (New Delhi: Controller of Publications, 1977), p. v.

Emergency, is described as having set to work – producing in his passage the 'misuse of mass media totally inconceivable in a democracy'.[50] Some further consequences would be listed:

'the distinction between party and government disappeared. Akashvani and Doordarshan became propaganda instruments of the ruling party and peddlers of a personality cult. Even media such as press and films otherwise outside the control of the government were made to dance to the tune called by the rulers by a ruthless exercise of censorship powers, enactment of a set of draconian laws which reduced press freedom to nought and an unabashed abuse of authority in the matter of disbursing advertisements, allocation of newsprint and release of raw stock for films'.[51]

To this end, the category of film is also one other notable element in the *White Paper*, given its general lack of coverage in the relevant scholarship compared to seemingly rather dominant discussions on the relationship between censorship and the press. One passage, coming under a section dedicated to explicating the ways in which the government approached various facets of the media, provides a significant amount of detail on the grave consequences that faced film producers 'who dabbled in political comment… during the Emergency'.[52] Films such as *Aandhi* (1975) and *Kissa Kursi Ka* (1978) were among some of the most prominent films to face censorship in light of their engagement directly with themes prevalent in this period.[53] Sensitivities here would vary greatly – with the former film facing suspension and a later release 'only when the producer came out with a revised version'; the latter being banned 'and later confiscated', with the film's negative having been 'purloined and subsequently destroyed'.[54] In closing discussion on the different ways in which censorship was experienced across a range of different media, this section aims to have therefore conveyed the breadth of media cross which such measures were implemented, and

[50] Ibid., p. v.
[51] Ibid., p. v.
[52] Ibid., p. 17.
[53] Ibid., pp. 17-18.
[54] *White Paper*, pp. 17-18.

also the sheer insight that can be tapped into through an engagement with primary sources documenting the Emergency's excesses in its aftermath.

The Indian Political Cartoon: A Condensed History

Having outlined in general terms what the media's experience of censorship was during the Emergency, this essay's focus will thus turn directly towards the political cartoon – a medium, although present in elements of the press previously discussed, arguably not considered in its own right very often. While by no means exhaustive in its coverage, for the purposes of space, this investigation will largely concentrate on the most prominent artists within the Emergency period – including the likes of Abu Abraham, R. K. Laxman, Sudhir Dhar, Mario Miranda, Rajinder Puri, Kutty, and O. V. Vijayan – and will accompany analyses of their work with a more open-ended look at the importance of graphic art in environments both hostile and unhostile to democratic expression. First, the political cartoon's history in India will be documented in more detail – providing an important pretext in discussion of its roots in the colonial era, through to the story of K. Shankar Pillai, and ending with the closure of *Shankar's Weekly* at the advent of the Emergency in 1975.

In detailing a condensed history of the Indian political cartoon, it is not sufficient to simply examine the trajectory of K. Shankar Pillai's career; rather, one must look further back still. It is with some irony that just as the Emergency powers written into the Indian Constitution directly derived from the reserve measures of the British Raj, the political cartoon would serve as an equal reminder of the colonial hangover.[55] E. P. Unny places the origins of the 'medium of dissent' in that of an Indian press 'beginning to question the foreign presence' in

[55] Jaffrelot & Anil, *India's First Dictatorship*, p. 15; Unny, 'The Indian Cartoon', p. 1 (of document).

its country at the advent of the 20th century.[56] Weaponizing nationalist sentiments, periodicals such as '*Hindi Punch*' or '*Oudh Punch*' would produce cartoons amongst other such clones of the original magazine, 'modelled on the *London Punch*' with the possible intention to 'placate and embarrass the ruling British over their back-home liberalism'.[57] An article by Preeti Singh complements this with the perspective of O. V. Vijayan – an Indian political cartoonist and author of much renown, who noted 'how Indian political caricature was an exotic import of Western political caricature' just as in the initiation of the country's domestic newspapers.[58] Regardless, a readership would develop from this, irrespective of origin or intention, and one such reader would be K. Shankar Pillai.[59]

Described by R. K. Laxman as a man 'gifted with wit and politically well informed', Shankar would strive to make his mark with a job at the *Hindustan Times* – a 'paper with intensely nationalistic views', and owned 'by a patriotically minded rich industrialist who gave his total support to Mahatma Gandhi and his cause'.[60] Here, Shankar would imbue the cartoon with a distinct political energy that matched the 'dispensation' of the paper – retaining a front-page placement that, as phrased by Unny, would be 'the capital's wake-up call'.[61] Laxman notes how very soon, Shankar's art would begin to make 'an impact on the public' – prompting 'viceroys and governing councillors' to 'take note of his cartoons', and in so doing, cementing his place as 'a favourite of the public and supreme in his field'.[62] Gradually, through the efforts of fourteen years of work, Shankar would succeed in having 'mainstreamed the Indian cartoon', and 'helped to elevate the profession of the cartoonist from being the creation of mere decoration in a newspaper to being on a par in status with the

[56] Unny, 'The Indian Cartoon', p. 1 (of document).
[57] Ibid., p. 1 (of document).
[58] Preeti Singh, 'Graphic Delhi: Narrating the Indian Emergency, 1975-1977 in Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm*', *South Asian Review*, 39:1-2 (2018), pp. 86-103 (96-98).
[59] Unny, 'The Indian Cartoon', p. 2 (of document).
[60] Laxman, 'Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak', p. 76.
[61] Unny, 'The Indian Cartoon', p. 2 (of document).
[62] Laxman, 'Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak', p. 76.

editorial commentator and political analyst'.[63] The influence of Shankar would be such that, as noted by Laxman, 'each paper' would come to want 'its own cartoonist to ridicule and lampoon the powers that be' – stemming from a realisation that not only would cartoons function as 'instruments for fighting the national cause', but they could also act as 'circulation builders if the cartoonist was a talented one'.[64]

A Year after Independence, Shankar would start a venture of his own in a weekly magazine, aptly titled *Shankar's Weekly* – a crucial moment in the history of the political cartoon in India, and of relevance to its discussion during the Emergency, due to the string of influential artists it would produce. Perhaps in relation to the essay's central hypothesis, the wide reach of graphic art as a visual media would be demonstrated through *Shankar's Weekly* – which would not only earn a 'nation-wide identity as the country's premier cartoon magazine' but would also boast a 'readership that far exceeded its circulation'.[65] Simultaneously, the setting of an India post-partition would also serve as a chaotic backdrop to the rise of the political cartoon's popularity – Laxman noting how amidst the 'turmoil' faced by the country, 'the press exercised its freedom and criticized the government, the political parties, and the bureaucracy, all of which combined to keep the country in a state of eternal crisis'.[66] The 'boldness with which the press was playing its role' would come to be a 'tribute' to the Indian government, which Laxman praises for having 'strictly played fair and respected the Fourth Estate even when the press was sometimes wrong, unkind, and unwarrantedly provocative'.[67]

Referring to the talent harboured by *Shankar's Weekly*, the 'Shankar School' of artists, as phrased by Unny, would include the likes of Puthukkody Kottuthody Sankaran Kutty Nair (popularly known as "Kutty"), who would be Shankar's most immediate protégé, and would

[63] Unny, 'The Indian Cartoon', p. 2 (of document); Laxman, 'Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak', p. 76.
[64] Laxman, 'Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak', p. 77.
[65] Unny, 'The Indian Cartoon', p. 3 (of document).
[66] Laxman, 'Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak', p. 80.
[67] Ibid., p. 80.

notably serve to alter the character of the cartoon towards the daily and 'visceral', in 'keeping with the nature of news that was picking up pace'.[68] The talent pool would go beyond *Shankar's Weekly* as well. Enver Ahmed's (professionally "Ahmed") tenure at the *Hindustan Times* brought with it Delhi's 'first popular social comic – *Chandu'*.[69] Quite notable was also Rajinder Puri: a cartoonist with international experience in *The Glasgow Herald* and *The Guardian*, who would become 'instantly noticed for his scalding political statements' as well as a marked ability for caricature.[70] Other important artists would include Laxman himself, whose front page placement on *The Times of India* would give India its 'first metropolitan cartoon' with famous instalments such as the 'Common Man', and 'You Said It' – a 'single-column cartoon' that served, in the words of Laxman, as a 'commentary on socioeconomic, socio-political aspects in rather a lighter vein, free of real political personalities or factual political events'.[71] Mario Miranda and Sudhir Dhar would also make their respective marks: both notable users of the pocket cartoon, with the latter appropriating it to 'chronicle the duplex Delhi of the 1970s and 80s'.[72]

The passage of Kutty from *Shankar's Weekly* would be followed by Thomas Samuel (professionally "Samuel"), who would join *The Times of India* and make a mark in creating 'the country's first pocket cartoon "This is Delhi" in 1953'; later moving to *The Indian Express*.[73] N. K. Ranga (professionally "Ranga") would develop a 'trademark slapdash style' as a 'spot caricaturist'.[74] Meanwhile, Abu Abraham would attract international fame in London and go on to join *The Indian Express* – a platform through which he notably narrated the events of the Emergency via a daily instalment called 'The Private View', later

[68] Unny, 'The Indian Cartoon', p. 3 (of document).
[69] Unny, 'The Indian Cartoon', p. 4 (of document).
[70] Ibid., p. 5 (of document).
[71] Laxman, 'Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak', p. 83.
[72] Unny, 'The Indian Cartoon', p. 5 (of document).
[73] Ibid., p. 3 (of document).
[74] Ibid., p. 3 (of document).

'anthologized in The Games of Emergency' (1977).[75] Indeed, particularly relevant to our discussion here, Abraham's cartoons would, as asserted by Singh, act as a 'trenchant critique of the establishment', focussing 'specifically on press censorship and the abuse of presidential ordinances'.[76] Vijayan himself would also build his reputation from here – adopting a distinctly different style of cartoon that 'junked anatomy altogether', made use of bleaker, 'under-detailed' backgrounds, and was accompanied by 'captions rich in allusions' and 'word play'.[77] This is noted by Unny as somewhat reflective of the times in which Vijayan, and the aforementioned artists, lived, with the Indian political cartoon's 'look and feel' growing 'steadily sombre', and its creator's 'vision' rapidly 'cheerless by the mid 1970s'.[78] This perhaps serves as a fitting segue into consideration of the political cartoon specifically during the Emergency.

The Indian Political Cartoon: Emergency and Censorship

With the history of the political cartoon in India outlined, it is now possible to examine, in greater depth, the question of the Emergency in relation to this artistic tradition. Documented here will primarily be the experiences of political cartoons of censorship – looking at the ways in which this would not only affect the art form, but also the artist. This will be achieved by narrowing in on the work of some of the most prominent artists in India between 1975-1977, as touched upon in the previous section – comprising a case study of sorts, with the intentions to reconcile particularly different experiences with one another in the interests of developing a considered, comprehensive perspective. Such an analysis of works will examine accounts/essays written and published by the three artists of particular attention – R.

[75] Unny, 'The Indian Cartoon', p. 3 (of document); Singh, 'Graphic Delhi', pp. 86-88.
[76] Singh, 'Graphic Delhi', pp. 86-88.
[77] Unny, 'The Indian Cartoon', p. 4 (of document).
[78] Ibid., p. 4 (of document).

K. Laxman, Abu Abraham, and O. V. Vijayan – and will close in discussion of some of the issues surrounding the artform itself, specifically with regard to the hypothesis put forward in the introduction to this essay. As such, this will include an evaluation of the aforementioned argument that graphic art is more accessible to, and thus more successful in reaching, the masses – and as such, can serve as a particularly impactful form of resistance to restraints on freedoms of speech.

Ultimately, this section will arrive at a compromise: taking into account that the political cartoon not only failed to bypass censorship in most cases, but in actual fact, fared worse than its written-text counterparts within the newspapers and magazines they were published in. Furthermore, as will be highlighted in relation to more contemporary problems surrounding the Indian graphic novel, the political cartoon can be interpreted to suffer from the same cast of problems – inadvertently creating and fostering a culture of elitism in its readership, and thus working directly against one of the hypothesis' core assumptions/predictions: that political cartoons would possess comparatively greater success in their ability to reach out to the masses and convey deeper meaning with more ease. Nevertheless, in relative terms, the political cartoon can still be seen to retain value for its readership and as a means through which dissent can be expressed in the context of authoritarianism. Looking specifically at the work of Vijayan, it is possible to discern some of the more inventive ways in which cartoons were able to outsmart censors, and at the very least carry some sort of political message across to those who read them – regardless of how intricate and sophisticated such communication may have been. With regard to the issue of illiteracy in India, which Indira Gandhi's twenty-point programme had ironically sought to tackle, the value of the political cartoon can also be seen to remain – arguably still more valuable than written text to the illiterate onlooker, and thus in some ways reversing the above trend of elitism and exclusivity in readership. Specific examples here will hark back to the mythological traditions that had

underpinned earlier political cartoons in India – detailed by Laxman as having effectively bypassed the censors of the British Raj, and successfully appealing to the more common viewer among India's population.[79]

The End of an Era: The Political Cartoonist's Emergency

In turning towards the onset of the Emergency in June of 1975, perhaps the most significant development to have occurred for the political cartoon, in the immediate-term, was the closure of *Shankar's Weekly*.[80] In light of the history just outlined in the previous section, the experience of 1975-1977 could therefore be interpreted as a turning point – wherein after the Emergency was lifted, a 'magazine boom' would follow, alongside a generally more opinionated and vociferous press, as indicated by Paul's study of *The Indian Express*.[81] The effect of the Emergency on various artists would, however, be pronounced. Interestingly, Unny can be seen to imply that there was movement towards censorship even in the lead up to the Emergency, highlighting the resistance that was faced by Rajinder Puri from his editors at the time.[82] More importantly though, is Unny's argument that the impact was felt by cartoonists the most – more-so than that of the journalist to whom was available the 'option to bend, crawl, defy and go to jail or get suitably vague', wherein 'there was no way the cartoonist could have produced cartoon after censor-proof cartoon'.[83]

This is one point supported quite notably by Laxman, whose own experiences of the Emergency as a political cartoonist convey the sense of helplessness that may have already been present in much of the media produced during this period, given the incredibly harsh nature of censorship – as has been elucidated by our previous examination of the findings of

[79] Laxman, 'Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak', pp. 71-73.
[80] Unny, 'The Indian Cartoon', p. 4 (of document).
[81] Unny, 'The Indian Cartoon', p. 4 (of document); Paul, 'When India was Indira', p. 209.
[82] Unny, 'The Indian Cartoon', p. 4 (of document).
[83] Ibid., p. 4 (of document).

the *White Paper* (August 1977). This is put quite succinctly in his remarks at the imposition of the Emergency: 'we lost our freedom of expression overnight', as well as his assertation that 'cartoons, of course, became the censors' primary target'.[84] The specifics of the experience of censorship here are particularly valuable to our understanding of this process in relation to the political cartoonist, given that the *White Paper* noticeably lacks thorough descriptions on the plight of this art form – only really distinguishing the "press" from other categories of media that were subjected to censorship, but not delving into the sub-categorical level of this medium in any real detail.[85] One particular passage by Laxman illuminates all:

> 'Every day my cartoons had to be sent to Delhi for censorship. One heard rumours of arrests without warrant and police raids on newspaper offices. Some of my journalist colleagues went to prison. For a political cartoonist, the situation became a nightmare. Whatever I drew, I ran the risk of offending someone in power… I sought a personal audience with the prime minister and submitted a memorandum explaining how the censorship had become mindless and rigid and how as a cartoonist I found it difficult to survive and pleaded a more kindly approach to my profession. I was promised leniency and assured that in a democracy cartoons played an important part. From then on, my cartoons began to make their nervous appearance in our paper once again with anemic satirical content. I became overcautious and did not want to test the patience of the censors'.[86]

Laxman's story, as above, is unfortunately marred by a downward trajectory lent to his work by the forces of censorship. A sense of ambiguity that hangs over the space afforded to his cartoons soon reveals its own fragility – resulting in Laxman's gain in confidence and 'courage' coinciding with his complete and sudden loss of power at the whims of the censor.[87] The gradual incorporation of 'taboo areas' into his cartoons, in discussion of 'the Congress party, inflation, law and order, the struggle of the press under censorship, and the

[84] Laxman, 'Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak', p. 85.
[85] *White Paper*.
[86] Laxman, 'Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak', p. 85.
[87] Ibid., pp. 85-86.

deception practiced by the rulers on the public through false propaganda', leads to a summons being received to stand before 'the minister in charge of press censorship'.[88] As Unny details in a synopsis of Laxman's struggles, the event comes to feel more like a confrontation – with the artist being 'rudely reminded that he wasn't above the law' and pushed towards 'a holiday' – wherein such a "reminder" constituted being 'arrested and put behind bars'.[89] It is the fact that Laxman genuinely considered retiring, however, that truly weighs down on the idea that the political cartoonist may have been more able to resist and evade oppression compared to other forms of media, as was assumed in this essay's hypothesis.[90] The 'psychological predicament' he later uncovers as having possessed press censors in response to his cartoons, perhaps acts as a bookend to this somewhat dismal conclusion: no matter the intention and portrayal, the subjectivity inherent in the political cartoon made it an artform almost too volatile in its own right for *any* depiction to pass through the censor board.[91]

However, a perhaps more balanced take on the relationship between the political cartoon and censorship during the Emergency is available in examination of the work of Abu Abraham. This is the point at which the increasingly dire setting painted by Unny and Laxman arrives at a crossroads with accounts of a less negative nature – serving to confuse our understanding of what exactly the "experience" of censorship was for this art form, in this period. To that end, the descriptions used by Unny in narrating how Abraham 'soldiered on' in spite of having been censored leaves something to be desired in determining just exactly what happened to the artist during the emergency years.[92] So too does Subin Paul's article on the *Indian Express* – the main newspaper in which Abraham published his cartoons – wherein little is mentioned

[88] Ibid., pp. 85-86.
[89] Unny, 'The Indian Cartoon', p. 4 (of document); Laxman, 'Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak', p. 86.
[90] Laxman, 'Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak', p. 86.
[91] Ibid., p. 88.
[92] Unny, 'The Indian Cartoon', p. 4 (of document).

here with regard to his work; more-so just outlining, in a basic sense, the ways in which the visual component of cartoons served to convey meaning in very subtle ways, and making use of select pieces by Abraham in order to demonstrate the operations of framing theory.[93] While this would importantly examine the methods through which dissent could be manifest then, it would still not indicate anything about the actual experience of the artform under censorship, and in relation to Abraham personally. Perhaps the best way in which to access this information would therefore be through an examination of the work of the artist himself – pin-pointing *The Games of Emergency* and *The Private View* comic strip as aforementioned by Preeti Singh, alongside written essays/articles by Abraham that he had published between 1975 and 1977. The foreword to *The Games of Emergency*, just as in the example above in relation to Laxman, contains a particularly telling passage:

"Each one of these contributions, most of which appeared in the *Indian Express* and *Sunday Standard*, expressed what I honestly felt on the day I did it. Some of the cartoons rejected by the censors are also included in this collection. After my first few Emergency cartoons, beginning with the two 'speak-no-evil monkeys', that appeared on June 28, two days after the Emergency was declared, pre-censorship was ordered. It was lifted after some weeks. It was again imposed a year later for another shorter period. For the rest of the time I had no official interference. I have not bothered to investigate why I was allowed to carry on freely. And I am not interested in finding out".[94]

In this regard, it is already discernible that Abraham's experience of censorship was markedly different to that of Laxman. Indeed, recorded in a documentary of the Films Division of India, titled *Thunder of Freedom* (1976, directed by S. Sukhdev), Abraham would even go as far as to confer his support to the Emergency – although admittedly not whole-heartedly, with his main reservations being kept for the ways in which the press was being dealt with.[95]

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[93] Paul, 'When India was Indira', pp. 201, 205-208.
[94] Abu Abraham, *The Games of Emergency* (India: Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd., 1977), p. 5 (of document).
[95] Films Division, *THUNDER OF FREEDOM (S.V.)*, online video recording, YouTube, 22 April 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AJ7z1U8j58&t=870s> [Accessed 26 April 2023].

Nonetheless, Abraham would still be compelled to claim that his situation was 'alright' – no longer being bothered by censors at the time of his interview.[96] Notably though, Abraham does make mention of a fact which is quickly brushed over: that he 'stopped working' during the time at which he was subject to censorship.[97] Calling back to the fear voiced by Laxman in his own account, it is therefore possible to piece together a slightly more unified narrative of the Emergency – wherein even if the censor did not act uniformly, and all of the time, It would still implement increasingly harsh measures when it did. Abraham's voiced half-support for the Emergency is reasonably be suspect in any case: with the Films Division of India operating under the guise of the government in order to push its own agendas.[98] Indeed, as stated by Abraham towards the end of his interview: 'I have generally supported the emergency, but as the prime minister said, it's a very strong medicine, and you know.. I can support it only as a temporary measure. It can't possibly go on forever'.[99]

Drawing from the experiences of these two artists, a somewhat bleak, and loosely unified narrative can thus be arranged on the plight of the political cartoonist. However, in a somewhat alternative take on the predicaments that had been faced by the censors that addressed Laxman's cartoons during the Emergency, their indecisiveness in qualitative assessments can also be flipped around: equating their sense of bewilderment with a surrender. The political cartoon as an art form would therefore derive a great deal of power when viewing the process of censorship in this light – inherently "loaded", and expressive by nature. One final artist study which can be seen to confer further power to the political cartoon in this sense is that conducted by Supurna Dasgupta – who illuminates the ways in which O. V. Vijayan was able to bypass the restrictions of censorship altogether by engaging

[96] Films Division, *THUNDER OF FREEDOM (S.V.)*.
[97] Ibid.
[98] *White Paper*.
[99] Films Division, *THUNDER OF FREEDOM (S.V.)*.

in a practice of 'self-censoring' by taking 'recourse to the form of the speechless doodle'.[100] The use of a purposefully 'naïve' style of art would therefore indulge in the protection, but also the space, it would provide the cartoonist 'from the disciplinary measures of the state'.[101] As such, the methods of Vijayan can be interpreted along the same lines of as the above take on Laxman's story: the ability of the political cartoon, whether intentional or accidental, to out-step the State acts as a fantastic method of resistance – arguably humiliating the oppressive censors of the Emergency period.

Indeed, the resourcefulness of the political artist in India would relate to even the earliest points in its tradition. As put best by Laxman, in describing the political cartoonist in colonial times:

"The political cartoonist worked under restricted conditions to ensure his paper's survival. He kept his ideas to broad symbols so as not to annoy any person or question any policy. Thus, his cartoons abounded in monsters, angels, tigers, lions, snakes, jackals, and elephants. There were, of course, the celebrated bulldog and the lion to represent the British rulers. A dove-eyes suffering angel symbolized mother India, otherwise known as Bharat Mata. The other creatures in the cartoonist's menagerie variously represented violence, injustice, want, famine, and pestilence according to the needs of the hour".[102]

Conclusion

Thus, in concluding this essay, it can be said that whilst the hypothesis outlined in the introduction has ultimately betrayed a certain naivety with regard to what political cartoons may have been capable of as a visual media within an authoritarian context such as the

[100] Dasgupta, 'The Nation and its Discontents', pp. 36, 41.
[101] Ibid., p. 37.
[102] Laxman, 'Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak', pp. 71-72.

Emergency (1975-1977), these preconceptions should not be discarded altogether. As has been showcased over the course of this essay, political cartoons can in actual fact be seen to retain a substantial amount of power, inherent in the open-ended nature of the art form – just as the censors dealing with R. K. Laxman's cartoons struggled to assign specific meanings to his work, and this ended up being a detriment to his own means of democratic expression, so too was this an inadvertent recognition of the political cartoon's power. It's ability to convey meaning in ways that bewildered censors is arguably a triumph in the resignation it provoked from the authorities: if in doubt, censor it all.[103]

Beyond this, restrictions on movement would also serve as perhaps the greatest determinant, barring perhaps a lack of skill, of whether or not political cartoons were be able to voice their message, and discussions of Abu Abraham's relatively unperturbed existence during the Emergency years serve to complicate the narrative, put forth by the likes of Laxman and Unny, of artists completely devoid of any of their agency.[104] Abraham's own cartoons, alongside his various articles voicing protest against the oppression of the state on the press, do represent in a limited sense what could be interpreted as an exception to the rule. However, as Dasgupta's review of O. V. Vijayan's work shows, this merely forced increasingly more creative ways to bypass the censors into existence. In a somewhat beautiful irony, Vijayan would salvage his own ability to produce art during this period by indulging in forms of self-censorship – by which token, the doodle as a specific type of cartoon/comic would shield him with its accompanying impressions of naivety and childishness.[105] Thus, as quoted by Dasgupta in this article: 'the doodle may be strange – but it does not bark, and it knows the secrets of the deep'.[106] Such efforts would therefore imbue power back into the

[103] Laxman, 'Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak', p. 88.
[104] Laxman, 'Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak', p. 85; Unny, 'The Indian Cartoon', p. 4 (of document).
[105] Dasgupta, 'The Nation and its Discontents', pp. 40-41.
[106] Dasgupta, 'The Nation and its Discontents', pp. 40-41.

hands of the political cartoonist during the Emergency – potentially allowing one, as Vijayan did, to beat the censors at their own game. In a sense then, whilst this essay may have been optimistic in assuming the extent to which political cartoons could mobilise meaning – almost seeing it as a phenomenon somewhat militant in fashion – and the success they would experience in doing so in comparison to other forms of media, the political cartoon allowed to run wild, or even just walk, demonstrates in no small way the role that they can occupy, as asserted by Laxman, as 'safeguards of democracy'.[107]

[107] Ibid., p. 91.

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