The Games of Emergency in Abu Abraham's Cartoons: Indian Emergency and the Question of Democracy

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Abstract
Indian Internal Emergency (1975) was a monumental event in the life and history of Indian republic. It challenged the fundamental ethos of Indian democracy, ushering in what Hickman defines as a "double layered constitutional system". This duality necessitates an analysis into the contemporary political, constitutional, and public discourse. The question of democracy is explored through the visual renderings of the event, examining the phenomenon of visuality and its interplay with the act of 'seeing'. Here, Abu Abraham's Emergency caricatures are studied to formulate a comprehensive understanding of pictorial metaphors around Indian Emergency. Abu drew Emergency in his daily bulletin of Indian Express, his consistent efforts were anthologized in The Games of Emergency, a pun on government's intent to register the 'gains of Emergency'. The research paper studies the cartoons that deal with the concerns of separation of powers, freedom, and constitutional morality and how that interlude of Emergency interact with public, political and artistic imagination.
Keywords: *Indian Internal Emergency, 1975, Abu Abraham, Visuality, Emergency Caricatures, Democracy in Developing World*

Any alternative would allegedly be much worse. Tyrants would imprison us without trial, confiscate our property and tax us without our consent. They might then use the revenue for purposes that suited them rather than us, such as building royal palaces while we starved. Democracy might not prevent all these excesses all the time, but we might feel that on balance democracy is a better arrangement. (1)

This assertion of Robert Pinkney in his *The Frontiers of Democracy: Challenges in the West, the East and the Third World*, arguably affirms the common belief and sanctity invested in the notion of democracy around the world. More so in the Third World, which saw a rise in tendencies of embracing the democratic phenomena post the Second World War, not much through a natural progression of consensus among the populace, but rather was bestowed with political freedoms when the overt colonialism witnessed gradual collapse. These democracies thrived or struggled to do so, in an environment of economic and social instability and lack of hope. Fukuyama notes in *The End of History*, economic prosperity to be a significant element for the success of any democracy and in turn his evident scepticism about democratic prospects in the Third World. He foregrounds the significance of fundamental changes in socio-economic structures as a necessity to attain sustainable political freedom, "A liberal revolution in economic thinking has sometimes preceded, sometimes followed, the move toward political freedom around the globe" (Fukuyama xiii). India, 'the premier democracy of the Third World' (Huntington 23) was no exception, democracy was a thoughtful political choice on part of Indian politicians and populace. It was realized in "the face of myriad social divisions, widespread poverty, and low literacy levels, factors that have long been thought by scholars of democracy to be at odds with the supposedly requisite conditions for successful democratic nationhood", writes Ornit Shani. India saw this democratic shift in the 'second wave of democratization 1943-62' (Huntington 16) when it struck a deal of independence. Since then, it has bewildered the doomsayers by sustaining the impossible, as articulated by numerous thinkers, historians, and social scientists. The success of its democracy has been an anomaly on a larger scale; it effectively defeats generally accepted theories of democratic longevity in modern nation-states. Contrary to the western discourse, emboldened by a fairly debated constitution and progressive nationalist thought of the founding fathers and [mothers], India averted the fate of democratic failure or disintegration. Selig S. Harrison remarks, "But a realistic Western approach to India must rest on a clear recognition that the odds are almost wholly against the survival of freedom and that in "the most dangerous decades" the issue is, in fact, whether any Indian state can survive at all" (338). His opinion is a coherent piece in the long thread of first-world voices speaking authoritatively of a former colony. India stood to be an exception in this aspect, despite

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the diversity running deep and wide in the society, encompassing all the possible horizons, i.e., language, faith, and culture. This 'Indian Spirit' (Guha13) defied thinkers of the repute like J.S. Mill, to think of democracy to be "next to impossible" in multiethnic societies and 'completely impossible in linguistically divided countries.' (Lijphart)

However, a few decades to that auspicious evening of August in 1947, which negotiated a democratic nation state based on the promising fundamentals of freedom, liberty, and tolerance, India witnessed tumult and uncertainty. The political instability brought forth the first-ever hiatus in the democratic streak of the republic. The early hours of 26th June 1975 saw the suspension of all the liberties enshrined in the Indian constitution with the President's invocation of Article 352 and declaring an internal Emergency, citing internal disturbance to be the primary cause. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi read the declaration to the populace through All India Radio; her words captured the dilemma of the Indian parliamentary system, "The President has proclaimed Emergency; there's nothing to panic about". Emergency broke the slew of India's 'tryst' with democracy and challenged the very discourse which occupied the central space in Indian history since the attainment of freedom to the contemporary times. In this paper, I will be studying the interlude of Emergency in the democratic history of the nation and how it interacts with public and political imagination with the help of selected visual satires of Abu Abraham.

Since the stone age, when our species was not proficient in the manners and methods of perceptual, empirical or philosophical enquiry, vision has been a cardinal supplement to other core senses that ensured and aided the evolution. Robert Bernasconi cites Rousseau to argue the significance of a supplement in contributing to the whole, "The supplement is an addition from the outside, but it can also be understood as supplying what is missing and in this way is already inscribed within that to which it is added" (2014). Cognitive evolution coincided sociological advancements, and the vision, till date constrained as plain sight, "…vision suggests sight as a physical operation, and visuality as a social fact" (Foster ix) was transformed in the process, from being merely a subconscious and routine exercise. It happened to be understood as something far more complex and comprehensive, the science and the sociology involved in 'seeing', where seeing was not just the consumption and understanding of the given visual fact. It prompted a paradigm shift in the discourse concerning vision and paved the way for modern scientific, sociological, and philosophical interpretations of vision.

However, visuality should not be seen entirely as a post renaissance or modern construct, strategic cultural and social use of pictorial discourse could be traced to ancient Indian (indigenous) artifacts. Keval J Kumar situates popular visual traditions and culture practiced in India as embodying early signs of visual component in folktales, "…for instance, in the cave paintings at Ajanta, the sculptures in Ellora and Khajuraho, and in the mix of architectural styles of hundreds of temples, mosques and churches and other types of shrines and pilgrim centres around the country" (Bollywoodization 2014). The omnipresence of visual stimuli assisting the human eye and cognition throughout existence validates the datum of our collective ease with pictorial representations.

Pictorial satires, not only make use of this collective ease but also transcend much of the limiting propositions imposed on the written word, for it does not carry an overtly stated prologue or a defining conclusion. They are not the hours long visual experience replete with consistent pleas in favour of aesthetic absolutism independent of external realities, nor there exists overarching display of opaque motifs which might necessitate a great deal of labour from audience, caricatures are different fundamentally in their utility. They efficiently code and convey the intended meanings, stories, words of policymaking and regulations, they effectively draw the lines of dissent or concurrence. Streicher hails caricatures as a visual counterpart of literary satire, "It suffices here to say that what in literature is satire, in pictorial art is caricature. Satire typically deals with demonstration and exposure of human vices or follies in order to scorn or ridicule humans; graphic caricatures ridicule pictorially." (431) And like satire in literature, caricatures utilise their ability of evoking shared socio-cultural memory and wisdom much like the memes, to the end of their performative role in public discourse.

John A. Crespi, while writing about Chinese caricaturing art Manhua in his *Manhua Modernity: Chinese Culture and The Pictorial Turn*, argues that its intermediality and transcultural traits, as happens to be the case in the context of many contemporary visual artifacts, transcend the ideological discourses of subversion. He further bets on the caricatures' ability to comprehend the 'word and image divide' and their prowess in mediating the opinions or agendas through strategic ambiguity, in the public sphere. "Pictorials, however, use images to attract people to the written word, making reading a pleasure rather than a chore. As Shao puts it, "Only after using pictures to satisfy their eyes and humour to relax their nerves can you irrigate their souls with ideas" (Manhua 101). This pictorial turn, however, does not make 'textual world' obsolete; rather, it supplements the existing pursuit. The 'pictorial spirit', therefore, houses the inherent inclusivity towards other methods of cognition, to cite Barbara Stafford, "I am arguing that we need to disestablish the view of cognition as dominantly and aggressively linguistic. It is a narcissistic tribal compulsion to overemphasize the agency of logos and annihilate rival imaginaries. . . Semiotic, poststructuralist, and deconstructivist translations of the pictorial can be equally self-protective and unidirectional" (Good Looking 5).

The Event of Internal Emergency

Internal Emergency's arrival with a midnight placed citizens under vigilance, and journalists and artists were restricted, compromised, or jailed. All the major news dailies could not be published in the days to come, and several foreign correspondents were expelled following the pronouncement, mainstream English newspapers like The Indian Express and The Statesman registered their dissent through blank editorials.

Guha in his *India After Gandhi* remarks it as a small chapter headed "The Autumn of the Matriarch", he sets the progressive notion of matriarchy beside the expunging of democracy, it is in line with the thought, Emergency just being an interlude in the democratic saga of independent India, a 'state of exception' (Agamben 2005). Agamben analyses the Third Reich and the subversion of Weimar constitution through the provisions provided therein. Similar methodologies were sought by the ruling dispensation in the implementation and subsequent rationalization of the Indian Emergency. Emergency was posited as the extra-constitutional response to unconstitutional and anarchic threats faced by Indian democracy.

Emergency also qualifies to be an event, critical enough which ushered in non-reversible alterations in lives of the masses, as reported mismanaged urbanization and drives of mass sterilization, "Women were reported to complain that they had been turned into bewas (widows) by the state, because with sterilisation "our men are no longer men" (Mehta 164). In lexicon of Veena Das, a critical event, "…tries to analyse all these various transformations in space by which people's lives have been propelled into new and unpredicted terrains." (Critical Events 1997) Drawing her reference from Francois Furet and his description of French Revolution, she analyses Partition of the Nation, Shah Bano and Roop Kanwar case, Sikh Militancy, and Bhopal Gas tragedy, as according to her, these events were precursor to "new modes of action" which altered the "traditional categories such as codes of purity and honour, the meaning of martyrdom, and the construction of a heroic life. Equally, new forms were acquired by a variety of political actors, such as caste groups, religious communities, women's groups, and the nation as a whole…" (ibid). Seeing through these caveats, Emergency happens to be a 'Critical Event' which transformed Indian Polity forever, and the subsequent awareness on the part of all the stakeholders.

This critical event transpired into an experiment which comprehensively tested the resilience of people and the vulnerabilities of the constitution and the parliament. Here, the real time visual representations of the happenings, as they took place, occupy the cardinal space in the analysis. For this very purpose two pictorial satires are selected from Abu Abraham's celebrated compilation, *The Games of Emergency*. The cartoons deal with the concerns of separation of powers, freedom, and constitutional morality and how that interlude of Emergency interact with public, political and artistic imagination.

Abu's Visual and Running Commentary

Figure.1 (Source: *The Games of Emergency*)

To the surprise of none, Freedom for press or the populace was troublesome in the view of ruling dispensation, so it was not awarded to either. Curtailment of any freedom was the modus operandi since the pronouncement of Emergency, "In the beginning of censorship, when a few leading newspapers such as The

Indian Express and The Statesman refused to abide the governmental censorship, the government withdrew its advertising support from these newspapers. Later on, this type of financial castigation was used on several other rebellious newspapers" (Singh 41). Prime Minister was reported to share the view that democracy is at odds with uninterrupted progress and development of the society, as she expressed in a public rally, in the month of March 1975,

[The] words "Freedom" and "Democracy" have not had the same meaning through the ages. When the Greeks spoke of "demos", they did not mean all the people but only a sixth or eighth of the adult population. Women and slaves were excluded. Even today, when some party speak of "the people", they exclude many classes and groups. What we in India are doing is to ensure that the people mean all the people. (Sel speeches and writings of IG, vol. 3, pp.522.)

Just two months later, there was rampant stratification at play in defining the limits of freedom for the people, Imprisonment of opposition leaders sporting nonconformity, coercive sterilization of docile citizens or slum clearing drives, it became a matter of participation or contest amid 'disciplined and dissenting citizens.' As prime minister decried the need of discipline in the masses, in the inaugural address of a symposium on the theme "Disciplined Democracy" convened in Bombay, she had the notes of praise for the organisers though not without a suggestion that she would have preferred a different title, "Discipline in Democracy". She shared the view that the noun, unlike the adjective, did not suggest coercion; there she also lamented Indians had become "too lax, too self-centred, too permissive, too in-disciplined". (speech and writing of IG 257). The lines were defining; the angry citizen was no more a legitimate political actor in the given circumstances. On January 9, 1976 government suspended the seven freedoms guaranteed by the article 19 of the Indian constitution. The very next month, the Prohibition of Publication of Objectionable Matter Act was passed, until then enforced as an ordinance.

The immediate reference point for Abu's drawing happens to be the suspension of fundamental rights and freedoms, and barring citizens from approaching any court of the land for seeking remedies against any violation of these by the state. Abu puts to use the Juvenalian spirit, in asking the essential questions to the entire ecosystem, which was in corollary with the establishment in providing justifications for the rationale of the internal Emergency. The arbitrage is, where the conventional western thought, represented by Fukuyama in this case, that 'economic prosperity in most of the facets being a setting stage for any liberal democracy' and the arguments presented by the ruling government for invoking the Emergency collide. The socialist schemes that followed thereafter, like 20 point programmes, work efficiency guidelines and other such measures resemble that very notion of democracy's incompatibility with the developing world. As Jafferlot and Anil write, "…they also serve as reflections of her ideal type of democracy. Here, references to liberal principles—the rule of law and individual freedom—are omitted, and emphasis placed solely on the demotic aspects of democracy: the people and their socio-economic well-being. Thus, the national good trumps political pluralism, and popular participation the need for electoral legitimacy" (25). The cartoon taps into the datum of the free society and the paradox of a constitutional dictatorship, as J.M. Bochenski writes in his *The Concept of Free Society*, "A definition of social freedom, i.e., of a free society, presupposes the concept of a politically free individual." Politically free individual was the first casualty of internal Emergency; the assault and subversion began with him. There was paucity of respite for anyone harbouring political freedom in their mind, not just the bureaucracy but organisations affiliated with ruling party were having unchallenged free run. Coomi Kapoor recalls the rampage caused by youth congress,

During the Emergency, Youth Congress members gained notoriety for flexing their muscles and terrorizing ordinary folk, particularly shopkeepers. Many unemployed young men with an unsavoury past now donned white outfits and Gandhi caps, claimed to be Youth Congress members and extorted money, ostensibly for implementing Sanjay's five-point programme. (185-86)

This piece of pictorial caution by Abu warns the honourable and populace alike, of the dangers involved in deviating from liberal democracy. Especially in a developing nation where large number of subalterns do not really know how to speak. Krishnakumar describes Abu's cartoons as 'single line editorials' speak for the muted citizenry, voice the clarion call for their freedom, the similar intent runs through this pictorial commentary as well.
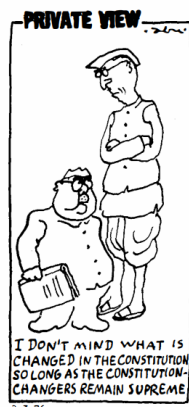
Figure.2 (Source: *The Games of Emergency*)

In parliamentary democracy, which India adopted from the colonizers with necessary alterations, independence and accountability hinges on the segregation of roles and powers assigned to Legislature, Executive, and Judiciary, in Indian Constitution. Beyond the word of constitution, young history of the independent nation has been a witness to numerous tussles informing the discourse of authorities and duties, in particular judiciary at odds with other two bodies or vice versa. Internal Emergency happens to take those differences to absolute sovereignty of executive, and legislature in the process. Prime Minister was not comfortable with the extravagant judicial overreach. She expressed her reservations pertaining to Keshvananda Bharti judgement, "We have always maintained Parliament has an unfettered, unqualified and unabridgeable right to amend the Constitution. We do not accept the dogma of the basic structure" (Chandra 211). The very dogma, which could have been constitutional protection against authoritarian dictates for the freedom and rights of the civil society.

In total, five constitutional amendments saw the light of day during the span of Emergency, aligning laws with the actions of government and not the other way round. These constitutional amendments were naturalized through the cloak of legal ritualism and legitimacy. These amendments effectively turned Constitution into a non-functional- non enforceable legal document, using the provisions provided in the same, the 'state of exception' was pervasive. Forty second amendment, which attempted to alter the basic premises of the Indian state, invoking that much-debated yet unsettled question of 'basic structure', presents a vivid picture of constitutional subversion and revision. Prashant Bhushan dissects the Allahabad High Court verdict, which was in all certainty the prime cause for what unravelled in the power corridors and poor households for those 21 months. "Prima facie, the declaration of the Emergency was Mrs Gandhi's knee-jerk response to two immediate developments: the JP Movement and the Allahabad judgment" (Jafferlot and Anil 230). Bhushan states, "In the Indira Gandhi v. Raj Narain case, the amendments in the electoral law that had retrospective operation and legitimized Mrs Gandhi's elections were placed in the Ninth Schedule and for that reason escaped judicial scrutiny. This was a subterfuge on the Constitution" (Case that shook 15)

Through this pictorial satire cartoonist draws a line of parliamentary ethics and conveys with audience the deviation of their elected Netas. Abu vigorously questions this conduct of subterfuge in his series of caricatured commentaries throughout the Emergency months. The cartoon depicts both the characters in an arguing state, Abu plays with suggestions and symbols rather than stating it explicitly, as suggested by psychoanalytic critic Ernst Kris, "Caricature in particular, is a play with the magic power of the image". It shares characteristics with McLuhan's notion of a cold medium, which allows for the participation and the message is not provided as a conclusive word rather the onus also lies on the conditioning and comprehension on the part of consumer. (Understanding media 1964) The short and fat character, drawn strategically in a certain physiognomy, could be seen holding a book, not with the religiosity and respect that is expected in the case of the constitution. But it's vague enough to suspend any certainty, whether it's a copy of the constitution or not. The supplementary text goes well with the body language of the short congressman, who seems to be responding to his tall and thin companion, slightly less than a fit of rage and disgust adorn his demeanour. This piece of satire decisively illustrates the prevailing attitude of the Indian polity in the contemporary days and perpetual and omnipresent tussle amid judiciary and executive, "…the inability of the PPP-led coalition government to take effective political and administrative action in the face of a strident judiciary grossly discredited it and undermined its potential to take the initiative in various fields of public policy". (Waseem 2012) Guha elucidates those attitudes in 1970s in following words, "On the one hand there was an increasing fragmentation of the polity, as manifest in the rapid turnover of governments. With ever fewer exceptions, politicians and parties had abandoned ideology for expediency, and principle for profit". (390)

Amid argued systemic violations, conflict of estates, the amendments brought in at the time of Emergency had come to stay, few of the amendments have been internalized into the core philosophy of Indian

state and constitution, insertion of 'Secular and Socialist' in the preamble being one such case. Prime Minister, while defending the forty second constitutional amendment referred to previous efforts by different sections of society and earmarked, "The bill was only designed to curb 'some recent attempts of the judiciary to encroach into political and legislative spheres.' 'The objective of the Bill', she concluded, 'is the rejuvenation of the nation and the Constitution". (Indira Gandhi, SSW, no.4, pp.283-98)

Conclusion

Artist Saul Steinberg described drawing as, "a way of reasoning on paper", which visual satires employ in their pursuit of voicing the difficult letters of dissent, makes them the most accessible tool to deflate rhetoric[1]. Abu's selected 'single line [visual] editorials' chronicle the Emergency with the cautionary footnotes of archives. They converse with the audience through their imagery, their dialogue is subtle and graphic, and penetrate the cultural memory beyond the layer of information. The cartoons studied, weave a thread around the nucleus, the 'discourse of democracy' and its relevance and sustainability in the developing world. Abu sets his conscience against what Emma Tarlo classifies as "official version of the Emergency as it was extolled by Indira Gandhi and the Congress Party" and exposes the paradox of free civil society and accountable state through these cartoons. He emphatically draws attention towards, "double layered constitutional system", in words of Hickman, "where both constitutional systems lie within the regime of legality but only one lie within the regime of human rights and freedom". (2005) The regime of Emergency, an interlude or the autumn of matriarch, meets the critical eye of history in in Abu's cartoons, specifically under the heavy clouds of censorship on the written word. Here, the consequential existence of the Emergency is examined in the socio-historical timeline of Indian state and how it disturbs and negotiate with status quo, i.e. 'Fundamental rights could also perish', 'Judicial review could also be Judicial encroachment'. History is illustrated as a consistent progression rather than as an established fact or the Final verdict, the pictorial satires sketch history and its subjects with cautious shadows and open-ended rhetoric.

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[1] Homepage of Saul Steinberg foundation mentions his assertion. Home - Saul Steinberg Foundation