

BACKGROUND AND BUILD-UP TO EMERGENCY

The period between **1973 and 1975** represents one of the most critical phases in the history of Indian democracy. During these years, a series of political, economic, and institutional developments created a situation that culminated in the declaration of a **National Emergency in June 1975**.

Unlike conventional emergencies associated with war or natural disasters, this Emergency was declared on the grounds of “**internal disturbance**”, raising important questions about the functioning and limits of democratic governance

The political background to this crisis lies in the developments after **1967**, when Indian politics became increasingly competitive and polarised. **Indira Gandhi** emerged as a dominant and charismatic leader, enjoying immense popularity, especially after the **1971 electoral victory**.

However, this period also witnessed the **centralisation of power** within the executive and the increasing **personalisation of political authority**. Opposition parties began to argue that governmental authority was gradually being transformed into personal authority.

At the same time, tensions developed between the **executive and the judiciary**. The Supreme Court struck down several government initiatives on the grounds that they violated the Constitution.

In response, the ruling Congress party criticised the judiciary, describing it as a **conservative institution obstructing pro-poor policies**. This conflict reflected a deeper constitutional debate over the limits of parliamentary power and the protection of Fundamental Rights.

The political crisis was further intensified by a **severe economic downturn**. Despite the promise of “**Garibi Hatao**”, the economic situation deteriorated significantly after 1971–72.

The **Bangladesh war** imposed a heavy burden on the economy, and the global **oil crisis** led to a steep rise in prices. Inflation reached alarming levels—**23% in 1973 and 30% in 1974**—causing widespread hardship among the people.

Industrial growth slowed down, unemployment increased, and the government froze salaries of its employees, leading to discontent among various sections of society.

Additionally, the **failure of monsoons in 1972–73** caused a decline in agricultural production, further aggravating the crisis.

In this atmosphere of economic distress, **popular protests began to gain momentum**. Student movements, which had been active since the late 1960s, became more intense.

There was also an increase in the activities of **Marxist-Leninist (Naxalite) groups**, who rejected parliamentary democracy and adopted insurgent methods.

The most significant developments were the **Gujarat and Bihar movements**. In Gujarat, students launched an agitation in 1974 against rising prices and corruption.

The movement quickly gained support from opposition parties and led to the imposition of **President's Rule**, followed by fresh elections in which the Congress was defeated.

The Bihar movement, which began as a student protest, soon acquired a broader political dimension under the leadership of **Jayaprakash Narayan (JP)**. JP called for a “**Total Revolution (Sampoorna Kranti)**”, aiming at a comprehensive transformation of the political, social, and economic system.

The movement expanded beyond Bihar and attracted people from various sections of society. It also received support from major opposition parties, which began to see JP as an alternative to Indira Gandhi.

As protests spread across the country, the political situation became increasingly unstable. Large-scale demonstrations, strikes, and acts of civil disobedience created an atmosphere of confrontation between the government and the opposition.

The government perceived these movements not merely as expressions of dissent but as a **challenge to its authority and the stability of the state**.

DECLARATION AND FUNCTIONING OF EMERGENCY

The immediate context for the declaration of Emergency was marked by a series of escalating conflicts. One important development was the **Railway Strike of 1974**, led by **George Fernandes**, which involved employees of India's largest public sector undertaking.

The strike threatened to paralyse the economy and was met with strong government action, including arrests and the deployment of the army. This reflected the growing tension between labour movements and the state.

Simultaneously, the conflict between the **judiciary and the executive** reached a peak. The **Kesavananda Bharati case (1973)** had established the principle that Parliament could not alter the **basic structure of the Constitution**.



This decision limited the power of the government and intensified institutional tensions. The situation worsened when the government superseded senior judges to appoint a new Chief Justice, leading to accusations that the judiciary was being politicised.

The idea of a “**committed judiciary**”, loyal to the government's vision, further deepened the crisis.

The turning point came with the **Allahabad High Court judgment of 12 June 1975**, which declared **Indira Gandhi's election invalid** on the grounds of electoral malpractice, specifically the misuse of government machinery.

This judgment created a constitutional and political crisis, as it questioned her legitimacy as Prime Minister.

Although the Supreme Court granted a partial stay, the opposition intensified its demand for her resignation.

On **25 June 1975**, a massive rally led by Jayaprakash Narayan called for nationwide protest and civil disobedience. He even urged the police and armed forces not to follow “illegal and immoral orders,” which the government interpreted as a serious threat to law and order.

In response, the government decided to declare a **National Emergency under Article 352**, citing a threat of internal disturbance. The proclamation was issued by the President on the night of **25 June 1975**.

As noted in the chapter (p. 9 image), the declaration was followed by immediate actions such as cutting off electricity to newspaper offices and arresting opposition leaders even before informing the Cabinet

The Emergency fundamentally altered the functioning of the political system. The **federal structure was effectively suspended**, with power concentrated in the hands of the Union government.

The government also acquired the authority to **curtail Fundamental Rights**, which meant that citizens could no longer approach the courts to seek protection of their rights.

One of the most significant features of the Emergency was the **suppression of civil liberties**. Political opponents were arrested in large numbers, and public protests, strikes, and demonstrations were banned.

The government imposed **press censorship**, requiring newspapers to obtain prior approval before publishing any material. Some newspapers protested by leaving blank spaces where censored content would have appeared.

Another major aspect was the extensive use of **preventive detention**, under which individuals could be arrested without trial on the suspicion of committing an offence.

The judiciary, which is normally expected to protect individual rights, failed to do so effectively during this period. In a controversial judgment, the Supreme Court ruled that even the **right to life and liberty could be suspended**, effectively closing the doors of judicial relief for citizens.

Although there were some acts of resistance, such as underground movements, protests by journalists, and symbolic actions like returning government awards, overall resistance remained limited.

Many institutions, including the police and bureaucracy, became instruments of political authority, functioning under the pressure of the ruling regime.

AFTERMATH, ELECTIONS, AND LESSONS

The Emergency period also witnessed significant **constitutional changes**. The government passed several amendments, including the **42nd Amendment**, which extended the tenure of legislatures from five to six years and limited judicial review in certain matters. Elections were postponed, and the democratic process was effectively put on hold.

Despite these developments, the Emergency came to an end in **1977**, when elections were announced. These elections turned into a **referendum on the Emergency**, particularly in northern India, where its impact had been most severe.

The opposition parties united to form the **Janata Party**, presenting a consolidated challenge to the Congress.

The results of the **1977 elections** marked a historic turning point. For the first time since Independence, the Congress party was defeated at the national level.

The Janata Party secured a clear majority, and **Morarji Desai** became the Prime Minister. This outcome demonstrated the resilience of Indian democracy, as the electorate decisively rejected what it perceived as authoritarian rule.

However, the Janata government soon faced internal conflicts and lacked cohesion. Leadership struggles among key figures such as Morarji Desai, Charan Singh, and Jagjivan Ram weakened the government.

Within a short period, the government collapsed, and fresh elections were held in **1980**, leading to the return of the Congress under Indira Gandhi.

This episode highlighted another important lesson: voters tend to punish not only authoritarianism but also **political instability and ineffective governance**.

The Emergency had several long-term consequences for Indian democracy. One important outcome was the

introduction of **safeguards against misuse of Emergency provisions**.

For instance, the term “internal disturbance” was replaced with “**armed rebellion**”, and it became mandatory for the Cabinet to provide written advice to the President before declaring an Emergency.



The experience also led to a greater awareness of the importance of **civil liberties and democratic rights**.

The judiciary, which had failed to protect these rights during the Emergency, became more proactive in subsequent years. Civil rights organisations also emerged, reflecting a renewed commitment to protecting individual freedoms.

At the political level, the Emergency contributed to significant changes in the **party system**. The Congress gradually lost its character as a broad-based “umbrella party” and became more ideologically defined. Opposition parties increasingly adopted strategies of unity, giving rise to the idea of **non-Congressism**.

The period also marked the growing importance of **backward caste politics**, particularly in northern India.

In conclusion, the Emergency represents both a **constitutional crisis** and a **political crisis**. It arose from conflicts between institutions such as the Parliament and the judiciary, as well as from tensions between state authority and popular movements.

While it exposed the vulnerabilities of democratic institutions, it also reinforced the strength of democratic values in India. The swift restoration of democracy after the Emergency demonstrates that, despite its challenges, the democratic system in India possesses a remarkable capacity for self-correction.

