

WHY MRS GANDHI LASH

ZAREER MASANI, author of a new biography of Mrs Gandhi, analyses the character and motives of the woman who has jailed her opponents and brought the world's biggest democracy to the brink of dictatorship

INDIRA GANDHI has demonstrated yet again her apparently infinite capacity for survival, and as before she has been original. The arrest of India's top Opposition leaders, including the charismatic and much-venerated Gandhian, Jayaprakash Narayan (popularly known as J. P.), is certainly unprecedented in the annals of independent India. So is the imposition of Press censorship, which was previously not found necessary even when India was at war with China and Pakistan and faced more real 'emergencies.'

The only precedents, if one can call them that, are the arrest of Left Communist leaders during the China war of 1962 and of labour leaders during the railway strike of May 1974. Under existing emergency laws, those arrested need not be brought to trial for six months, and the laws, of course, can be amended at will by the large Congress majority in Parliament.

Indira Gandhi's latest coup may be more dramatic than its predecessors, and more startling to Western opinion, with its touching faith in India's democratic mystique. But seen in the context of Mrs Gandhi's political style and of political developments in the sub-continent generally, the authoritarian role

eleventh hour she threw her weight behind the rival candidate, securing his election against the official Congress candidate. At the same time, she demonstrated her socialist credentials by firing Morarji Desai, her conservative Deputy Prime Minister and would-be successor, and nationalising 14 major banks. During the ensuing Congress split, she succeeded in projecting herself to the masses as their champion against the reactionary and ageing politicians who opposed her.

Hardly had she emerged triumphant from the 1971 General Election, with a popular mandate that rivalled her father's, than she was confronted with an external challenge — the Bangladesh crisis and the ominous refugee influx. Deciding that discretion was the better part of valour, she resisted for nine long months chauvinistic pressure to send Indian troops into East Pakistan. Then, in December 1971, when world opinion had been mobilised against Pakistan, Indian military preparations completed, Soviet support assured and the Pakistani military machine demoralised by guerrilla warfare, she delivered a lightning blow and resolved the crisis by a neat surgical operation.

Her victory against Pakis-

The child of Nehru

INDIRA GANDHI: Born 1917, only child of marriage of convenience between rich Kashmiri Brahmins. Lonely childhood. During struggle against British Raj, her father, Pandit Nehru, spent total of nine years in prison, beginning when she was five. Mother was seriously ill with tuberculosis. Indira often left alone with Hindu grandmother who believed Nehrus were suffering from dreadful sins in past lives.

Attended schools in India, Switzerland and England (Badminton School, Bristol), but stronger influences may have been Gandhi and the Bengali poet and philosopher Tagore, at whose feet she sat, and long letters (since published in two volumes) father wrote from prison, amounting to a correspondence course in human evolution and world history. Read history at Somerville College, Oxford, but poor health prevented her from completing course.

Married childhood friend, journalist Feroze Gandhi (no relation to Mahatma), a Parsi. Both jailed as agitators. Was separated from him before his death in 1960. Two sons.

During Nehru's Prime Ministership became his indispensable companion, confidante and hostess (her mother had died in 1938), a unique vantage-point on exercise of power. After his death in 1964, became Minister of Information in the Government of Lal Bahadur Shastri, whom she succeeded following his fatal heart-attack in 1966.



The Observer, 29.6.75.

RED OUT

The opponent she imprisoned

JAYAPRAKASH NARAYAN (J. P.), born into a peasant family in Bihar in 1902, must rank as the Grand Old Man of Indian politics, having been a close confidant of both Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru.

He began his political career as a member of the American Communist Party while he was at university in the US. Though he remained a Marxist till the 1950s, J.P. broke with official Communism in 1930 when he joined the Congress Party as head of its labour department.

J.P.'s finest hour was the Quit India Movement of 1942-43. He led the most serious revolt against British rule since 1857 and his daring exploits made him a national hero.

After Independence J.P. worked closely with Gandhi, who was believed to be grooming him as an alternative to Nehru. After Gandhi's assassination, J.P. and his Socialist Party seceded from Congress to form the main opposition to it in Parliament. Despite political differences, J.P. and Nehru remained close friends, and Nehru is believed to have made several efforts to persuade him to join his Cabinet.

Disgusted with the factionalism that was becoming characteristic of Indian politics, J.P. left the Congress in 1955 to devote himself to the Sarvodaya Movement which aimed at a redistribution of land through non-governmental, Gandhian methods of persuasion. His liberal views on Kashmiri



and Naga secessionism, though frowned upon officially, won him respect in India and abroad. Till 1972 his relations with Indira Gandhi, whom he had known since she was a child, were amicable and during the Bangladesh crisis he toured the world, with her approval, to argue the case for an independent Bangladesh.

He returned to active politics in 1974 as leader of an anti-Government and anti-corruption campaign, but the vagueness of J.P.'s socio-economic programme and the disparate nature of his following, which ranges from far Left to far Right, militate against his being able to provide a coherent national alternative to Mrs Gandhi. This has not prevented him from emerging once again as a charismatic mass hero. He alone has the national stature to challenge Indira Gandhi's leadership. But his health is poor—he has a serious heart condition, diabetes and a kidney infection—and prison life is unlikely to improve it.

Jealous of its own constitutional prerogatives, has generally turned a blind eye to the blatant injustice suffered by millions of Untouchables and other underprivileged groups.

The Indian Press, which has shown so much sympathy to established Opposition leaders, has said little about the torture of Naxalite (Maoist) and other revolutionary prisoners, thousands of whom have been imprisoned for several years without trial. Indian democracy is in the doldrums.

For the Indian masses who live at or below subsistence level, the real tragedy will be, not the death of democracy, but the fact that the present political power struggle diverts attention from the urgent need

for radical social and economic reform.

In the absence of any coherent alternative—J.P. and the Opposition have yet to formulate theirs—Indira Gandhi, whether one likes it or not, offers the only viable All-India leadership available. In the concluding section of my recent biography of her,* I outlined two alternate strategies that she might adopt to maintain her position—a dictatorship with military support, similar to Nkrumah's in Ghana and

or a coalition with the Communist Parties, the Socialists, and other genuine radicals, while freeing her from the dead wood of her own defunct party. It is still not too late to hope that she will opt for the latter course.

* *Indira Gandhi: A Biography*, Harvill Harman.

and of political developments in the sub-continent generally—the authoritarian rule of Bhutto in Pakistan, Sheikh Mujib in Bangladesh and Mrs. Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka—the recent events are neither unique nor unexpected.

On previous occasions when she has found herself in a tight corner, Mrs. Gandhi has lashed out with the same sense of drama and political instinct, invariably catching her opponents off guard. Her initial reaction to any crisis is mild and cautious, sometimes to the point of appearing defeatist. But when she judges that the hour is ripe—when her supporters have been mobilised and her opponents are confident that she has at last been brought to bay—she strikes with ruthless efficiency.

Elected Prime Minister in February 1966, as a decorative figurehead who would do the bidding of the Syndicate of Congress Party bosses, Mrs. Gandhi found herself compelled to resort to the same political methods as her rivals in order to preserve and strengthen her precarious position. Threatened in July 1969 by an inner-party move to oust her through the election of a hostile President, she appeared to acquiesce in the adoption of the Syndicate's nominee as the Congress presidential candidate, even to the extent of filing his nomination papers herself. But the last word was hers. At the

near surgical operation.

Her victory against Pakistan raised Mrs. Gandhi's political stature to unparalleled heights, leading to her virtual deification as Durga, the Hindu Goddess of War. After the State elections in February 1972, which gave her party large majorities in almost every State, Mrs. Gandhi proceeded to nominate State Chief Ministers of her own choice. Her supremacy in the Government, the party and the country, appeared absolute. Yet, in no more than two years, she was to find her leadership threatened once again, this time by 72-year-old Jayaprakash Narayan, who had returned to active politics to lead a national crusade against Congress misrule and corruption. What had gone wrong?

Perceptive economists had been pointing out since 1972 that the inflationary spiral triggered by the Bangladesh crisis and war could only be arrested by severe financial stringency, by stern measures to curb hoarding and black-market profiteering by the farming and trading classes, and by the establishment of an effective public distribution system for essential mass consumer goods. But this prescription could hardly be followed by a party whose members were mostly committed to self-enrichment at public expense, whose economic policies favoured the propertied elite which dominated it and whose political

funds were largely dependent on illicit contributions of 'black' money. And so prices continued to soar—by about 30 per cent a year—as did popular discontent in a country half of whose population live below the official poverty line. Meanwhile, chronic industrial faction-fighting by Congressmen demonstrated that Congress Governments out in the States were no guarantee of stable or clean administration. It could not be long before Indira Gandhi, who had promised so persuasively to 'remove poverty, would be held responsible for the country's ills. And in a country where personal charisma counts for more than political logic, Jayaprakash Narayan was being widely hailed as Gandhi's political heir and the country's potential saviour, his followers ranging from the right-wing Jana Sangh to the Communist Party (Marxist).

A series of by-elections and the recent Gujarat State elections clearly demonstrated that the Congress was fast losing its electoral grip, while inner-party factionalism was paralyzing Congress Governments in virtually every State. The success of Opposition attempts at a united front under J. P.'s auspices, boded ill for the Congress in the General Election due in February 1976. J. P. was even making inroads into the Congress itself, winning over a small but influential group of dissident Congress MPs. The Allahabad High Court judgment, barring the Prime Minister herself from public office, was the last straw.

As in the tense days of the Congress split, Indira Gandhi addressed large rallies at which she sought once again to present herself as the champion of the underprivileged and the victim of a combination of 'Right reaction' and 'Left adventurism.' But this time the old magic seemed to have paled—there was a serious credibility gap. And when the Opposition led by J. P. began a mass agitation to secure her removal, Congressmen themselves were no longer any different from the Opposition in their options—she had either to resign or fight with every weapon at her disposal.

As in previous crises, she held her hand, appearing to acquiesce in what the courts might decide, and waiting, meanwhile, for her party to rally round her. Now, when the Opposition has overreached itself in its impatience to force her out even before the Supreme Court verdict, she has struck hard, presenting herself as the victim of a conspiracy which has the backing of an unnamed foreign Power.

In the light of recent revelations about the CIA destabilisation campaign in Chile, the conspiracy theory may not appear as ludicrous to many Indians as it does here; and Mrs. Gandhi may well ride out the storm of protest raised by the followers of the arrested leaders. One thing is clear—she is not going to relinquish office so long as she has a say in the matter. Even if the Supreme Court verdict goes against her, there is nothing to prevent the President and the Chief Election Commissioner, both of whom are her nominees, from freeing her of any electoral disqualification. And an early general election, especially with J. P. and other Opposition stalwarts safely in prison, could relieve the pressure, at least for the moment.

A few years ago, she chided a dictator-minded interviewer: 'The people can be rescued from poverty only through hard work and not by any single person setting himself up as a saviour and dictator. If you look around you, you will find that dictatorships are not faring too well these days. I cannot imagine my ever becoming a dictator. . . . Dictatorship is not necessary to fight poverty. Nor does dictatorship give people strength.' In the present state of suspense, one can only hope that Mrs. Gandhi has not changed her mind and that the recent emergency measures are a

temporary expedient which will be revoked as soon as the Supreme Court gives its verdict. It does not follow, of course, that the crisis of Indian democracy will be resolved by the court's verdict, the release of the Opposition or the unmasking of the Press. That crisis has its roots in the widening political and social and economic reality. Indian legislatures have never been more than a forum for the competing elite groups who control the 'vote banks' and cynically manipulate Government patronage for their own ends. The Indian Judiciary, while