

# **Prabir Purkayastha's fight against two Emergencies in India - under Modi and Indira Gandhi**

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**New books by the imprisoned founding editor of NewsClick trace his personal and political journey across two grim periods, and weave in insightful critique of science and technology**

**PRABIR PURKAYASTHA'S RATHER** dramatic abduction in 1975 and his subsequent year-long detention under the draconian Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) was his first experience of incarceration. During a students' protest on the politically charged campus of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi in 1975, three months after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi seized absolute power to begin the Emergency, Purkayastha was picked up by the police in a case of mistaken identity.

"I was on the lawns of the School of Languages that morning, with a few friends from the SFI [Students' Federation of India], when a black Ambassador stopped near us and a burly man got out, Purkayastha writes in *Keeping up the Good Fight*, his recent memoir. "He came up to me and asked if I was D.P. Tripathi - then president of the students' union. I replied that I was not, but my questioner was a cop, DIG-Range P.S. Bhinder, and he didn't believe me. He and his men, all in plainclothes, swiftly proceeded to kidnap me in broad daylight." The real D P Tripathi was arrested a month later, and, together with Purkayastha, became a sort of Communist Party of India (Marxist) voice in jail.

In a brief recap of the 21-month Emergency, spanning June 1975 and March 1977, Purkayastha succinctly describes what he terms "a grim period in India's post-independence history". But the arrests and "preventive detention" of the political opposition, students and activists, and the censorship of the media amid a suspension of fundamental rights, are not a thing of the past. Authoritarianism, centralised control over all arms of the state and a well-oiled propaganda machine are, once again, ominously prevalent in India today, this time under the government of Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Forty-six years later, in February 2021, Purkayastha was once more subjected to heavy-handed action by the state. This time, it was the Enforcement Directorate raiding the Delhi offices of NewsClick, the digital news platform where Purkayastha was the founding editor. The raid continued for almost five days, and spread to also cover NewsClick staff members' residences in over thirty locations in Delhi.

It is not difficult to see why NewsClick, and Purkayastha, have become targets. Over the years, NewsClick has been steadfast in its coverage of people's movements - most recently the farmers'

agitation against the ruling Indian government's controversial agriculture acts of 2020, better known as the "farm bills", which looked to de-regulate hitherto government-run agricultural markets. The hundreds of thousands of farmers blockading major roads and laying siege to Delhi were met with water cannons, tear gas and lathi charges. Individuals reporting on the farmers' movement were intimidated, and spurious cases of "sedition" and "promoting enmity between communities" were foisted upon senior journalists. Even then, so effective was the agitation that the government was forced to repeal the laws in November 2021.

In August 2023, an article in the *New York Times* alleged that Chinese funding was being channelled to media organisations across the world - including NewsClick - to enable coverage in line with the desires of the Chinese state. The article claimed that these funds were being channelled through the US entrepreneur Neville Roy Singham. The US-based Worldwide Media Holdings (WMH), an investor in NewsClick, responded in a statement that it had "never received any funding, nor taken direction from any foreign individual, organisation, political party, or government." WMH's funds, it said, came from the sale of Roy Singham's company ThoughtWorks. According to a lawyer for WMH, this information was supplied to the Times during its background research, but the published article failed to include it.

On 3 October 2023, Purkayastha was arrested for the second time. Amit Chakravarty, the head of human resources at NewsClick, was arrested too. Both were charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), accused of promoting pro-China propaganda using foreign funds.

But Purkayastha's life and mind encompass much more than his two arrests, much as both are landmarks on his journey. It is no easy task to weave a personal and political life journey together with a well-informed critique of science and technology - and even more difficult is making all of this accessible to the non-political and non-scientific reader. Yet Purkayastha - an activist and engineer by training, in addition to his foray into the media - accomplishes just this in two slim volumes published by LeftWord. *Knowledge as Commons* examines the symbiotic relationship between science, technology and society, exploring one of the knottiest issues India faces today. *Keeping Up the Good Fight* is an intensely political memoir, with Purkayastha's personal experiences in the turbulent 1960s and 1970s presented not through the lens of a victim but rather of a maker of history.

The epigraph to *Keeping Up the Good Fight*, which went to press just before Purkayastha's second arrest, quotes the architect of the Constitution of India, B R Ambedkar: "They cannot make history who forget history." Clearly a lesson close to Purkayastha's heart, it is one for us all to heed amid Modi's assault on democracy and civic liberties in India, characterised by many as a second, undeclared Emergency that rivals and even outdoes Indira Gandhi's first. As of this writing, Purkayastha and Chakravarty continue to be in jail. The chargesheet in the case is yet to be filed, with a court pulling up the Delhi Police as recently as February for its tardy investigation.

**PURKAYASTHA WAS A** sickly child in a service-class Bengali family that moved around to follow his father's job in the Indian Revenue Service. A studious loner, it was when he joined Bengal Engineering College in 1965 that Purkayastha got his first whiffs of political thought and action. This was a time of ferment: the food movement and student struggles in India, and globally the uprising in Paris and protests against the Vietnam War in the United States. The chapter 'Learning to Fight', in *Keeping Up the Good Fight*, encapsulates the young man's journey of politicisation. "I was bowled over, excited by the language and clarity of Marx: I still remember this," Purkayastha writes. "The

Communist Manifesto, one of the first pieces I read, was one long gooseflesh moment.”

The power of the word and the potential for change led Purkayastha to “choose a side” and join the Communist Party of India (Marxist). This was instead of choosing the Naxalite movement, helmed by Charu Mazumdar’s Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), which drew in many young activists with a belief in “revolutionary violence”. When Purkayastha and others opposed the burning of the college library, the consequences were grave: “The Naxalites put up posters against five people who were going to be killed, including me. Ashim Ganguly, the person who drew me to the party, was killed close to his house in December 1970.”

Working on a shop floor for a few years, Purkayastha came face-to-face with the fundamental injustice of the caste system, which deems artisans who create new knowledge through their hands to be unskilled workers, as well as the alienation of labour that accompanies automation. Moving with his family to Kanpur where the CPI(M) was founded in 1925, allowed Purkayastha a closer association with the party, and with the inevitable intra-party dissensions. One key question guided Purkayastha more than any views on political issues: “Which side of the larger class struggle are they on?”

Moving from Kanpur to Allahabad for a master’s degree and then on to Delhi for further studies saw Purkayastha grow as a student leader and become familiar with varied disciplines. These included the philosophy of science as well as Hindi literature, which he delved into with help from friends and co-travellers who, in many cases, went on to occupy prominent positions in public life. Purkayastha’s involvement in student politics at Delhi’s Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) was a turning point, and meant navigating various streams of thought, with the JNU campus then home to everything from Trotskyites and socialists to Free Thinkers. This period was equally impactful in Purkayastha’s personal life – he writes in a matter-of-fact way about his friendship with the student union councillor Ashoklata (Ashoka) Jain, whom he would eventually marry after their relationship was rudely interrupted by his incarceration.

In recent years, JNU has once again become a focus for state efforts to suppress dissent and alternative politics. In his memoir, Purkayastha asks why JNU and other universities are frequently attacked by authoritarian forces – whether these be Indira Gandhi’s Congress party during the Emergency or the current ruling combine of the Bharatiya Janata Party and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. The answer: “The rulers understand the strength of the resistance that can come from students and youth. Universities are places where new thinking and new knowledge is supposed to emerge.” Besides raising the usual demands for better hostel facilities, scholarships and such, students at the more politicised public universities in India have also generally aligned themselves with wider progressive movements, making them an even larger threat to any repressive regime.

In the 1970s, the foot soldiers of the regime were not always schooled in what threats they were expected to identify during raids. Purkayastha details an incident from the time: “One of the more amusing sidelights of this midnight raid was when the policemen mistook Bob Marley, the Jamaican reggae singer and composer, for a dangerous radical. They picked up the student who had Marley’s poster up in his room. The victim was B. Muthu Kumar, who later joined the foreign service and, as ambassador of India to Tajikistan, was one of those who engineered India’s ‘alliance’ with Afghanistan’s Northern Front and its charismatic leader Ahmad Shah Massoud.”

His account of incarceration details the age-old methods of depriving undesirable subjects of civil liberties, particularly with inhumane solitary confinement. Purkayastha also points to how food politics, segregation along religious and caste lines, and the ignominious practice of manual scavenging carried over into prison from like on the outside, as did class divisions between educated prisoners and non-lettered ones. The list of those incarcerated along with Purkayastha reads like a who's-who of anti-Congress leaders, from both the Left and Right.

Things changed dramatically after Gandhi unexpectedly relinquished her emergency powers and called for elections in 1977 - and lost. Perhaps, as Purkayastha speculates, "Having tasted popular success and international respect, she did not want to be known as the one who had converted India to an autocracy like many other newly independent countries."

In his post-jail life, while "relearning normalcy", Purkayastha took up a job in the digital control of power plants. Ashoka, meanwhile, went on to become a whole-timer of the CPI(M) and president of the leftist women's group Janwadi Mahila Samiti. Tragedy struck when Ashoka, aged only 31, died of a cerebral haemorrhage just six weeks after their baby was born. Life went on, Purkayastha writes, compressing into three words what must have been the herculean effort of dealing with grief and rearing an infant, while also juggling a day job and political activism. How did he cope? What were his support systems? We can only surmise, because Purkayastha moves on to describe his professional journey, his activism around science and his engagement with the momentous events of the 1980s - from the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 to the Bhopal Gas Disaster that same year - tackling questions of industrial safety, civil liability and more.

The setting up of the Bharat Jan Vigyan Jatha (Peoples' Science Campaign) in 1987, the formation of the All India Peoples' Science Network in 1988 and then the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Jatha (Campaign for Total Literacy) in 1990 were direct results of a churning in people's science movements. "By the 1990s, my earlier confusion and 'dilemma' about balancing science and technology with politics was resolved," Purkayastha writes. "It was no longer a question of 'balance' or trying to 'bring together' different aspects of my life. As far as I was concerned, my politics lived in the same place as my involvement in various forms with science and technology."

It was this deep engagement with politics that forced several more skirmishes with the establishment.

**IN THE FIRST** chapter of *Keeping up the Good Fight*, Purkayastha asks, "Does Every Generation Have to Face an Emergency?" Perhaps yes, but some generations have to face them twice over.

While the draconian MISA was repealed by the new government voted into power after the Emergency, other counter-terror laws were soon enacted, and older ones still in the statute books gradually became weaponised against dissenters. The UAPA, under which Purkayastha is currently booked, was enacted in 1967 and strengthened by successive governments, a dangerous trend that allowed those in power a way to legitimise political witch-hunts. Since there is no presumption of innocence under these laws, - it is jail, not bail, that is the norm in anti-terror cases. As data shows, the prosecutorial process is itself a punishment. In response to a question in parliament, the government revealed that 97.5 percent of people arrested under the UAPA between 2016 and 2020 have been imprisoned for multiple years while awaiting trial. Significantly, this law has gone unchallenged, with the exception of petitions against a 2019 amendment that allows individuals, in

addition to organisations, to be designated as terrorists, and another calling into question the over-broad definition of “unlawful activity”.

The Free Speech Collective, a group I am part of that works to protect free speech in India, documented a total of 15 journalists charged under the stringent anti-terror act since 2010. Seven, including Purkayastha, are still in jail, charged under multiple criminal laws. Purkayastha says in his memoir, “I have no desire to become the news. Nor does NewsClick; its job is to cover the news. It will continue to do what it has done from the time it was set up: follow people’s movements on the ground and amplify the voices of those who are rarely heard in our society.”

NewsClick started in 2009 with a modest budget, intending to be a news-and-views organisation running both text and videos, with a focus on “a new video generation” that Purkayastha believed would be “lost to a different kind of politics.” What was the difference? “I always find it disturbing that when the workers march in the city, news reports are too often about the traffic jams they caused, rather than their demands,” Purkayastha writes. As a counter, he set about covering people’s movements, as well as farmers, workers, Dalits, women, forest dwellers and other “excluded” sections of society. This focus perhaps explains the Modi government’s attempts to silence the feisty news portal.

Alongside his work at NewsClick, Purkayastha was a dedicated civil-society activist in Delhi, bringing together Gandhians, Marxists, socialists and non-party political activists. But it is Purkayastha’s contribution to media freedom – a barometer of the health of any democracy – that shines through most strongly. A lasting image of the Emergency was the cowering and compliance of the Indian press in the face of authoritarian rule. There were a few dissenters, but the rest, in the mocking words of the BJP stalwart LK Advani, who was also imprisoned during those years, “crawled when asked to bend.” The press was muzzled through a censorship regime unprecedented in independent India. Purkayastha highlights that today’s media is more diversified, with multiple print, digital and broadcasting platforms, and opines that it is much harder to control. He also lauds the courageous anti-establishment voices that still make themselves heard despite widespread repression via court cases, intimidation and threats, and laws like the Information Technology Rules that curtail free speech.

Muzzling critical thought on social media through sedition and defamation cases, as well as bullying by online vigilantes, shapes the discourse through force. However, the mainstream Indian media’s embrace of a right-wing agenda and pro-government propaganda, as also the close nexus between corporates, the government and religious fundamentalists that shape public discourse through co-option as well as coercion, has not come in for critical analysis from Purkayastha. He merely describes the media’s “double role” of providing propaganda interspersed with disinformation, but this does not adequately capture the diabolical role of the well-funded pro-government media machine now at work in India.

Another marker of the health of a democracy is the functioning of the government agencies. The main question is whether they do their work with a measure of neutrality, or operate as tools of harassment. Purkayastha draws parallels between how both Indira Gandhi and Modi’s administrations are marked by the use of government agencies such as the Enforcement Directorate, the Economic Offences Wing and the National Investigation Agency to harass and intimidate critics, whether these are individuals, non-governmental organisations, or opposition parties and politicians. He says, “At one level, there is much more widespread resistance now, but there is also a more

pervasive attack, and I think that's one clear distinction between the Emergency then and the 'emergency' now."

Such control through the law and government agencies, backed up by boots on the ground - then the goons of the Youth Congress, led by Indira Gandhi's son Sanjay, and now various squads of *gau rakshaks* (self-styled protectors of cows) and even armed Hindu nationalist goons abetted by the police - is a time-tested strategy of all repressive regimes. There is the "actual physical violence, including lynching, in the name of protecting cows," he writes. And today, "There is also the terrible violence of language in social discourse, and in social media by the troll brigade. The IT cell of the major political party in India today is at the helm of the new media onslaught, an organised force with huge resources."

According to Purkayastha, the other major difference between the two periods is ideology. While there was ascendant authoritarianism and erosion of democratic rights during the Emergency, the Congress did not at the time espouse an exclusionary politics that branded certain people as outsiders or anti-nationals and lesser citizens (although episodes like the infamous Turkman Gate incident, involving the forcible sterilisation of mostly Muslim men in Delhi during the Emergency, did bring disproportionate consequences for particular communities). After the BJP came to power in 2014, however, there has been widespread targeting of Muslims, Dalits, Adivasis as well as "secularists" by mainstream political forces - not just fringe elements, as apologists for the Hindu Right like to claim.

On the other hand, what was prevalent during Gandhi's reign was what Purkayastha calls "secular oppression". The Emergency was a short-term "fix" to consolidate state power, whereas the undeclared emergency of today involves a hollowing out of the very structure of the Indian state as it earlier existed. Analysing such differences, armed with evidenced-based arguments, is crucial to building strategies to push back authoritarian regimes.

**PURKAYASTHA'S KNOWLEDGE AS COMMONS** provides insights into the intrinsic relationships between science, technology and politics. While he displays a sharp and critical eye on science and technology, what comes through equally strongly is Purkayastha's passion for the subject, and his drive to become a science activist. It is this love, he says, that led him to be part of the people's science movement and the free software movement. Purkayastha became one of the founding members of the Delhi Science Forum, a non-profit set up in 1978 with the belief that "science can play an important role in improving the quality of life and removing social and economic disparities" and in "opposing all forms of obscurantism and stands for promoting scientific temper in society."

He talks about a major transformation in scientific research whereby the output of even publicly-funded institutions is privatised - something particularly notable in the pharmaceutical industry. "This generates more income for the university, while a still larger share of benefits flows to the corporations who are able to 'enclose' the output by buying patents on the findings and applications of such publicly funded research," Purkayastha explains. As markets and the demands of global capital increasingly control science, there is a drive towards monopolies and, consequently, decreased advancement of knowledge systems that bring social benefit or directly meet the needs of people. When the output of scientific research is meant to take the form of patents that translate into money, the goal of university systems and science institutions will inevitably become creating a new class of scientist-entrepreneurs - a reality we are confronted with today. Knowledge as Commons: Towards Inclusive Science and Technology by Prabir Purkayastha. LeftWord Books

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Through the example of the free software movement of the 1980s, Purkayastha makes a case for collaborative scientific exploration. “What stands in the way of liberating this enormous power of working together for the generation of new knowledge and new artefacts?” he asks, and provides then the answer: big capital, and private appropriation, in the shape of patents and intellectual property rights. Purkayastha also asks another crucial question: is science also a part of the ideology of the ruling classes? His answer: “As long as the historical conditions exist for class rule, science, as a part of this ideological battle, will also be a terrain of struggle.”

Though Purkayastha acknowledges the marginalisation of women in science, he gives short shrift to the rich feminist perspectives on science and technology, touching upon it just in one brief footnote: “Some feminist critics of science and technology also use the theme of domination to attack current science and technology as male-centric.” This dismissal of a distinct and well-developed stream of thought does the reader a disservice. Alongside being presented with Purkayastha’s sharp insights about the power dynamics that influence science, readers could have been invited to also engage with reasoned debates about the inherent patriarchal biases of science and technology. This is evident in the exclusion of women not just as generators of knowledge but also as subjects of science, and also by the pervasive myth of “objectivity” and gender neutrality, particularly in medicine.

Large chunks of *Knowledge as Commons* deal with dense technical matters, which can be a challenge for the lay reader. But what is clear enough is the analysis of the politics of science and technology in post-Independence India. The country’s early attempt at self-reliance via large-scale industrialisation failed due to an inability to keep up with rapid technological advances, and was then reduced to merely large-scale assembly. As Purkayastha writes, “The key difference between an ‘atmanirbhar Bharat’ [self-reliant India] and genuine self reliance is knowledge: who owns the knowledge to build plants and equipment.”

The running theme in both of Purkayastha’s books is a fierce critique of authoritarianism, illogic and obscurantism, especially when these things enter politics. In the last section of *Knowledge as Commons*, Purkayastha tackles the elephant in the room: what he describes in *Keeping Up the Good Fight* as the current ruling dispensation’s “ideology-driven project of building a Hindu Rashtra which will have little to do with the inclusive, secular nation with a scientific outlook envisioned by so many of our freedom fighters.”

“This attack on reason and science is also an attack on history, replacing the actual advances in Indian mathematics, astronomy, and medicine with myths,” Purkayastha writes. “In positing mythology as history, it destroys the basis of how to study history using reason and scientific tools. Instead, science and history become the playground of a perverted nationalism.”

Besides ludicrous claims about the origins of all innovation being in India, the most dangerous aspects of the current trend have been the attacks on rationalists and secularists fighting orthodoxy and obscurantism. “It is not where you produce, but what knowledge you have that determines winners and losers in today’s global economy,” Purkayastha writes. He posits that building a nation with a scientific vision requires control over the knowledge. “Developing its people is the key to the future development of a country.”

So how does one resist the current emergency-with-no-name? The answer, says Purkayastha, is to build unity through movements based on class, which transcend mobilisation around community, religion and caste. He asks, "Is it any surprise that movements - from farmers' movements and workers' movements to anti-caste movements and students' movements - become ideological threats to the RSS and the BJP?"

Such solidarity is perhaps the way to counter the strategies of the powers that be to silence dissenting voices and remould the state without them. "People's movements provide the larger world with its only rays of hope," Purkayastha reminds us. "And for me, in my life, they have taught me meaning and given me purpose." Hopefully these rays are strong enough to penetrate the prison walls and bring some optimism for Purkayastha and others who, like him, remain incarcerated for speaking out.

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