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M E E T T H E P R E S S

Produced by Lawrence E. Spivak

SUNDAY, AUGUST 24, 1975

GUEST:

INDIRA GANDHI - The Prime Minister of India

MODERATOR:

Lawrence E. Spivak

PANEL:

James L. Greenfield - The New York Times

Elizabeth Drew - The New Yorker

Carl T. Rowan - Chicago Daily News

Jim Laurie - NBC News

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MEET THE PRESS

MR. SPIVAK: From New Delhi, India and Washington, D. C., MEET THE PRESS Brings you today an interview with the Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi. It will be two months next Tuesday that her government declared a national state of emergency.

The Prime Minister is in a television studio in New Delhi. With her is NBC correspondent Jim Laurie.

The other questioners on our panel today in our Washington studio are Elizabeth Drew of The New Yorker, James L. Greenfield of the New York Times and Carl T. Rowan of the Chicago Daily News.

Madame Prime Minister, I would like to start the questioning.

In your address on the State of Emergency you said, "The actions of a few are endangering the rights of the vast majority."

What rights of the majority were being endangered?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: A few people had created a situation of indiscipline which was leading to us great problems of law and order and had they continued I think we would have had anarchy in this country.

Unfortunately these movements which started quite some time ago, they declared a plan of action on the 25th of June, which would have aggravated the situation.

MR. SPIVAK: A New York Times story says that although you insisted you were responding to a threat to internal stability, that there were many who believed that the only real threat was to your own political power and future. How do you answer that?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: I don't see any truth in that at all because everybody knows what has been happening here in the last year or so. We had a movement in the state of Gujaratt, we had a movement in the state of Bihar and in Gujaratt the members of our legislative assembly were threatened and intimidated and forced to resign. There was violence. Students were not attending college. We had strikes. In fact at all levels there was such indiscipline that even government functioning was becoming extremely difficult.

When this campaign was announced, they said that the motive was to paralyze the central government. Earlier they tried to paralyze the government of these two different states which I mentioned, Gujaratt and Bihar. But it is obvious that if this happened on a nationwide scale -- and this was what was announced -- there would have been wide scale violence and in this period of international uncertainty and internal economic difficulty, I think there was grave internal danger to the country.

MR. SPIVAK: One final question, Madame Prime Minister. The Saturday Review quotes you as saying in your recent interview with them, "What has been done in India is not an abrogation of democracy but an effort to safeguard it."

Now how can you safeguard democracy if you abandon the very essence of democracy, free press, free speech and the right of dissent?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: Democracy has two obligations. There are obligations on the government that it should allow free press, free speech and association and so on but it also has an obligation on the others to observe the rules of the

game, if you like, but that was not being done, and this was what was resulting. This was a very small minority. It was not a question of the entire country wanting something. It was a small minority. Elections were only a few months to go and had they waited they would have had the verdict of the people.

But one of the opposition leaders said, "This will have to be fought out on the streets."

Another one said, "There has to be total revolution," and he tried to incite not only the industrial worker but the Army and the police.

Now this could not have strengthened democracy in any way.

If the people feel that their needs are not being met and their lives are being constantly disturbed, and I mean the mass of the people, then that poses very grave danger to the system.

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MRS. DREW: Mrs. Gandhi, when will you restore the civil liberties which have been suspended?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: It is very difficult to give a date. Naturally, this is not a permanent situation. There are many different types of people involved. They are the recognized political parties, there were certain groups with whom they had combined which said they were not political, which didn't believe in democracy, never said they believed in democracy, and this was the major danger.

Now if those who genuinely believe in democracy are willing to observe the rules of democracy, then this whole process could be expedited.

As you know, although we have censorship of the press and some people are under detention, the whole opposition is not under detention. In fact, most of them are out. Most of those who are in prison are not political people. Some of them are what you call bad elements which the police have on their list, and others are of these parties which we have banned and, as I said, the parties banned are not political parties but are those which had plans for violence and had committed violence in the past.

MRS. DREW: But Madame Prime Minister, with something like 60,000 people in jail and the opposition silenced and the press censored, how can any free decision be arrived at as to when there is order and when there could be civil liberties returned? Is it not just subject to your own decision?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: No, it isn't. I am afraid you have a very wrong view of what is happening, here.

Firstly, the number that you have mentioned is out of all proportion with the truth. It is nothing like that, at all.

People are already being released almost every day. Those decisions taken are not taken by a person, they are taken, as they were taken before, by a cabinet, by various committees and at various levels.

The government is functioning as it was functioning. I have no powers than I had before. Our emergency as you know is under the Constitution and we had to ratify it in Parliament and even though some members of Parliament are in prison, some opposition of all parties did attend that session and the small number who are under detention would have made no

difference to the two-thirds majority even if they had been out. This was done under the Constitution.

MRS. DREW: Will you give any pledge that you will in effect lift the State of Emergency?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: I can assure you that I do not want this to continue indefinitely. In fact I can also assure you that I am deeply committed to democracy. Not merely because it is a good idea but because, for a country of India's vast size and great diversity, I think democracy -- that is, the people's participation -- is the only way to make it function.

MR. GREENFIELD: Madame Prime Minister, I think one of the problems is that we still don't clearly, at least in this country, understand just what crisis you did face. We see your strength in India. You outnumber the opposition in Parliament two to one. Out of twenty-two states, you control all but three.

Much of your opposition is vocal. Jai Prakash Narain says he is nonviolent. You, yourself, say this is a small minority. Why did you really have to move in the extreme way you did? We simply cannot see that it was a national emergency. I wonder if you would elaborate on that.

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: Well, perhaps you are just too far away. I have tried to explain that although the numbers of people involved in the agitations were not large, we all know that, although the work of construction needs hard labor and needs time and people, the work of destruction needs very, very little time or people or energy.

This is what was happening. In Parliament, itself, there was obstruction. Government business could not go on and many important subjects -- economic, education and so on -- just couldn't get to a discussion, because a very few people, a handful of people, were disrupting it.

But something much worse happened in these two states, as I just said. That the Gujaratt Assembly was dissolved merely through the agitation of some people. And at one point they said they should have the right to recall. Now I don't think that your Congress has any such thing.

And who were the people asking for recall? Not those who had elected the member but some students from the city who had no idea about his constituency, about his work, about his reputation. So this was the sort of thing that was happening. As I said, that, worse than the actual things -- I mean we don't have the time to go into the details of these matters, but worse than this was the general atmosphere of irresponsibility. Everybody said that this was a time to get what they could for themselves, and nobody bothered about the country.

Now in a developing country you simply cannot continue in that way. And the very announcement of the emergency did bring about this discipline and I can assure you that if you were here and could go about, you would see that there is no fear, at all. There is calm. People are going about their business in a much more effective way. Whether it is the House fight, whether it is the student people, the students who were giving up exams, who were threatening the supervisors, they are now peacefully studying. And this is happening in all of

the spheres of activity. This is democracy in a way. That the people should feel that this is not government business just to run the country, it is their business.

I personally believe in a greater decentralization but it needs also a strong center which will keep the country together.

A prime minister's primary duty is really to keep the country's unity and integrity. If you lose that, then how do you keep democracy or anything else?

MR. GREENFIELD: I agree with much of what you say and if it is true and if you want to tell the world this, why not put the people on trial? You have a good court system. Why not let the world know what they were about to do?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: How would the world know what they were going to do?

MR. GREENFIELD: I think if you had trials and you tried them and it was explained that they were threatening to endanger your country. But none of that is available. There is not a free press now in India, even to reporters. I think if you had a free press or allowed information to get out and put people on trial they would understand your problem more. Do you agree? Why not a free trial?

PRIME MINISTER AGNDHI: Court cases go on for years and years and it is very difficult to prove anything. If a person has not personally indulged in arson or whatever, you couldn't convict him. What we have done in a large number of cases is preventive detention, because we had information that this might happen. Not that the particular individual might do it but that a situation was being created which

would lead to violence.

Now this is not merely guess work. We came to this decision after the experience of these things happening in different parts of the country and at different times.

MR. ROWAN: Madame Prime Minister, there has been some talk that you are moving toward one-party rule in India. Are you moving toward one-party rule, or not?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: No. I don't think it would work. And we have not banned our parties.

MR. ROWAN: Now one of the things that your Congress Party has done in this emergency is to reduce substantially the power of the courts. You say at some point you are going to lift the emergency. Can you ever restore a situation where the courts play the role they were playing prior to this situation?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: All countries have had to change their constitutions from time to time, including the United States of America. There is no conflict between the judiciary and the parliament. Neither of these is higher than the other. They are supposed to be equal. The executive power lies with parliament in a parliamentary system, which is what we have.

MR. ROWAN: Your parliament, though, has passed a retroactive law declaring you not guilty of any kinds of election violations.

Now I understand your supreme court on August 25 is going to make a ruling as to whether that constitutional amendment is valid.

If the Supreme Court says it is not valid, will you accept the judgment of the Supreme Court?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: That is a hypothetical question.

I don't want to comment on my case because it is not allowed, here, while such matters are in court.

MR. ROWAN: My question is very simple, Madame Prime Minister. It is whether or not you believe the Supreme Court of India has still the authority to decide whether this constitutional amendment is legal.

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: The Supreme Court does have the right to decide but as I said, here, the essence of parliamentary democracy does make parliament supreme, in so far as all executive action is concerned.

MR. LAURIE: Madame Prime Minister, you say you are still committed to parliamentary democracy. Elections are due in the first of the year, in February. Will they take place?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: I can't give a definite answer at this point because naturally much depends on how the situation is. We must be able to ensure fair elections.

MR. LAURIE: What are the contingencies, here? What would influence you to have elections in the early part of the year?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: It is too early to say this. The emergency has only been there for two months and many things have taken place since then.

MR. LAURIE: But you seem to have things well in hand, from my observations at least here in India. Is it not time for some sort of relaxation?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: This is a difficult question to answer. Not because there isn't an answer but these things just can't be announced. There is no doubt that one must

choose a time for relaxation but there is also the question that the other side must be willing, also.

MR. LAURIE: Returning to that question of the other side, what would the political detainees have to do to gain their release? Is there any possibility of having some of these political prisoners be released, at this time, or in the near future?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: As I said, that they should observe the rules of democracy. That is, you speak in Parliament, you defeat the party in the elections but you don't take it to the streets and you don't intimidate people to resign their seats in between.

MR. SPIVAK: Madame Prime Minister, in your address on the State of Emergency you said, "Certain powers have gone to the length of exciting our armed forces to mutiny." How much real danger was there that the armed forces would mutiny?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: I don't think there was a real danger but this sort of thing, it causes confusion in the minds of people, in the masses of the public as well as amongst the armed forces. I have no doubt at all that the armed forces and the police would stand firm but that a person would say this sort of thing and say, let me be tried for treason, I don't think that is a good situation in a country which is just developing and is at a very difficult stage of development.

MRS. DREW: You speak of the necessity of discipline and of the irresponsibility of the opposition. Are you saying that it is possible that a country with the size and the problems of India that there are situations, and we might be facing one, that democracy might have to give way in order to make progress?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: No, I don't think so.

MR. GREENFIELD: Just eight months ago, Madame Prime Minister, in your New Year's address you said, "Some totalitarian systems have put all their people to work, have eliminated [?] flies and also the dissenters, but many dictatorships have failed to solve the basic problem. When this problem was opened to us we deliberately chose the democratic system although we knew it was slower." Was it too slow?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: No but it was -- you see the last two years have been extraordinarily difficult years economically speaking for nearly every country in the world, so there was a special situation which was exploited by the opposition.

My case is not really relevant except that it gave another cause for escalating this sort of campaign and there has been a campaign of hate and calumny against me personally, against those who support me, against my family. Not just now when this emergency is taking place but for a year or more before.

MR. SPIVAK: We have only two minutes left.

MR. ROWAN: Madame Prime Minister, recently some of your Congress Party supporters were outside the U. S. Information Agency offices shouting, "Shame on the CIA." Do you know of anything done by the CIA or any other U. S. Government agency that caused you these difficulties, or that you can construe as an effort to undermine your government?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: I can only say that what has been appearing in your own press and the media has disturbed many

within your country and many people in other countries, including India. Sometimes there are presences which you cannot prove.

MR. LAURIE: Madame Prime Minister, what do you think your emergency has achieved that could not have been achieved in a less radical manner?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: The people have had a shock and they have realized that they have certain obligations to themselves, because this is not for us, for the government, it is for themselves. If the country doesn't develop or the students don't study, it is they who suffer, not the government. So this new feeling -- it is even enthusiasm, it is not just discipline -- this can involve people, which is a very important step in democracy, the participation of people at all levels.

MR. LAURIE: If there is enthusiasm, though, in some areas, in other areas I detect, at least among intellectuals, some fear, fear of being arrested. Doesn't this kind of poison the climate here a bit?

PRIME MINISTER GANDHI: I think that this is very limited. There is some fear amongst those who were indulging in black marketing and hoarding and smuggling because we were taking severe measures against them.

MR. SPIVAK: I am sorry to interrupt, Madame Prime Minister, but our time is up. Thank you, Madame Prime Minister, for being with us today on MEET THE PRESS.

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