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A Case of Mistaken Identity

WHEN MORNING BROKE on September 25, 1975, Prabir Purkayastha had no idea that his life was about to change. The day began normally in his Ganga hostel dormitory in the New Campus of New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). He got dressed and ate breakfast in the dining hall. Rather than wait for the shuttle bus, just after 9 a.m., he set off down the rocky shortcut that led from the ridge behind the dormitories to the Old Campus, which temporarily housed the university's administration and classrooms. He strode past the craggy ridge of boulders and bushes that lined the uneven path and entered the campus through the back entrance. A few minutes later, Prabir was outside the School of Languages. Three students, all like him members of the Student Federation of India (SFI), were already gathered there. The SFI, affiliated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M), was the dominant student organization on campus.¹ One of its members, Devi Prasad Tripathi, was the president of the JNU students' union.

On that morning, the campus was thick with tension. It was the second day of the three-day strike called by the SFI in response to the expulsion of Ashoka Lata Jain, an elected students' union councillor, who also happened to be Prabir's

fiancée. Ashoka was no political firebrand, itching for a confrontation with the authorities. But she had crossed them by chairing a students' union meeting and issuing a pamphlet, protesting the denial of admission to nineteen students on allegedly political grounds. One of them was Tripathi. Having completed his master's at JNU, he had sought admission to the M. Phil. program in the Center for Political Studies. Denied admission, he was technically no longer a student and hence could not chair the students' union meeting. That is why Ashoka had stepped in, provoking the authorities to expel her.

It was to carry out the SFI's strike call to protest the university's action that Prabir was at the School of Languages on the morning of September 25. The school was housed in a multi-story building constructed in the uninspiring public works style of generic modernism. An asphalt road, set between two arid lawns dotted with a few withered trees, branched south from the university's main entry gate to the east. Prabir and his comrades stood on the road leading to the school entrance, approaching the few arriving students to persuade them to boycott classes. Devi Prasad Tripathi joined them briefly to discuss the day's strike action before walking away to the library (Figure 1.1).

Around 10 a.m., a black car drove through the main gate, turned left, and continued toward the School of Languages. It was an Ambassador, one of the three automobile models manufactured in India and one invariably used by officialdom. At the wheel was a physically imposing Sikh, the DIG (deputy inspector general) of Delhi Police, P. S. Bhinder. With him were T. R. Anand, a DSP (deputy superintendent of police), and two constables, all in plainclothes.

The car stopped near the students. Bhinder got out, walked over to Prabir, and asked: "Are you Devi Prasad Tripathi?" Prabir



FIGURE 1.1. School of Languages, JNU, 1970s.
Courtesy: Anwar Huda personal photo.

replied that he was not. The next moment, he found himself being pushed toward the car. His friends rushed to save him from the plainclothesmen and momentarily succeeded in pulling him away from the car. Prabir also resisted, but the policemen beat back the students, lifted Prabir off his feet, and shoved him into the rear seat. Prabir's friends screamed for help. One of them rushed to the driver's side and tried to snatch the car keys from the ignition. But Bhinder came from behind, grabbed her hair, and hurled her to the ground. A flicker of hope rose momentarily in Prabir when he locked sights with a small group of students standing nearby, witnessing his ordeal. But it died as quickly as it had arisen when he saw them turn away with fear in their eyes. With the constables holding the slender, long frame of a struggling Prabir in the rear seat, his legs jutting out of the open door, the car reversed in high speed, turned in the direction of the entry gate, and raced out of the campus.

The abduction happened so suddenly and so fast that all Prabir's friends could do was to yell after the disappearing Am-

bassador. A crowd instantly collected. In angry bursts, Prabir's comrades shouted out what had happened. No one, including the three eyewitnesses, clearly understood the meaning of what had just occurred. What was clear, however, was that Prabir had been snatched away in broad daylight. The shock and confusion billowed into a surge of outrage. Just then, someone spotted DSP Anand walking toward the gate. In the melee, the abducting party had left him behind. With tempers raging in the hot September sun, the angry crowd pounced on the police officer trying to slip out unnoticed. He was pushed, shoved, and beaten. Timely intervention by cooler heads among the assembled students and some faculty members saved him from further manhandling by the inflamed crowd. Policemen in plainclothes, stationed outside the university gate, also stepped in to rescue the roughed-up DSP.

The campus was agog with rumors and speculation as the news quickly spread. Who had abducted Prabir? No one knew that they were policemen because the kidnapping party was not in uniform. Was the black Ambassador the same as the one that had brought Maneka, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's younger daughter-in-law, to campus? Who else did the kidnapers leave behind and where were they hiding? Some students reported that a plainclothes policeman had flashed his revolver when rescuing the abandoned DSP. The furious students marched to the administration block and demanded that the university officials take action. A student was dispatched to lodge a report of kidnapping at the Hauz Khas police station under whose jurisdiction JNU fell.

Meanwhile, the policemen and their quarry sped toward the nearby R. K. Puram police station. Prabir kept protesting that he was not Tripathi. Bhinder was having none of it. Like Devi Prasad Tripathi, Prabir was thin and wore glasses. Though the likeness ended there, Bhinder was convinced that he had

nabbed Tripathi.² He handed Prabir over to the duty officer, asking him to keep the detainee in custody, as he was to be arrested under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA), and drove off.

Nothing could have prepared Prabir for this sudden, unpleasant turn in his fortunes. He had moved to Delhi a year earlier and had only recently secured admission to the doctoral program in computer sciences at JNU.³ Joining JNU made sense, for he spent most of his time on its campus, where he had found kindred political souls in the SFI. His own political baptism had occurred as a nineteen-year-old college student in 1969. After graduating from high school in Calcutta, he secured admission to the Bengal College of Engineering, following a career path favored by many middle-class families. At his college, he discovered the plays of George Bernard Shaw, whose *Arms and the Man* was a prescribed text. Reading Shaw drew him to socialist thought. Also influential were the writings of the Australian radical journalist Wilfred Burchett that he devoured on his visits home to his parents, who lived close to the National Library in Calcutta. Burchett's reporting from Vietnam reinforced the widely prevalent sentiments against the war waged by the United States. Reading Marx and Engels, bought in a bookstall set up during the annual college reunion, hit him like a bolt of lightning. Now he was a leftist. The only question was: which organization to join? He attended a rally addressed by the CPI(M) leader, Hare Krishna Konar, in Burdawan. That settled it. The CPI(M) was already the foremost left force in Bengal. Its insurgent Marxist ideology appealed to rebellious students and youth. So Prabir joined the SFI, the CPI(M)'s student organization.

After graduation, he worked at a small engineering firm in Calcutta but quit after a few months. He moved to Allahabad

in 1972 to pursue a master's program at the Motilal College of Engineering. In Allahabad, he got to know students active in socialist politics who were influenced by Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia's thoughts and actions against caste inequality in Indian society. Prabir introduced them to Marxism and to the SFI. In March 1974, he joined a bank as an officer but gave up the job after a few months. Bitten by the bug of politics, being a banker was not for him. He returned to his studies but since his college in Allahabad did not have a computer, he moved to Delhi in 1974 in order to use the ones available at the Indian Institute of Technology. Since the institute happens to be adjacent to JNU, Prabir often found himself there with fellow SFI members. Among them was Devi Prasad Tripathi, one of the socialists he had known in Allahabad and had recruited into the SFI.

Born to a Brahman family, Tripathi was raised by his mother in an Uttar Pradesh village while his father ran a tea shack in Calcutta.⁴ Burdened with severe sight impairment since his birth, he overcame this physical challenge to excel academically. He read voraciously, peering at books and newspapers barely inches from his face. When he joined Allahabad University in 1970, Tripathi was already fluent in Bengali in addition to his native Hindi, and could read and understand English. He read political theory and literary classics, and gained entry into Allahabad's exciting circle of Hindi writers and intellectuals. A year later, the precocious student from Allahabad applied and was admitted into JNU's master's program in political science. The milieu was anglicized, but this Hindi-speaking student found ways to navigate it, improving his command over English along the way. Devi Prasad Tripathi quickly became known as DPT. Charismatic and an accomplished conversationalist, Tripathi exuded personal warmth, forming friendships across JNU's political divides. He emerged as a popular SFI leader

and won election to the students' union as president in January 1975.⁵ Ever welcoming, it was now Tripathi's turn to introduce his friend Prabir from Allahabad to the circle of SFI activists and supporters at JNU.

In that circle was Ashoka. She had joined JNU's M. Phil program in regional development in 1972, after completing her master's in geography from Agra. Moving to India's capital city was a new experience. Not only was Delhi larger in scale and different from the small, north Indian town of Bijnor where she had grown up, JNU was unlike anything she had previously encountered. The academic level and the system of graduate study were challenging, and the small student body was drawn from all across India. Also new to her was JNU's hothouse of radical politics. Much of the discussion on Indian politics, peppered with references to Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, and Mao, was conducted in English, as it was the only common language among the multilingual student body. Students with elite, anglicized backgrounds, of which there were many, thrived in this English-language world. Ashoka came from a different one. She was raised in a traditional, middle-class Jain family, schooled in the Hindi medium. Yet she found her feet in JNU's demanding environment. She flourished as a student and made friends, most of whom were from the SFI. The SFI put her up as a candidate in the 1973 students' union elections. Soft-spoken and always with an open smile, Ashoka was widely liked. She won handily.

In JNU's heady political atmosphere, the lines blurred between friendship and political association. Chatting over tea at the Ganga Dhaba, browsing the Gita Book Centre and the People's Book House outlet, and going together to the library, to the movies, and shopping merged imperceptibly with political activity. Prabir met Ashoka after Tripathi introduced him

to this set of SFI friends and political associates. Soon they were spending time together. Their association was not so much around day-to-day political organizing but involved discussions on intellectual issues such as the role of capitalism in Indian agriculture, then a topic of debate among Indian academics. While Ashoka was attracted to Prabir's intellectual side, Prabir was drawn by her lively personality. One day he asked her out for tea. He could tell that she knew it was an invitation with meaning. When she accepted, Prabir was overjoyed. Conversations on intellectual and ideological matters soon blossomed into a romantic liaison.⁶ Now, Prabir had an additional reason to stay on in Delhi, and he applied for admission to JNU. Initially admitted by the Centre for Science Policy, he was shifted to the inaugural PhD program in computer sciences. Admission in JNU also gave him a room in the student dormitory on the New Campus. With everything coming together for him and Ashoka, the couple filed a civil marriage application with Additional District Magistrate (ADM) Prodipto Ghosh. The magistrate was to later enter Prabir's life in less pleasant circumstances. But until that dramatic turn of events on the morning of September 25, when he was engaged in the strike action against the expulsion of his comrade and girlfriend, life had run smoothly for Prabir.

What caused the sudden change in his fortunes on that fateful morning? The immediate explanation is that late at night on June 25, 1975, President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, on the recommendation of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, had declared a state of Emergency. His proclamation cited threats posed to the internal security of the nation. But the trigger was the June 12 judgment of the Allahabad High Court, upholding a petition that charged Indira with corrupt practices in her 1971 election. The judgment unseated her from the Parliament and barred her

from contesting elections for six years. On June 24, the Supreme Court granted a stay, pending the disposal of her appeal against the judgment. Having obtained the injunction, Indira swiftly moved to secure the proclamation of Emergency. With constitutional rights suspended, the police conducted midnight raids across the country to round up her political opponents, including the politician Raj Narain who had filed the election petition case against her. Spearheaded by a coterie commanded by her younger son, Sanjay Gandhi, her regime unleashed a reign of coercion and intimidation to crush challenges to her power. Dissent was silenced with press censorship. Opposition leaders and activists were arrested under preventive detention laws and thrown into jail. JNU was also targeted. The police swooped down on the campus at 3 a.m. on July 8 and arrested around twenty-five students. Armed with advance knowledge of the impending raid through friendly police sources, much of the SFI leadership, except one, escaped arrest. Without much information on students, the police rounded up random suspects, including the campus's popular singer of country westerns!⁷ The event of September 25 occurred against this background.

Why did JNU attract the punitive eye of the state? For one thing, it was—and still is—unique and enjoyed the prestige of being named after Indira's father and India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Although M. C. Chagla, a jurist and the education minister, introduced the JNU bill in the Parliament at the end of 1964, the discussions on the university's establishment began soon after Nehru's death on May 27. In August 1964, the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund formed a committee of experts to discuss the establishment of an institution of higher learning named after Nehru that would be different from existing universities.⁸ The committee solicited opinions

from noted individuals, including the nuclear scientist Homi J. Bhabha and the industrialist J. R. D. Tata, who suggested something modeled on the French Grand Écoles.⁹

The most detailed advice came from Dr. Douglas Ensminger of the Ford Foundation in Delhi. His nine-page note titled “Prospectus for a New National Institution of Higher Learning in India” proposed a small residential institution named Nehru Academy, or the Nehru National Institute for Higher Learning or Advanced Studies, or the Nehru National University. It advised the passage of special legislation to create the institution to ensure that it would be independent and free from governmental interference. The note also contained specific suggestions on the structure of the institution, a nontraditional and interdisciplinary curriculum, and the recruitment of talented faculty and students housed in a residential campus. It recommended that the campus be located near an urban and industrial center, not in Delhi but possibly in Bangalore, Nasik, Hyderabad, or Trivandrum.¹⁰

The expert committee headed by Romesh Thapar, a left-wing journalist and the founding editor of the noted public affairs journal *Seminar*, developed Ensminger’s proposal into a final plan.¹¹ Proposing Nehru Academy or the Nehru Institute of Advanced Studies as possible names, the Thapar committee envisioned the establishment of a small, research-oriented institution of a different kind. It was to advance Nehru’s ideas on national integration and his global outlook. In keeping with Nehru’s broad-minded scientific perspective, the new institution would stress interdisciplinary study and research and abandon the annual examination system of Indian universities. It would recruit top Indian faculty from within the country and abroad and teach a select body of students. Disagreeing with

Ensminger's view, the committee strongly recommended that it be located near Delhi, both because that would be more convenient for international exchanges and because Nehru's reign as prime minister was in the city.

The left-wing student body of JNU in the 1970s would have been inflamed if they had known of the role played by Ensminger in the foundation of the university. Not only were the student activists stridently anti-American, India's image under Nehru and Indira was also pro-Soviet Union. But Nehru, in spite of his socialist leanings, was not averse to American assistance. While securing Soviet help in establishing highly visible steel plants and heavy engineering projects in the public sector, he was receptive to expertise and assistance for modernization from everyone, including the Ford Foundation. The foundation recruited Ensminger, a rural sociologist who had earned his doctorate from Cornell University and had previously worked in the Department of Agriculture in the United States, to establish and lead its field office in India to promote its agenda of "human welfare." He proved to be an excellent choice, for Ensminger recognized that the foundation's success as a philanthropic organization depended on keeping its distance from the U.S. government. Recognizing Indian political sensitivities, he positioned the foundation in India as a purely technocratic body of development and social engineering. He defended India's goal of achieving a "socialist pattern of society," fought Ford's New York headquarters to secure local veto power over projects, and made sure that they were partnered with Indian social scientists.¹² During the nineteen years of his tenure in New Delhi, Ensminger succeeded in inserting the foundation in shaping key areas of development initiatives. In addition to spearheading programs such as family planning and rural community development, the Ford Foundation helped establish

several important institutions like the Indian Institute of Public Administration, the National Institute of Design, and the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad and Calcutta.

The key to Ensminger's success was the rapport he established with Nehru. Upon arriving in New Delhi in 1951, he concluded, "Nehru was India." Not only was he the prime minister, the external affairs minister, and the head of the Planning Commission, he "told the people of India what he expected of them, and the people looked to Nehru to tell them what he wanted them to do."¹³ Accordingly, Ensminger quietly forged a productive working relationship with Nehru, regularly informing him of and discussing with him all of the foundation activities, which he presented as technical advice and financial assistance on priorities determined by the Indian government. At no time did he have to wait longer than three days to meet with Nehru, and they frequently exchanged messages on ongoing projects. Over time, Ensminger thought that they had developed a relationship "truly Indian in character." Evidently, his ready access to Nehru made him appear such an influential figure that the American architect Albert Mayer, who headed the formulation of the Delhi Master Plan, remarked in 1959 that Ensminger was "the second most powerful man in India."¹⁴

Nehru's death in 1964 profoundly saddened Ensminger, but his productive relationship with the Indian government continued. It is no surprise therefore that he was asked for advice on setting up a university that was to be named after a leader he so admired and with whom he had worked so consequentially during independent India's formative years.

Ensminger's proposal was revised and redrafted into a plan for JNU. As the Ford Foundation chief had suggested, special legislation was introduced in the Parliament, which passed the Jawaharlal Nehru University Act in 1966.¹⁵ The university

formally started functioning in 1969 under the newly appointed vice-chancellor, Gopalaswami Parthasarathi, or GP as he was popularly known. It was housed temporarily in the unoccupied buildings originally constructed for the National Academy of Administration on the southern outskirts of the city while construction for a permanent campus began on the adjacent rocky outcrops of the Aravalli mountain range. The government held a design competition for a master plan for the new JNU campus, which attracted sixty-eight proposals. It invited the competing architects to design a campus that reflected Nehru's educational philosophy of unity of knowledge and reflected the "unity in diversity of India" and embodied "the spirit of democracy and social justice." The injunction that the plan should incorporate the states and cultures of India did not mean an institution "where Kerala students live in the Kerala House" and "Bihar students in the Bihar House." The ideal was that the students and teachers from all of India would live together in the spirit of unity in diversity. Just as Nehru was "thoroughly modern and still rooted in and took sustenance from the past—not its fossils," so should be the university named after him.¹⁶ JNU was to literally embody the ideal of a pedagogic state, teaching its citizens to be Indian in the fashion that Nehru envisaged. The irony was that this was being built precisely when the ideal itself was coming apart on the streets.

The architectural competition, however, went ahead. The winning entry was by C. P. Kukreja Associates. It planned for a campus built of red bricks set amid rocks and shrubs, designed to reflect the terrain. The student dormitories were named after India's rivers as a nod to national integration. By 1973, the New Campus was ready to house students while teaching and administration remained on the Old Campus. The university itself had become fully operational a year earlier. Vice-Chancellor

Parthasarathi, an Oxford graduate, a former barrister, and a diplomat, recruited top faculty from across India and abroad. Initially, many of the admitted students were from privileged and anglicized families and were graduates of elite institutions. To diversify the student body, the system of admission introduced in 1974 was designed to give preference to applicants from economically deprived families and to those belonging to the officially classified backward regions of the country.

Both Parthasarathi and his subordinate N. V. K. Murthy, the registrar, were suave, cosmopolitan individuals, cut from the Nehruvian liberal cloth. They were open to diverse views and opinions, tolerated dissent, espoused a plural view of India, held progressive social and political values, and exuded an internationalist outlook. They fostered JNU as a place of academic excellence and free exchange of ideas between the administration and faculty and students. Radicalism thrived in this milieu. Many of the leading historians and social scientists recruited to the faculty also belonged to the Left. Graduate students formed the overwhelming majority of the student body, while the undergraduates were confined to the School of Languages, where the prime minister's younger daughter-in-law, Maneka Gandhi, the wife of Sanjay Gandhi, was a student of German. The university was small—under 800 students and 200 faculty until 1975.¹⁷ This fostered an atmosphere of a close-knit community woven together with informal, face-to-face relationships and exchanges. The residential campus and the close proximity of the dormitories of men and women also produced a liberal atmosphere of conversations and friendships across genders, which was unusual for India.

From the very beginning, the SFI was dominant among JNU students. The All India Student Federation (AISF), which was affiliated with the Communist Party of India (CPI), enjoyed

a much smaller influence, but together the two organizations gave a strong leftist cast to student politics.¹⁸ By 1973, another group, called the Freethinkers, had emerged as a powerful opposing force. Led by Anand Kumar, a socialist, the Freethinkers mobilized students against what they depicted as the SFI's domineering attitude. Also opposed to both the SFI and the AISF was a small group named the Marxist Forum founded by Jairus Banaji, an Oxford graduate fluent in several European languages and a research scholar in history. A Trotskyist with a deep knowledge of Marxist theory and the history of the European Left, Banaji was a brilliant polemicist in English. His withering critiques of the party Left immediately elevated the debate from the standard CPI-CPI(M) propaganda to high Marxist theory. Packed meetings during student elections were treated to passionate debates on the history of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Comintern, as well as erudite discourses on the bourgeois character of Levi-Strauss's structural anthropology. Students and teachers rose in ovations to speeches by Isabel Allende and Tariq Ali, the British Marxist, denouncing the CIA and U.S. imperialism for engineering the 1973 coup against Salvador Allende's socialist regime in Chile. A standing-room-only auditorium of students listened in rapt attention to E. P. Thompson's discourse on Marxist historiography and his critique of the structural Marxism of the French theorist Louis Althusser. Vivan Sundaram, the radical artist, held a successful show of his artwork on campus. Students spilled out on the streets in support of the 1974 strike by railways workers, fighting pitched battles with the police.

Indira Gandhi and her political opponents were sideshows on a political and ideological stage dominated by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, and Mao. With the Left dominant on campus, the ruling Congress Party and the other principal op-

position parties had virtually no presence. It was in the far larger Delhi University where the student organizations of the Congress and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Jana Sangh (the precursor to the present ruling party, the BJP) battled it out. JNU's high-octane Left politics was often in the news. The anti-establishment student upsurge in Bihar led by Jayaprakash Narayan enjoyed vigorous support on campus from the socialist Anand Kumar. The SFI was less than fully supportive of JP but decidedly anti-Congress. The CPI-affiliated AISF backed the Emergency, but it had little influence among students. Indira could not ignore the anti-Emergency sentiment in a prestigious university named after her father and located in the capital. The den of subversives had to be flushed out. Accordingly, the police raided the campus in the early morning of July 8. By this time, the liberal Parthasarathi was no longer the vice-chancellor and Murthy had left to become the director of the Film Institute in Pune. There was no administrator willing to protest against the unauthorized police action. The new vice-chancellor had ruled that membership in the students' union was voluntary. The situation was already inflamed.

But the immediate cause for Prabir's kidnapping on September 25 was different. It began with an incident involving Maneka Gandhi, the nineteen-year-old wife of Sanjay. Growing up as Maneka Anand in a Sikh family, she had initially enrolled to study political science in 1973 at Delhi's Lady Shree Ram College for Women, where she won a beauty contest. She began to work as a model, advertising bath towels on billboards and in magazines. However, this career ended abruptly when a chance encounter with Sanjay at a party in December 1973 quickly blossomed into a romantic relationship. On July 29, 1974, eighteen-year-old Maneka Anand was engaged to twenty-eight-year-old Sanjay Gandhi. Two months later, they were

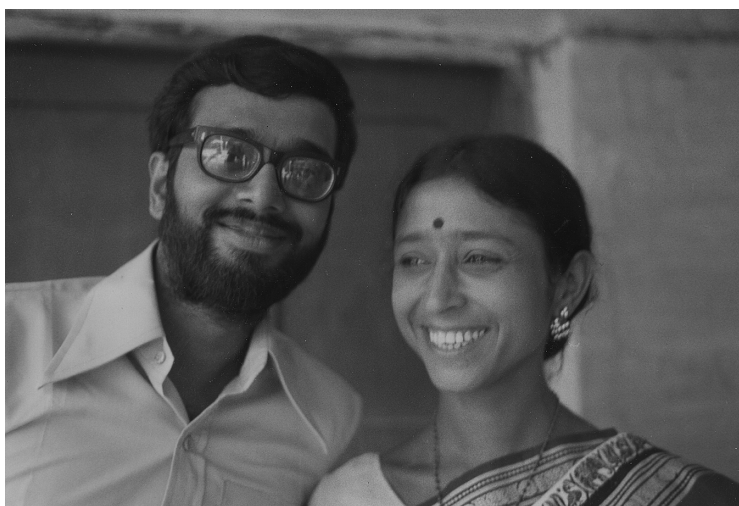


FIGURE 1.2. Prabir Purkayastha and Ashoka Lata Jain, 1977.

married in a quiet, private ceremony attended by close family members. By this time, Maneka was a student of German at JNU (Figures 1.2–1.6).

On the day Prabir was abducted, Maneka arrived on campus just before 9:00 a.m. for her class in the School of Languages. She got out of her black Ambassador and walked to the elevator to go up to her classroom. As she waited, Tripathi, accompanied by other students including Prabir, asked her to heed the strike call and boycott classes. “You are one of us, Mrs. Gandhi Junior!” Maneka exploded in anger. “Just you wait and see. Your heads will roll on the ground!”¹⁹ Then she stomped off. An hour later, another Ambassador entered JNU, and Prabir was whisked off.

As he waited at the R. K. Puram police station, Prabir continued protesting that he was not Devi Prasad Tripathi. His efforts were in vain. Meanwhile, ADM Ghosh (the area’s mag-



FIGURE 1.3. Devi Prasad Tripathi, 1975.

istrate to whom Prabir and Ashoka had previously applied for recording their civil marriage) received a wireless message from the superintendent of police (SP) of South Delhi, Rajinder Mohan, summoning him to the Hauz Khas police station. Earlier that morning, Mohan had received a message from DSP Anand (the officer attacked by students after Prabir's kidnapping) that some students had prevented Maneka from attending her class. Initially reported by the police officer accompanying her in the car to JNU, this information was quickly conveyed

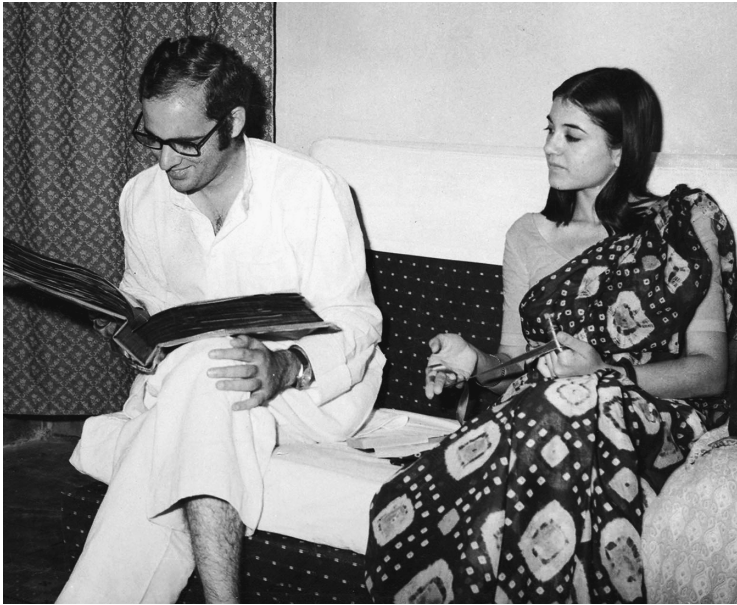


FIGURE 1.4. Maneka and Sanjay Gandhi, 1976.

Source: The Times of India Group © BCCL.

to Anand, who, in turn, promptly informed his superior, SP Mohan. Mohan then drove in his black Ambassador to JNU where Anand was waiting outside the gate. As they stood by the car, an agitated DIG Bhinder, the second highest-ranked Delhi police officer, showed up.²⁰

Less than an hour had passed since the incident involving Maneka, and three police officers were already assembled at the spot of reported trouble. Delhi Police is not famous for its speedy response to complaints by the citizenry. However, the complaining citizen in this case happened to be Sanjay Gandhi. And he voiced the grievance to no ordinary policeman but to the DIG of Delhi Police, Pritam Singh Bhinder. The forty-one-year-old police officer was a Sanjay favorite. A high-achieving



FIGURE 1.5. DIG P. S. Bhinder, 1970s.

man of ambition, he was the first college graduate in his Punjab village.²¹ After graduation, Bhinder went on to earn a master's degree and sat successfully in the nationwide competitive civil service examination in 1956. His low score ruled out recruitment into the Indian Police Service that he coveted. Rather than accept an appointment in a less-desirable civil service branch, one that would secure guaranteed employment for life, Bhinder rolled the dice. He declined to join any other service and sat for the examination again the following year. This time



FIGURE 1.6. ADM Prodipto Ghosh, 1970s.

he was ranked fourth, and he went on to be at the top of his class in training. Inducted into the Punjab cadre of the police service in 1958, Bhinder was assigned to Haryana when it became a state in 1966. Fortune smiled on him during his tenure as the senior SP in Gurgaon. He got to know and had opportunities to serve Sanjay, whose Maruti car factory lay within his jurisdiction. Evidently he had gained a powerful patron, for Bhinder was transferred to Delhi and appointed to the important position of DIG (Range), the number two position in the

police hierarchy. As Sanjay increasingly took on the charge of battling his mother's political opponents, Bhinder stood loyally beside him as a police officer willing to promptly execute his orders.

On the morning of September 25, Bhinder had come to JNU directly from the prime minister's house where Sanjay had grumbled that, according to Maneka, JNU was rife with antigovernment activities. Sanjay had asked him to take drastic action.²² Wasting no time, Bhinder jumped into his Ambassador and drove straight to JNU where the police officers Anand and Mohan were already gathered near the gate. Upon arriving, Bhinder asked them what information they had about Devi Prasad Tripathi. Although a warrant for arrest under MISA, the preventive detention law, for DPT awaited execution, the officers admitted that they did not know what he looked like, let alone his whereabouts. However, he had reportedly been seen recently in the School of Languages. This was enough for Bhinder. True to character, he announced he was going to make the arrest himself immediately. He left his own car with SP Mohan, got behind the wheel of the SP's black Ambassador, and drove into the campus with DSP Anand and two constables.²³

ADM Ghosh knew none of this story when he entered the Hauz Khas police station. Officers at the station informed him that a student had been arrested in JNU, following a scuffle between the police and the students. As the story did not sit right with Ghosh, he summoned JNU officials to the police station. When the dean of students and the registrar arrived, they discovered from Ghosh that it was the police who had abducted Prabir. They protested the police's unauthorized entry into the campus and demanded to know the reasons for his arrest. The magistrate then confronted SP Mohan with what he had

learned from the university officials. The police officer then recounted a very different story from the one about a simple scuffle that ADM Ghosh had initially been told. No, there had been no arrest and no student scuffle with the police. In fact, Bhinder had driven into JNU and snatched a student named Devi Prasad Tripathi. But Ghosh knew from his talk with the JNU administrators that the student in custody was not Tripathi.

Ghosh was a young Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer from the 1968 batch. Like Prabir, he was a Bengali and had grown up in a middle-class family. After completing his high school from Delhi Public School, he received a Science Talent Search Scholarship and entered the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, from which he earned a degree in chemical engineering. But while Prabir gravitated toward politics after his engineering education, Ghosh passed the civil service examination and was assigned to the IAS cadre that included the Union Territory of Delhi. It was in his capacity as ADM Delhi (South) that the engineer-turned-administrator had first encountered the engineer-turned-political activist Prabir when he and Ashoka had applied for a marriage license. Encountering him now under very different circumstances, Ghosh set about piecing together the details he had gathered and noted the discrepancies in the police accounts. He concluded that Prabir's arrest was a case of mistaken identity and declined to issue a warrant for his arrest. Placing the facts of the arrest before his superior, District Magistrate (DM) Sushil Kumar, Ghosh asked for guidance. Kumar informed him that since the issue involved the "PM's house" (a euphemism for Sanjay Gandhi), he had to consult the Delhi lieutenant governor (LG) Krishan Chand. Meanwhile, Bhinder had already been in contact with the LG, boasting that he had found a "gold mine" of subversives in JNU.²⁴ He flatly denied that it was a case of mistaken identity

and claimed that, along with Tripathi, Prabir had been on his radar as one of the ringleaders. When SP Mohan informed him that Prabir's name did not figure in the police list of student leaders targeted for arrest, Bhinder brushed him off. The decision was made, and he would be supplied with the necessary warrant. After consulting Bhinder, the LG instructed ADM Ghosh to issue a warrant since the information had come from above. ADM Ghosh, whom Prabir had approached to register his civil marriage to Ashoka, was now ordered to authorize his arrest. The issue of a MISA warrant required the police to submit justifying evidence to a magistrate. The police had not submitted any such evidence; it was supplied a few days later in an unsigned note. Yet Ghosh felt he had no option but to issue a warrant. Why? As he explained later, because the "practice was not to issue detention orders on the basis of subjective satisfaction of a Magistrate but to issue them on the directions of our official superiors."²⁵ Late that night, Prabir was transported from the police station to Tihar Central Jail in Delhi. He was later transferred to Agra, where he spent twenty-five days in solitary confinement.

The Emergency had produced a raging storm, and Prabir was one of its accidental victims. What created this maelstrom? And why did it rain down on the Nehruvian oasis of JNU? Founded to embody Nehru's vision of a progressive, plural, and internationalist India, the university had witnessed no clashes over caste, religion, or region characteristic of national politics. The Emergency's disruptive arrival on campus served notice that it would no longer be exempt from the convulsions of Indian politics. It suggests that understanding Prabir's arrest requires us to place it not only in the glare of immediate events but also against the larger background of India's experience with democracy, beginning with the constitution.