

RAGE AND OUTRAGE IN DELHI AND ACROSS THE NATION

Jawhar Sircar

Ananda Bazar Patrika, 08 Mar 2020

In December last, when agitations against the discriminatory Citizenship Act Amendment had just begun, Ananda Bazar Patrika published an article where I had stated “No one can predict.....how the Modi-Shah duo will retort, and one fear that haunts analysts is of a mischievous communal riot” (বহুত্ব, শেষে পর্যন্ত, Ananda Bazar Patrika, 27th December, 2019). Now that this riot has been successfully operationalised and lives lost, we need to understand seriously what is that we are up against. Over the last several weeks of sleepless nights, the issue has metamorphosed from independent protests against an amendment to a law to a much wider nation-wide, multi-religious struggle against authoritarianism and communalism. Three hated abbreviations, CAA, NRC, NPR, finally brought out the hitherto-cautious but harassed Muslim on to the streets, sick as he was of five years of endless torment. He found immediate and wholehearted support from secular India that suddenly sprang out of the dark to which it had been pushed by aggressive majoritarianism. What is more fascinating is that ordinary Muslim women, housewives with babies in arms and angry young educated girls, who had never before stood up to state power, took the unprecedented lead — as did lakhs of first-time protesters. They conquered the fear of fear and that itself worried the regime the most. Indian history will not easily forget the Sikhs and Hindus who joined the protesters as a mark of solidarity, setting up food camps and providing blankets to fight the biting cold of a harsh winter. From Shaheen Bagh to Park Circus and a dozen other spots all over the country, the air is thick with endless tales of camaraderie, as countless Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and Buddhists rejected the special status offered to them by the CAA, to stand beside victimised Muslims.

But having said so, we also need to seriously interpret the events of the last 10-12 weeks and realise that the Delhi riots constitute the first major response of a regime that scorns democratic discourse and its patience is running out. The violent masked storm-troopers sent to smash and beat up dissent at JNU were only a short trailer of this regime’s new PPP or Private Public Partnership model, under which messy violence is outsourced to experienced goons. The state guarantees them immunity from police action and the present JNU case proves this, shamelessly. The regime also expects judges to be compliant or face overnight transfer. To feed the animal genes of a section of trigger-happy policemen, the PPP state then targets them to selective sites like Jamia and Aligarh universities and other trouble spots in Guwahati, Mangalore Lucknow or Chennai. It is imperative to realise that Modi is not Indira 2.0. While dictatorial Indira Gandhi surely crushed all opposition and, like Modi, always smelt conspiracies everywhere, she did not inject poison into the body

polity that outlived her. Modi's legacy may take decades of painful chemo-therapy to contain, even after his dispensation becomes just a bad memory. He is the first to accord respectability to communalism, and though future India may cap the holes from where racial reptiles emerged, they will still be slithering in rage, under the ground. The second difference is that Narendra Modi certainly does not share Nehru's or Vajpayee's commitment to democracy and no one can predict how he will behave in the face of a debacle. Even autocratic Indira took the electoral rout of 1977 in her stride, but after two unbroken decades in power, at the state and central level, Modi and his extreme proximity to the army are both worrisome. Never before has the Indian public been taught to celebrate and worship the armed forces and the 'nation', just because this regime desperately needs to cover up its complete disappearance from the freedom struggle.

The recent riots are actually the regime's limited-over response to the nation-wide agitation against tampering with citizenship laws. It is also Home Minister Amit Shah's manner of expressing displeasure at the voters of Delhi for rejecting the BJP at the recent polls, by giving India a dress rehearsal of how vulnerable Hindus are in the face of Muslim belligerence, that led to the death of two police officers. This narrative obviously ignores basic facts that are known even to the international media, that it were mainly Muslims who were slaughtered. So, the foreign media is told to shut up. Those who have handled riots know how critical is the role of gathering intelligence as soon as the first wisp is in the air, and how swift pre-emptive arrests can prevent a conflagration. These were not only absent, but BJP strongman Kapil Mishra was allowed to pounce on the agitators at Jaffrabad and Chand Bagh on Sunday 23rd — which led directly to the riots. All the rioting was, interestingly, concentrated in a small part of North East Delhi, locally called trans-Jamuna or Jamuna-paar. This thin slice that lies to the east of the Jamuna river, contains less than ten percent of Delhi's voters and assembly seats and it is here that the BJP won 6 of its 8 seats recently, with one more seat close to it. All the riot-affected areas like Khajuri Khas, Maujpur, Karwal Nagar, Seelampur, Bhajanpura are in this BJP stronghold. It is here that the police stood as mute spectators when victims, mainly Muslims, were killed or grievously injured, and their homes, shops and vehicles set on fire. The rest of Delhi that voted against the BJP was not (or could not be) set on fire — not even those most vexatious Shaheen Bagh and Jamia Nagar areas.

The point is that Kapil Mishra's incendiary speeches and tweets violated half a dozen punishable sections of the Indian Penal Code, not only now but even months ago, when he led mobs shouting "gaddaaro ko goli maro" (kill the traitors). He gets away as he represents the hard core or BJP and RSS beliefs. He may well be using a wildly-successful, punishment-free formula of 'riot and bloodshed' to catapult himself from state to the national level. Incidentally, had conscientious judges of the Delhi High Court not actually viewed the recordings of Kapil Mishra's provocative speeches, and had two refreshingly-bold judges of the Supreme Court not pulled up the Delhi Police, the riots would have continued unabated. Incidentally, the most

glaring transformation that one notices in the highest courts is that justice and relief appear to be very judge-centric and emanate from a few, while many deliver homilies, without actually fast-forwarding the restoration of human rights. Tragic.

The short point is that we are in for a long haul and need to dig our trenches before selective arrests begin and phase two of state terror is unleashed. Non-political, crowd-financed agitations also have their limits, but what overrides such mature worries is that it is not just protest, but the 'General Will' that Rousseau had defined, in romantic terms. It is now part of plural India's long-awaited reply to communal terror. The long lathis that police use to crush dissent and smash evidence-recording CCTV cameras are not dreaded any more. Even the non-police weapons they are reportedly using to shoot protesters do not frighten those who have given their hearts and soul. We are now witnessing that historic phase when the 'society' has transcended the individual. This is when the community becomes the centre of all social activities, not the hearth, when, life, laughter, meals, joy and sorrow are all shared in common. We see it lightly at some puja mandaps in tightly-knit localities, but a protest camp is much more serious. A culture of protest and deep involvement triggers a spontaneous outburst of creativity. Defiant poems, challenging songs and teasing slogans resound everywhere and provocative graffiti and public art rock the false gods. What it all hopefully means is that the individual has subsumed himself into the 'greater cause' and is now willing to fight it out till the end, irrespective of consequences.