

“THE NEW CITIZENSHIP LAW HAS IGNITED A BATTLE FOR INDIA'S SOUL”

Jawhar Sircar

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The sudden, unplanned outburst in many parts of India on the issue of citizenship is, no doubt, the first major general agitation against Narendra Modi. For five and a half years, the world's largest democracy had silently watched authoritarianism and communalism tighten their stranglehold, but now, it appears to have found its voice back. People who were distressed at the serial collapse of every public institution and bulwark of liberty and fair play, and had despaired at the death-wish of the Congress, the decimation of the Left and the listlessness of unimpressive opposition parties, have suddenly woken up, thanks to this spontaneous fury. Many of those media houses that were tirelessly manufacturing consent for the regime were compelled to take note.

Analysts feel that the recent agitation is not sufficiently broad-based as it is led by students and the youth; that it is confined only to some urban centres and to the middle class, and is largely fired by one community. These accusations could have been true on 15th December when the movement started in Jamia Milia Islamia and India Aligarh Muslim universities, but the disproportionate brutality of the police action united thousands of non-Muslims all over India and broadened the base of the agitation. We may also recall that the two mass uprisings that shook India in 1974-75, the Nav Nirman movement of Gujarat and Jayprakash Narayan's Sampurna Kranti of Bihar, were also localised and led by the young, before really old men like Morarji Desai and Jayprakash took over. Frankly, it required the party-less, leaderless youth to muster both courage and recklessness to halt the invincible Ashwamedha horse whose Yagna was celebrated by Modi-Shah, as soon as their batteries were recharged in May 2019.

The first five months of Modi 2.0 witnessed more depredations on India's democracy and secularism, especially on the latter, than ever before. This year's

two sessions of Parliament made a mockery of democratic discourse, as the regime's brute majority in the Lok Sabha and floor management in the Rajya Sabha ensured that the bombardment that started with the Triple Talaq Bill never stopped. Amendments were hustled through parliament to curb civil liberties and further strengthen the National Investigation Agency; to empower detention without ascribing reasons under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) and to emasculate the Right to Information Act. Other hastily-hustled laws introduced dangerous clauses in medical education and central universities and legitimised Big Brother's Aadhaar Card. But palpable shock waves rocked the nation in early August, and went far beyond, when Article 370 of the Constitution was repealed, with undisguised relish by the central government. Given the sui generis nature of Kashmir's accession to India and the special guarantees given then, this article conferred some token autonomy to Jammu and Kashmir, but this was amputated without anaesthesia. Unprecedented numbers of armed forces were flown to ensure that any dissent by Kashmiris was totally overawed, even as their state was slashed into 'union territories' and deliberately degraded. Mainstream India was too stunned to respond and the endless series of vindictive tax raids on opponents and peremptory arrests by the CBI appeared to have sent shivers regarding the ruthless, malicious style of governance. The prolonged detention of the former Finance and Home Minister and a Chief Minister also ensured that no one dare challenge the new Shah of India.

Even before the nation could recover from the massive crushing of civil liberties in Kashmir, came another trauma on 31st August, when the National Register of Citizens (NRC) for Assam was published. It took 50,000 government officials ten long years to prepare this register and it cost the people of India some 1200 crore rupees, even if we remain silent on the corruption and sheer harassment that accompanied this programme. In the last few years, the Supreme Court had taken upon itself the task of regular monitoring this very difficult exercise to weed out infiltrators, but when 19 lakh people, most of them Hindu Bengalis, were excluded from the Register, everyone was upset. Those who had targeted 'Bangladeshi Muslims' were disappointed at the small number caught in the net, while those who were left out were shattered — especially as 'detention centres', inspired surely by Nazi concentration camps, were being built for them. Flare-ups took place in Assam but before we reach the next phase of

unrest, let us recall how the Supreme Court had fast-tracked hearings and submissions to resolve the vexatious issue of Ayodhya before a Chief Justice retired, which is rather odd. The same court had put on hold critical decisions on the constitutionality of the blitzkrieg in Kashmir and severe human rights issues. The Court's verdict of 9th November that effectively handed over the disputed plot to Hindus was based on non-watertight evidence, but it may have ensured that majoritarian violence did not break out, as it had in 1992-93 and in 2002. Or, maybe the perpetrators of the mentioned riots had sheathed their swords as, after all, they got what they wanted — Mandir Hum Wahin Banayege (we promise that our temple will be at that spot). Naturally, disconcerting whispers also arose and many criticised what they considered to be a capitulation before majoritarianism. A lot of angst would, however, surely have been taken care of if only the honourable court had issued a deadline, as it had done to ensure land for the temple and mosque, for the time-bound finalisation of criminal cases, that are dragging for a quarter century, and punish those who openly vandalised Babri Masjid. After all, the apex court had severely condemned it, and what better could we expect if action had accompanied words?

But let us move on, to the tipping point, that came finally in mid-December when the regime gloated the successful passing of the amendment to the Citizenship Act of 1955. Though it spoke sentimentally of wiping the tears of those persecuted minorities who were seeking refuge in Mother India, the undisguised target was the legitimisation of discrimination against Muslims. Strategically, Hindu and other non-Muslim refugees from three Muslim countries were chosen for this favour and four other neighbours were left out. It was, however, the promise-cum-threat issued repeatedly by Home Minister Shah that the Assam-type gruelling NRC survey would be extended to other parts of India, that led to the sudden explosion of popular wrath. At this stage, we also need to understand that the causes for protests in Assam, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and the rest of India are quite distinct from each other. The Assamese, who are paranoid about being outnumbered by Bengalis, are up in arms against the BJP and its CAA for trying to 'regularise' Hindu Bengali immigrants who were left out by the NRC. They feared that many more Bangladeshi Hindu refugees would be given citizenship and upset Assad's precarious demographic balance. On the other hand, Tamils are agitating mainly against the omission of Lankan Tamil refugees in this Christmas gift, though

some are also against religious discrimination. The ruling party in Bengal, that has organised massive all-community protests, aims to further consolidate its base among the minority community. It also highlights the terror that NRC evokes — of bureaucratic harassment, corruption and heartlessness — to win over the majority.

The semiotics in the battle are interesting. The national flag has, for instance, been snatched back by the agitators from the ultra-nationalists, who had, appropriated it quite brazenly. Historically, this Sangh parivar had virulently opposed the Indian tricolour at the time of our Independence and had continued to insult it until Sardar Patel compelled them to accept the nation's flag. Muslims, who were being repeatedly grilled and heckled for the last five years about their loyalty to India, are now proudly waving national flags as their response, as part of the citizenship agitation. Students in Delhi and elsewhere are also innovating several Gandhian techniques, like, say, offering flowers to policemen and trying to reach their hearts. National and patriotic songs are now the weapons of the weak as they stand up to the grossly inhuman viscousness let loose by the regime in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka and Assam, where their are hegemony prevails. But then, this reminds us of similar outbursts of patriotism that we had seen in the protests in Delhi after the Nirbhaya incident in 2012-13. We can hardly forget how countless young men and women had responded to Anna Hazare's call against corruption and had brought the capital city and other parts of India to a halt. They had given fresh life to forgotten Gandhi caps, but the lasting result of their agitation and sacrifice is that a crafty Arvind Kejriwal has been catapulted to power and a publicity-crazy Kiran Bedi sits in the overrated chair of a Lieutenant Governor.

But attacking a doddering liberal-secular government in India then is different from taking on the present breed of ruthless megalomaniacs, who stop at nothing. No one can predict how long the public anger will be sustained and how the Modi-Shah duo will retort, and with what ferocity and vindictiveness. One prays that communal conflicts do not break out in this charged atmosphere or are even manufactured to split the movement. Some say that a war-like attack in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir could also distract attention from civil protests, as belligerence always pumps patriotic adrenaline. The protest that was lit by

students of two central universities and may have been taken up first by Muslims, as they were/are the targets of Hindu extremists, has certainly metamorphosed into a general revolt. It is now a movement of the young, not only against unfair religious discrimination, but also against authoritarianism and against cutting of funding and interfering in education. Economic failures and increased joblessness are also stoking dissent, finally, as well. The fact is, however, that our liberal secular forces have remained content with signing righteous petitions, writing strong articles and holding debates on television or within safe surroundings. Liberals in neighbouring Bangladesh, on the other hand, had to combat brutal authoritarianism and religious fanaticism much and more directly. From 1989, they organised massive Mangal Shobha-jatra rallies as anti-Ershad protests by secular forces and continue to bring out these mammoth demonstrations every year on 14th April, as evidence of their war on Islamic obscurantism. In February 2013, several thousand intellectuals, teachers and street-shy middle class professionals gathered spontaneously at Shahbagh in Dhaka and demonstrated for days on end, compelling their government to hang Islamic fundamentalists, who were guilty of murder and rape. The Religious Right was taken aback by the scale of protest and the determination of secular democratic forces, that withstood physical attacks — thanks to the bold youth brigade that had joined the secular chorus.

Whatever be the results of the present CAA-NRC movement, the first gashes and scars that have been inflicted will not be easy to hide. The hypnotic charm of Modi, created through his glib, sweet-talking series of lies and fanned largely by well-paid corporate marketing and media professionals and amoral strategists, is finally broken. Those who were aghast to see India's youth following him like Pied Piper and heaping their votes in his favour, are finally relieved. The moot point we need to remember is that different sets of Indians had voted for different Modis — as India's multi-purpose saviour or Kalki Avatar; as Mister Clean who would bring black money from Swiss banks; as the poor tea-server who symbolised humility; as the determined anti-dynast who lived a frugal existence; as the great patriot who would elevate India's position to the highest level; as the warrior who would smash terrorism; as the economic Midas who would usher in revolutionary liberalisation; as Santa Claus who would distribute millions of jobs; as the heroic, aggressive leader of the Hindu 'nation' and as the dreaded nemesis of 'pampered Muslims' who would show

them their place. Every time this multi-rooted banyan around Modi is shaken by protest, as now, different self-contradictory elements get jolted out and disaggregate themselves from this contrived conglomerate of power — that money, cadres, oratory andchutzpah aggregated. As repression increases and brave-hearts face the brunt, different and differing heterogeneous groups are compelled to come together in their united struggle against authoritarianism and communalism. That is the lasting contribution of each such mass movement towards the strengthening our democratic tradition.

Ugly majoritarian fanatics who were conferred legitimacy by Modi and his ilk will, however, continue to bark and troll — even among the most educated or prosperous circles. At the end of the day, we must realise that even after seven decades, India is still a process, not a product. More important is the harsh fact that this India has space for only one idea to prevail, hopefully the plural one.