

A NATION LOSING DEMOCRATIC STEAM

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Indian Constitution - Features & Significant Provisions related to The Preamble, Union & its Territories and The Citizenship

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These are bewildering times for members of civil society in countries bordering India, who are no longer able to appeal to New Delhi on the platform of reason, pluralism and even humanity. When New Delhi appeared arrogant or tone-deaf in the past, there were ways to make yourself heard, but today there is a silencing within that weakens not only the spirit of India, but the prospects of peace in South Asia.

While the first term of Prime Minister Narendra Modi saw adventurism, from demonetisation within to blockade without, his re-elected government seems intent on changing the face of India through majoritarian intolerance under the banner of Hindutva. While putting fear in minority communities, this trajectory is also accelerating India's economic decline and weakening New Delhi's international influence.

While the adoption of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act in December has triggered India-wide dissent, it began as an act of geopolitical folly. For domestic appeasement, Home Minister Amit Shah and Mr. Modi brought forth a Bill that essentially accused three selected countries of discrimination against their Hindu, Jain, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist and Parsi minorities. In one stroke, New Delhi distanced itself from the friendly state establishments of Dhaka and Kabul, and deepened the divide with Islamabad.

Even discounting the fact that residents of glass houses must resist the urge to throw stones, this was an unexpected accusation. While no South Asian country is free of majoritarian discrimination, the concern of New Delhi's rulers was clearly not the well-being of the minorities of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, who have been in fact been made more vulnerable by the Act. The Indian authorities did not engage in sustained international effort to address the issue, such as through the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues. The appropriate approach here would have been to join the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees, and to be open to foreigners of any faith or persuasion who seek refuge. To cherry-pick among non-citizens on the basis of religion was crass.

Now, the human rights community and intelligentsia in the neighbouring countries are left in an awkward position when challenging the CAA's selectivity — their interest is to promote inclusion within rather than demand that India become an 'equal-opportunity' host for Muslims as well. Nevertheless, one must challenge India's Home Ministry as to why the CAA ignored the larger number of Muslims of different sects enduring sectarian strife. These include Ahmadiyya and Shia, particularly Hazara, of Pakistan and Ahmadiyya and Bihari Muslims of Bangladesh. And why ignore the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India and the vulnerable Rohingya of Myanmar?

In reality, the adoption of the CAA is just a way-station on the Hindutva highway, which considers not just modern-day India but all of the notional 'Jambudvipa' as the Hindu homeland. Those galloping along this highway believe in a selective rendering of a Hindu subcontinent overrun by invaders from the northwest. This exclusivist project seeks to paint the variegated belief system of 'Hinduism' with a broad ideological brushstroke. Faith has been turned on its head, becoming less a quest for spiritualism. Many god-men, god-women, gurus and babas have boarded this Hindutva wagon, notably the *mahant* of Gorakhnath temple who is now also the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister.

The Indian establishment has thus super-charged its social engineering campaign, specifically targeting the country's Muslim citizenry. The campaign started with the revocation of the autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir, followed by the Ayodhya verdict that privileged mass belief over evidence. The enactment of the CAA and the scheme to confirm citizenship through the National Register of Citizens is part of the plan.

Of course, India's population of 200 million-plus Muslims will not be going anywhere. India is their homeland, and they have no extra-territorial magnet similar to Israel vis-à-vis the Jewish people. One searches, therefore, for an explanation as to why Indian society has thus been led to the cliff's edge. This seems to be motivated by nothing more than a hunger for political power using religion and ultra-nationalism as tools. Mr. Modi and Mr. Shah have essentially lined up behind Muhammad Ali Jinnah's two-nation theory, leaving India's Muslims emotionally drained and fearful.

In a world increasingly defined by populist ultra-nationalism, seen in the ascent of figures like Donald Trump, Rodrigo Duterte and Jair Bolsonaro, India with its ancient-civilisational and modern-Gandhian heritage should have been framing the democratic response to myriad pressing issues, from global warming to nuclear weaponisation. A confident, egalitarian-minded India would also have been leading the discourse on international migration and challenging China for its internment camps for Uighurs and for using facial recognition technology for surveillance. Instead, we have a regime whose topmost leader terms Muslim immigrants as 'termites' fit to be dumped into the Bay of Bengal; which keeps Rohingya refugees away with threats of deportation; and which is itself rushing to catch up with Beijing in building internment camps and using facial recognition and drones to control dissent.

Looking at India from the outside, we see a ruling establishment that values mythology more than history and a society losing its scientific edge, its great universities being run to the ground. India under Mr. Modi is losing democratic steam, with its weakened courts, progressively politicised military, and a police force and investigating agencies that are willing instruments of power-brokers. Many of us have been there, done that.

The genie that has been released through the enactment of the CAA must be forced back into the bottle, taking into consideration the sheer scale of human tragedy possible in the subcontinent. And, while the ongoing countrywide dissent against the CAA by lay-citizens has been spontaneous and heartfelt, it may not be enough to challenge a party that has just been elected with an overwhelming majority for a five-year term.

One used to regard India's Central government as the protector of citizens when the States went renegade, but what happens when the Centre goes rogue? Devolution of power and authentic federalism is clearly the solution for human dignity and social justice in a country as vast and diverse as India. Here, as a former Chief Minister of Gujarat, Mr. Modi could have set an example as the great federalist Prime Minister. Instead, he has presided over a further Centralisation of governmental power, with the Hindutva agenda part and parcel of this process.

And this is why it is vital to recognise the institutional resistance to the CAA emerging from the States run by non-BJP parties. Amidst the gloom, one sees in the State-side reaction not only an immediate response to the CAA, but the glimmer of possibilities of a longer-term restructuring of the Indian state towards governance that is more accountable to the people. The centripetal force represented by Narendra Modi requires a centrifugal counter from the States of India.

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