**A glimmer of light**

[Kamila Hyat](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/kamila-hyat)

January 2, 2020

We have heard arguments through the decades that democracy in our part of the world brings no rewards and simply results in worse conditions of life, increased corruption and no real change.

In India, the rewards of seven decades of almost unbroken democracy are beginning to pay off. People have begun a valiant and vibrant fight-back against the increasingly autocratic rule of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his BJP government by taking to the streets in cities across the country. Finally, the conscience of people, accustomed to life in a pluralist democracy that has claimed secular credentials since it gained independence in 1947, has woken up.

The movement is led by young people. It began in the universities of New Delhi, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh and other places as the fight-back began. The silence that followed the change in the status of Kashmir in August this year, taking away its autonomy and converting the only Muslim majority region in India into a union territory, has been ended. The series of anti-Muslim measures taken by Modi have been recognised as such by the people of India. Hindus and Sikhs have gathered to protect Muslims as they pray; they have defended those under attack during protests, and the marches comprise people from all walks of life and all faiths.

Ten of the chief ministers of India’s 29 states have rejected the change in the citizenship act passed by parliament and spoken out against it. More and more politicians are marching along with the students, activists, religious leaders, writers, academics and intellectuals who have decided that India cannot be changed in such a fundamental way, turning it into the essentially Hindu state that Modi and his supporters believe in.

The Citizenship Act grants the right to citizenship to persons of all religions coming into India from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, except for Muslims. The exception was immediately spotted by India’s 200 million Muslims, a huge minority in a country of 1.3 billion people, as discriminatory. More and more analysts, activists and experts have joint them in this view.

Students at the Jamia Millia University in New Delhi began the protests. They were quickly joined by students from other colleges, and the anti-Modi protests have spread across India, demonstrating that it can be extremely hard to impose draconian laws upon a country if it is used to ideas of equality, a lack of discrimination, democracy and equal status for all citizens.

Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, the two men who can best be called the founders of modern India, both stood strongly for these values, with Gandhi laying down his life while defending them. The people of India have demonstrated they remain true to these ideals. There is also growing opposition to a register of citizens being put together by the New Delhi government. It is widely believed the register will be used to remove citizenship from Muslims and perhaps change the demographics of specific regions and territories.

In Assam, angry protests have already broken out over what is perceived as a threat to the unique culture and traditions of the region by the arrival of immigrants of all religions from other parts of the world.

The Modi government will have to respond. So far, it has blamed the protests on opposition politicians and insisted they are not large enough to create anything more than a small nuisance. This however is untrue. The media has begun to withdraw from its shell as the fear created by the BJP begins to fade through the force of the power that people can generate and speak out against what is happening in the country and also Kashmir, which has been in a state of lockdown since August.

This is what a true democracy looks like. Sikh and Hindu men leading Muslim girls and women in the protests safely away from police in a troubled town in Uttar Pradesh – ruled by the BJP, where 1,000 arrests have already been made – shows that the soul of India has not yet been destroyed. While democracy in that country has had many flaws and gone through short periods of crisis, most notably during the Emergency declared for 18 months beginning in 1975, it has essentially persevered.

The people have been able to speak through their votes and elect representatives without disruption. It is from this that their power comes, and it is for this reason that democracy remains the best possible system of government despite the difficulties embedded within it or the faults that may crop up within some elected governments.

We see the contrast with Pakistan, ruled for most of its seven decades of creation by military rulers. Acts of oppression, including the ban on student unions in 1984 and the crackdown on labour unions under the Musharraf regime in the 2000s, have left a lasting impact. While students did march for their rights in cities across the country last month, there is a question mark over whether after the crackdown immediately launched by authorities, the movement can continue. Even democratic governments, elected by people at least on record, seem to have imbibed some of the less pleasant qualities of autocratic setups.

The mosaic of voices speaking out from India both encourages and depresses. The Shiv Sena, an extremist Hindu organisation, has blamed the country’s population explosion on Muslims, a claim which statistics and demographics prove to be completely inaccurate, with the majority Hindu population growing at a much faster rate. The same Hindu extremist groups have also called for the sterilisation of Muslims. They echo voices heard in earlier times of India’s ugly past.

But there are also voices of light and rationality. Writer Arundhati Roy has been eloquent in her demands that the Citizenship Act and the register of citizens be abandoned. As she has done before, she has refused to be quietened by threats or warnings. Others too continue what is turning into a battle. After months and months of horror, the better side of India is beginning to shine through. In this play of shadows, with darkness sometimes eclipsing the light, we must hope that good will win out in the end.

India has essentially held on to its secularism despite periods during which it came under threat. Yes, there is much that needs to be better; but there is hope that the next generation will bring with it a better future for the world’s largest democracy.

The writer is a freelance columnist and former newspaper editor.

Email: kamilahyat@hotmail.com