**People power grounds Modi juggernaut**

Aijaz zaka Syed January 24, 2020

Narendra Modi is in a league of his own. He swept back into power in May 2019, defying disasters like demonetisation, GST, unemployment and agrarian distress. His is the first government in the last 30 years to return to power with full majority and a massive mandate. To throw away all that goodwill and popular support in less than six months is an extraordinary feat. It is incredible how the tide of public opinion has turned in such a short time.

The trouble with power – total, unbridled power as Modi and his party enjoy – is that it goes to the head. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, as someone argued.

Buoyed by their re-election, the Gujarat clique appeared unstoppable. In their hubris, they concluded that they had the people’s mandate to run roughshod and bulldoze through their not-so-secret agenda to paint India saffron and disempower its minorities.

From punishing Muslim men in the name of triple talaq to stealing Kashmiri freedom, and from clinching judicial sanction of the Babri Masjid destruction to the brazenly discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act, it appeared as if nothing could stop the Modi juggernaut. That is, until India’s youth and students took it upon themselves to confront the reign of tyranny and say enough is enough.

The BJP and its dual-faced duo couldn’t have in their wildest dreams imagined that students and youth would succeed in doing what opposition parties have so miserably failed to do – bring the Modi juggernaut to a screeching halt and check its wilful, wholesale destruction of the republic and the idea of inclusive India.

But then, as some would argue, life is more cunning than any theory or plan you may devise. It throws up challenges from the most unexpected quarters.

Who would have thought that this ruthless regime that has with its muscle, money power and government agencies virtually crushed all dissent and opposition, neutralised free media and overpowered all state institutions would be humbled by the power of ordinary Indians! Who would have thought that the famously submissive Indians, including the meek Muslims, would stiff up their backs to turn on their tormenters!

Such spontaneous, sustained demonstrations by students, women and youth, rocking the length and breadth of India for nearly a month and a half now, have never been seen before. What makes these protests against the trinity of CAA-NRC-NPR truly phenomenal is their democratic nature. They cut across all divides and barriers. Contrary to the BJP’s claims, they are not organised by any political party or group and are essentially organic and leaderless. They are more like a people’s movement, a popular resistance, if you will, against the divisive policies and actions of this order.

Above all, Indians of all religious persuasions and beliefs are, in one powerful voice, firmly rejecting the hateful agenda of the BJP and Hindutva to divide them all over again in the name of religion.

This movement may have been sparked off by a group of Jamia Millia Islamia students (those iconic images of Ayesha Renna and Ladeeda Farzana in hijab telling off brutes in uniform are the stuff legends are made of). But the whole nation rose up in defiance within hours with universities and colleges and ordinary people making common cause with the students of Jamia and Aligarh.

This is no longer a protest by Muslim students or by Muslim women, most of them homemakers, agitating peacefully and patiently at Delhi’s Shaheen Bagh. Today, everyone – Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians – is part of these protests against CAA-NRC-NPR and all the sickness of the soul they represent.

There is a universal acknowledgement that the three measures – the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, National Population Register, and the National Register of Citizens – are a way of declaring India a Hindu Rashtra.

Ordinary Indians, the majority of whom happen to be Hindu naturally, have awakened with a jolt to the fascist nature of this order and its single-point agenda. Most people have realised that all this government is interested in is playing ‘Hindu-Muslim’ and blaming Muslims for all of India’s woes forever. Let the economy run into the ground. Let millions starve to death and farmers kill themselves in their thousands.

Shaheen Bagh, India’s answer to Egypt’s Tahrir (Freedom) Square, has already inspired numerous such protests across the country, from Allahabad, Lucknow, Kanpur and Patna in the Hindi heartland to Mumbai, Calcutta, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Chennai and Kochi in the rest of the country.

They are often accompanied by popular resistance poetry in Urdu from across the border. Faiz’s immortal ‘bol ke lab azad hain tere…’ and the blood-stirring ‘hum dekhenge…’ – my all-time favourite – and Habib Jalib’s ‘aise dastoor ko main nahin manta’ have fired up the imagination of a restive country.

To see the young and old rock to the heaven-piercing battle cries of ‘azadi’ and ‘inquilab’, the slogans first raised by the students of Jawaharlal Nehru University, the tukde-tukde gang in the BJP-RSS lingo, is an incredibly uplifting experience. The slogans, rekindling the spirit of the freedom movement, have now been embraced by the whole nation, demanding freedom from an oppressive order.

This is why for all its brute power and cunning, the BJP and its crafty leaders do not quite know how to respond to these extraordinary demonstrations. If they ignore them, there is every danger of them getting out of hand and costing the BJP power itself. They have already demolished the myth of the invincibility of Modi and BJP.

On the other hand, if they put down these protests with an iron hand, as they have done in Kashmir, there is bound to be outrage at home and around the world. The world has been watching these protests with keen interest.

Although governments across the world have so far been enigmatically silent, the global media has been dutifully reporting on how Indians in their millions have been out on the streets for more than a month now. The UN and the US Commission on Religious Freedom have strongly condemned the CAA and so have global rights watchdogs, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

Yet the BJP predictably refuses to come off its high horse. While the PM lives in a bubble of his own, accusing the disparate opposition parties of financing the million marches and silent protests throughout the land, his deputy is smug enough to resolve that nothing would make the government roll back the black law. “Protest as much as you want. The government will not budge,” thunders the home minister with characteristic condescension.

But then history has been full of such conceited men and women and how they brought about their own downfall. Indira Gandhi’s infamous Emergency years that Modi and his party evoke time and again to run down the Congress saw such hubris. The people of India punished the Congress for that arrogance, inflicting a most humiliating defeat on the party.

All tyrants end up deluding themselves that they are invincible and they are here to rule forever. The worst are those who have had the privilege of being elected by the people. Instead of respecting and guarding the privilege and democratic trust, they end up taking it for granted and even abusing it.

No wonder that, instead of being chastised by the anger on the streets and heeding the popular clamour over the attempts to wreck the republic, the government is accusing the protesters of being bankrolled by the opposition.

The ancient Greeks believed that those whom the gods wish to destroy they first make mad. And the longer the BJP persists in its folly of defending the indefensible CAA-NRC-NPR, the faster would be its fall. Modi and Shah ignore the lessons of history at their own peril.

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