Irrational passions BY M A H I R A L I | 3/4/2020

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| UNTIL recently, many of those who hailed the advent of the Modi regime as some kind of a new dawn for India often sought to justify their allegiance by pointing to the absence of mass violence. That argument, never entirely credible, has lately been laid to rest in the national capital.Beyond the fact that the anti-Muslim pogroms in New Delhi and the consequent violence on both sides were instigated by Kapil Mishra, who failed to win a seat on behalf of the BJP in last month`s legislative assembly elections, the chief culprit was the bigoted intolerance unleashed from on high.The BJP`s landslide victory in last year`s Lok Sabha elections was undoubtedly a motivating factor. The ruling party`s intended trajectory should have been obvious long before then, but the popular endorsement enabled it to drop its unconvincing disguise.The f ascist face of the RSS no longer needed to be concealed behind a mask.The re-conquest and defenestration of Kashmir was barely contested in India.Perhaps the Modi government saw that as a green light for slithering forward with other items on its agenda. But the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens provoked widespread protests, compounded by a frequently vicious ofhcialbacklash.Delhi was, in many ways, a horror waiting to happen. Inevitably, the events of the past 10 days have evoked memories of the madness of Partition, as well as of the atrocities committed against Sikhs in New Delhi in 1984 endorsed back then by a different ruling party and against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, when the state`s chief minister, Narendra Modi, preferred to look the other way.Last week, as prime minister, he was initially too busy wr apping himself around the belly of the beast, so to speak, to pay any heed to the events unfolding all around him in Delhi. He skipped the press conference that concluded Donald Trump`s visit, leaving the beast to assure everyone that his host `wants people to have religious freedom, and very strongly`.Preferably not in India, though. But it would be pretty pointless trying to explain that to a US president who himself thrives on bigotry and the notion of divide and rule.Even the darkest clouds, though, often appear with a silver lining. As Arundhati Roy, who has consistently been warning fellow Indians against the inexorable rise of fascist tendencies, noted in a speech on Sunday: `People on both sides have shown themselves capable of horrifying brutality as well as unbelievable courage and kindness.That was true even during the catastrophe that accompanied independence. In Delhi lastweekitmanifesteditself in plentyof instances of Hindus and Sikhs sheltering their Muslim neighbours or conveying them to safety, and vice versa. The news agency Reuters highlighted the story of Savitri Prasad, a 23-yearold bride in the Chand Bagh locality, whose wedding was cancelled as violence flared. But her father decided it would go ahead the following day. `Today, none of our relatives could attend my daughter`s wedding,` he told reporters. `But our Muslim neighbours are here. They are our family.There have been several reports about Delhi high court judge S. Muralidhar, who was promptly transferred after he questioned police inaction, as well as police superintendent Neeraj Jadaun, who took a risk by crossing the Uttar Pradesh state boundary to put himself and his team between a rampaging mob and the residents of Karawal Nagar. In Gokalpuri, Mohinder Singh and his son Inderjit made about 20 trips within an hour on their motorcycles to ferry up to 80 of their Muslim neighbours toKardampuri.There are, no doubt, numerous others whose names and specific deeds history may not record, but they are very much a part of the battle for India`ssoulunleashed by the souHess Hindutva brigades.On the other side of the border, thereare those who interpret the irrational passions witnessed lately in Delhi as a vindication for Partition. They salute the prescience of the separadsts in foreseeing the majoritarian path India would take.Perhaps they should pause to wonder whether an India with a Muslim minority far larger than its present size might have been considerably less vulnerable to the toxic ideas propagated by the likes of Modi and Amit Shah. Perhaps they should think again about intellectually aligning themselves with the likes of Yogi Adityanath, the almost unbelievably retrograde UP chief minister who is keen on renaming Meerut after Mahatma Gandhi`s assassin, Nathuram Godse.Pakistan has its own deplorable history of bigotry to reckon with, of course, and there were times when Indian-style secularism offered a possible antidote. But India has forged ahead in recent decades, and it is up to its citizens registered or otherwise to decide whether their nation`s march towards f ascism can be halted before it`s too late. m mahir.dawn@gmail.com  |