**The illusion of secular India**

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On the 25th of May, 2022, just as all of Pakistan was glued to its television screens for the (anti)climactic conclusion to PTI’s long march, across the border, in Delhi, Yasin Malik, the fabled leader of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), was convicted to a sentence of life imprisonment, on trumped up charges of terror financing. Specifically, in an FIR dating back to 2017, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) of India, after a two-year delay, implicated Yasin Malik on (fabricated) charges of terror financing, and connected him to (alleged) incidents of violence in the Kashmir valley that took place in 2016. In a corpus of evidence that could not convict a cat for killing a mouse, Yasin Malik was put through a sham trial and sentenced to life imprisonment. And in this tectonic event, which should have run alarm bells across a country that claims Kashmir to be its jugular, no one in Pakistan really made a peep. With the exception of a few token statements from the political top brass, as well as the ISPR—No one. Made. A Peep.
The impotence towards India, shown by Pakistan’s political elite over the past several decades, has only been amplified in recent days, as we revert to ‘purana Pakistan’. Somehow, somewhere, the collective integrity of the people, to defend what is rightfully theirs, has gotten lost in the myriad of feckless politicking.
Be that as it may, nature (the divine and undisputable reality of being)—has a way of taking its own course. Pakistan will certainly stand trial, in the court of time, for the crimes and the criminals that we have imposed upon ourselves. But, simultaneously, India will also be chastised, in the sweep of history, for the unforgivable saffron knife that has now killed the illusion of a secular India.
Let’s examine this further.
At the turn of the century, a tolerant and burgeoning Indian society was poised to become the next big thing in Asia. We watched, enviously from across the border, as India’s claim of an inclusive democracy won allies across the world. Just as Pakistan was getting swallowed by the menace of intolerance, extremism, and in-fighting amidst different sections of the society, India was accosting the world to its many opportunities. Kashmir had been all but forgotten. Even the Muslims of mainland India had turned a blind eye to the atrocities in the Valley, choosing instead to participate in the Indian dream. The policy of projecting Pakistan as a haven for terrorism and intolerance was working. And the new America-India strategic partnership was bearing geopolitical fruits.
In walks Modi. Once known as the butcher of Gujrat, Modi had rebranded himself as a mascot for ‘incredible India’. But, in reality it was just that: branding. Simmering under the carefully constructed veneer of democratic ideology, Modi’s Hindutva ideology was waiting for an appropriate moment to strike. And then, during his reelection campaign, the moment presented itself. Under the false flag pretext of Pulwama attack, Modi decided to attack Pakistan in February of 2019. It was just the ‘first drop of the ocean’ he would say later. Nothing short of ‘Akhund Bharat’ was the aim. His energised right-wing Hindu base loved the idea, giving him an overwhelming majority in the May 2019 elections.
This victory gave the Hindutva goons a mandate to take even bolder steps for entrenchment of their ideology of hate. Next came the long-promised goal of revoking Kashmir’s autonomous status, in August of 2019. And with it, the wheels started to come off Modi’s Hindutva wagon. India’s right-wing fascist ideology was at display for the entire world to see. Even within India, the saner voices started to question Modi publicly. Muslims, Christians, even lesser caste Hindus, started to view their own State as enemy of the people.
But the fascist Modi did not stop here.
Next came the even more controversial Citizenship Amendment Act—a law that revokes citizenship of Muslim immigrants of India. As millions of people gathered on the streets to protest this move, across India, Modi doubled-down on his bet. He allowed his right-wing party goons to terrorise and torture Muslims. People, across the world, started to recognise that Kashmir was not a one-off thing. Modi was racist, anti-Muslim, and anti-minorities. The resulting clashes across India, especially in and around Delhi, displaced hundreds of thousands of minority individuals (mostly Muslims) from their homes, which had been burnt to the ground by Hindutva goons. Overnight, these minorities became the largest group of internally displaced people in Asia. India’s sham secularism stood exposed in all its shame.
Modi had not yet recovered from this, when Coronavirus arrived to the shores of India. And suddenly, India’s soft underbelly in terms of poverty, displacement, unemployment and a weak social security structure was visible for everyone to see. Modi’s policies for controlling the pandemic, which included shutting town all of India at four-hour notice, caused a mass exodus around the country—thus spreading the disease to underdeveloped and minority-centric areas. It seemed that Modi’s policies, if at all, only catered for upper-class Hindu lives. Everyone else—especially the minorities—were of no importance in secular India.
Facing the unprecedented spread of Coronavirus across India, Modi’s racist regime turned to the tactics it knows best: blaming the Muslims for their problem. Singling out one gathering of (foolish) Muslims in Delhi, the Tablighi Jamaat, where several participants tested positive for Coronavirus, Modi’s Hindutva government decided to turn the epidemic into a purely communal issue. Phrases such as ‘Corona Jihad’ and ‘Tablighi Jamaat Virus’, were used by Modi’s ministers. The abominable right-wing Indian media was all too happy to jump on this bandwagon. And overnight, in India, Coronavirus became another weapon at the hands of Modi’s fascist regime, to turn peaceful Indians against one another.
India was still reeling from the (ongoing) effects of Coronavirus, when Modi attempted to direct people’s attention by reverting to his ‘go to’ strategy of drumming up conflict with Pakistan. To this end, his government started to claim that they plan to take over all of Kashmir, through force, ‘including Azad Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Askai Chin’. And that, in this way, they will cut CPEC from its ‘jugular’.
This was a step too far. It not only threatened Pakistan, but also China’s interests in the region. And China was willing to defend it with its military muscle. Consequently, in reaction to Modi’s expansionist agenda, China decided to place its troops in the Galwan Valley and Pangong Lake area (from where India had plans to approach Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan). The resulting conflict cost India more than 2 dozen soldiers, along with substantial territory. As the conflict flared, China also used its ‘soft power’ to turn other Indian neighbours against Modi (including Nepal and Bhutan), while ousting India from the strategic Chabahar-Zahedan project. And none of the global powers that Modi had relied upon for support, have come to its aid.
If anyone thought that Modi’s fascist regime may have learnt its lessons, they were wrong. Modi has stepped up his apartheid policies, by doubling down on his Kashmir atrocities, and now by convicting Yasin Malik. And for many, who follow India’s geopolitics, this may be last nail in the coffin of a secular India. It would further ostracise the Kashmiris, marginalise Muslim minority across India, and undermine the confidence of other religious and regional groups fighting against the Hindutva ideology.
When Modi was elected to power for the second term, everyone had expected that he will implement right-wing policies; however, no one had expected that he would bring India to the edge of intolerant fascism, and then jump off the cliff.
Whenever dispassionate history of this period of India is eventually written, it will remember Modi has the man who single-handedly unravelled the dream of a secular incredible India.