**Negative drift towards alienating minorities**

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I grew up in the days of cowboy movies and comics. Invariably the non-conformist hero would stand up for the underdog.My formative years were spent alternating between the worlds of Clint Eastwood, Kirk Douglas and the Irish Priests of Burn Hall, Abbottabadand the rustic world of “Jagga” and Lala Sudhir in rural Lyallpur. I have lived most of my adult life overseas as a brown skinned Muslim which has heightened my sensitivity to the needs of minorities.

Persecuting the weak,be it pogroms in Europe or the Natives and Blacksin the Americas; all appear as dark chapters in human history. Recent history is also tainted with similar atrocities against Rohingyas in Myanmar, Muslims in India, Uighursin China, Hazaras in Baluchistan; invariably based on religious or ethnic intolerance. But when such intolerance gets interwoven with a deliberate state policy it becomes planned cruelty.

We have witnessed the perpetuation of this indignity of intolerance and bigotry becoming a part of political platforms of rulers. It has manifested in two forms. First, when leaders bend to bigotry to further their own political ambitions like Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar. A Nobel Peace prize laureate who stood up to oppressive military junta, championing the cause of the downtrodden. Once in power she became a silent spectator when Rohingyas were brutalized by soldiers and Buddhist priests for the sake of political expediency.

The second form was witnessed during President Trump’s tenure. He manipulated a nation that prided itself as the melting pot of religions and ethnicities into politics of division and intolerance. Fortunately, Americans spoke and rid themselves of Trump who threatened to unravel the pillars of democracy. Hefailed to undo the edificeof democracy built painstakinglyon the blood, sweat, and sacrifices for the cause.

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A bigger disaster is unfolding in the sub-continent. India since independence, prided itself in its secular values.Their Constitution stipulates it in its preamble. It was a perfect solution given their diversity in religion, ethnicity and languages.

We, as Pakistanis, sometimes complain about our diversity and regional languages. Here are some interesting figures. India has 22 officially recognized languages. There are a total of 121 languages spoken by groups of 10,000 or more. The languages and dialects spoken are in excess of 19,500. There are over 2,000 ethnic groups assimilated from within India and around the globe. Seven main religions are practiced in India and it is the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Such a spread could only be woven together by making diversity subservient to the State; hence the Founding Fathers choosing Secularism.

It worked well for Indians. They emerged as a nation united undertheir tri-colored flag “Tranga” and responded to clarion call of “Jai Hind”. All that is faltering under PM Modi. He came to power on a message of economic reform and cleanup of corruption under a lethargic Congress. His first term yielded positive results and India emerged as a global economic engine seeking a seat amongstworld powers.

For reasons that only history will discern, PM Modi abandoned the path of economic leadership and adopted “Hindutva” as his ideological compass. Towards that end he adopted devious means to stoke Hindu nationalism, like the Pulwana incident, to pave the way for a second term. The dividend was a thumping majority.

PM Modi’s 2nd term started in May 2019. He is an exceptional person who crafted his way up from a tea boy to Prime Minister. This time around he devised a novel strategy. Subjugation of non-Hindu minorities by legislation bulldozed through Parliament.

Within three months into Modi’s 2nd term on August 5th 2019 through a Presidential Decree he rescinded Article 370 that gave Kashmir a special status. He converted them into Union Territories directly under the yoke of Delhi’s rulers. The fiercely independent Kashmiris fought back to face the brutality of occupying Indian forces. The resistance continues, recognized globally as a blatant human rights violation.

PM Modi’s second master stroke came in the shape of Citizenship Amendment Bill passed in December 2019. It was engineered to discriminate and marginalize Muslims andwas rammed through both chambers of Parliament in three days. The Bill violates secular principles enshrined in Indian Constitution,prohibiting faith to be used as a condition of citizenship.This brazenmovesparked country-wide protests led by Muslims and joined by secular minded Indians. Brute State machinery was used to quell these demonstrators who werealso subjected to attacks by the ruling BJP’s hordes and extremist RSS, while Police looked on as spectators.

Having effectively shackled Muslims, PM Modi turned his attention to Sikhs mainly engaged in Agriculture. In September 2020 through three Acts of Parliament, referred as Farm Bills,he undertook his next onslaught. He wants to shift the control of farm produceto his power base, the business elite and away from the farmers. It has faced fierce resistance. The farmers took over the Red Fort on Republic Day replacing “Tranga” with “Nishan Sahib”. 60 percent of Indians are engaged in this industry throughout the country.This time around PM Modi may have bit more than he can chew. Sikhs around the world have stepped out in support of protesting farmers.

It is time for secular minded Indians and all minority leaders to expose BJP’s game of subjugation of minorities one by one. They should unite and work together to steer this great diverse nation away from fundamentalism to the dynamic secular path envisioned by the Founding Fathers. Or face demolition one by one.