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**Victory belongs to Shaheen Bagh**

So the aam aadmi’s ‘jharu’ (broom) has swept away the toxic garbage that the BJP had flooded the national capital of Delhi with.

The credit for the spectacular performance by Kejriwal’s Aam Aadmi Party is being attributed to his brand of development politics and doles like free ‘bijli aur pani’ (electricity and water). The AAP government had also done a commendable job by paying attention to the pathetic state of Delhi’s overcrowded and ill-equipped schools and hospitals.

The former corruption crusader, Kejriwal, survived the most vitriolic, vicious and no-holds-barred campaign in India’s history. Modi’s BJP unleashed more than 300 MPs, dozens of central ministers and chief ministers, not to mention the full force and resources of the central government on Delhi with federal ministers openly calling Kejriwal a ‘terrorist’ and demanding his head. That the AAP leader defied all of this to win 62 out of 70 seats in the Delhi assembly right under the nose of Modi and Amit Shah is quite something. Not a mean feat by any means.

How did he do it? By cleverly and consciously refusing to take the BJP’s bait and getting drawn into the deliberately divisive and deeply polarising issues that the Hindutva party feeds and thrives on. He kept it simple. While the BJP as usual deployed its tried and tested dog-whistle politics, ranting about the “persecution of Hindus” in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan and about throwing out “traitors and termites” (read: Indian Muslims), Kejriwal talked about good governance and the promises he has delivered on, like the good old ‘bijli aur pani’ issues.

After weeks of confused silence and pent-up frustration over the ever-expanding protests against the CAA-NRC-NPR, the BJP poured out all that anger and fury in Delhi with central ministers brazenly calling for “shooting the traitors!” (desh ke ghaddaron ko, goli maro salon ko!) right in the national capital when parliament had been in session. The target of their ire, however, was not Arvind Kejriwal but Shaheen Bagh.

The crowded, impoverished neighbourhood in Delhi’s Okhla has been the epicentre of protests for two months with thousands of women, young and old, protesting against the brazenly discriminatory citizenship law and this regime’s stealthy assault on the very identity and existence of the country’s 200 million Muslims.

The protest site near Jamia Millia Islamia, the great university founded by Maulana Mohammed Ali Jauhar, is being compared to Egypt’s iconic Tahrir Square. However, even Tahrir Square did not witness such determined, sustained and peaceful protests for so long.

What makes Shaheen Bagh truly historic and epic is the fact that this is an all-women affair representing all age groups, from school and college students to housewives to grannies in their 80s and 90s, defying the diktats of an incredibly vindictive regime.

If anyone therefore deserves the credit for Kerjiwal’s extraordinary victory, it is these women of Shaheen Bagh. For it is not Kejriwal or his AAP but Indian Muslims and the women of Shaheen Bagh in particular who have borne the brunt of the BJP’s brazen and blistering hate campaign all these months. It had was unprecedented even when pitted against its own eventful record.

In its desperation to wrestle Delhi from the AAP, the BJP pulled out all stops, including restrictions imposed by law and the Election Commission as well as civilised conduct. If Anurag Thakur, honourable minister in the Modi cabinet, exhorted his supporters to “shoot the traitors,” another BJP leader and Member of Parliament Parvesh Verma repeatedly warned Hindus that if they didn’t vote for the BJP, Muslims would invade their homes and rape their women.

In response, all the benign apparatchiks of Election Commission did was to ban them from campaigning for 48 hours. As for the BJP, in a snub to the EC, it fielded both Thakur and Verma to open the key budget debate in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha respectively.

Not surprisingly, this poisonous rhetoric by the top leadership of the party produced instant results with at least two gun attacks at Shaheen Bagh and one at Jamia, with the shooters demanding a ‘Hindu Rashtra’ and expressing loyalty to the Parivar. Mercifully, no one got hurt in these ‘incidents.’ But you never know what the future has in store, if this mindless and perpetual vilification of a voiceless minority continues on the watch of the leaders of the world’s greatest democracy.

One thing is for sure: hate hurts and has real consequences. We saw how the mindless demonisation and hatred of Jews eventually resulted in Hitler’s Germany. It produced a Holocaust with seven million Jews being killed on the watch of an indifferent and slow to act world community.

According to many genocide watchers, who have studied the history of Nazi Germany as well as what happened in Palestine, the Balkans, Rwanda and Burma (Myanmr) next door in more recent history, there are ominous signs that suggest how we in India, God forbid, may be heading in that direction.

One of the first and clearest signs and preludes to the unthinkable is this deliberate otherisation and disenfranchisement of an entire community. This happened in Nazi Germany beginning first with a special identity card system being introduced for the Jews. In 1935, the Nuremberg laws stripped millions of Jews of their German citizenship. They were made to wear a special badge clearly setting them apart from other Germans. Then came their dispossession with their businesses and assets being taken over by the state and being handed to the majority. Finally, they were segregated and kept in concentration camps before being paraded to their final destiny.

Disturbingly, thousands have already been declared ‘illegal’ overnight in India, and kept in detention centres in Assam and elsewhere.

But I would like to believe that we Indians are more tenacious and would never accept and give in to this fascist tyranny. The ‘aam aadmi’ or ordinary people of this country that Kejriwal’s party claims to represent are essentially decent and reasonable human beings, as people everywhere are. It is these ordinary people who have been standing up to this totalitarian regime, protesting alongside Muslims against its unabashedly fascist policies and the hateful attempts to divide and destroy India in the name of religion and other holy cows.

But for these attempts to succeed, India’s leading politicians like Kejriwal must take a firm and uncompromising stand against the politics of hate and exclusion being played by the ruling party and its hydra-headed Parivar. Reasonable and right-minded people everywhere heaved a sigh of relief over the AAP’s victory. But this was not the BJP’s rout by any stretch of the imagination. The party’s vote share only grew, polling 40 percent of votes.

What we badly need is a nation-wide movement of concerned citizens and a coalition of secular forces and organisations that really care for this country and its wellbeing. Kejriwal may have won this election but he did not do so by confronting Hindutva fascism. Far from it. He played the same soft Hindutva card of the anti-corruption movement that had catapulted him to the national stage. As Mihir Sharma puts it so well, “Kejriwal did not step up to Modi, he side-stepped him! This is a victory of not just cowardice, but of submission to the BJP’s core values.”

He hasn’t had the courage to take a stand on burning issues like the CAA and NRC or about what Shaheen Bagh’s women have been clamouring for months, braving bitter cold and assassin’s bullets. In fact, he declared that given a free hand, he would clear Shaheen Bagh in a couple of hours, and that nobody had the right to block traffic indefinitely!

India badly needs credible leaders with a soul and a spine, who can confront tyranny and hate with hope and inclusion in these divisive times, not opportunists trying to be all things to all people.

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