

Awakening to fight for India's soul

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OPINION

NEW DELHI Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party government have deployed propaganda very successfully since coming to power in 2014. So much so that numerous egregious decisions the government has made — demonetization, electoral bonds allowing secret donations to political parties, a flawed citizens registry in the state of Assam, revoking the autonomy of

Authoritarian and divisive policies of the Modi government have pushed Indians into the streets in protest.

Jammu and Kashmir — were accepted by a majority of people.

But over the past few days, India seems to have risen up in countrywide mass protests. A growing awareness of what the recently passed Citizenship Amendment Act

means for the country seems to have *jolted people, bringing them into the streets.*

The Act makes religion the basis for deciding who will be offered Indian citizenship and who will be prosecuted for being an illegal immigrant. Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians and Zoroastrians from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan can obtain Indian citizenship, but not Muslims, even if they are from the persecuted Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan or Shiite Hazaras in Afghanistan. Citizenship based on religious identity violates a core principle of equality in the Indian Constitution.

The exclusion of Muslims leaves no room for doubt that the bill advances the blatantly sectarian agenda of Mr. Modi and his government, which is to transform secular India into a majoritarian Hindu nation.

The reaction to the new citizenship law panned out in three steps. There were massive protests in India's northeastern states bordering Bangladesh, fueled by the fear that new settlers of any religion pose a threat to their small populations and many indigenous cultures. In Assam, the largest northeastern state, ruled by Mr. Modi's B.J.P.,

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five people were killed in the protests and internet connectivity was blocked.

Elsewhere in India, after six years of fearful silence, Muslim community organizations, afraid that they could be rendered stateless, stepped out to protest in towns and cities across the country.

University students who had watched aghast as the bill became law in the blink of an eye, pushed through a weakened parliament by a government with massive electoral majority, held protests against what they saw as subversion of constitutional values of secularism and equal citizenship. Violent police action to shut down student protests has had the opposite effect: Young people, horrified and angry at the violence, poured into the streets as never before.

Indian Muslims and secular-minded Indians have been concerned that the government now has a tool to exclude or threaten to exclude Indian Muslims from citizenship. Amit Shah, Mr. Modi's right-hand man and the home minister of India, has repeatedly said the Citizenship Amendment Bill will be followed by the National Register of Citizens — aimed at identifying and removing illegal immigrants. The N.R.C. places the burden of proving citizenship on the individual. The proof is a set of documents establishing that a person's parents have been resident in India before a specified date.

The N.R.C. has been tested in Assam, where nearly two million people — Hindus and Muslims — have been left off the register mostly because they did not have all the documents or the documents had errors. Error-free documents, if the documents exist, are a rarity in India.

The sense is that even Indian Muslims, particularly in border states, may fall through the N.R.C. cracks if they cannot produce the documents required, while Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians and Zoroastrians can claim citizenship through the new citizenship law. Mr. Modi's party has always maintained that only Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism and Buddhism are Indian religions. The inclusion of Christians on the list of acceptable communities in the new law is seen as a peace offering to influential Christian groups in the West.

It was almost this fraught backdrop on Dec. 13 that students at two major public universities, Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi and Aligarh Muslim University in neighboring Uttar Pradesh, held protests against the new law. Both universities have significant Muslim student populations and histories linking them to Muslim social reform movements and India's independence movement. The protesting students spoke of equal citizenship; the government saw troublesome, young Muslim bodies on the street and unleashed the police upon them.



DIVYAKANT SOLANKI/EPA, VIA SHUTTERSTOCK

Tens of thousands of Indians protesting against the recently passed Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizens, in Mumbai, India, on Thursday.

At Jamia Millia Islamia, the police stormed the campus, exploded tear-gas canisters inside the library, smashed everything in sight and battered students with their bamboo staffs, before marching them out onto the street with their hands up in the air. Police brutality left a student blind in one eye and many with broken bones. At Aligarh Muslim University, about 85 miles southwest of Delhi, police brutality was at an even higher level. Tear gas canisters were fired into student dorms. Scores were injured, battered by police with heavy bamboo staffs and rifle butts. At least two students are in critical care with

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head injuries, and two had their hands blown off by stun grenades fired by the police.

Prime Minister Modi sought to discredit the protests as violent and deployed his usual sectarian dog whistle. "Those creating violence can be identified by their clothes," Mr. Modi said. Every Indian heard that as a reference to Muslims, to the skull caps and shalwar kameez, a knee-length, long-sleeved shirt with a pair of loosefitting trousers that Muslim men in northern India wear. Mr. Modi, his party and the broader Hindu nationalist movement have worked tirelessly to redefine India as a majoritarian Hindu nation and cast India's Muslims, secular intellectuals, liberals, progressive universities, respected former prime ministers, vice presidents and anyone who disagrees with their politics, including the political opposition, as the "enemy within."

The brutal police action against students at Jamia Millia Islamia and Aligarh Muslim University, a majority of

whom are Muslim, seemed calculated to peddle stereotypes of violent Muslims and to terrorize India's Muslims, once again, into silence, by criminalizing their best and brightest.

But for the first time in years it seems silencing people may not be so easy. What followed the police violence was not acquiescence but an inspiring assertion of citizenship and solidarity by tens of thousands of young, educated Indians in universities and colleges across the nation.

Even campuses known for their political and social conservatism, like the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Indian Institutes of Management, held vigils and signed petitions against the new citizenship law or in support of Jamia and Aligarh students, sometimes defying hostile college administrations.

There have been new forms of protest, like public gatherings to read aloud the preamble to the Constitution of India, which promises justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. Every day lists of protests in different towns and cities are circulated, and every day the number grows.

Mr. Modi's government, clearly rattled, is now using a colonial-era law prohibiting public gatherings to prevent protests in the states where the B.J.P. or its allies are in power. But protests have continued, and well-known writers and activists have been arrested, along with dozens of other protesters.

The protests are small, hopeful signs that there are people, particularly younger Indians, still willing to fight for an India that is not a majoritarian Hindu state. This could yet be the reopening of a fearless national conversation about equal citizenship and the idea of India.

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