Divisive agenda hurting India

Fissures and fault lines have now spread beyond religion to region and age deepening the divide in our country

The year 2019, particularly the later part, was a turbulent one for India and the Central government had to face a tough time though the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) had got a massive mandate in the parliamentary elections held in April-May last year. The passing of the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill by Parliament and the President’s quick assent to the Bill has sparked a countrywide agitation against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2009. The stir against CAA is largely led by students and youth.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on December 22 apparently backtracked on what Home Minister Amit Shah promised on multiple fronts, including Parliament. Modi clarified that his government has no intention of linking the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and National Population Register (NPR). While saying so in Delhi’s Ramnilla Maidan, the Prime Minister also ignored the 2019 Lok Sabha election manifesto of the BJP, which promised the introduction of NRC in “other parts of the country”.

Modi further clarified that the government has not set up any detention centre to detain those classified as non-citizens. The six detention centres in Assam that house around 1,043 people were set up by the government but at the order of the Gauhati High Court. Realising the mass discontent on the NRC, the government is now passing the buck to the court. This statement of the Prime Minister can be seen as a partial victory of the anti-CAA-NRC agitators.

Changing Narrative

The Centre has spent Rs 13,000 crore over the last 10 years engaging half of the total police force staff in preparing the NRC in Assam. Notwithstanding the claim of the government that the preparation of the NRC was done at the direction of the high court, the BJP is seeking the Supreme Court to review the NRC results as it did not match the Hindutva agenda of the ruling party. The government again wants to spend another Rs 13,000 crore for re-verification of the NRC results.

The faultline that divides the country has spread beyond the religious line. Apart from religion and caste, the polity is divided region-wise and generation-wise. Differences between South and Northeast and the rest of India have never been so conspicuous. The agitation against CAA is mostly led by youth and India has never witnessed such a sharp generation gap. The political leadership of the country is controlled by the people whose average age is above 60 years though 50% of the population of India is 28 years old or less.

Identity Crisis

It is difficult to understand how many national identity cards or registrations are needed for an Indian citizen to prove her/his citizenship. Family Identity Card, Passport, Aadhaar, PAN Card, NRC and now NPR — as if the foremost priority of our government is to prove the genuineness of its citizens. The government is wasting up the economy by spending all its energy on furthering its divisive religion-based agenda.

In the last quarter, India’s GDP growth rate slipped to 4.5%. Even though India’s GDP growth rate has been declining for six consecutive quarters prompting many to call it ‘growth recession’, Modi said in a speech at the inaugural session of ‘100 years of Assocham’ (Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India) that, “Five-six years back our economy was heading towards disaster. Our government has not only stabilised it, but also made efforts to bring discipline to it. We have paid attention to fulfilling the decades-old demands of the industry.” It seems that all we are getting from our leaders is only empty rhetoric.

Constitution and its Sanctity

We have been taught since our childhood about the salient features of our Constitution and its sanctity. Secularism and single citizenship are among them. The narrative of secularism has been changed since 2014. The concept of single citizenship is tangled with controversies. The Centre has given a concession to some of the States of Northeast that require inner line permit and some areas under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution by keeping these States within the ambit of the CAA.

The cut-off year for determining the citizenship of those who came from Bangladesh is 1971 for Assam as per Section 6A of the CAA. However, under Article 6 of the Constitution, the cut-off date for migration to India from Pakistan is July 19, 1948. Since section 6A is applicable in Assam only, the 1971 cut-off year will not be applicable in other States.

Neighbour’s Progress

When India is morbidly pursuing a divisive policy, our neighbour Bangladesh has achieved spectacular economic progress. Bangladesh, long thought to be one of the least developed countries in the region, posted some of the strongest growth figures in the world, even leaping ahead of Pakistan in GDP per capita in recent years. Bangladesh is now ahead in life expectancy at 72, compared with India’s 69.1, according to the World Bank and Human Development indicators. The infant mortality rate (per thousand live births), Bangladesh scores better at 25.1, compared with India’s 31.5. It is in mother mortality rate (number of maternal deaths per 1,000,000 live births) that India does significantly better at 170 compared with 210 for Bangladesh. The indicators for education are mixed. India does better in mean years of schooling at 6.4, compared with 5.8 for Bangladesh.

However, Bangladesh is ahead in terms of women’s literacy, making a powerful comment on our social system.

While CAA reveals India’s religiously selective attitude towards refugees, it surprisingly leaves the persecuted in Sri Lanka out apparently because it is not a Muslim majority country. This needs to be seen in the context of Bangladesh’s effort to deal humbly with 1 million Rohingya refugees (one of the largest refugee populations in the world) from neighbouring Myanmar.

The economic and social progress in Bangladesh alloys the fear of influx of people from Bangladesh to Northeast or Bengal. If the present trend continues, people from India will migrate for better opportunities to Bangladesh and other neighbouring countries, which may surpass India in economic progress in the near future.

(The author is a senior journalist from Assam)