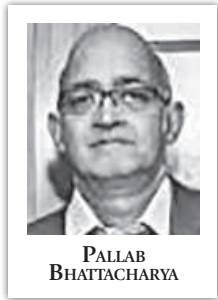


India stares at the New Year with high politics over CAA/NRC



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

IT has been more than a fortnight that the pan-India protests against the contentious Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) are going on. The violence and police firing that have often accompanied the agitation snuffed out more than 20 lives. On December 19, the country witnessed the most extensive protests with tens of thousands of people hitting the streets across cities defying prohibitory orders.

The scale and intensity of the protests have come down since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech at a public rally in Delhi focusing mainly on CAA and the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC). Nonetheless, the agitation is on. Part of the reason for a lull could be the Christmas and year-end holidays before street protests gain momentum again. There are reports that the opposition parties and civil society groups are in the midst of planning how to intensify the protests. The protests in the first two weeks had largely been loosely-coordinated attempts by those opposed to the government and remained confined mainly within university campuses before the political parties took the headlong plunge against CAA/NRC with the Left parties, marginalised in Indian politics, taking the lead.

The political battle lines were firmly drawn with Modi's massive rally in Delhi's Ramlila Maidan on December 22 ostensibly to launch the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's campaign for Delhi assembly elections due in February next year, followed by a huge street march by the party's Working President JP Nadda in Kolkata in support of CAA and the top Congress leaders' sit-in at the memorial of Mahatma Gandhi at Raj Ghat in Delhi against the changed citizenship legislation on

the same day. The nearly 90-minute speech by Modi at the Ramlila Maidan was by far his most lengthy enumeration of the views on CAA/NRC from the highest echelon of the government. It marked an aggressive launch of the BJP's "mass contact" drive across the country to counter the anti-CAA/NRC protests, underlining the fact that the agitation could not be dismissed as a feeble push-back by the Left-Liberal camp, defeated by a wide margin in parliamentary elections just seven months ago. There was also recognition in the BJP that it was late at least by a week in taking to the field in countering the anti-CAA/NRC protesters, allowing a perception to grow that it was being defensive on the issue. So, the party sought to overcome that by fielding no less than the prime minister to make up for the time lost.

On Christmas day, coinciding with the late BJP leader and former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee's birth anniversary, Modi launched a sharp attack on those who indulged in arson and other forms of violence targeting public and private properties during the anti-CAA/NRC agitations. This contrasted starkly with the anti-BJP forces' allegation that the BJP government unleashed repression on agitators using the police apparatus. There is recognition on both sides of the political spectrum that if images of destruction of railway stations, empty trains and vehicles dented the agitators' cause and image on the one hand, the strong-arm tactics by the police and death of the protesters also did not help the government either.

The prime minister's focusing on vandalism in his speech in Lucknow was aimed at pinning down the opposition and calling into question the method of the anti-CAA/NRC opponents. The choice of Lucknow to amplify the focus on vandalism is significant because Uttar Pradesh had seen the worst violence and the highest number of casualties (19) among the Indian states. Most importantly, and worryingly, the contrast



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS/ADNAN ABDI

in the narratives projected by the BJP and anti-CAA/NRC protesters brings out a sharply polarised society. The BJP government in Uttar Pradesh has adopted a tough response to violent protests, arresting over 1,000 and detaining more than 5,500 people and also setting in motion the process of attaching the properties of those who indulged in violence for recovery of the amount to compensate damage to public properties.

Modi's Ramlila Maidan speech made a few key points: 1) he sought to reach out to Muslims by assuaging their fears that CAA would take away citizenship and that NRC would derecognise them as Indian citizens; 2) he tried to de-hyphenate CAA and NRC as coupling of the two has caused the fears among Muslims; 3) he pointed out that NRC has neither been brought up in parliament nor before the cabinet; 4) he put

up a strong defence of CAA; 5) he tore into the opposition for "spreading rumours and fear" about CAA and NRC; and 6) he tried to draw the opposition parties into a polarising debate by asking them to spell out what they had against the members of religious minorities who came from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan and took shelter in India.

The opposition is aware of the problem of joining the polarising debate because, by doing so, it risks losing ground in the event of an electoral backlash from the majority community. It is for this reason that the opposition has tried to frame the NRC as an "anti-poor" issue and equated it with the 2016 demonetisation policy which caused economic hardships by banning big currency notes. A number of opposition leaders including Sonia Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi

(both Congress), Sitaram Yechury (CPI-M), Akhilesh Yadav (Samajwadi Party) and Arvind Kejriwal (Aam Aadmi Party) pointed out how millions of people were made to stand in long queues before banks to return banned notes and how a similar story could be repeated in the case of NRC when people line up for procuring documents to prove their citizenship. What is perhaps forgotten that demonetisation did not prevent the BJP from returning to power for a second term (in national polls in 2019).

The prime minister's remarks on NRC at the Ramlila Maidan meeting, which appear to suggest that it is not happening anytime soon, must be seen in the context of reservations about NRC voiced by some of BJP's allies like Janata Dal (U) and Lok Janshakti Party and some other non-NDA and non-UPA regional parties. So far, eight ruling parties in the states—the Congress, the Trinamool Congress, Biju Janata Dal, Janata Dal (U), CPI(M), Aam Aadmi Party, Telangana Rashtra Samithi and YSR Congress Party—have opposed NRC. These parties are ruling 12 states: Punjab, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Puducherry, Odisha, Kerala, Bihar and Delhi. The BJD, AIADMK and YSRCP have supported the Modi government's major legislations on scrapping the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, criminalising instant triple *talaq* and citizenship amendment bill in parliament. The question is: can the BJP afford to burn bridges with these allies by pushing NRC down their throats? It is the opposition to NRC by some BJP allies and non-NDA and non-UPA parties that has enthused the opposition to take on a more aggressive stand on the issue. To sum up, high politics has begun playing out over CAA and NRC as we are about to step into a New Year.

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AFFORDABLE BIOSIMILAR MEDICINE

A low-hanging fruit ready for picking

AHMED A AZAD

THE pharmaceutical sector in Bangladesh has huge potential and opportunities for producing affordable modern medicines for the ordinary citizens as well as the developing world. The vibrant pharmaceutical industry produces 98 percent of all medicines used domestically, and exports high-quality drugs to about 130 countries. Almost all medicines made locally are generic (exact copies of the original drugs) produced by repackaging ("fill-finish") of imported active chemical ingredients (ACI). At a recent seminar organised by the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI), it was claimed that local production of ACI could substantially decrease the production cost of generic medicines and increase export earnings from the current USD 130 million to over USD 1 billion within five years (The Daily Star, November 3, 2019). The pharmaceutical industry and university researchers have till now failed to join forces to develop generic API in Bangladesh, even though the required expertise and technologies are available.

To move with the times, and for long-term viability, the local pharmaceutical industry needs to think beyond generic medicines. In the last two decades, largely as a consequence of lifestyle, climate and environmental changes, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and chronic ailments (such as diabetes, hypertension, asthma and various cancers) have rapidly proliferated in both developed and developing countries. Chemically synthesised small-molecule drugs, and their generic copies, have not proved to be sufficiently effective against these NCDs and chronic diseases.

Attention has largely shifted to a new class of drugs, Biologics, which are genetically-engineered versions of naturally occurring bioactive proteins and peptides present in the human body. Cheaper copies of Biologics, which retain their biological and therapeutic properties, are known as "Biosimilars" as they are structurally similar but not identical to the originator Biologics. Biologics and Biosimilars are produced by recombinant DNA technology where microscopic bacteria, fungi or mammalian cells are converted into living factories for the large-scale production of rare and high-value foreign proteins.

In more recent times, a new class of Biologics has entered the market and it constitutes the bulk of novel drugs in the pipeline of major multinational drug companies. In these new Biologics, proteins or peptides of medical importance are linked to, and resemble, human monoclonal antibody (mAb) molecules. These new mAb Biologics are unusually potent in treating and managing previously untreatable forms of NCDs and chronic diseases. These new wonder drugs are extremely expensive, costing in excess

of USD 50,000 per person every year, and clearly out of reach for the common man. There is, therefore, huge demand for cheaper mAb Biosimilars. Producing these in developed countries is not effective in making them more affordable to the citizens of poorer countries.

This has created a great opportunity for any developing country, with reasonable technological proficiency and low labour and production costs, to step in to produce the new class of Biosimilars. The global market for Biosimilars, and particularly the mAb Biosimilars, was USD 2 billion in 2013, and has now surpassed USD 30 billion, and is projected to reach up to USD 0.5 trillion in 2026. Even if Bangladesh could capture 5 percent of the global market for Biosimilars, it could amount to USD 50 billion and its export could become the



SOURCE: POWERUP/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

largest, and most stable, foreign exchange earner for the country. Compared to generic medicines, the development of the new Biosimilars, particularly the mAb Biosimilars, is technologically and conceptually complex. Because they are biologically produced, Biosimilars are not exact copies of the original Biologics, and as such they are subjected to very extensive and costly regulatory procedures to ascertain safety and effectiveness, resulting in increased production costs.

The overriding rationale for undertaking this ambitious project would be to develop affordable mAb Biosimilars for the common man in Bangladesh and the developing world. This could be possible if these wonder drugs were locally produced from scratch, including the development of the molecular seed clones. This would also provide a mechanism for competing with—and keeping ahead of—potential rivals like Korea, China, India and Brazil by making use of the WTO's exemption of Bangladesh from patent restrictions till 2033. While all developed and developing countries have to wait till

patent expiry to copy a novel Biologic into its cheaper Biosimilar, Bangladesh is legally free to copy any new Biologic, irrespective of its patent status, thus gaining valuable time over potential rivals in developing, selling and exporting new Biosimilars. It would be a pity if the pharmaceutical sector in Bangladesh failed to make the best use of this competitive advantage.

Does Bangladesh possess the competencies required for developing and commercialising new Biosimilars from scratch? At least one local company has invested heavily in establishing world-class large-scale fermentation and downstream processing facilities (under GMP conditions) to produce recombinant protein APIs of a number of first-generation Biosimilars (such as Insulin and Erythropoietin) from

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clone selector to complete the proof of concept studies needed to demonstrate that it is, indeed, possible to develop the seed molecular clones in Bangladesh.

This ambitious project would work best as a tripartite partnership between the research community, the industry and government. While productive collaboration between academic researchers and the industry should be the biggest strength of the pharmaceutical sector, in reality, lack of substantive university-industry links remains one of its major weaknesses. To encourage academia-industry collaborations, researchers could be offered a share of profits from the sale of products they help develop, and the industry could be granted tax concessions for supporting R&D. Government agencies could play important enabling roles. The Directorate General of Drug Administration could streamline and simplify guidelines to speed up the regulatory process, and the Bangladesh Medical Research Council could establish Contract Research Organisations (CROs) to support and expedite preclinical animal studies and human clinical trials.

Bangladesh has the technical capability to produce the latest Biosimilar medicines. Can a nation that aspires to become an advanced nation by 2041 afford not to take advantage of this opportunity to use home-grown technology and local talent for producing the latest and most effective high-tech medicines at an affordable price for its own citizens and those in developing countries, and in the process also create wealth for the nation? This would also be an opportunity for early investors to stake a claim for big rewards in the future. Political will, self-belief and a need for all stakeholders to work together are critical for the successful production of the latest Biosimilars in Bangladesh.

Prof Ahmed A Azad, PhD, is a retired academic and biomedical researcher. After retirement, he has been working with resident and NRB scientists to help develop molecular biosciences research capacity in Bangladesh. Email: aazad1945@gmail.com

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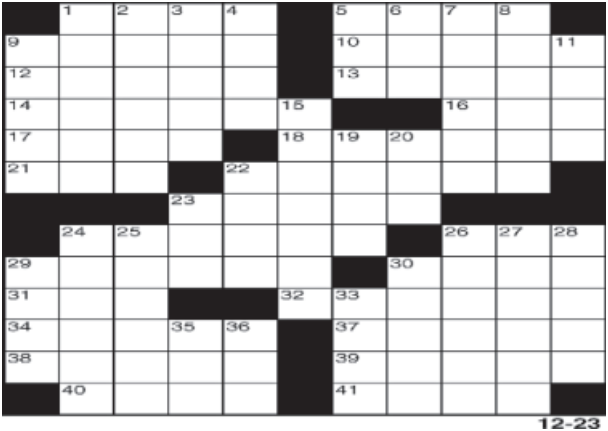


WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
(1564-1616)
English poet, dramatist, and actor often called the English national poet and considered by many to be the greatest dramatist of all time.

Our bodies are our gardens to which our wills are gardeners.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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|---|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| ACROSS | 31 Granola bit | 8 None too bright |
| 1 Swear | 32 Elf who helps | 9 King with a golden touch |
| 5 El --, Texas | 15-Down | 11 Cooking mint |
| 9 Devilfish | 34 See 13-Across | 15 Renowned reindeer |
| 10 Black suit | 37 "Superman" star | 19 Latest word |
| 12 Ticked off | 38 Poker pot | 20 Snaky shape |
| 13 With 34-Across, fellow with a sleigh | 39 Less common | 22 Baseball's Jesus |
| 14 Father of 15-Down | 40 Christmas song | 23 Soak up |
| 16 Embrace | 41 Christmas tree topper | 24 Lenin's successor |
| 17 Oodles | | 25 Spud |
| 18 Anxious feeling | DOWN | 26 Phone feature |
| 21 Retired jet | 1 Christmas songs | 27 Cunning |
| 22" – Fideles" | 2 Loosen a bow | 28 More cunning |
| 23 Loses speed | 3 Artery opener | 29 Foot holder |
| 24 Thread holders | 4 "Smooth Operator" singer | 30 Terrific |
| 26 Includes in an email | 5 Machines with CPUs | 33 Screws up |
| 29 Clog | 6 In the style of | 35 Salt Lake City player |
| 30 Brazenness | 7 Bit of beachwear | 36 Word part: Abbr. |



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