

Feminist Dissent: Shaheen Bagh, Citizens and Citizenship

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I



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***'I have nothing to give either—except this gesture, this thread thrown between your humanity and mine...'* (Toni Morrison)**

As COVID-19 sweeps all before it, the focus on injustices of another time is being further entrenched by populist regimes that are mobilising the pandemic for political ends, while also drowning out the politics of dissent. And yet, those very injustices have generated the politics of holding the state accountable for its omissions and commissions. It was a beautiful January day (22nd, 2020 to be precise) when I first went to Shaheen Bagh in north east Delhi. The sit-in, largely of women protesting against Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), had been going on for a month already and the news about and from Shaheen Bagh was in the media every day,

dividing opinion. The pandemic has pushed these women out of the public space of Shaheen Bagh, but the struggles against the CAA continue, as do the assaults on those who stand up against the state.

II



'When it encounters resistance from the other, self-consciousness undergoes the experience of desire—the first milestone on the road that leads to dignity'. (Fanon)

Citizenship frames our relationship with the state in many ways – through law, policy, through its political institutions. The state has the power to delineate who is a citizen and who is a 'stranger', a migrant, a refugee, and even a traitor (see Jayal, 2013) on the three worlds of Indian citizenship).¹ Political dissent is also important in understanding citizenship. What spaces can citizens occupy, what language they can speak in, what clothes they can wear (or not), what demands can they make. The resistance to the Indian state's pushing through a law on citizenship that seeks to identify the Muslim community as not deserving of refuge led to an outcry among the Muslim populations and all those who take India's secularism seriously resulted in an astonishing political spectacles of solidarity –

hundreds of people, particularly women, who had never participated in political protests coming out and peacefully occupying public spaces in opposition to this exclusionary and discriminatory law. The visibly Muslim women of Shaheen Bagh, supported by students, teachers and ordinary people decided that they would oppose the Citizenship Amendment Act. As evidenced by their press interviews, many women had never come out of their homes for any political event before this and yet here they were – their peaceful refusal in the face of political vitriol a powerful gesture of strength in the face of state prejudice.

I saw women of all ages, young and old, with children, in high heels, in niqabs and burkas and trousers, sitting on durries in front of a mic occupying and claiming a multi-use space of performance. The women chatted, listened, whispered and laughed out; they clapped for the performers, they raised slogans in support of democracy and against those who would silence them. The atmosphere was festive, relaxed, with no fear.

III



***'Time is on the side of the oppressed today, it's against the oppressor. Truth is on the side of the oppressed today, it's against the oppressor. You don't need anything else.'* (Malcolm X)**

As the Indian state sought to exclude a sizeable population from its narrative on citizenship through the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019, the women of Shaheen Bagh in southeast Delhi decided that they had had enough. Coming out of their homes, they made their presence felt in a way that connected them with the Indian independence movement – an insistence that their rights be recognised through their presence in a public space that could not be overlooked. They occupied a road, made into a garden of hope (bagh), an aesthetic oasis in the midst of the hustle and bustle of a mega-city's poor corner. And how attractive a space it became – with art, books, and libraries; with singing songs – the two most popular being Gandhi's favourite bhajan (devotional song) 'Vaishnav Jan To' and the ghazal by Faiz Ahmed Faiz 'Hum Dekhenge'--reciting poems, readings in different languages. Just their presence opened up spaces – there and

elsewhere. The optimism among the protesters was palpable – perhaps this was a turning point in Indian politics? A time for a new framing of citizenship that spoke to India's secular state?

This optimism spoke to other struggles for equality in the world, where also, even as Covid-19 takes its deadly toll, there was sense of change in the public discourse. From Malcolm X, to #Muslim Lives Matter, the exuberant art in Shaheen Bagh made connections with struggles across borders. As the US burnt in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd, the solidarity of the oppressed came to be expressed in this mural – there is Malcolm X, the leader of Black refusal to engage with an institutionally racist state, and then there is the slogan of #Muslim Lives Matter, connecting this struggle with that of Black people everywhere. Since 9/11, Muslim refugee population has soared worldwide, making them some of the most vulnerable in the world.² To deny them the right to refuge in India can only be institutionally Islamophobic. The pandemic underlined the role of the state, of public services and the importance of solidarity in public life is being celebrated – through rainbows in windows and claps for those who serve communities in this time of crisis. This optimism is of course important; there is a need to see a light at the end of the tunnel. But just like solidarity is not charity, optimism too needs to be tethered to experience. Even as we hope for the best, history teaches us difficult lessons.

Urgency and crises do not always challenge the status quo; they can also consolidate privilege. To challenge this consolidation what is needed is not only 'truth on the side of the oppressed' as Malcolm X declared, but also solidarity networks that can resist the privilege that congeals in times of crises. Activism is difficult but is the essential ingredient of change

IV



'Why would she not let me come here?! She would be here, but she cannot see! She is looking after the kids so that I can be here.'
(Interview)

Women/dadis (grandmothers) of Shaheen Bagh – they did not want to be saved by upper caste Hindu men; they were saving the constitution's essence by demanding that the right to refuge be extended to all groups. They also built bridges across the structural landscape of institutional and social exclusion and prejudice: on India's Republic Day, 26th January, the mothers of Rohith Vemula and Junaid Khan and the 'dadis (grandmothers) of Shaheen Bagh', Asma Khatoun (90), Bilkis Bano (82) and Sarwari (75) hoisted the national flag amid chants of 'samvidhan ki Raksha, desh ki raksha' (defence of the constitution is defence of the country). Indeed, expropriating the national flag and the constitution as symbolic of their struggle was a powerful move to undermine the mobilisation of majoritarian nationalism by the BJP government. The reciting of the Preamble of the Indian Constitution, which describes India as a secular state became a performance of defiance and also of claiming citizenship.

This popular engagement with, defence of and loyalty to a secular constitution that provides equal rights to all citizens of India was claim-making at its best. The claim here was one that provided these women and men and children with the discursive and political confidence to refuse to lay down and let the Islamophobic and exclusionary populist nationalism roll over them, bundling up their stake in the direction of the politics of the country.



‘How “Shaheen Baghs” have cropped up all over India’. (*The Times of India* newspaper headline).

As I stood around, I struck up a conversation with one of the many women in the crowd gathered and listening to the speeches. She was stood there in the middle holding the hand of her young daughter. ‘How old is she?’ I asked, pointing at the child. ‘Eight. My younger child is at home with my mother-in-law’. ‘Ah, so you brought her with you, here? Did your mother-in-law let you?’ ‘Why would she not let me come here?!! She would be here, but she cannot see! She is looking after the kids so that I can be here’.

I didn't need to know any more about the passion with which those present and those absent – looking after the children, cooking, taking turns in attending the meetings – feel about the issues at stake. But challenges also bring risks with them – of discursive as well as physical violence.

V

Protesters against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in Delhi's Shaheen Bagh were removed and some detained, more than 100 days after they started the agitation, amid a lockdown in the national capital over the Covid-19 outbreak. In Shaheen Bagh, Gali No. 6 was declared a containment zone after three persons had tested positive for Covid-19.³ Muslims were targeted in many parts of the country as carriers of the disease and violently assaulted. Many other anti-CAA protesters were arrested amidst the COVID-19 lockdown and charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.⁴

But the women of Shaheen Bagh did not entirely disappear in the face of this onslaught. They left their traces – in the stories that were told about them. In the slippers they left on 'protest beds' to remind the state of their presence in their absence become powerful expressions of resistance.

As the murder of George Floyd, and then of Rayshard Brooks, showed, institutionalised hatred is not easy to reverse.⁵ In India, the courts as well as representative institutions such as Parliament have recently shown a wilful disregard for the struggles to ensure citizenship rights of all people.⁶

In such times acts of remembering together, reevaluating and reimagining community spaces, becomes central to creating spaces of solidarity and of visualizing a future which is discontinuous with the present socio-economic order in which we live.⁷ But as the global protests against these murders and against discrimination more generally in the form of BlackLivesMatter, and the protests of Shaheen Bagh women have shown, taking a stand is important regardless of outcome. Taking a stand builds

solidarities that can last; taking a stand can challenge a state that is cruelly blind to what the politics of hate can do; taking a stand can effect change. By challenging a populist state, by refusing to accept a diminished citizenship, and by standing up for the principles of a progressive constitution, the women in Shaheen Bagh, among many others campaigning for change, have shown us a glimpse of what a reimagined politics might look like.

For a longer version of this essay, see -

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/openindia/india-populist-nationalism-popular-constitutionalism/>

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Notes

¹ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2014/12/26/the-three-worlds-of-indian-citizenship-an-evening-with-professor-niraja-gopal-jayal/>

² <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SM.POP.REFG>

³ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/three-more-containment-zones-in-delhi-total-now-60/story-EPm5oCtA9LdjKyn28lLeNK.html>

⁴ <https://thewire.in/rights/caa-protesters-jamia-statement>

- ⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>;
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/06/20/former-atlanta-officer-charged-with-killing-rayshard-brooks-reprimanded-pointing-gun-car-2016/>
- ⁶ <https://thewire.in/law/the-supreme-court-of-india-is-a-court-of-rights-not-of-contempt>
- ⁷ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/openmovements/community-spaces-india-constructing-solidarity-pandemic-times/>