Citizenship, Religion, and the Politics of Belonging: A Case Study of Shaheen Bagh

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Lade gein, phir mare gein
We’ll fight unto death.

Ayesha, a young woman in hijab whose team prepared the replica of India Gate at Shaheen Bagh, February 2020

Humlog mar jaye gein par protest se nahi uthey gein
We’ll die, but [we are] not ready to leave the protest site.

Akhtari, a burqa-clad woman at the site, March 2020

1 The extraordinary spectacle of burqa-donning Muslim women in the vanguard of resistance against an authoritarian state at Shaheen Bagh in New Delhi raised a considerable challenge within the Indian public sphere. Across the political spectrum there was interest in this seemingly new phenomenon. Of course, the thrust of this inquisitiveness varied. The spectacle did not fit within the preconceived discursive debate wherein Muslim women have been represented as “subjugated” and “submissive,” in need of “emancipation” and “empowerment.” It was startling for many to see—at Shaheen Bagh, as well as on news channels—the body language, confidence, force, and clarity of thought of women on the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019, and issues related to it.

2 The protest site popularly called Shaheen Bagh was only a small patch of the GD Birla Marg (Road 13-A) that connects Mathura Road to Noida via Kalindi Kunj. The name comes from the fact that the locality adjacent to Road 13-A is a thickly populated Muslim colony named Shaheen Bagh (Shaheen literally means falcon). Around 10 to 15 women and some men from this locality took to the GD Birla Marg, near the overbridge, on 15 December, 2019, the day the Delhi Police stormed Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI), a Central University in South Delhi. It remained a site of resistance for 101 days. Owing to
the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown of Delhi in the third week of March 2020, the women had already evacuated Shaheen Bagh, and the space was just a site of symbolic resistance where around half a dozen or less women used to be present. 101 days later, when the protest at Shaheen Bagh was dismantled by the Delhi Police in the midst of the Covid-19 lockdown, the site was no longer merely the name of a Muslim locality in South Delhi. Instead, Shaheen Bagh has become an iconic symbol of resistance in defense of the Constitution. The movement inspired many similar localized sit-ins by Muslim women across the country, apart from the larger anti-CAA protests. A variety of narratives abound around this phenomenon. This paper seeks to unpack some of the narratives around Shaheen Bagh, ranging from its representation in the Hindutva-dominated public sphere to the voices of the protestors themselves.

Here, I would hasten to add that this was not the first instance of Muslim women’s political mobilization. British India did see such mass demonstrations, and one of these was the Muslim women’s pro-League political protest against the Khizar Unionist government (Willmer 1996). In post-Independent India, Muslim women had come out on the streets to articulate their citizenship grievances in the wake of introduction of the Muslim Women Protection of Rights on Divorce Bill, 1986. The Committee for the Protection of the Rights of Muslim Women embodied the collective aspiration of Muslim women for equal citizenship, and it had organized public meetings in Calcutta, Trivandrum, Delhi, and other parts of the country to flag the issue of unequal treatment of Muslim women (Hasan 1989). Unlike the case of Shaheen Bagh, many women who took part were “urban, employed, educated and largely middle class” (Hasan 1994:xvi). Moreover, the political mobilization was two-pronged: It was against the state, and also against the community (ibid.: xvii). In sum, equal treatment of gender was the central plank in the battle for citizenship. However, at Shaheen Bagh the women were protesting against the CAA, 2019, which made citizenship conditional upon religion, for the first time in India. More importantly, the women were not focused on a strictly Muslim issue, but a wider movement in which others too joined in. Such a struggle in a democracy transcends ethnic boundaries. To add more to it, the Muslim women’s political protest reflected their location primarily in relation to their religious identity, not just their gender. And, they were not resisting just as members of the Muslim community but as Muslim women of the community.

The dominant discourse on Muslim women in the Indian public sphere revolves around the tropes of Triple Talaq, parda (veiling), and polygamy. And this category of theoretical “Muslim women” which need saving is static and ossified (Kirmani 2013:141–67). Given this understanding of Muslim women, for the Hindu Right wing, the existence of Shaheen Bagh was a major provocation, with the assertiveness of Muslim women becoming something that must be destroyed at all cost. Right wing TV channels like Republic claimed that the women were forcibly sent to the site of resistance by their husbands. The current political dispensation, its Hindutva constituency, and right-wing media—electronic as well as print, have sought to find supposed dangerous conspiracies, the hidden intentions, and the real motives of people sitting at the spot. The real source of worry was the presence of women in burqas. Who were these women? Were they making their own choices? Did the women understand the Act? What brought them to the protest scene? The basic assumption underpinning these questions was that these powerless women were illiterate and devoid of any
agency. Alternatively, these women were seen as “passive citizens,” to use Kant’s words (cited in Weinrib 2008:1), of a marginalized community.

This paper tries to understand the transition of the Muslim men and women from a state of silent citizenship to insurgent citizenship. Since the BJP-led NDA government came to power in 2014, the state of the Muslim community in India could be mapped onto a spectrum of silent citizenship. The concept entails a decision on the part of citizens in favor of silence—not voice—in the face of available political choices (Gray 2015). The deafening silence on the lynching of Muslims, and the Babri Masjid verdict, 2019 are a case in point. According to Sean Gray, there could be “five distinct degrees of silent citizenship” regarding participation in a democratic struggle or in collective decision-making. The scope of remaining silent in democratic politics ranges from active decision to more remote attitudes of awareness, ambivalence, aversion, and disaffection of citizens. He further adds that these are all conscious decisions of people to not engage in democratic politics, and certainly has got “implications of civic passivity and quiet inaction” (Gray 2015). It goes without saying that the Shaheen Bagh movement ruptured this “civic passivity” and “quiet inaction.”

Democracy and citizenship, according to Étienne Balibar, are “inextricably linked,” and it is the former that “makes the institution of democracy problematic” (Balibar 2015:1, emphasis original). For understanding the “antinomy” that lies at the heart of democracy and citizenship, the conceptual category of “insurgent citizenship” has been used by James Holston, Étienne Balibar, and others. The term entails those practices that help in making the boundaries of modern citizenship to be universal. And these practices are “insurgent” because those people who are in power never yield their power voluntarily (Balibar 2014, 2015). In Holston’s rendition of the term, “insurgent citizenship” encompasses an evaluation of the ways people’s mobilization takes place against a modernist state planning agenda (Holston 1999). He has used the term to map people’s struggles in Brazil. For him, the term stands for movements that: irr upt in cities where large numbers of marginalized residents are national citizens.

These movements for new formulations of citizenship are grounded in urban residence as the basis of mobilization and focus on the inequities of urban conditions in defining their agendas of right-claims and participatory practices (Holston 2009).

Insurgent citizenship, according to Holston, could be built based on “organized grassroots mobilizations and everyday practices that, in different ways, empower, parody, derail, or subvert state agendas” (Holsten 2009:167). The concept of insurgent citizenship, therefore, is also useful to understand the anti-CAA moment. By using it in the Indian context, I point to the sudden eruption of a mass movement in a democratic set-up when an insurgent population realize as active citizens the wrong done to them. The movement resorts to democratic means of pressuring the government to review its decision so that the collectivity gets justice. To this specific end, the citizens searched for an insurgent space to engage in resistance to claim equal citizenship. The scale and scope of the upsurge is sudden, unprecedented, and dramatic. This paper, therefore, focuses on “bottom-up” agentic processes to understand the “unanticipated” agency of people who helped in putting up extraordinary resistance to the political regime following the enactment of the CAA, 2019.

Drawing on Judith Butler, I look at Shaheen Bagh as a “performance,” and this performance as a public “text” borrowing from Paul Ricoeur (1973). Butler challenges the link between gender and sex, stating that gendered behaviors are not given, rather
social constructs (Butler 1990). She further makes the following point: the fact that “the
gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the
various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler 1990:185). Stated differently, the very
act of performing gender roles gives shape to subjectivity. Taking a cue from Butler,
this paper uses the concept of “performance” against the backdrop of the formation of
an identity of an “insurgent citizen” premised on the performativity of citizenship.
Paul Ricœur discusses four criteria to establish the nature of a text to its meaningful
action. And the last criterion that he discusses deals with the fact that “human action is
also something which is addressed to an indefinite range of possible ‘readers’ … like a
text, human action is an open work, the meaning of which is ‘in suspense’” (Ricœur
1973:103). In other words, the performativity of citizenship at Shaheen Bagh could be
read as text, and the text is subject to multiple interpretations.

The article, first, discusses the CAA, 2019. Second, it briefly deals with the image of
Shaheen Bagh that was projected in the Indian public sphere. The final part seeks to
make sense of the movement. This paper is based on participant observation, and semi-
structured interviews with the protestors.

**CAA, 2019: The Call of the Homeland**

By introducing the notion of *jus sanguinis* or descent-based principle, the Citizenship
Amendment Act, 2019 has effected a major shift in the idea of citizenship in the Indian
legal framework, while the constitution of India simply recognizes *jus soli* or birth-
based principle. The 1955 Citizenship Act, which defines conditions of access to Indian
citizenship, had seen amendments earlier, for instance, in 1986 and 2003. The 2003
amendment passed by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regime was particu-
larly significant in that it introduced the category of “illegal immigrants” and also paved the
way for a National Register of Citizens (NRC), and the Citizenship Amendment Bill
(CAB) (Roy 2019). The 2019 CAA entrenches a majoritarian and exclusionary idea of
citizenship by giving citizenship to “persecuted minorities,” viz., Hindus, Sikhs,
Christians, Buddhists, Jains, and Zoroastrians, from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and
Pakistan—the three Muslim majority countries. But the ambit of persecuted minorities
does not entail Myanmar’s Rohingyas; Pakistan’s Shias and Ahmadiyyas; Afghanistan’s
Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks; Sri Lank’s Tamils; and China’s Uyghurs. With this
reconfigured citizenship India has moved towards “an idea of racial citizenship,”
something that members of the Constituent Assembly had avoided (Jayal 2019:34).
Here, it needs to be mentioned that the government had already made changes to the
Passport (Entry into India) Rules, 1950, and the Orders under the Foreigners Act, 1946,
to allow non-Muslim refugees from Pakistan and Bangladesh to remain in India even if
they entered the country without valid papers (Jayal 2019; Roy 2019). Seshadri has
perceptively observed that giving shelter to persecuted minorities from the three
aforementioned countries feeds into the BJP’s anti-Muslim narrative that Muslims have
only been persecutors, never persecuted. Furthermore, it also reinforces the notion
that Muslims are outsiders and Islam is an alien religion. This exclusion of Muslims
from the Act has only helped in keeping the ideology of the Sangh parivar intact
(Seshadri 2020).

The CAA looks even more anti-Muslim if understood in conjunction with the NRC. The
objective of the latter is to identify illegal immigrants. This NRC exercise in Assam
excluded 19 lakh people from its list. Since the exercise required documentary evidence to be included in the citizenship register, a large chunk of people could not make it to the final list, especially women and poor people who normally do not have access to such documentation (Karmakar 2019; Pisharoty 2019). In the absence of the required documents, Muslims will not be able to claim citizenship because the CAA does not have the provision to cite religious persecution for them while others would simply become citizens by citing the provision. Similarly, the non-inclusion of Sri Lanka in the Act has put Hindu Tamils in dire straits because persecuted Tamils, too, cannot claim citizenship. Moreover, this NRC also seems particularly harmful when it is seen in connection with the National Population Register (NPR). The NPR is simply a “Register of usual residents of the country” which aims to “create a comprehensive database of every usual resident.” However, according to the citizenship rules 2003, the information collected through NPR would be used for NRC (Bhatia 2019). In bringing a new citizenship law, BJP certainly took into account the Hindu Bengali vote bank considering the assembly elections in West Bengal and Assam in 2021 (Danyal 2009).

There is another way of reading the Act. Stripped to its most basic, the enactment of the CAA, 2019 could be interpreted as the legal translation of the discursive categories of pitrbhumi (fatherland) and punyabhumi (spiritual homeland)—propounded by Savarkar, the ideologue of Hindutva. This conceptualization of the conjoined twin presupposes the Muslims and Christians of India as its “Other” owing to the idea that the punyabhumi of both faith communities is outside the country. Contrary to this, a Hindu’s pitrbhumi as well as punyabhumi is deemed to be India, therefore, according to the RSS which identifies nation only with religion, a Hindu’s loyalty to the nation is not divided (Ahmad 2007:1–11).

The CAA is very similar to Israel’s Law of Return policy (Jayal 2019:37). Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism have been considered parts of Hinduism by the Indian Constitution. The explanation II to Article 25 (2) attests to this fact (Singh 2005:915–16; Mahapatra 2012). It also needs to be reminded, here, that BJP had vehemently opposed Sonia Gandhi’s political legitimacy for holding public office during the 2004 Parliamentary elections because of her “foreign origin” (Roy 2006:1422, Roy 2010:154–60). This objection, therefore, should be read against the background of Hindutva ideology. In the current Act, however, the presence of Christians in the category of persecuted minorities can be interpreted as a way to stave off a “western outcry” (Luce 2020). Since religion is a constitutionally impermissible ground for classification, the phrase persecuted minorities provides a cover.

The Muslims are coming!8

The image of Shaheen Bagh that was projected in the Indian public sphere by the Hindutva discourse can be thought through the concept of “imaginative geography.” Imaginative geography, according to Edward Said, is a “universal practice of designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is ‘ours’ and an unfamiliar space beyond ‘ours’ which is ‘theirs’” (Said 1994:54). Such a conceptualization necessitates a dichotomy of spatial relationship of “our land-barbarian land.” This dichotomy “does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction” (Said 2003:54). Here, “[I]t is enough for ‘us’ to set up these boundaries in our own minds; ‘they’ become ‘they’
accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from ‘ours’” (Said 2003:54).

15 The Hindutva discourse made Shaheen Bagh such an “unfamiliar space” of “they” and “theirs” meaning a “barbarian land,” wherein their discourse regularly fed negative images of Muslims for delegitimizing people’s struggle. The protest site was called “mini-Pakistan,” which is now a byword for “a land of jihadi (holy warriors) and aatankwadi (terrorists).” This is not an individual case; rather for Muslim populated geographies the moniker of “mini-Pakistan” has been in usage in non-official and even in official language (Hazarika, Prasad, and Ali 2018) because Indian Muslims are blamed for the partition of British India. The RSS ideologue Golwalkar’s Bunch of Thoughts, too, used “Miniature Pakistans” for Muslim populated areas of India (Golwalkar 1966:174).

16 During Delhi’s state assembly election (February 2020), the category of “our land—barbarian land” was tangible. BJP MP Parvesh Verma, for example, said that people of Shaheen Bagh (“barbarian land”) would barge into Hindu houses and “rape their sisters and daughters and kill them.” Similarly, the colonial trope of sexual licentiousness, and debauchery in the Muslim community was deployed for discrediting the women and their mobilization. Desh ke gaddaron ko, goli maaro saalon ko (shoot the traitors of the country) became the rallying cry against the peaceful protestors, by people in power like Union Minister of State, Anurag Thakur (Krishnan 2020). In actuality, one person made it to this “mini-Pakistan” brandishing a gun (Mishra 2020), and on another day, another person shot bullets [in the air] there, too (Khan 2020).

17 The genealogy of such an image could be traced to the imperial racialization of “Muslim-ness” as reflected in W.W. Hunter’s The Indian Musalmans. Any particular religion, or for that matter any group, could be racialized, since phenotype or biology does not capture the way power “invents, assigns and defines” race on exclusionary traits (Fuerst 2017:7). Hunter’s primordial explanation for violence in the aftermath of the 1857 rebellion has made violence an inalienable property of Muslims that is “inherent, unchanging and transmittable” (Fuerst 2017:7). To add to this, Hunter’s expressions “Rebel camp” and “Traitors camp” (Hunter 1876:9 and passim) used to designate Muslim populated areas have travelled a particular trajectory to become “mini-Pakistan” in its current usage.

18 The Orientalist trope of Muslims as barbaric and predisposed to violence, combined with an essentialized reading of Islam and Muslim history as full of blood-thirsty and iconoclastic Muslim conquerors, has enabled and buttressed the stereotyping, stigmatization, and demonization of the community by the Hindu right wing in India. This trope gave rise to a negative image of Muslims in the Indian public sphere. It has become especially powerful since the RSS/BJP came to power in 2014. For instance, the two reports brought out by Lokniti (CSDS)-Azim Premji University testify to deeply entrenched anti-Muslim racism in contemporary India. The first report indicates that almost half of Hindus from Odisha and Haryana consider Muslims to be the least patriotic, and also the most violent community (CSDS-APU Report 2017:27–29, 40–44). On the question of chanting Bharat mata ki jai (long live mother India), eating beef, and a few other queries, the second report shows that people’s responses overwhelmingly coincide with majoritarian nationalism (APU-CSDS-Lokniti Report 2018:60–67). In today’s India, therefore, the Hindutva discourse has made Muslims, using the words of Hunter, a “persistently belligerent class” which is “a source of permanent danger” (Hunter 1876: Dedication) for the Hindu community.
Scripting a resistance

Women wearing burqa, and men with a skull cap and beard have been stigmatized, and are being looked at with suspicion, which is symptomatic of anti-Muslim racism in India, too. A few years back a Dalit leader had contemptuously advised Muslims in a protest: “By all means come in large numbers to our rallies. But don’t come with your skullcaps and burkas” (see Mander 2017 for a critique of this). Post-9/11, against the backdrop of America’s war on terror in Afghanistan, Hirschkind and Mahmood (2002) astutely observed that the burqa-donning body has become “the visible sign of an invisible enemy that threatens not only ‘us,’ citizens of the West, but our entire civilization” (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002:341). Undoubtedly this observation holds as true for India as for the Western hemisphere.

The question that concerns us is: How did people come out of the “dark background of mere givenness,” to borrow Hannah Arendt’s words (cited in McNay 2018:41) to protest against a law? To understand this shift, I interviewed people at Shaheen Bagh to comprehend their legal understanding. Since I live near this place, it was easy for me to attend this protest and frequent the site for around 70 days. It also made it easier to build rapport with the participants who opened up easily. I talked to 45 women and 25 men, and the ambit contained students studying in class XII to persons of around sixty-five years of age. Interviews were conducted in Urdu and Hindi. The respondents were literate and illiterate people who came from diverse backgrounds and experiences such as working women, stay-at-home mothers and wives, single mothers, school- and college-going students, cooks, and domestic labor. The men I talked to were mainly engaged in teaching, carpentry, tailoring, and small-scale businesses. Most of these respondents came from the nearby predominantly Muslim populated localities of Okhla, viz. Shaheen Bagh, Abul Fazal Enclave, Zakir Nagar, and a few people would come from Old Delhi, Madanpur Khadar, Jaitpur, and Kalkaji. I also met with people from other communities who made it to the site regularly.

It was, to begin with, quite evident that these were not politically naive people. They had a good sense of what had been happening in the country in general, and with the Muslim community in particular under the current political regime. So, they instinctively felt included at the protest site, and it also filled them with optimism. Most of the respondents shared their optimism with me as:

_Yahan aa kar achcha lagta hai_
Coming to this place [Shaheen Bagh] makes [me] feel good.

Except for five women and two girls, all these 63 people had been making it to Shaheen Bagh from day one. The two girls had to write board exams so they were not very regular. Zeba said that it was important to come to this space because _qaum_ (the Muslim community in India) would always stand together for _haq_ (truth) and _insaf_ (justice) keeping aside their differences. To prove her point, she also showed me a screenshot of a saying of Prophet Muhammad, which read:

_Allah tala meri ummat ko gumrahi per ikathha nahi kare ga, aur jamaat per Allah ka haat hota hai._
God will never let the people of my ummah align together on depravity, God’s help stays with the collectivity.
The point that she wanted to make was that the community was diversified along class, caste, gender, and doctrinal lines, however, the coming together of people around this particular cause proved that the protest was genuine, and thus it should be supported.

A few women told me that they came to know about Shaheen Bagh from their husbands, or sons. Most of these women came of their own volition, and a few said that they got encouragement from their husbands, too. One woman told me that her husband said:

*Ghar pe kyun rahti ho? Jao aur protest me shamil ho*

Why do you stay at home? Go, and take part in the protest.

Other women came despite resistance within their families. Zeeshan recounted:

*Mai yahan waqfe waqfe se aa rahi hoon. Indino Delhi me mere sasur sahib aaye hue hain. Ek din mai Shaheen Bagh ke liye nikal rahti thi to vo bole ke bahar jaane ki koi zaroorat nahi hai. Kisi waqt bhi danga ho sakta hai. Mahaul kharab ho raha hai. Mai ne kaha ke mai sabzi lane jaa rahi hoon aur yaha aa gai*

I have been coming to this place on and off. These days my father-in-law is here in Delhi. Today as I was about to leave for Shaheen Bagh, he said that there was no need to go out. Violence may erupt at any moment and the situation is bad. I told him that I was going to buy vegetables, and came over here [laughs].

People perceived the CAA and the NRC to be an individual as well as a collective attack on the community as the motif of *qaum* emerged prominently in the conversation. To them, *wujud* (existence), *tashakhus* (identity), and *baqa* (survival) of *qaum* was at stake owing to the fact that the Act would brand them a *racial caste*,12 to use Michelle Alexander’s term, irrespective of their social differences. Since the axis of discrimination that is integral to the CAA is religion, the same pivot played a key role in building-up solidarity from within. One poster hung from the iron grill near the tent showed Maulana Azad’s picture with a message inscribed on it:

*Aagar tum sirf apne liye zinda ho to iska matlab yahi hai ke Tum apni qaum ke liye zinda laash ho*

If you are living for yourself, that means you are a living corpse for your community.

I also came across a poster that was pasted on a small water tank near the transmission tower that wanted Shias and Sunnis to rise above the theological divide:

*Arey Shia Sunni chor ke bolo la ilaha illallah Do away with Shia and Sunni, Speak up, There is no god but Allah.*

Similarly, there were messages for transcending theological differences that exist within the Sunni world. Such a poster was also hung from the grill near the tent:

*Firqa parasti! Murda baad! Murda baad! Sectarianism! Down! Down!*

Except for two men who had participated in the Shah Bano protest in the 1980s,13 for all the 68 people interviewed, it was the first protest of their lives. People came to the site everyday and spent as much time as was convenient for them. A few people living in and around the place made it twice or even thrice a day. They had been coming to Shaheen Bagh for the last sixty or more days. All the respondents mentioned the violence that was unleashed on the students of Jamia Millia Islamia as the immediate
factor that led them to come out of their homes. More specifically, the brutal way the police dealt with protesters at JMI and Aligarh Muslim University (AMU)—two Muslim minority universities—reinforced their perception that Muslims were being reduced to second class citizens. They had watched video footage and live coverage of the violence so they could not be misled into believing otherwise. Moreover, people mentioned the BJP-ruled Uttar Pradesh government’s handling of the anti-CAA resistance and brutal use of force, as well as violent victimization of Muslims as further reinforcing the heightened sense of discrimination against the community.

Almost all the respondents—barring a few—confessed to the fact that initially they either had merely a nodding acquaintance with the Constitution of India, or had no idea about it, at least at the beginning of the protest. Regarding Article 14 and Article 15 of the Constitution, which guarantee equality and prohibit discrimination among citizens, only two persons had a rough idea. However, after coming to the site, these respondents learnt about the Constitution and the CAA, and how it would affect them—politically, socially, and economically—in their actual lives.

Leaving aside six persons, all the 64 respondents had regularly been casting their votes, and said that they would be exercising this democratic right in the future, too. They believed that the Constitution of India was under threat from the “present government”, or the “Modi-Shah” duo. On the question of not being able to articulate political dissent when Muslims were being lynched, or when the Babri Masjid verdict came down, many respondents opined that Muslims should have risen in rage when the lynching was happening. Not engaging in dissent, they confessed, was a grave mistake on the part of the community. Had Muslims strongly protested lynching, this government would not have taken them for granted. A young woman said tersely:

Logon ne bola nahi kyun ke unhe dusre ka dukh nahi dikhta. Apna ghar jalta hai tab dusre ka dukh samajh aata hai
People didn’t speak up because they can’t empathize with others. You start feeling other’s pain only when you encounter it.

One woman who had come to the site from Jaitpur looked anxious. With a catch in her voice, she told me:

Our suffering owes to our silence. Nobody is representing anyone, here. This is our personal battle. It’s not the time to sit at home.

In spite of her busy schedule, Saira who worked as a cook in a madrasa used to come to the protest scene two to three times every day. She put it fiercely:

CAA humsab per aafat le aaya. Her ek ke jaan pe pad gya isliye humlogon ko nikalna hi thha. Babri, teen talaq jaisi cheezon pe sabar kar liya
The CAA has brought adversity to all of us. Everyone is going to be affected by it so we came out. We showed our patience on Babri and Triple Talaq.

The Babri Masjid verdict, to all respondents, was an injustice that the qaum grudgingly accepted for the sake of peace so that the BJP might put away its enmity and hatred for Muslims for good. An older person of around sixty-five years of age had been coming to the place since day one. He opined:

Ye to Musalmon ke saath sarasar na-insaafi hue. Hum thaga gaye. Musalman kuch na bola kyun ke Hindu-Musalmah ho jata, bahut dange hote. Ye dekho; hum kah de ke is per mera aastha hai. Kya ye mera ho jaye ga? Inki niyat hi nai thi...
Injustice has been done to Muslims. We got cheated. Muslims didn’t speak up because it could have turned into Hindu-Muslim violence, and that could have further multiplied. Look at it [pointing towards a cart], if I say that it belongs to me because my faith is in it. Will it be mine? They didn’t mean it …

One woman of around forty-five years of age who held an M.A. said:

Vo log apna zehan banaye hue they. Hum log is masla pe awaz uthhate to Hindu-Musalmkarwadete
They had already made up their mind. Had we shown our anger they would have started communal violence.

Over a cup of coffee, Anas who was pursuing his M.A. degree put his opinion like this:

Babri Masjid ka faisla jis din aaya usi din Musalman samajh gaye tihey ab paani sir se ooper aa gya. Babri Masjid ko ek lamba waqt hoga, talta gya. Aur aakhir me insaaf nahi mila!
The day the Babri Masjid verdict had come, Muslims got to know that enough is enough. The issue of Babri Masjid dragged on for a long time. And at the end of day justice was denied!

For all the respondents, the CAA-NRC was the last straw. They were unanimous that the new citizenship law was blatantly anti-Muslim. And their conviction further got confirmed by the fact that BJP made a remarkable volte-face on the NRC in Assam and from supporting began to oppose it, claiming the exclusion of “genuine citizens” [i.e. Hindus] from the list. On the NRC, one woman poignantly said:

Iske baad to kuch rahe ga hi nahi
There will be nothing after this.

Regarding the ultimate outcome, one woman looked very optimistic. She put it:

Nahi pata thha sir pe baith jaye ga. Humlogon ne tareekh me padha hai ke ek Badshah Firon
thha aur ye bhi jante hain ke uska hashr kya hua
We didn’t know that they would cross all limits. But, we have read about Pharaoh and his fate in history books.

The commitment to the cause got reflected in multiple replies. As one woman said:

Us waqt tak aate rahe gein jab tak faisla apne haq me nahi ho ga
We’ll keep coming out [to protest] unless the decision comes in our favor.

An elderly woman who was reading the big poster near the tent confidently told me:

Bardasht se bahar ho gya, ab nahi rukengein
Enough is enough! We can’t wait any longer.

One major and common factor that brought people to Shaheen Bagh was the fear that detention centers were already a fait accompli for them due to a lack of documents, or insufficient papers. Their imaginings of the terror and violence that were constitutive of detention centers as well as the fear of deportation to an unknown place made them anxious, even panic stricken. A poster in Urdu hanging from an electric pole outside the tent summed up their apprehension very eloquently:

CAA 2019, NRC aur NPR ke bhayanakdeo ki mokhalfat na ki gayi to
Hamari naslein zindah dur-gor ho jaye geen
If we don’t resist the dangerous demon of the CAA 2019, NRC and NPR today
Several generations of ours will be buried alive tomorrow.

A number of visitors would stop by and read the same Urdu poster. It had a detailed explanation of the CAA, NPR and NRC, and their implications for the Muslim community. The last paragraph was particularly alarming where it described how the new citizenship law and the making of citizens’ list would impact Muslims in India:
In short, the trinity of CAA 2019, NRC and NPR has transformed the Citizenship Act 1955 into a dreaded demon and if [we] consider Assam to be a sample then this Citizenship Act would render more than five crore citizens of the country stateless in their own country. Not only citizenship would be snatched but people’s land and property would also be seized. India would turn into a slave market—democratic and lawful in nature, and of all oppressed people, Muslims will be on the top of the list because they are the immediate target of this law. Its implementation may take fifteen years but if it is not being resisted now, and prisons and cemeteries do not get fed then our next generations will be justified in accusing us at every breath. Bearing a few wounds in this path will save our later generations from being buried alive. God willing.

The outcome of the NRC in Assam and the corresponding plight of people in detention camps left a deep mark on the mind of people, and they also came to realize that ghospetiye (infiltrator) and Bangladeshi have become the prominent signifiers that would strip them of their citizenship in the coming times. The legitimate apprehension was that the “webbed apparatus of racialized state” (Stoler 2017) through institutionalization of the NPR-NRC-CAA and its Kafkaesque mechanism would remove Muslims from the definition of citizenship, which will finallyculminate in their en mass deportation to detention camps. In other words, the plight of people in the wake of the final outcome of the NRC in Assam helped them realise that they would meet the same fate. Moreover, people had painful memories of a series of violent attacks on the community—a series of mob lynchings, Muzaffarnagar riots (2013) and Batla House “encounter” (2008)—in the recent past, and the demolition of Babri Masjid (1992) and Gujarat pogrom (2002). Of all the respondents, some of them might not have seen the latter two events but they did experience them as, to cite Marianne Hirsch’s concept, “postmemories”—memories that get passed on to the “generation after” from the one which came before (Hirsch N.d.). But, citizenship was the ground on which they could fight against such attacks. Without citizenship, there would be no vantage point to resist.

While it is hard to fathom people’s exact attitude (Gray 2015), one could say that there might have been one or more than one reason for not engaging with the democratic protest. Thus, the silence of the people ought not to be read as disengagement or nonengagement with democratic protest but as a form of “hostile silence” (cited in Gray 2015:486). This can be inferred from people’s performances at Shaheen Bagh, and also their arguments, opinions, and anger infused with other emotions.

An Insurgent Space of One’s Own

Sit-ins, absenteeism, strikes, lockouts, and such forms of protest have been part of many democratic struggles. Concerned citizens of a democracy resort to such measures, and women also participate in protests. On perceiving the discriminatory nature of the CAA, 2019, the women and men of Shaheen Bagh also resorted to the same democratic practice of the sit-in. It was neither unusual or undemocratic, and nor was it opposed to their religious identity as some would argue. To this particular end, therefore, GB Birla Marg (Road 13-A) was taken into possession by some citizens of the country in order to register a protest in the aftermath of the enactment of a discriminatory law that people felt would paralyze them—politically, economically, and socially. What was unusual, about Shaheen Bagh, however, was that women and men had captured the road at short notice. And what made their insurgent activity even
more interesting was the fact that GD Birla Marg is not a designated and ritualized space for protests like Jantar Mantar and Ramleela Maidan in New Delhi. On the contrary, the thoroughfare is an important lifeline of the national capital. Furthermore, the movement was not led by any particular leader or organization—political and/or religious. The people were coming to the place on their own. And the physical space of protest belonged to everyone for political claim-making. While comparing medieval political practices to modern ones in a city, Sassen writes: “Today’s political practices ... have to do with the production of ‘presence’ by those without power and with a politics that claims rights to the city and to the country rather than protection of property” (Sassen 2011:574). Considering Sassen’s insight, it could be said that the coming up of Shaheen Bagh also helped in the “production of ‘presence’” that brought a profound change in the powerlessness of people because, to quote Sassen again, “becoming present, visible, to each other can alter the character of powerlessness” (Sassen 2011:574).

The nucleus of this insurgent space was a big tent—made of tarpaulin and bamboo—akin to the Speakers’ Corner in Hyde Park. Inside the tent, there was a makeshift stage. From the stage, speakers—social activists, university teachers and students, parliamentarians, Bollywood actors—delivered talks. Women were the only ones allowed to sit inside the tent listening to talks being delivered, enjoying cultural programs, or participating in the Preamble reading session. They also sang and clapped together with the cultural activists and shouted revolutionary slogans. Anyone who wanted to show solidarity by giving a speech, singing, performance or poetry recital had to give their names first to female volunteers in charge of the stage, and then they were invited one by one by the female compere. The use of smartphones for clicking pictures, recording events, and taking selfies was a permanent fixture. It was easy to notice young and old people talking politics ad infinitum across the long stretch of GD Birla Marg. All these performances had become routinized and ritualized. Generally, the protest site became busy in the evenings, and on weekends metamorphosed into a big collectivity. On one particular Sunday, more than one lakh people joined in. It was only this small tent that was there in its early days, and later Shaheen Bagh kept evolving continually. There was no over-all coordination there but still all the parts looked perfectly harmonious.

James Holston’s rendering of the concept of insurgent citizenship encompasses people’s active engagement with the society which stems from their exclusion from the citizenship. It also includes disruptive as well as transgressive practices culminating in the spatial production of the marginalized and oppressed in the city (Holston 1999, 2009). At Shaheen Bagh women, men, and children came in ones, twos, threes, as well as in groups of numerous sizes to join the protest against the discriminatory citizenship law. They held the Indian flag and had anti-CAA bands wrapped around their foreheads; “No to CAA” emblazoned on their cheeks or bare chest; the Indian flag strapped around bodies; anti-NPR-NRC-CAA badges stuck on their chests, and Indian flag caps and mufflers on their head. These active citizens also brought their own placards and posters inscribed with words like inqilab zindabad (‘long live revolution’), sab mil kar lade the goron se (together we fought against the Britishers), and others such messages suitable for the insurgent space borrowed from India’s independence movement. And also pasted them on the shopfronts lining one side of the street, suspended them from the foot over-bridges and hung them from electricity pillars.
Several groups made use of the available empty space—and performed there—singing the revolutionary poems of Iqbal, Faiz, Jalib, and Rahat Indori as well as national and patriotic songs; chanting *inquilabi* (revolutionary) slogans in unison; shouting anti-government and anti-NPR-NRC-CAA slogans; taking selfies; and clicking group photos. All the while, protestors' body language, posture, movements, symbolic gestures, styles of various kinds also testified to their political acts. For instance, one person would shout: *Ham le ke rahe gein* (we shall certainly have our freedom), or *Ham kya chahte*? (what do we want?), and people would passionately shout back *CAA se Azadi*! (Freedom from CAA!) with a clenched fist up in the air, drawing on the Kashmiri slogan for azadi via JNU where it was extended to freedom from hunger and poverty. Performances were individual as well as collective, and such a group was not an exclusive one, rather any individual could join in. In addition, individuals also participated in the protest in their own way. One came across people reading books at the two libraries—"Fatima Sheikh-Savitribai Phule Library" and "Read for India." In the latter, one also found kids making paintings depicting multiple ideas of "unity in diversity," "living together separately," and other such paintings. There were women, men, and children taking a stroll and visiting the two libraries; attending to banners, posters, placards, graffitied walls and roads, murals and others; visiting the overbridge—transformed into a makeshift photo gallery—festooned with handwritten poems, caricatures, cartoons, and paintings depicting angst and anger, and the ingenuity of people as well. The use of smartphones for clicking pictures and taking selfies with the replicas of India Gate, a detention camp, and other installations was ubiquitous. People also filmed and shared live videos on social media platforms. In sum, Shaheen Bagh was a conduit through which political expression of myriad types were conveyed through varied performances to the political regime and beyond. Conversely, everyone was involved in the articulation of her/his political acts through performances that were embodied, as well as verbal or non-verbal.

Balibar makes an important point that there come situations when the antinomy that is entangled with democracy and citizenship comes forth and becomes visible (Balibar 2015:4). With hindsight, one could say that the emergence of Shaheen Bagh was that particular "moment" when this antinomy became clearly visible to people that gave rise to their performed politics. At the insurgent space, people came to realize "the aporia of CAA" that the current political regime is trying to cover, and also learnt how the CAA should be seen in conjunction with the NRC. The identity of an insurgent citizen was not given; furthermore, the people did not have any engagement with any protest earlier as it was their first ever participation in such an event. Moreover, they were not even card-carrying cadres of any political party armed with knowledge and/or experience about the ways and means of engaging in such a protest. So, it was only during their performances at the site that they came to realize the importance of resistance, the modus operandi of a democratic protest, and how to democratically engage in a demonstration. Following Butler, this identity of an insurgent citizen was "tenuously constituted in time, [that got] instituted in an exterior space [that is, Shaheen Bagh], through stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 1999:191, emphasis original); an insurgent identity achieved "not [through] a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition" (Butler 1999:198, emphasis original). Thus, the repetition and iteration of performances at Shaheen Bagh helped in the internalization of an identity of an insurgent citizen—based on a sense of being wronged and in opposition to the current political dispensation. Alternatively, people's democratic engagement at the scene with all their
performances was a manifestation of an internalized identity—the identity of being a Muslim as a second-class citizen. Engaging in this politics at the insurgent space also helped women in subverting the scripted narrative of docility and subordination that is attached to them.

The insurgent democrats at Shaheen Bagh also took recourse to the Islamic tradition of seeking help and courage from God in the time of crises in their fight against zulm (oppression) and na-insafi (injustice). Women were engaged in saying nemaz (prayers) at the back of the tent, collectively and individually; keeping voluntary roza (fast) and breaking it; reading the Quran and reciting duas on rosaries. It should be stressed, here, that the protest was not meant only for an abstract legal status that the term citizenship stands for in a nation-state (Yuval-Davis 2007). On the contrary, it was about an embodied notion of citizenship that entails identity, belonging, emotions, sensibilities, as well as participatory and legal aspects of citizenship. To put in another way, the protest echoed people’s idea of citizenship, and how these people conceive and practice this citizenship in their everyday lives. Of particular note is the fact that this public display of religiosity was not staged because, to invoke Asad, din (“religion”) is “coeval with life” (Anjum 2018:72) for believing and/or observant Muslims. On a particular chilly evening, women were performing ijtimayi dua (collective supplication) wherein they kept weeping copiously for quite some time while asking God for His help. Referring to God, the words were:

Save our country. Now our country is in crisis. Let the truth triumph. Where would we go after leaving the country? Help us from the Beyond. Save our men, children, women. Make us strong so that we can come out of our homes and fight for our rights. Save our Shaheen Bagh. If we don’t wake up now then we will not be able to wake up ever again. Those who got martyred (shahid) for the country [people who got killed during the anti-CAA protest by the state] give them high station in that World. Please end the oppression that is being done to our children ...

This special prayer cogently captures people’s emotions for their watan (country), and also their fear and anxieties of losing it. The usage of the word shahid for those who were killed during the anti-CAA movement, as well as the replica of India Gate inscribed with the names of the dead from the protests tells us about people’s embeddedness in watan, and also their conviction that haq (truth) was on their side. Furthermore, the prayer also indicates the importance of faith in the lives of people and the way their religion is bound up with their identity and in turn with citizenship. Stated differently, the embodied practices reveal people’s conviction that the country is as much theirs as anybody else’s. One poster firmly conveyed to its readers that:

Qeyamat ke roz bhi … Hindustan ki mitti se wajood me aayun ga!
On the day of resurrection, too… [I] will come into existence from the land of Hindustan!

And one day I also stumbled upon this poignant poster:

Bachpan se chumta aaya hoon. Hindustan ki zameen!
Mathe se har namaz mei, kaise Nikal do ge hume Hindustan se?
Since childhood [my] forehead has been kissing the earth in every prayer!
How would you throw [me] out from Hindustan?

As the news of the protest at Shaheen Bagh—burqa-clad women spearheading an anti-CAA movement round-the-clock in the face of Delhi’s biting cold, and also against the right wing’s efforts to subvert and dilute their legitimacy—spread, sympathizers started coming to the spot. Perhaps the tenacity of a movement that refused to bow down to an unflinching government triggered hope in people and thus they started
pouring in. The presence of teachers, students, artists, and activists adhering to varied ideological organizations from different quarters of Delhi was conspicuous. Expression of solidarity also started streaming to the destination as news of the protest started making rounds throughout the country. For instance, members of the Punjab Kisan Union from Punjab came to show solidarity. They also started a Langar (community kitchen) for providing free meal to protestors. The Chhattis Biradri Langar was started by a collective from Haryana. Later, the Guru da Langar (the Langar of Guru) was opened by advocate DS Bindra. One Tribal rights group comprising women had come from Jharkand. The qurbani (sacrifice) of the landlords adjoining GD Birla Road was widely discussed as they did not take rent from the shop owners all the while for supporting the movement. One Rakesh Kumar had made a 40-foot-high iron and mesh map of India. Multifaith prayer was also held wherein religious-heads from different communities participated. So, people from varied communities were part of the movement from the beginning and this only got stronger in the course of time.

53 “The city is a space where the powerless can make history,” writes Sassen (2011:574). Similarly, the emergence of Shaheen Bagh in its entirety as a space of insurgent citizenship in South Delhi did the task of, first and foremost, empowering people with the hope and optimism that they could alter their destiny by engaging democratically with the political dispensation. This led them to come out of their homes to perform their political acts of dissent. The insurgent space also made available the icons, idioms and phrases that are required for democratic dissent. More importantly, the political wisdom that these people absorbed after visiting the place was that the fight could only be won through a sustained collective effort, nothing else. It also needs to be emphasized that the people did have an idea about the workings of democracy given their engagement with the “everyday state” in getting official documents, such as Aadhar cards, election IDs, or ration cards. The anti-CAA protest took their engagement into a different—and for many of them—new sphere.

54 Following from the above, therefore, Shaheen Bagh could be summed up as a metaphor of public performance having a multiplicity of actors and teachers, that could also be read as “public text”—visual as well as oral genres, that was addressed to a diverse audience of “readers.” Alternatively, just like a text, human action is also an “open work” whose meaning is subject to interpretation (Ricœur 1973). And when this “public text” got disseminated by electronic and print media, as well as through social networking platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and others, it was read, interpreted, internalized and acted upon giving rise to multiple Shaheen Baghs—spaces of insurgent citizenship—across the country.

Conclusion

55 What becomes clear from the foregoing description is that the display of non-violent resistance at Shaheen Bagh was a challenge to the statecraft of modern nation-building that is embodied in the proposed CAA-NRC. Alternatively, the demonstration was a politics that resisted “de-democratization of democracy,” and also pleaded “democratization of democracy.” Because people cannot conceive of their lives without citizenship in a nation-state, given the fact that citizenship has a direct bearing on the right to life and dignity. The upsurge of people at the protest site, therefore, was a collective effort by Muslims as insurgent citizens, at reclaiming the nation. Second, the
highly performative action in “traditional” clothing was a resistance against the racialized identity of Muslims, and also represented an attempt by Muslims, particularly women, to take back the power to define what it means to be “Muslim as Muslim” at the present historical juncture in India. Third, Shaheen Bagh was about life so it refuses to let itself be pinned down to any single dichotomous essentialism of tradition-modernity, secular-religious, etc. that is constitutive of the discursive space. More to the point, the translation of the “public text” as well as its purchase throughout the country reflected a manifestation of people’s imagination of the “idea of India” that rendered the dichotomy of watan and qaum—its hierarchization or antagonism, pitr bhumi (fatherland) and punyabhumi (spiritual homeland), Dar-ul Harab (abode of war) and Dar-ul Islam (abode of Islam) extraneous. In addition, it also fractured the authority of the “political elite” as well as “religious elite” of the community by not allowing the former to lead the movement and also not letting itself be governed by the latter. Taken as a whole, Shaheen Bagh took the democratic political subjectivation of Muslims, particularly of women, to a new height, and graduated them to a politics of the street.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


NOTES

1. I am thankful to Nandini Sundar for her insightful reading and detailed comments on earlier drafts of the article. Many thanks to the anonymous referees for their critical comments and important suggestions. The errors, if any, are my responsibility alone.

2. Shaheen Bagh including the Muslim localities like Zakir Nagar, Abul Fazal Enclave, Ghaffar Manzil, and others come under Okhla. Okhla is a large, to quote Peter Marcuse’s concept, “ethnic enclave” (cited in Kirmani 2013:62), in addition to other locations and ethnic enclaves in Delhi, inhabited predominantly by Muslims. Kirmani did her study on Zakir Nagar. One learns that the place used to be farm land, which belonged to Yadavs and Gujjars; it was home to middle-class teachers in the 1970s, and now is primarily known as a Muslim neighbourhood (Kirmani 2013:63). What holds true for Zakir Nagar is equally true and truly equal for other localities of Okhla.

3. Christophe Jaffrelot made this comment on the Shaheen Bagh movement in his talk on the first panel of the virtual academic seminar on “Dismantling Global Hindutva: Multidisciplinary Perspectives” (DGH) on 10 September 2021.

4. I draw on Talal Asad’s understanding of agency. It is “a complex term whose senses emerge within semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of relating to people, things and oneself.” See Asad (2003:78).


7. See https://censusindia.gov.in/

8. This heading is taken from Kundani’s (2014) book.

9. Translations from Urdu to English are mine.

10. The sit-in started on 15 December 2019. However, the first day of respondents’ participation in the sit-in as they recounted was 16 December 2019.

11. All names have been changed to maintain anonymity.

12. Alexander defines the term to “denote a stigmatized racial group locked into an inferior position by law and custom.” See Alexander (2010:12).

13. The Shah Bano case was a controversial maintenance lawsuit. After obtaining a divorce from Mohd. Ahmed Khan, Shah Bano had filed a maintenance lawsuit in the Supreme Court of India. The Court gave a judgement in favour of the lady for getting an alimony from her husband.
However, the judgement was later annulled by an Act of Parliament under the Congress government that had succumbed to the Muslim clergy. See Pathak and Rajan (1989).

14. Regarding the title suit of the Ram Janabhoomi-Babri Masjid disputed site, the Supreme Court of India gave its final verdict on 9 November 2019. The apex court granted 2.77 acres of land of the disputed site for the construction of Ram Temple at Ayodhya to a trust. The court also ordered the central government to provide five acres of land to Uttar Pradesh Sunni Central Waqf Board as a compensation for the construction of a mosque away from the spot where the Babri Masjid actually stood. For the Muslims in India, this verdict is a gross injustice because the whole controversy around Babri Masjid was “invented” by the Hindu right-wing outfits. See Sundar (2019). For a synoptic view on the whole issue, see Noorani (2003: xvii-l ). In 2003, when the BJP-led NDA, under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, was in the government, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) had excavated the Ram janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid site to find evidence of a temple below the Babri mosque. The data was tampered with, and there were procedural lapses in the excavation as well. See Varma and Menon (2010).

15. It goes without saying that there were people like Sharjeel Imam and others who had given a call for the sit-in.

16. In the popular imagination, the Azadi slogan is used by Kashmiris for freedom from India, however, Kanhaiya Kumar, the student leader from JNU, made it a catchphrase for all demonstrations by extending its meaning to other domains of struggle. Now the slogan has come to stand for azadi from all kinds of injustices, as well as oppressive structures. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=58&v=i6hY0AhaRfw&feature=emb_logo

17. On many occasions the anti-CAA protests were the target of police crackdowns in which the police allegedly opened fired on protestors, and many people were killed. Interestingly, all such deaths occurred in BJP-ruled states. Of all the CAA protest-related death, 70% occurred in U.P. followed by 20% in Assam. See Sen and Singaravelu (2020).

18. For both the terms, see Balibar (2014).

19. Lapidus has used “political elite” and “religious elite” for understanding the responses of Aligarh and Deoband to European colonialism, respectively. By these two terms I also mean the same two classes in today’s India which is, however, now not limited to Aligarh and Deoband anymore. See Ira M Lapidus (1987).

ABSTRACTS

Shaheen Bagh is no longer merely the name of a Muslim locality in South Delhi (India). It has, in fact, now become an iconic symbol of resistance in defense of the Constitution. Based on participant observation, as well as semi-structured interviews with the protestors, this article engages with women and men transitioning from a state of silent citizenship to insurgent citizenship by putting up an extraordinary resistance to the political regime in the wake of the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019. It also argues that the routinized public performances at Shaheen Bagh aided to internalize an identity of insurgent citizen—based on a sense of being wronged, and in opposition to the current political dispensation. Furthermore, the performative politics at the site helped women to subvert the scripted narrative of docility and subordination that is usually attached to them.
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Keywords: Shaheen Bagh, Muslim women, Constitution, silent citizenship, insurgent citizenship, performativity

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