

Shaheen Bagh (2021): Gender, Affects, and Ita Mehrotra's Graphic Narrative of Protest

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ABSTRACT

Ita Mehrotra's journalistic memoir, *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (2021), through the graphic narrative medium, facilitates a reading of the Shaheen Bagh protests in India, particularly those in Delhi, as pivoting on affective strategies. This article argues how the women of Shaheen Bagh in Delhi mobilised affects primarily through the following activities – sharing food, singing songs and the display of artwork. The article explores: What role does the graphic narrative genre of Mehrotra's book play in the representation of affective strategies used in the Shaheen Bagh protests? And since Shaheen Bagh was considered remarkable because the organisers were Muslim women (Verde and Kumar, 2020, n. p.), how does the study of gender and ethnicity in relation to affective strategies contribute to this proposed reading? This article is situated within the intersecting discourses of South Asian Feminisms, Contemporary South Asian literature, and Affect Theory.

Keywords: Indian feminism, Shaheen Bagh protest, affect and activism, graphic narrative

INTRODUCTION

The Government of India passed a law on the 11 December 2020 that recognised citizenship of India along ethnonationalist lines. This law, known as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), defied Constitutional fundamental rights, specifically Article 14 'Equality before the Law' and Article 21 'Right to Life'. It claimed to grant citizenship to all Hindu minorities, who were displaced from India during Partition, and who are supposedly being persecuted in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh, but the law excluded Muslims from these countries who were also similarly displaced from India. Finally, it forced existing citizens to prove they are truly 'Indian' through appropriate documents (birth certificate, voting identification, etc.). In the final days of 2019 and early months of 2020, there had been numerous protests against this law nationwide, in which 25 people were killed and thousands detained under police custody. This article will focus on an iconic protest that started in Delhi but gradually spread to the rest of the country - the Shaheen Bagh women's protest. In Delhi's Shaheen Bagh area, Muslim women spear-headed this movement, sending out a protest message that the CAA-NRC laws were not only authoritarian, but nobody in India, and especially the Muslims, were obliged to comply with its stipulations. The activists staged a sit-in for 101 days from 14 December 2019 to 24 March 2020, redefining the very idea of dissident feminist protest in the country. They were leaderless and free of any form of involvement from NGOs, founding themselves completely on a shared sense of solidarity. Numerous women's protests across the country started to imitate them and their idea of 'care as resistance' (Verde and Kumar, 2020: n. p.). It has now been more than two years since the Shaheen Bagh protests were forced to end due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Kiran Bhatia and Radhika Gajjala (2020) have argued that care was used by the women of Shaheen Bagh as a strategy of protest to counter non-violently the 'legitimacy of violence enacted by the police, the government, and those supporting the CAA and the NRC in India' (Bhatia and Gajjala, 2020: 6299). They mention in passing that care was a part of the protest's 'affective framework' (2020: 6299), they do not engage with the concept of affect as a strategy of protest for long. I argue in this article that the protest's affective framework was a strategy which singles it out as a unique form of feminist resistance against growing Hindu nationalism, religious sectarianism and right-wing conservatism in India.

Ita Mehrotra's journalistic memoir, *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (published in New Delhi by independent Yoda Press in 2021), through the graphic narrative medium, facilitates a reading of the Shaheen Bagh protest as

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pivoting on affective strategies. The black and white graphics narrate the incidents at the Shaheen Bagh protest site in Delhi through a conversation between the author and one of the real-life protestors, named Shahana. Shahana reminisces about her own family history and how they came to live in Shaheen Bagh. Gradually, the narrative also explains the political events that were set in motion as a reaction to these protests. I argue in this article how the women of Shaheen Bagh, as represented in this graphic recollection, mobilised affects primarily through social activities - sharing food, singing songs and the display of artwork. The article raises the questions: What role does the graphic narrative genre of Mehrotra's book play in the representation of affective strategies used in the Shaheen Bagh protests? And since Shaheen Bagh was considered remarkable because the organisers were Indian Muslim women (Verde and Kumar, 2020: n. p.), who are seen by Hindu majoritarianists as subjugated by male members of the community, how does the study of gender and ethnicity in relation to affective strategies contribute to this proposed reading?

In this close reading of the Mehrotra's graphic narrative, examining how text and image interact to portray the affective strategies that were used in the Shaheen Bagh movement of Delhi, I have used primary and secondary sources on the movement and on the wider socio-political issues the movement addressed, framed by affect theory and scholarship on anti-colonial and feminist protest strategies in South Asian history. I situate my article within the intersecting discourses of South Asian Feminism(s), Contemporary South Asian literature, and Affect Theory.

The Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 was by no means an isolated political move but rooted in a history of India's citizenship laws, as Rahul Rao (2021) argues. The Citizenship Act, 1955, granted citizenship to all persons born within the Indian territory, irrespective of their religion and ethnicity. This law was amended in 1986 to include a clause which stated that at least one parent must be an Indian citizen. The law was amended further in 2003 and then it required that both parents must be Indian citizens or at least one of them should not have been an 'illegal migrant' (Rao, 2021: 590) during the birth of the child. However, in the 1980s, its most restrictive form occurred in the region of Assam, when ethnic majority groups there started to protest 'illegal' Bangladeshi immigrants entering the state (2021: 590). The Congress, who were in power in the centre at that time, passed the IMDT (Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal) Act, 1983, which made it difficult to frame immigrants as 'illegal' (2021: 590) because the responsibility to prove 'illegality' (2021: 590) lay entirely on the accuser. Since the Foreigners Act, 1946, which was in operation for the rest of the country made the 'illegal immigrants' (2021: 590) prove their 'right to remain' (2021: 590), Assamese citizens saw this as discrimination against them. The NDA (National Democratic Alliance), a group of parties headed by the BJP, filed an affidavit to fight this and the Supreme Court soon declared IMDT unconstitutional on grounds of being discriminatory. The Assamese Chief Justice, Ranjan Gogoi, whose ideological affiliation was proved to be majoritarian later, was mainly responsible for this 'zealously activist' (2021: 592) act. These sentiments of the Assamese ethnic majority were later manipulated for the introduction of the CAA-NRC in 2019.

The NRC or the National Register of Citizens was a precursor to the Citizenship Amendment Act or CAA and jointly aimed to disenfranchise Muslims in an elaborate political move. A draft of the NRC was first published in Assam in 2018. Rao explains that through the NRC, 'the 'illegal' (mostly Muslim) migrants might be detected, deleted (from electoral rolls), and deported (to Bangladesh)' (2021: 592), which was planned to be extended to the rest of the Indian states as well. Angana P. Chatterjee (2021) mentions that NRC required everybody to submit legal documentary proof of their citizenship, or they would be detained and deported (Chatterjee, 2021: n. p.). Ironically, the defaulters in this case turned out to be mostly Hindus, which BJP had not anticipated (Rao, 2021: 592). The NRC disenfranchised 1.9 million people out of the 33 million population of the state (2021: 592). So, it was revised and republished in 2019 by which only Muslims were to be disenfranchised (2021: 592). The CAA was introduced to grant Indian citizenship to refugees from all other ethnic groups except Muslims, who were fleeing ethnic persecution in the neighbouring Muslim-majority countries (2021: 592). The immigrant detention centers required in this operation had already started to be built in Assam (Chatterjee, 2021: n. p.). If there are no established legal protocols, detentions can last for an indefinite period unless the detainee is deported soon (2021: n. p.). At the time Chatterjee wrote her book (2021), there were 13 detention centers, and more were under construction (2021: n. p.). Some jails served as detention centers in Assam and one to accommodate close to 3000 people was being built in Goalpara (2021: n. p.). That was supposed to be India's largest detention centre for 'illegal' (Chatterjee, 2021: n. p.) immigrants. By November 2019, already a total of 1043 immigrants were imprisoned in six centers in Assam, out of which approximately 20-25% were women. There were young children too. By April 2020, close to 30 detainees had died due to mismanagement, unhygienic conditions, starvation, and some from mysterious reasons (Chatterjee, 2021: n. p.). Although the Supreme Court had ordered in May 2019 that 'those regarded 'non-citizens' and detained for more than 3 years, be conditionally released' (Chatterjee, 2021: n. p.), this was not heeded. The NRC's operations were postponed in 2019 due to the Covid pandemic, but there remains widespread fear that any Muslim can be detained any time if they failed to show citizenship documents.

In India, many children under the age of 5 and mostly the old-aged do not have birth certificates or other identity proof for many reasons including illiteracy, a lack of awareness, inaccessibility of registration centers, or

inaccessible procedures for registration and procurement of documents. After the CAA bill was signed into law, Muslims, who make up 14.2 percent of the Indian population suffered relentless anxiety that this law would rob them of their citizenship - even if they had documents (Changoiwala, 2020: n. p.). As data has shown, women were a major part of those facing disenfranchisement and being detained since they migrate more because of the culture of patrilocal residence within Indian marriages (Changoiwala, 2020: n. p.). The protests emerged as a challenge to the political structure that was triggering this anxiety and displacement among Muslim women and Muslims in general.

The history of South Asian women activists can be traced back to the anti-colonial movements in India. However, although most protest movements in South Asia and around the world demanded a certain experience in organisation or unionisation, the protest camps at Shaheen Bagh were extremely spontaneous and under no specific organisational or political banner. The women who started the protests were largely homemakers, aged grandmothers, and some ordinary professionals, who followed unorthodox protest method - sharing food, singing songs while helping their grandchildren with homework, putting up artwork by themselves and the children at their homes, and so on - which initially triggered concerns of safety among onlookers. It became uniquely representative of South Asian feminisms in the way it challenged the stereotypical conceptions of Muslim femininity and domesticity by spilling into the largely male-dominated public space of the streets. The practices of so-called women's responsibilities like cooking and nurturing, which were activities imagined to be strictly confined to the domestic sphere, were used to stage a resistance against the conservative and perceived anti-Muslim state laws. The common stereotype of the Muslim woman is that she is dominated and controlled by her husband and has no will of her own (Edwards, *et al.*, 2021: 4). Moreover, the popular belief in the country says that it is university students and renowned feminists who encourage protest, not the 'quiet resistance' (2021: 3) of a few poor and ordinary Muslim women. Therefore, these women were not expected to have the ability to be strategic, which partly indicates how radical the protests were perceived.

As Hillary Chute (2017) defines the term 'graphic novel,' as opposed to 'comics,' as a 'book-length comics for a sophisticated adult audience' (2017: n. p.). The mode of communication of a 'graphic novel' is however neither like a 'graphic,' that is, an image, nor a 'novel' (a word-text) but works through a relationship between the two—the movement of image and words on a page in a sequence. Making meaning out of this interaction of two distinct yet related elements is similar to how meaning is produced in poetry, as it involves a 'distillation and condensation' (2017: n. p.) of time on the page. In poetry, the different elements like rhyme, line break, and in short, the form interacts with the message to shape time as it flows through the body of the poem. A kind of 'aesthetic labor' (2017: n. p.) is required or expected to slowly break these condensed symbols down. This expected aesthetic labour has been used for affective purposes, as an awareness or call for action or just to present a historical testimony like iconic graphic novels such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980) (Chute, 2017: n. p.). Mehrotra's *Shaheen Bagh* (2021) provides testimony of a historical South Asian feminist protest movement that used affective strategies as a resistance method by the interaction between words and images on the page to show how affective strategies were adopted. The focus of this article is on analysing how the movement has been represented in Mehrotra's graphic narrative, rather than commenting on the movement as it took place in real time.

South Asian graphic narratives are being increasingly studied by notable literary scholars such as Pramod K. Nayar (2018), Harleen Singh (2015), Pia Mukherjee (2015), Kavita Daiya (2021), Amit Rahul Baishya (2019), Ritu Gairola Khanduri (2016), and others. Writing specifically about the graphic narrative of protest, Charlotta Salmi (2021) states that these narratives function as 'intermedial texts': 'It is precisely when prose fails, or there are no words to be had, that the intermedial text bears witness to its failure and presents alternative avenues for confronting state force' (Salmi, 2021: 171). By 'intermedial texts', Salmi means that the graphic medium of these narratives mediates between the written and the spoken word to express what is ineffable in these forms of expression. Affects, which, according to Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (2021), occur in 'in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon' (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 1), are 'intensities' (2010: 1) that pass between human bodies and non-human bodies, sometimes sticking to these bodies. *Shaheen Bagh* (2021) appears journalistic in its retelling of the story of the protest, including interviews with activists, documentation of the activities at the protest site, what was being said by political leaders, and the ways in which the protestors responded. However, in utilising a graphic medium for memorialising such protest, the affects used for carrying out resistance through the protest could be portrayed more effectively through using this 'intermedial text' rather than through solely prose or the spoken word (Salmi, 2021: 171).¹

Shaheen Bagh is a small locality in the predominantly Hindu, Indian city of Delhi's Jamia Nagar area, which houses a prominent Muslim-majority institution of high academic standing, the Jamia Milia Islamia University

¹ I have used 'comics' and 'graphic narrative' interchangeably in my article because these terms have the same connotations, the latter only being used as a marketing strategy since 1964 to sell this kind of books to an adult bourgeois readership, who would not otherwise consider them to be of any literary merit (Chute, 2017: 33-37).

(JMI). The area itself is a marginalised part of Delhi because of its huge Muslim population, who consider it safer than the more gentrified parts of Delhi, as we know from the character of Shahana in Mehrotra's book:

(...) I have realised how it's so SAFE, beyond anything else, for my family to live in Shaheen Bagh. This is why Muslim families live near each other. I feel like we NEED to live close together, whether it is in Shaheen Bagh, Jafraabad or Old Delhi...It is also why my parents never considered moving to 'better' parts of Delhi even when they can afford to! (Mehrotra, 2021: 22)

The immediate cause of the Shaheen Bagh protest was a police crackdown on Jamia's students in December, which disrupted the idea of safety that Shahana had. Ziya Us Salam and Uzma Ausaf (2020) recount that on 15 December 2019, the police attacked not only the students who were protesting the Citizenship Amendment Act, but also students studying in the library and praying at the mosque. Tear gas was released and there was considerable brutality and violence from state forces. Amidst this, two hijab-wearing Muslim women fought bravely to shield a male friend from the police's baton. This instance was the first blow at shattering the image of the 'coy, speechless, and powerless Muslim women' (Salam and Ausaf, 2020: 7). In a way, Shahana's idea of Muslim safety in Delhi lying within proximity with other Muslims is emphasised through these two women who fight to protect their friend.

At the protest site, safety would mean an absence of violence from protestors as well as from police or other state forces. However, it is very difficult to agree on what is violent and what is not. Judith Butler (2020: 1) argues that for some physical attacks only will qualify as violence and for some emotional harassment too would be included in the definition. In politics, what a state or any regulatory power considers violent is always what threatens their legitimacy:

As much as it would make matters easier to be able to identify violence in a way that is clear and commands consensus, this proves impossible to do in a political situation where the power to attribute violence to the opposition itself becomes an instrument by which to enhance state power, to discredit the aims of the opposition, or even to justify their radical disenfranchisement, imprisonment, and murder. (Butler, 2020: 5)

Therefore, in case of any resistance against the state, it is also extremely difficult to precisely pinpoint what could be considered non-violent, since that 'power to attribute' (Butler, 2020: 12) violence (or non-violence) to an act is wrested by the hands of the state. In fact, the state could claim its response to protests via police brutality legitimate in order to have a 'monopoly' (2020: 12) on violence. Butler warns against giving up on this debate on what constitutes violence/non-violence by striving to 'establish a way of distinguishing between a tactical attribution of violence that falsifies and inverts its direction, and those forms of violence often structural and systematic, that too often elude direct naming and apprehension' (2020: 5). This means on the one hand, we should see the label of violence that the government pastes on the protestors of CAA-NRC to 'invert' (2020: 5) the actual 'direction' (2020: 5) of violence (that is, from the government towards the disenfranchised Muslims or police brutality on the Jamia Millia students). On the other hand, we should also discern the more subtle and 'systematic' (2020: 5) kind of violence enacted through judicial, social, and legal oppression (like the CAA-NRC).

To follow a resistance strategy based on non-violence, Butler suggests that the tendency towards individualism needs to be avoided and social relations need to be formed (Butler, 2020: 9). After all, violence is not only an attack on a person but also on 'bonds' (2020: 16), which in this case, is the bond between public and the state. In using the ethics of care and affective strategies centred on safety and security, social relations between people of all communities are established and strengthened by activists such as the Shaheen Bagh women as part of a non-violent protest. In the next section, I discuss anti-individualistic tactics such as hospitality, female bonding, confidentiality, defiance (of gender roles), empathy, and love and comradeship as affects in circulation in the camp and represented in Mehrotra's graphic recollection. These affects are collectively utilised to impart feelings of safety and security, which forms the overall affective strategy of the protest.

SHARING FOOD

The first instance of affects of safety mobilised through food sharing represented in the book takes place in the conversation between the narrator and Shahana. It starts with a page solely devoted to a single strip of two panels where a tea kettle is pouring tea into a tumbler and then a hand is lifting the tumbler (see [Figures 1a and 1b](#)). We see the steam from the tumbler waft to the next page to signal a continuity. On this second page, we realise that the hand belongs to Shahana, now holding this tumbler of tea, conversing with the implied narrator who stands outside the panel. The tea becomes a symbol of the start of a friendly conversation.



14

(a)

15

(b)

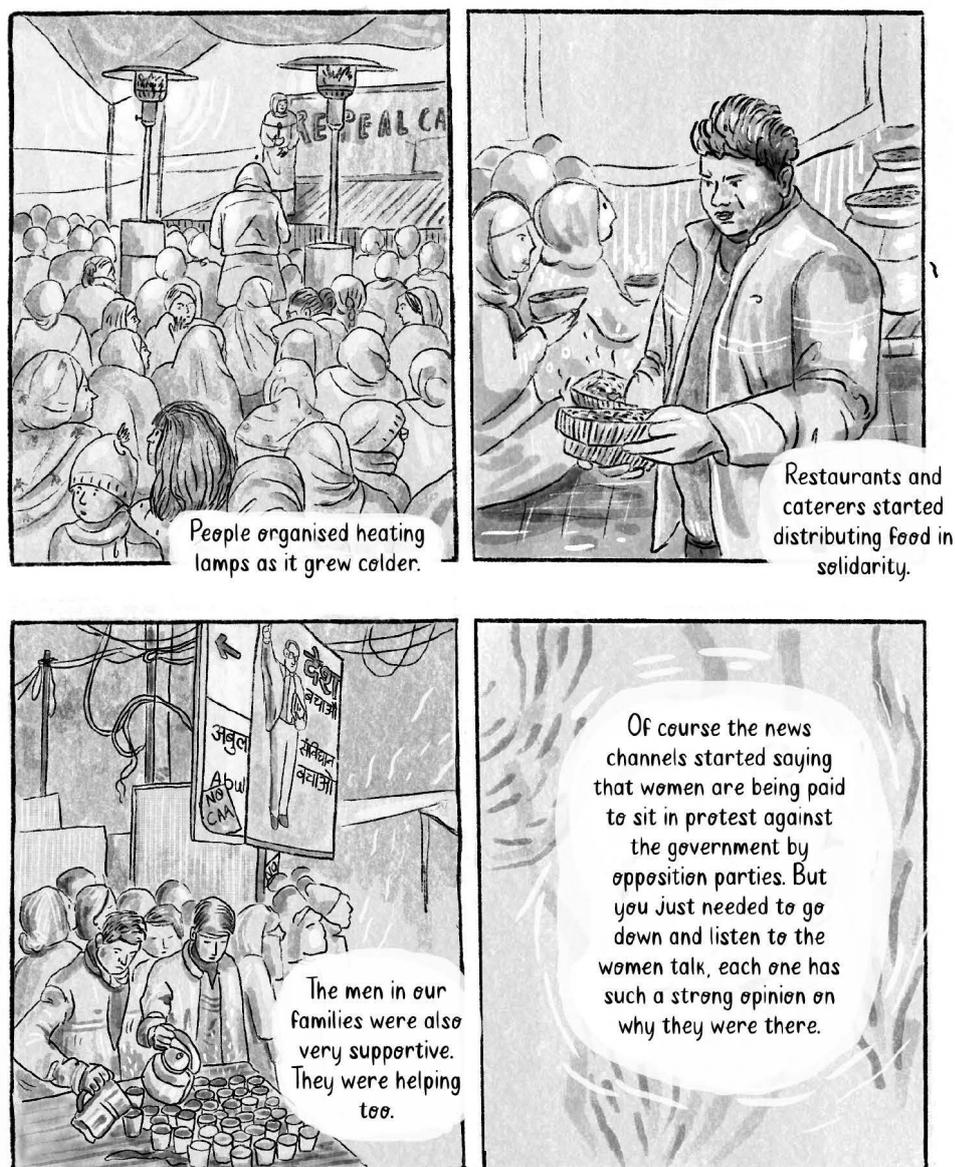
Figure 1. Shahana and the narrator conversing over tea. Excerpted with permission from *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (pp. 14-15) by Ita Mehrotra (© Ita Mehrotra)

Philip Lutgendorf (2012) notes that tea (or *chai* in Hindi), which started as a colonial artifact, gradually became a pivotal Indian symbol of hospitality and particularly central to ‘male friendship’ (Lutgendorf, 2012: 25). That it was characterised as a ‘male’ cultural artifact, is because the public sphere where the tea-stalls serve tea to a primarily office-going urban clientele (Lutgendorf, 2012: 25), which are male-dominated spaces. Beginning the narrative with a kettle pouring tea into a typical glass tumbler of a Delhi tea-stall while a female friendship develops there, is therefore, notable and significant. This is how the graphic medium positions the text in a women’s movement - by denoting the flow of time from picking up the tumbler to the start of a conversation and friendship between a Shaheen Bagh participant and a writer (both women) through tea fumes across the comic’s gutter.² Chute writes in the introduction to her book that comics, in the words of Art Spiegelman, ‘choreograph and shape time’ (Chute, 2017: n. p.) and she explains that this happens by ‘arranging it [time] in space on the page in panels, which are, essentially, boxes of time. (...) Panels are how the cartoonist gets to experiment with presenting time, with duration and motion’ (2017: n. p.). The panels in the graphic illustration above use the drifting of fumes across the gutter between them and the next page to ‘arrange’ time ‘in space’ (2017: n. p.). This temporal path is the path to a female ‘bond’ (Butler, 2020: 16), that counters state violence through sharing stories.

The cup of tea here is a crucial element, which symbolises sharing secrets and confidentialities, as in the figurative ‘spilling the tea’. ‘Spilling the tea’ actually derives from ‘spilling the beans’, a phrase etymologically rooted in Ancient Greek (Khalis and Rifhan, 2019: 220). When ‘spill the tea’ was first used, it did not refer to the drink but to the letter, ‘T’. Lady Chablis, an American drag queen used it in 1994 to refer to ‘truth’ (2019: 221), that is, truth about their life as transgender persons. However, the meaning intended by Lady Chablis stuck to the word and the word ‘tea’, as in the drink, took its place to refer to ‘spreading gossip or secrets’ (2019: 221). The tumbler of tea in Shahana’s hands, thus, metaphorically works to denote confidentiality.

Shahana opens up to the narrator about how their family had struggled since the times of Partition to survive on their land in Delhi, and as quoted before, how she had come to realise that Shaheen Bagh was one of the safest places in Delhi for Muslims (Mehrotra, 2021: 22). As she says those words, her face becomes the sole focus of the panels, perhaps to highlight the cautious flinching and sideward glances of her eyes. Reading the relationship between the pictorial representation of her expressions and her words in the comics (Chute, 2017: n. p.), the reader gleans that this is supposed to be a hushed comment. The bond developing between the two women also demands

² ‘Gutter’ in the language of comics is the space between the panels.



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Figure 2. Men helping the women at the protest site. Excerpted with permission from *Shabeen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (p. 47) by Ita Mehrotra. © Ita Mehrotra.

an understanding of confidentiality as an affect, implied symbolically in the graphic gestures and in the sensitive content of their conversation, rather than being stated outright.

Reclaiming the tea stall as a site of female bonding produces defiance as an affect when it comes to socially prescribed gender roles. The sit-in protest at Shaheen Bagh for close to three winter months required essential needs like hunger and warmth to be met. Men from different religious ethnicities and occupations assisted the women in large numbers in fulfilling these necessities, although they were not allowed to enter the women's enclosure (Farooqi, 2020: n. p.). Sikh-Punjabi and Muslim men shared food, braved the cold along with the women, and donated money for snacks, blankets, and rugs (see [Figure 2](#)). Although such care responsibilities are generally expected to be fulfilled by women while men engage in discussions, defiance of those expectations functioned here as another affect used strategically.

Moreover, the fact that this act of rebellion took place on the male-dominated city streets makes it doubly defiant. Shilpa Phadke, *et al.* (2011) claim that although and even for the Hindu middle-class woman, the idea of 'loitering' or existing without the intention of doing a chore on the street is demonized by the society as 'mad', 'bad' or 'dangerous' (Phadke, *et al.*, 2011: 15); it is not very different for Muslim women except for an added

complexity: ‘... the fact that their entire community is looked down upon with hostility, and lives in fear of violence, means that they not only have decreased opportunities to venture out of community boundaries but also that their movements and behaviour are more closely policed by their families and community’ (2011: 46-47). In the Shaheen Bagh protest, the opposite happens, and it is the men in Muslim families as well as from other communities who do chores like cooking and distributing food, while the women are engaged in political conversations, usually considered to be the men’s forte. However, the caption bubble covering the last panel in [Figure 2](#) says that media channels were propagating that the women were ‘paid’ by the ‘opposition’ to sit there, which politicises the affects involved in food sharing in the government’s favour.

In January 2020, Amit Malviya, the BJP IT Cell Head, claimed that the Muslim women at Shaheen Bagh were backed by Muslim men and were getting remunerated for their efforts with 500-1200 rupees and a plate of biryani (Salam and Ausaf, 2020: 16). Malviya tweeted a video, making these claims, which also added that ‘the more hours each woman sits, the more money she makes’ (*Times Now*, 2020: n. p.). Apart from filing a defamation suit against Malviya, the women responded to this allegation with an invitation: ‘Come to my house, my daughter-in-law makes the best biryani. We will serve you’ (Salam and Ausaf, 2020:156). In [Figure 2](#), we see a different sort of invitation in the words in the speech bubble: ‘But you just need to go down and listen to the women talk,’ on a page filled with panels focused on men serving food. The gutters again become crucial to this interpretation here since in reading comics, that is where ‘human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea’ (McCloud, 1994: 66)³.

The invitation is used by the Muslim women of Shaheen Bagh as a non-violent affective strategy, inviting people for food and then cooking and serving it is an act of care with associated affects that are rooted in gender bias. Traditionally, cooking and serving food (as well as all other forms of care work) have been associated with women in a patriarchal social setting. Doing them well become acts of doing femininity correctly (Limeberry, 2014: 29; Thomas, 1993: 666). Interestingly, for the women in Shaheen Bagh, promising to cook and serve food to their opponents is ‘a source of potential empowerment and social engagement’ (Limeberry, 2014: 36) while simultaneously being ‘a site of oppression and structural disadvantage’ (2014: 36). As an act of non-violence, the women, by saying these words, appear to cohere to the oppressive structure of mandatory care work, while the real objective behind the invitation is to diffuse the hatred and suspicion circulated by the right-wing around the food cooked and served at the protest site. Myrte E. Hamburg, *et al.* (2014) write that offering food is not only a sign of caring for the other, thus building an empathetic relationship between the provider and the receiver but is also a form of emotion regulation in the receiver. This primarily takes place due to every individual’s association of positive feelings with food and feeding. These feelings include the association of food with the satisfaction of a basic need as well as affects like ‘empathy and supportive behaviour’ (Hamburg, *et al.*, 2014: 5), which might aid the individuals involved to draw closer and to make ‘allies’ out of ‘enemies’ (2014: 5). Therefore, the prospect of feeding here is intended to regulate the feelings of suspicion around sharing of food at the protest site by converting suspicion into love and comradeship.

The protest strategy of mobilising affects through food sharing is rooted in the Sikh religious tradition of *langar*.⁴ Cooking or serving food was not solely left to the men but was a unified act of service, however, the men doing it voluntarily, irrespective of caste or religion, were seen by the women as ‘helping’ (see [Figure 2](#)), which is significant because in most Indian households, men do not share the load of domestic work. In Mehrotra’s book (2021), we see this gesture from men on page 47 and then on pages 60 and 61, with a sequence of showing women’s hands rolling and patting the dough. These panels on the two pages create a temporal continuity by depicting a similar scene at the protest site, finally ending in a panel on page 61 itself, showing both men and women from all communities standing together with hands on each other’s backs. The use of *langar* by Muslim and Sikh men and women to combat Muslim persecution under Hindu fanaticism recontextualises *langar* in a unique expression of secularism. At the same time, it challenges gender roles in both communities, underlining the importance of seeing Shaheen Bagh as a feminist radical social protest. *Langar* has also been used later by the farmers in Punjab to protest the Farm Bills in 2021 (Sandhu, 2022: n. p.), continuing the deployment of this protest strategy in South Asian resistance.

³ Scott McCloud (1994) says that we are able to construct this ‘continuous, unified reality’ (McCloud, 1994: 67) of a narrative despite the panels ‘fracturing’ time and creating a ‘jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments’ (1994: 67) because we are using the gutters as ‘closures’ (1994: 67). Closures are this practice of seeing unconnected parts but stringing them together to form a whole connected narrative (1994: 63).

⁴ Michel and Ellen Desjardins (2009: 4) write that the *langar* has been crucial to community building in Sikh religious and cultural history. It was inspired by the Sufi tradition and by Guru Nanak’s (the first Sikh guru or prophet) concern for feeding the poor and destitute against the dictates of a caste conscious society.

SONGS

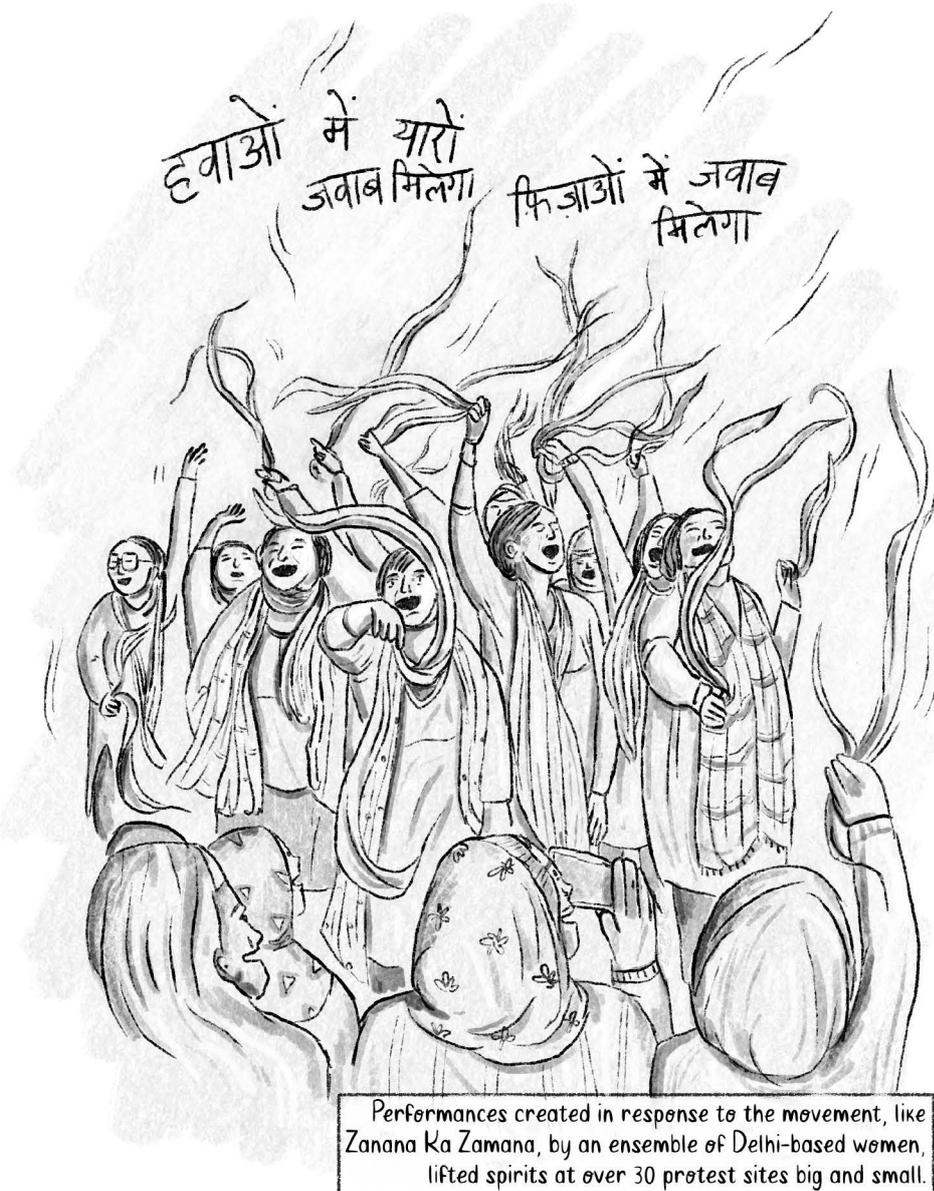
Mobilising affects of safety through singing songs is another protest strategy that was used in Shaheen Bagh. Affects like persuasiveness, affective information, excitement, inspiration, empathy and hope are central to communal singing, the affective quality of protest songs has played a crucial role for centuries in mobilising people for resistance. In India, although protest songs have been around since the anti-colonial and anti-caste movements in the 1930s, they were formally adopted in the 1940s by the Communist party's cultural wing, The Indian People's Theatre Association (Pande, 2013: n. p.). During the Shaheen Bagh protests, many songs and even hip-hop music became popular channels for dissent like Varun Grover's '*Kagaz Nahi Dikhaenge*' (We Refuse to Show Our Articles) (2019), Faiz Ahmad Faiz's '*Hum Dekhenge*' (We Will See) (composed originally in 1979), Arivarasu Kalainesan's '*Sanda Seivom*' (We will fight) (2020), and Divine and Dub Sharma's '*Azadi*' (Freedom) (2016, inspired from the words of Jawaharlal Nehru University's student-activist, Kanhaiya Kumar's speech), among others. In fact, the hip-hop protest culture gained a new momentum in India due to the songs directly composed to resist CAA (Ramadurai, 2022: n. p.). To discuss the composition and circulation of these songs in detail here is beyond the scope of this article. I shall focus instead on how they have been represented in Mehrotra's book (2021) and how certain lines from the songs have functioned visually and affectively in those pages. However, a brief background on the songs is required to understand their impact as seen in Mehrotra's book.

Two songs whose performance has been illustrated in the book are Varun Grover's '*Kagaz Nahi Dikhaenge*' and Faiz Ahmad Faiz's '*Hum Dekhenge*.' '*Kagaz Nahi Dikhaenge*' is a poem that Grover wrote and then recited on Twitter in Dec 2019 to protest the CAA and NRC. It is inspired by Rahat Indori's poetry and a Bangla anti-CAA protest slogan, '*Amra kagoj dakhabo na* (We Will Not Show Our Papers)' against the CAA. Opposition leaders like Shashi Tharoor and Sitaram Yechury shared Grover's poem and it circulated widely, becoming the 'anthem' against CAA and NRC (Outlook Web Bureau, 2019: n. p.). '*Hum Dekhenge*', on the other hand, by leftist poet and revolutionary, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, was first published in 1980 in his collection, *Mere Dil Mere Musafir* (Dubrow, n. d.: n. p.). The poem's use during the anti-CAA protests started with a controversy: on Dec 17, 2019, IIT Kanpur's students started protesting police brutality on Jamia Millia Islamia's students. The poem was recited by a student to a crowd of fellow student protestors, and this was recorded and put on Twitter. A post-doctoral faculty member lodged a complaint against the use of this poem because its lines allegedly invoked 'communal sentiments' (Dubrow, n. d.: n. p.). It did not, however, stop the poem from being adopted as another protest anthem against the CAA and NRC. Not only was the poem used in India but also abroad in the many global demonstrations against the CAA. For instance, in one such protest held in Cape Town, South Africa, a woman named Kathyayini Dash sang this song into a microphone outside the Indian Consulate (Dubrow, n. d.: n. p.). It became a symbol of the anti-CAA protests worldwide and eventually the cover design of Ita Mehrotra's book (Mehrotra, 2021: cover design).

Protest songs offer forms of truth that challenge power structures, empower participants and other listeners to fight, spreading information that builds the mass of the movement, and overall, can facilitate social change (Cort, 2013: 5). These functions help understand how songs function affectively in Mehrotra's *Shaheen Bagh*, which depicts the auditory effects of the songs through a visual medium. There has been an adoption of Urdu/Hindi poetry into songs for some time in India, although '*Hum Dekhenge*' had already been sung as a protest song in a different context in Pakistan earlier. By depicting the effect of these songs in comic form enables the representation of these sentiments captured in the lyrics in a medium that can portray the emotions that remain ineffable through solely words or images (Salmi, 2021: 171)

Poems sung as songs during protests created the atmosphere for action and charged the participants emotionally. Tiina Rosenberg (2013) mentions that creating an 'atmosphere' is as important for staging a protest as the physical location, and music plays a part in the former by acting as a 'mediator and cohesive element' as well as evoking 'strong corporeal responses' (Rosenberg, 2013: 179-80) among protestors. These corporeal responses are embodied affects, as per her understanding (2013: 180). She conceives affects as purely bodily reactions to a stimulus (2013: 180), while the definition of affects I am working with in this article, straddles both physiological and emotional realms. In contrast, Dard Neuman (2008) shows how protest music affects listeners emotionally and conceptually. However, since he does not talk about the body, I will be using his ideas in conjunction with Rosenberg's in this discussion.

Neuman refers to sociologist R. Serge Denisoff's term 'magnetic song of persuasion' (Neuman, 2008: 2) to describe protest songs, which are as we see, purposefully affective. They are clear in their political significance, and this is the goal of creating and singing these songs in the first place - 'identifying problems and prescribing clear solutions' (2008: 3). This makes it easier for them to influence outsiders to join the movement by making them aware of the grievances fuelling the protest and its goals (2008: 2-3). In this way, it mediates between the protestors and onlookers and strives to create between them the bond that Butler (2020: 16) has mentioned in her book (Neuman, 2008; Rosenberg, 2013). Thus, persuasiveness operates through protest songs to attract the mind and the body towards forming affective solidarities with other members of the movement.



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Figure 3. Women waving their *dupattas* and singing. Excerpted with permission from *Shabeen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (p. 80) by Ita Mehrotra. © Ita Mehrotra.

In the depiction of the protest in Mehrotra’s book (2021), the protest songs are ‘lifting spirits’ (see **Figure 3**). The scene in the drawing covering the full page shows the words of a song charging up the crowd as they fling their *dupattas* into the air in excitement, singing the lyrics. Other women take pictures, documenting this moment for inspiration for those who will see the video/photos, whether posted online or circulated via messengers (see **Figure 3**). The representation of bodies and minds present in this scene creates images of solidarity through performing protest songs together in order to garner support for their cause.

In the ‘magnetic song of persuasion’ (Neuman, 2008: 2), information becomes affective because the knowledge of the cause, the demands, and the goals presented through the songs excite empathy and even a sense of responsibility for the people protesting. The women disseminate this affective information by singing these songs to draw more and more people in a short time. Persuasiveness lies in the information in the songs that influences the judgment of recipients to form attitudes or take actions, based on whether this affect is positive or negative (Albarracín and Kumkale, 2003: 453). This is evident in the way Grover and Faiz’s poems/songs became viral and

drew in voices from all over the world in support of the Shaheen Bagh women, and other anti-CAA protests in the country.

Along with such affective information, outsiders are also drawn in through the generation of empathy, transforming 'the passive listener into an active participant' (Neuman, 2008: 3). The affects that are in play here are empathy and hope, 'lifting spirits' (see [Figure 3](#)) signifies a resurgence of hope. Juan Rene Carrillo (2014) highlights this affective strategy in the context of the US Civil Rights Movement. At that time, songs/music in African American churches were used to promote, as J. E. Williams said, a 'culture of hope,' which 'provided boycotters with a range of meanings to find solace and empowerment in giving hope to succeeding generations that it was possible to abolish oppression' (quoted in Carrillo, 2014: 6-7). Mehrotra's book (2021) similarly allows the reader to visually trace the operation of such musical affects in a graphic medium, for instance in the way the *dupattas* flutter like flags of freedom with the lyrics of the song, which translates in English as 'The answer will be found in the air; the answer will be found in the breeze' (see [Figure 3](#)). The hope for an answer to their call for freedom from oppression, is depicted in drawing the lyrics adrift, metaphorically embodying that affect. Subir Dey and Prasad Bokil (2021) call this representation of sound 'sound-symbolic words' (Dey and Bokil, 2021: 1080), which are 'located between the art and the text, an element that is meant to be read (like text) as well as viewed (like an image)' (2021: 1080). The reader can visually experience that strategic construction of a 'culture of hope' (J. E. Williams as quoted in Carrillo, 2014: 6) with for example how '*Hum Dekhenge*,' a song which became most popular during the protests has been represented metaphorically by paper boats on water (Mehrotra, 2021: 63-64, 111-117), denoting a kind of flow of a 'culture of hope' (J. E. Williams as quoted in Carrillo, 2014: 6). This image of paper boats is a representation of a similar creation seen on the streets of Shaheen Bagh during the protests, inspired by the emotion in '*Hum Dekhenge*'. Paper boats were arranged in the shape of a heart (Mehrotra, 2021: 64) and at the actual protest site, and the text of the poem, '*Hum Dekhenge*,' was placed below, accompanied by a toy tank, to denote 'the military's small power when compared to that of poetry' (Dubrow, n. d.: n. p.). The state's authoritarian regime is represented by the military, and poetry or song symbolises the struggle against it, cutting a benign figure of secularism and equality that the Constitution of India traditionally upholds.

This performance of songs underlines their non-violent identity, much like Judith Butler's (1999) concept of performativity, which states that the gender and sexuality of individual subjects are cemented through their repeated performances of these identities through acts, through language, and through the categorical relations of opposition with members of other gender identities. By singing songs in contrast to using military violence, the participants of Shaheen Bagh protests are building an image of their struggle as welcoming, whilst the rigid citizenship laws of the Indian government build walls against religious minorities. Moreover, the lyrics of the songs sung like these lines from Grover's '*Kagaz Nahi Dikhaenge*' (2019) - '*Tum aansu gas uchhaloge, Tum zeher ki chai ubhaloge, Hum pyaar ki shakkar ghol ke usko, ghat-ghat-ghat pee chayenge*' (You will spray tear gas, You will brew the poisoned tea of hate, We will stir the sugar of love in it, and drink it up in one go) - further emphasise the strategic performance of songs to affectively establish a loving, peaceful identity against the government's violent championing of divisive sentiments.

'*Hum Dekhenge*' was composed by Faiz originally in 1979, to protest the oppressive regime of Zia-Ul-Haq. The refrain of this song also features on the cover of the book on a placard held by a woman in hijab standing in a puddle of water. There are circular lines around her that show winds blowing. The use of these different images of flow (of water and of air) visually depicts the strategic use of affects through protest songs. One of the ways in which Seigworth and Gregg (2010) theorise affect in political activism is

[...] the hard and fast materialities, as well as the fleeting and *flowing* ephemera, of the daily and the workaday, of everyday and every-night life, and of 'experience' (understood in ways far more collective and 'external' rather than individual and interior), where persistent, repetitious practices of power can simultaneously provide a body (or, better, collectivized bodies) with predicaments and potentials for realizing a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm. (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 7) [emphasis mine]

Put simply, affects are 'intensities' (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 7) generated in the repetition of diurnal acts of political resistance which bind bodies into a collective. These intensities then help these collectives to realise and imagine an alternative reality, different from what exists in the present. The way that happens is when these intensities are channelled through 'repetitive practices of power' (2010: 7), for instance, in the repetitive singing of protest songs during a protest can produce intensities/affects like defiance and persuasiveness. These intensities are also 'fleeting and flowing' (2010: 7) and that's how they travel within the collective. Anti-CAA protest songs like '*Kagaz Nahi Dikhaenge*' (2019) and '*Hum Dekhenge*' (1979) going viral to produce similar sentiments in people worldwide who were against these draconian laws is a good example of this phenomenon. The 'culture of hope' (J. E. Williams as quoted in Carrillo, 2014: 6), is built through the 'flowing' (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 7) of such intensities that are mediated through the performance of protest songs.

Music is used as an affective strategy to arouse empathy. Empathy can be understood to be of two kinds— one, passive bystander empathy, which is the ability to perceive others’ emotions and understand their challenging situation, an ability that is innate to the human brain; and two, active empathy, in which one performs care acts for ‘emotionally connecting with another person’s need for support’ (Berardi, *et al.*, 2020: 59). This can be effective in forming communities and solidarities, especially during times of crises (2020: 61). Drawing the lyrics of ‘*Hum Dekhenge*’ across pages till the end of the graphic recollection in a kind of visual, symbolic flow evokes empathy as ‘emotional capital’ (Dunn, 2004: 235), which functions as a ‘resource for mobilizing potential participants and for sustaining their involvement’ (2004: 236). Through informing and persuading the bystander, affective empathy is evoked by the songs sung by protestors to facilitate and embed care acts like sitting at the site in solidarity, spending nights in the cold, and stretching oneself to the utmost for the cause by bringing children there, and the men helping with the provision of food and warmth through distribution of blankets. In Mehrotra’s pages, we see more and more women and men join in as the lyrics flow out. However, music also has other functions in protests such as historicising truths and challenging power structures, and according to Rosenberg. ‘*Kagaz Nabi Dikhaenge*’ (2019) by Varun Grover, another popular song of this movement, serves this purpose.

We see the refrain of Grover’s song floating above a crowd of protestors (Mehrotra, 2021: 86) as the graphic narration informs how Shaheen Bagh’s impact spread far and wide like in Bihar, tracing the reach of empathy. This song, while expressing defiance as one of its affects, is centred on an expression of self-suffering as an acceptable alternative to violence, in order to differentiate oneself from the government’s character. The women are protecting lives and engaging in non-violence by not doing what the opponent are inflicting on them. While the Hindu right-wing seemingly does not value their lives, the protestors do not replicate such sectarianism. The strategy of self-suffering is not simply a passive immolation of the self -Roberto Baldoli (2019) cites Mahatma Gandhi to claim that self-suffering might also have ‘the intent to harm’ (Gandhi as quoted in Baldoli, 2019: 9), which can be exemplified through fasting ‘deployed wrongly’ (2019: 9) or by causing ‘emotional and moral punishment of the other’ (2019: 9). In refusing to show the papers, a ‘moral punishment’ (2019: 9) is inflicted on the authoritarian government by claiming rights to live on the country’s land without obeying the government’s draconian laws. For instance, one woman in the novel is seen demonstrating a deeper significance to the activists’ refusal to show documents: ‘The money that will be spent in the process of creating a countrywide NRC is ours. We will not let this happen’ (Mehrotra, 2021: 44). The song also hearkens back to Hindu-Muslim unity under secularism, the protestors’ assertion of power does not shy away from expressing ‘rage, indignation, or aggression’ (Butler, 2020: 21) but avoids physical attacks, pursuing non-violence aggressively (2020: 21). Thus, the social relationship between the protestor and government remains cordial.

ART

The constituent affects of safety mobilised through the display of artworks utilises Baldoli’s concept of ‘moral punishment’ (Gandhi as quoted in Baldoli, 2019: 9). Shaheen Bagh’s artwork, as represented in Mehrotra’s book (2021), includes posters, installations, and objects used for symbolic purposes like the black balloons and the slippers left on empty cots from the movement. In the Shaheen Bagh protest, sarcasm is deployed to challenge the cynicism and popular perception of BJP’s invincibility:

Hegemonic parties sustain their power by convincing people of their invincibility. This invincibility is always a myth, but it becomes a self-perpetuating myth when it spreads outside the core of its supporters. When even opponents start to believe this myth of invincibility, they either collude with the ruling regime or are reduced to paralyzing cynicism. (Ali, 2020: n. p.)

Mocking and exposing the facade and the mythical nature of such invincibility can be a powerful tool of affective resistance. In the novel, there is an image in the book of a woman holding a poster that says ‘*Yahan picble saal ki topi nabi mil rahi. Inko 1970 ke papers chahiye?!*’ (translated below by Mehrotra as: ‘Here we can’t find last year’s winter caps and they want us to find papers from 1970?!’) (Mehrotra, 2021: 28). Maria Brock (2018) calls such sarcasm ‘ironic protest’ (Brock, 2018: 282), and says that this is as much a response to an authoritarian regime as it is to cynicism. Brock writes that sarcasm and cynicism are jointly a psychological product of the modern social condition (2018: 282). However, contrary to what she argues - that such use of sarcasm is futile and not serious activism - I posit that sarcasm can be useful as an affective strategy in such anti-government protests. Political comics are frequently based on this affect, through caricatures and other satirical depictions of influential figures, political comics use sarcasm to criticise and point out social and political foibles. They function as ‘mechanisms for social control, reflecting conflict and maintaining dominant social structures’ (Chen, *et al.*, 2017: 132-137). The poster does not use pictorial caricatures but the mockery of government mandates in the CAA/NRC laws by juxtaposing citizenship papers with last winter’s caps, functions as a trenchant caricature.



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Figure 4. Detention centers in Assam. Excerpted with permission from *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (p. 44) by Ita Mehrotra. © Ita Mehrotra.



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Figure 5. The mock detention centre at Shaheen Bagh. Excerpted with permission from *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (p. 62) by Ita Mehrotra. © Ita Mehrotra.

The above panels are from two separate pages but read together operate effectively if one wants to understand the affective strategies of the detention centre installation at Shaheen Bagh. The panels in **Figure 4** are intended to provoke horror. The top panel shows a woman holding a drawing of the detention centre in Assam. She says that her husband has been taken to one of them and the subsequent panels provide a snapshot of what those centers look like as the woman narrates her story. The panels, particularly the one at the bottom of **Figure 5**, brings the horrific concept of the detention centre even closer to the everyday reality of the people outside Assam by depicting the model installed at the protest. The mock detention centre is shown to have a few children and people wandering peacefully, looking at the drawings hung inside (see **Figure 5**). One panel shows drawings hung everywhere on the street, starting with just a caption bubble saying, 'And how much art and poetry filled up the whole area'. The contrast created on these pages implies that the women at the site were creating art and bringing people together while the government was creating fear and dividing them. The detention centre becomes that symbolic node which is imbued strategically with these affects— one of solidarity and respect for the Constitution because the posters in the model included those of B. R. Ambedkar and J. L. Nehru among others, in contrast to the fear and hatred mobilised by the current government's detention centers in Assam. If one goes by Butler's definition of care as providing 'social and economic forms of support for life' (Butler, 2020: 39), the government might be seen as the primary caregiver. The Model Detention Center Manual, prepared and circulated by the government, outlines a wide range of facilities under basic human needs to be provided in the detention centers, but in reality, many have been found to have died while staying in the detention camps due to cruel and unsustainable conditions (*The Logical Indian*, 2019: n. p.; Maanvi, 2019: n. p.). The installation, and its portrayal in Mehrotra's book, underlines the denial of care to the Muslims in India from the government through its stark depiction of the horror. An element of satire is working here too: Salmi writes that 'satirical images capture the tension between the ludic and the rigid in the comics narrative system' (Salmi, 2021: 181). The model detention centre on page functions as a caricature of the caricature in Shaheen Bagh. The caption bubble in the top panel says: 'Protestors gathered in Khureji Khas in Delhi and released thousands of black balloons. Their slogans could be heard for miles around' (Mehrotra, 2021: 72). The image of women and a few men and children holding balloons which are seen floating up in the sky over the traffic includes shouts of '*Inquilab Zindabad* (Long Live the

Revolution)' (2021: 72), intended to symbolically shame the government, 'in shame how [one is] situated becomes visible, creating a paralysis that may lead to a resolution in an apology' (2020: 42).

The panel depicting flip-flops on empty charpoys (Mehrotra, 2021: 31) function as stand-ins for the women who had to go home because of the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic in India. A caption bubble inside the panel says: 'But it was only a matter of days before the site was forcefully closed off' (2021: 31). This strategic placement of the flip-flops to suggest resilience and determination are 'symbols of protest' (2021: 31). There is another inset of a sheet of article with these words scribbled in hand:

25 March 2020 NEW DELHI: The nearly 100-day long protests came to an end on Tuesday, with Delhi police and paramilitary forces clearing the site on Tuesday. 'Many of us felt that if we don't give up the space now then we won't be able to reclaim -' (Mehrotra, 2021: 31)

The writing is abruptly cut off there. While there is the resigned acceptance of an end to the protest, whose strength is underlined in its longevity ('100 days'), there is a promise to 'reclaim' (Mehrotra, 2021: 31), with a return and resilience in the voices of those oppressed under Hindu supremacy. The flip-flops are, therefore, also reminiscent of the undefeatable nature of the protestors. Here again, a 'culture of hope' (J. E. Williams as quoted in Carrillo, 2014: 6) is constructed through the artistic deployment of such a symbol.

CONCLUSION

Ita Mehrotra's *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (2021) is a journalistic memoir whose graphic medium functions as an intermediary text, presenting the strategies of Shaheen Bagh protest, Delhi, within an affective framework. This framework articulates political resistance on the part of ordinary Muslim women (homemakers, aged women, and a few lower-middle class professionals). Affects related to non-violence and safety were used strategically by these women to fight their disenfranchisement under the new CAA and NRC laws. Such affects were mobilised through social practices such as sharing food, singing songs, and displaying artwork at the protest site.

Shaheen Bagh challenged the binary of appropriately gendered use of space whilst also protesting Hindu nationalism and anti-Muslim attitudes in modern India, and raising important questions about the relationship between gender, non-violence, and political activism. It can be seen as manifesting Butler's ideas of non-violence as an effective tool of resistance, as Shaheen Bagh formed solidarities which are crucial to the survival of a secular democracy. The necessity of strengthening ethnic and gender solidarities not just within the nation but also abroad is through the generation of positive political affects. Sharing food, performing protest songs, and making art, helped generate these positive affects which enabled the movement to remain non-violent despite an aggressive government backlash. Mehrotra's graphic memoir participates in this feminist collective struggle as a postcolonial narrative that bears witness, testifying to and archiving a historical protest (Mehta and Mukherjee, 2015: 3). The novel traces the operation of affective protest strategies to oppose ethnocentric citizenship laws, the illegalisation of minority lives, and the unchecked rise of detention centers under the current right-wing nationalist, Hindu majoritarian government in India.

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