

Shaheen Bagh and the Politics of Protest in the Anti-CAA Movement in India

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to understand the pathways and politics of resistance within the anti-CAA/NRC (Citizenship Amendment Act/National Register of Citizenship) protests in India. Led and organised by Muslim women, the activists living in the locality of Shaheen Bagh emerged as a powerful symbol of resistance against, and reimagination of, hegemonic notions of nationalism, secularism, citizenship, and belonging in contemporary India. By exploring the resistance seen in Shaheen Bagh as a case study, our analysis tries to understand the ways in which the protest was a reflection of emergent solidarity, engendered in part by the communalisation of everyday life in India and the rise of Hindu majoritarianism. We contend that the actions in Shaheen Bagh should be seen as symbolising an organic resistance movement located at the intersection of gender and religion. This research aims to raise the following questions: How did the activists from Shaheen Bagh navigate its potential as a gender-based protest movement while framing a political opposition to CAA/NRC? How does the idea of Shaheen Bagh offer us new vocabularies of thinking about alternative democratic futures through the prism of prefigurative politics? This article suggests we need to resist a linear or coherent reading of the protest and instead attend to its fragmentary, contested, and contradictory forms.

Keywords: Hindu nationalism, Shaheen Bagh, anti-CAA protests, prefigurative politics

INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, Shaheen Bagh, one of the localities in the Jamia Nagar area of New Delhi became the epicentre of resistance against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in India. The occupation-style protest, held in a Muslim-majority neighbourhood and led by Muslim women, became a significant event in the contemporary Indian political landscape. The opposition to the Act stemmed from its exclusionary logic in the immediate sense, but also from the wider anti-Muslim sentiments that have intensified in India under the Bharatiya Janata Party's rule since 2014. CAA is an amendment to the Citizenship Act of 1955. Under the Act, fast-track Indian citizenship is extended to Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians who had migrated to India before the end of December 2014 from the Muslim-majority nations of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. In excluding Muslims from this provision, the amendment introduced religion as a qualifier for citizenship for the first time in the history of modern India, a secular state.

For Irfan Ahmad (2020), the law reflected a form of 'legal populism' that effectively creates exclusionary categories of authentic people, denoted by Hindus and other non-Muslims, against an inimical 'Muslim Other' within the country. According to Ahmad, the law 'installs a Hindu home' in India and manifests the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) reimagination of India as a Hindu nation-state. The promulgation of the CAA was followed by the announcement of a nationwide National Register of Citizenship (NRC). The NRC is a government registry that would identify legal citizens of India based on documentary proof. Read in conjunction with each other, the dual policies of CAA-NRC are notable for their ostensible anti-Muslim intent. While the NRC calls into question the citizenship status of all Indians, the CAA extends a safety net to communities other than Muslims.

These laws need to be understood as complementary instruments that further the ethno-nationalist agenda of the BJP (Jaffrelot, 2021) in India, which has increasingly turned to legislative changes to promote its ideology. Since the re-election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2019, the government has introduced legislation criminalising

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triple talaq,¹ dissolved the semi-autonomous status of the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir, and expedited the construction of a Hindu temple over the ruins of the historic Babri *Masjid* (mosque). Resultantly, the ratification of CAA was recognised by many as an attempt to strip Muslims in India of their citizenship status. It set off a wave of protests across India in the first widespread expression of resistance to the BJP's ideology of *Hindutva* (ideology of Hindu nationalism). Several student groups and civil society organisations participated in demonstrations led by Muslims to oppose the amendment in many cities. The capital city of New Delhi emerged as the heart of anti-CAA protests in India.

In terms of the protest at Shaheen Bagh, its location in a Muslim-majority neighbourhood played a crucial role in fostering the Muslim women-led sit-in at the site. Shaheen Bagh is situated at the convergence of several Muslim residential localities. The area is home to Muslims of divergent socio-economic backgrounds, including labouring classes, wealthy businessmen, and white-collared professors teaching at the adjacent University of Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI). In her work on Muslim segregation, Ghazala Jamil (2014) has noted JMI to be an important consideration in motivating Muslim relocation to Jamia Nagar during the rise in communal tensions in the 1990s. As a result, JMI has always held aspirational status for the residents of Jamia Nagar due to its promise of socio-economic mobility. Considering the intricate ties between the occupants of Shaheen Bagh and JMI (Farooqi, 2020), it is easy to understand why the area erupted into protests when the Delhi police stormed the campus of JMI on 15 December 2019 and attacked the students demonstrating against the CAA. The protest at Shaheen Bagh started as an organic gathering of worried family members, neighbours, civil society individuals, and students and eventually evolved into a momentous sit-in that lasted for a hundred days.

The most notable aspect of the demonstration was the overwhelming presence and visibility of Muslim women at the protest site. Shaheen Bagh was 'organized, led and sustained by Muslim women' (Bhatia and Gajjala, 2020: 6287) from the area. Given the popular representations of Muslim women as 'victims of Islam and Muslim men' (Jamil, 2017: 121), this mobilisation drew intense media and popular attention. The protest represented a critical rupture in the unopposed growth of the BJP and its ideology of Hindu nationalism since 2014. Many media outlets expressed surprise over the formidable challenge offered by Muslim women to the BJP's ethno-nationalistic agenda. In recognition of its significant impact on contemporary Indian politics, our research emphasises the protest at Shaheen Bagh as being a critical event of gendered activism in South Asia. We read the Shaheen Bagh protest through the interconnected lenses of gender, religion, and spatiality to highlight its distinctive forms of resistance by drawing upon the framework of 'prefigurative politics'. The observations are drawn from documentary research of news reports and social media, anecdotal accounts, and ethnographic observations from our visits to the protest site at Shaheen Bagh and other smaller sit-ins in Delhi.

This article is organised as follows. In the first section, we look at the intersection of religion and gender to consider the ways in which the protest at Shaheen Bagh was informed by these identity markers and their impact on the nature of the protest. In doing so, we focus on historicising the participation of Muslim women as political agents against dominant narratives that dismiss them as passive subjects. In the second section, we focus on the geographical location of Shaheen Bagh to understand the significance and survival of the protest movement in the face of extensive state pressure on anti-CAA protestors. We argue that Shaheen Bagh's position within the peripheral Muslim-majority area of Delhi is essential to understanding its emergence as the face of anti-CAA resistance in India. In the third section, we study Shaheen Bagh as a case of 'prefigurative politics' to assess its radical potential. In doing so, we move past instrumentalist perspectives and attend to the embodiment and realisation of alternative democratic ideals within the physical site of Shaheen Bagh. We examine the emergent subaltern solidarity and pedagogical values that were intrinsic to the protest. We conclude by reflecting on the transcendental nature of the protests and their enduring relevance for gendered activism in India.

SECTION 1

Religion and Gender at Shaheen Bagh

This section looks at how religion, gender, and nationalism were intertwined within the repertoires of protest at Shaheen Bagh. The tensions evoked by the heavy use of nationalist symbols reflected the divergent ways in which Muslims in India were confronting their relationship with the nation in light of increased polarisation and violence against Muslims. We also reframe Shaheen Bagh firmly within the long and hitherto overlooked history of Muslim women's activism in independent India. In doing so, we argue that restricting Shaheen Bagh as an instance of gendered activism ignores the role of religion in informing the protests.

¹ Triple *talaq* is a means of instant divorce in Hanafi Islam. Muslim women's groups opposing the practice in India have been historically supported by the Hindu Right. This is because the Hindu Right sees triple *talaq* as reflective of stereotypes about Muslim men being oppressive and 'anti-women' (Agnes, 2019: 339). The bill introduced by the BJP unduly punishes Muslim men by criminalising the practice as opposed to merely banning it.

The protest at Shaheen Bagh was remarkable in its reclamation of nationalist symbols that have been used in the past to browbeat Muslims and question their patriotism towards India. The protest site was saturated with nationalist markers that asserted the Indian identity of the participants alongside religious signifiers that iterated their Muslimness. Among other things, Shaheen Bagh as a visual field was marked by the overwhelming presence of the national flag, sprawling posters of revered freedom fighters, and even a towering iron structure of the Indian map. The protestors highlighted the country's secular foundations as enshrined in the Constitution of India by participating in mass recitations of its preamble and singing the national anthem. This strategy of wielding emblems associated with Indian nationhood was used to communicate the affective ties and belonging of Muslims with the ideals of a secular India. For Ranabir Samaddar (2020), these practices were reflective of what he calls 'insurgent constitutionalism' and a politics of refusal. The key, for him, is the protestors interrogating 'how to disobey the law, yet swear by the virtue of constitution.' This formulation is complemented by Fahad Hashmi (2022) who argues that collective and individual public performances such as the protest infrastructure and installations, political graffiti, sloganeering, and more reflect the political engagement of the protestors and their 'insurgent citizen' identity.

The emphasis on nationalism by Muslims offered a challenge to their disenfranchisement through the CAA-NRC in two distinct but interrelated ways. First, it emphasised Shaheen Bagh as a people's protest that emerged to defend the secular idea of India and welcomed interfaith solidarity. The protest site evolved from a makeshift tent to a festive space hosting interfaith prayer, public speeches, exchange of books, concerts, and community kitchens run by men and women across different religious identities. In inviting people across all faiths to participate alongside the Muslim residents of Shaheen Bagh, the protestors successfully mobilised an emotional linkage between the country's religious diversity and national identity. Second, the protest at Shaheen Bagh resisted the traditional reading of citizenship as a membership status limited to the exchange between the state and its citizens. By repurposing the segregated protest site as an inclusive space amiable to students, artists, intellectuals, and ordinary civilians across all religious boundaries, Shaheen Bagh reconfigured the understanding of citizenship as a relationship *among* citizens. Shaheen Bagh's configuration as an all-embracing demonstration moored to relative Muslim neglect in the highly segregated landscape of India prompted people to view the protest as a reclamation of the diverse and secular foundations of the country.

Seeing the radical potential of Shaheen Bagh as a noticeably religious yet inclusive protest site, the BJP was actively involved in vilifying the protestors (Chatterji, 2020). Notably, Prime Minister Narendra Modi reaffirmed the necessity of the CAA at an election campaign rally in December 2019. He announced that the protestors responsible for any violence were easily identifiable 'by the clothes they wear' in an allusion to their Muslim identity (*The Economic Times*, 2019). This was an apparent effort to frame the protests as an exclusively Muslim issue and not one that was being opposed by various sections of the society. In an election rally, Home Minister Amit Shah referenced the protest at Shaheen Bagh as a rallying point for votes for his party. Shah called upon the voters to 'press the button (on the voting machine) ... with such anger that its current (shockwave) is felt at Shaheen Bagh' (Mathew, 2020). In another rally, Shah said, 'voting for the BJP candidate will make Delhi and the country safe and prevent thousands of incidents like Shaheen Bagh' (Chatterji, 2020). The ubiquity and persistence of such inflammatory rhetoric against Muslims in general, and Shaheen Bagh in particular, showed that the use of nationalist symbolism was no guarantor of altering popular perceptions of the community and the protestors.

The predominantly Muslim nature of the protests also became a point of contention in liberal circles. Many protestors chanted distinctly Islamic slogans like '*Allahu Akbar* (God is Great)' and '*La ilaha illallah* (There is no God but Allah)' at protest sites. When videos of the religious sloganeering became viral on news and social media, they were used as a basis to discredit the secular foundations of the protest. Shahi Tharoor, a Member of Parliament and a liberal politician, expressed his opposition to the video by equating the slogans with Islamic extremism (*TimesNow News*, 2019). Tharoor, who avowed his support to Shaheen Bagh and JMI protestors, exemplifies the ambiguities of expressed solidarity between Muslims and liberals in India. It is apparent that the liberal support for the protesting Muslims impinged on their ability to sanitise the protests of any meaningful assertions of their Islamic identity.

This double bind also sparked debates within the Muslim community. Irene Akbar (2020) defended the practice of religious sloganeering by vindicating it as an enactment of Muslim defiance to an anti-Muslim law. In response, Hayaat Fatemah highlighted the need to create 'a space where a non-Muslim can raise the same slogans with the Muslims' (Fatemah, 2020). The unjustified equation of any Muslim religious assertion as 'communal' in wider public discourse informs this split. In some ways, this also manifested in the protestors decision to not allow any local clergy or Islamic leaders to either lead or control proceedings at the protest site. These debates also raise questions about whether Muslims can truly broker the terms of their belonging in India while claiming their religious identity.

As soon as Shaheen Bagh emerged as an important protest site within the wider anti-CAA-NRC movement in late 2019, there were organised efforts to discredit the protestors. A prominent allegation in this context was that



Figure 1. Aysha Renna, a student confronting police officers to defend a fellow student during Anti-CAA/NRC protests. 2019. © Arun Kumar and *New Indian Express*.

the women protesting were ‘anti-India’ and had been paid by opposition parties like the Indian National Congress. This claim was not just made by online trolls but was echoed by Amit Malviya, head of the BJP’s IT Cell. Malviya released a video on Twitter with a man claiming that the women were being paid an hourly amount and made more money the longer they stayed. This unverified claim was then amplified by national media houses like Times Now and Republic TV. While a subsequent investigation by news outlets Newslandry and AltNews exposed the role of local BJP leaders in creating the video to spread misinformation, the claims made stuck in popular understandings of the protest and protestors.

The attempt to discredit the protestors as paid actors stems from a wider disregard of Muslim women as political agents within Hindutva politics and beyond. Muslim women are often portrayed as oppressed or victims of a hegemonic, patriarchal Islamic culture within wider public discourse (Bacchetta, 1994; Jamil, 2017). The debates around issues of triple *talaq* and *purdah* (facial coverings) are often weaponised by the Hindu right to further this narrative of Muslim women as lacking any form of political agency, and these ideas can feed into the stereotypes about the social backwardness of Muslims (Agnes, 2019). Such narratives persist beyond the circles of the Hindu Right and are often endorsed by mainstream women’s organisations in India. By stressing the incompatibility of women’s rights and emancipation with any form of religious identification, these organisations, often overlook the implicit universalism of their own Hindu identity markers like caste names or clothing choices.

For Ghazala Jamil, the ‘false universalism’ of the women’s movement in India reproduces the subaltern status of Muslim women given the dominance of upper-caste, upper-class Hindu women in these spaces (Jamil, 2017: 21). The ignorance of self-narratives from the Muslim community leads to scholarship that systematically treats Muslim women as silent or invisible bystanders to the everyday processes of political participation and social change that affect them significantly. In response, Muslim women’s organisations embody the dual resistance at the heart of Muslim women’s activism in India. Groups like the Muslim Women’s Rights Network or the *Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan* actively challenge the exclusionary nature of the mainstream women’s movement in India as well as the religious orthodoxy within Islam that marginalises women.

Kirmanji finds this vision of Muslim womanhood as existing within a ‘third space’ that aims to reconcile the opposition between women’s rights and religious identity (Kirmanji, 2009: 82). We believe situating the Shaheen Bagh protestors within this dynamic is relevant given their determined refusal to trade off their ‘Muslimness’ to legitimise their political claims. Instead, they located the strength of their dissent manifestly within their location as Muslim women in BJP’s India. In doing so, they exposed themselves to police intimidation, hate speech by BJP leaders, and violence by Hindu vigilantes. Aysha Renna, a young student of History at JMI became the indelible image of this dual resistance when her photograph opposing the police went viral (*Yahoo News*, 2019). In the image, Aysha raises her fingers at a heavily armed policeman to protect another student who was being beaten heavily with batons. In her fearless confrontation of the state’s brutality against Muslims, the otherwise defenceless Aysha became a symbol of strength, resistance, and hope.

SECTION 2

The Significance of Shaheen Bagh

Shaheen Bagh became an iconic symbol of Muslim women's resistance in India and sparked similar sit-ins that emphasised secular values and women's leadership across the country (Lahiri, 2021). Given the popularity and influence of Shaheen Bagh, there is a need to understand how it emerged as a bastion of anti-CAA opposition in India. In what ways did Shaheen Bagh offer a resonant template of resistance that drew people to the protest site and inspired others to model their own protests after Shaheen Bagh? How did the BJP and other right-wing forces respond to Shaheen Bagh's unifying potential?

Whilst the choice of Shaheen Bagh as a protest site was partly due to its closeness to JMI, it also carried the strategic advantage of being close to a significant thoroughfare. In response to the attack on JMI, the residents of Shaheen Bagh blocked the road in protest and disrupted the traffic between Delhi and the satellite city of Noida. The location of the protest site in a Muslim-dominated neighbourhood added to the protestors' sense of togetherness and safety from outside attacks and police harassment. Even though rumours of right-wing mobs planning attacks on the protest site circulated and disturbed the protestors, the protection offered by being in a Muslim locality contributed to the longevity of Shaheen Bagh. This is especially apparent in the violent police response and mob attacks on other protest sites. Occupations in other areas of Delhi proved vulnerable to police pressures and counter-mobilisations by right-wing groups due to their presence in areas with mixed religious populations. In contrast, Shaheen Bagh remained a relatively impenetrable protest site due to its location in a Muslim-majority area on the outskirts of Delhi.

Britta Ohm (2021) traces the 'legal awareness' of Shaheen Bagh residents to the Batla House encounter of 2008, where the Delhi police gunned down two Muslim men suspected to be terrorists in the Jamia Nagar area. Ohm notes that feelings of injustice and shock circulated among the residents in the aftermath of the encounter, and they were increasingly subjected to police excesses. As a result, the protestors held 'ample experience with family members being exposed to arbitrary police harassment and detention' (Ohm, 2021: 758).

Shaheen Bagh's significance was also driven by its ability to generate a potent and inclusive vision of Indian democracy that challenged the BJP's reimagining of India as an exclusionary *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu nation). This alternative vision was implicit in the site's evolving physical and material infrastructure. Initially restricted to a marquee, the makeshift tent at Shaheen Bagh soon expanded into a large encampment. Stages emphasising open dialogue were constructed to give people space to speak, vent, and engage with each other. Shaheen Bagh housed a rich cultural ethos evidenced by the presence of political graffiti, performances of revolutionary songs and poems, intellectual and literary discussions, a visible revival of the legacy of Indian freedom fighters through homages, painted portraits, and literary texts at the site. Additionally, an informal community kitchen was set up to feed the protestors and visitors sustained by the food and supplies donated by visitors.

The physical architecture of Shaheen Bagh was charged with political meaning and attention to care that made it possible for Muslim women to participate in the protests actively. Given the disproportionate burden on women for child-rearing, housekeeping, and domestic duties, the presence of libraries, classrooms, beds, and kitchens on the protest site increasingly eschewed any logic of remaining at home for the protestors by drawing the activities of the private sphere into the protest site. These structures at the site arose out of recognising these delimiting factors for women and gave birth to a community-enabled sense of agency. The women could participate without any constraints of domestic life since the protest site mitigated their immediate concerns.

One of the volunteers running the classroom at the protest was JMI student Younus Nomani. He told journalist Ayushree Nandan that 'to encourage every woman in Shaheen Bagh to step out and resist, we created a space in the neighbourhood where their children can be looked after' (Nandan, 2020). This sentiment is echoed by Satya Prakash (2020), a volunteer at the Shaheen Bagh library. In an article, Prakash wrote that although the library was created to counter misrepresentations of the protestors as 'misguided' and 'brainwashed people' who did not understand the issues they were protesting against, the success of the initiative became apparent once the women started frequenting the library, reading books and engaging in political discussions. These statements exemplify how the evolving infrastructure of Shaheen Bagh engendered co-constitutive modes of political participation. In doing so, Shaheen Bagh promised a sense of security, political purpose, and an 'ethics of care' that precipitated its continued evolution and growing participation by women (Bhatia and Gajjala, 2020: 6291).

Beyond the emancipatory possibilities of Shaheen Bagh for Muslim women, the protests also generated inter-faith participation and solidarities among students, farmers, and civil society members. Shaheen Bagh encouraged different social groups to coexist with mutual respect through regularly-held interfaith prayers, the celebration of cultural festivals, and inter-dining at the protest site. These seemingly banal activities had revolutionary potential, considering that food, festivals, and public prayers have increasingly become sites of violence and exclusion for marginalised communities in India. As a result, the ideals of syncretism, tolerance, and diversity encouraged by Shaheen Bagh challenged the exclusionary values of Hindu nationalism. Shaheen Bagh successfully framed CAA



Figure 2. A road sign on the freeway occupied by protestors painted over to read, ‘*Inqilab Zindabad* (Long live the revolution)’ alongside pictures of Mahatma Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar. 2019. Picture by author.

as a political issue that threatened the secular fabric of India, even though it disproportionately affected Muslims. In mobilising ‘a new vocabulary of secularism’ (Laliwala, 2020), the protestors at Shaheen Bagh embodied ideals of equality, freedom, justice, and tolerance that are foundational to the Indian Constitution.

Shaheen Bagh in the Hindutva Imaginary

The BJP and the Hindu Right were acutely conscious and wary of the transformative potential of Shaheen Bagh. Since the first week of the protest, there was a concerted campaign by these groups to delegitimise the protestors and their cause. As the protest persisted and grew despite these counter-narratives and gained international attention, the response turned violent. When a four-month-old child died from exposure to cold as the mother was participating in the protests, the right-wing media painted the women and other protestors as callous, uncaring people who wilfully subjected their child to the cold weather. *OpIndia*, a media site associated with the BJP, published an article that said, ‘Little by little, the life was dragged out of the child. Reports say his mother didn’t even realize when the light finally ebbed away from him’ (*OpIndia*, 2020). By suggesting that the mother could not realise her own child was dying (an unverified claim), the implication painted the mother and other protestors as callous and insensitive women.

Similarly, Safoora Zargar, a member of the anti-CAA Jamia Coordination Committee, was unduly arrested on the charges of organising communal violence in Delhi in February 2022. Zargar, who was pregnant at the time of her arrest, became a cause for heavy criticism of the central government since she was imprisoned during the pandemic despite her poor health. The right-wing ecosystem on social media immediately worked to discredit the sympathy and attention being drawn to this case by publishing morphed images of Zargar and claiming that she got pregnant at the protest site. In response to the criticism of the government for jailing a pregnant student during a pandemic, *OpIndia* ran an article reporting that one of the conspirators in the assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was pregnant at the time of her arrest (*OpIndia*, 2020). By comparing Zargar, a student imprisoned without trial, to a convicted member of the terrorist group LTTE, there was a clear attempt to dehumanise Zargar and render all sympathy towards her as misplaced.

The right-wing campaign to malign the protestors was not limited to personal attacks on the women, there was an attempt to frame the protest site as ‘anti-national’ in itself. The wide-scale presence of Islamic symbols and Shaheen Bagh’s location in a Muslim locality were used to claim that the protestors were Pakistani (that is to say foreign agitators) or anti-India. Kapil Mishra, a BJP leader who made numerous inflammatory speeches during this

period, tweeted saying ‘Pakistan has entered Shaheen Bagh’ and adding that ‘Pakistani hooligans have captured the streets of Delhi’ (*Express News Service*, 2020). Amit Shah, the Home Minister of India, laid the stakes clearly in an election rally. He asked the voters if they wanted to be on the side of ‘Narendra Modi, who conducted airstrikes and surgical strikes on Pakistan’s soil to kill terrorists’ or with ‘people who back Shaheen Bagh.’ Through this false equivalence, the protest was presented as being organised and supported by people who were anti-Indian as defined by BJP.

The media actively contributed to this portrayal as well. Sudhir Chaudhary and Deepak Chaurasia, two television news anchors who had run multiple late-night shows questioning the legitimacy of the protests, were denied entry to the protest site. Sudhir Chaudhary later tweeted videos of the event and added that he thought that Indian law did not apply to Shaheen Bagh and whether he would need a new visa to enter the protest site (Azam, 2020). By reinforcing the language of access and borders, the implication was clearly to relegate the protest site as somehow ‘beyond India’ and hence a Pakistani space. It is evident how such narratives fed into the wider discourse of Islamophobia circulated by right-wing social media outlets that constantly label Muslims as anti-Indian.

Statements like those by Anurag Thakur, a minister in the BJP government, who called for ‘traitors to be shot’ while speaking about Shaheen Bagh only intensified these sentiments by openly encouraging violence (Press Trust of India, 2020). These statements inspired immediate violence when a 17-year-old boy openly fired at the protestors injuring a student, followed by another man shooting in the protest area. These instances became a precursor to the wide-scale violence that took place in February 2020 that killed 53 people, two-thirds of whom were Muslim. While the violence did not take place in the Shaheen Bagh neighbourhood, it was centred around areas like Seelampur and Jaffrabad where similar sit-ins by Muslim women had become the target for locals and BJP leaders like Kapil Mishra (Gettleman, Raj and Yasir, 2020). Many Muslims also suffered significant material loss as homes, mosques, shops, and automobiles were targeted and burnt. This was the natural culmination of the hate campaign that the BJP leaders and other right-wing groups actively channelled against the protest at Shaheen Bagh. It also reflects the deep-seated anxiety provoked by the wave of popular resistance triggered by the protests at Shaheen Bagh that represented the anti-thesis to the BJP’s ideology of Hindu nationalism.

SECTION 3

Shaheen Bagh as Prefigurative Politics

On 24 March, a day after the complete lockdown announced by Prime Minister Modi came into effect, Delhi Police moved to clear the protest site at Shaheen Bagh. While the women had already suspended mass gatherings and maintained a small symbolic protest, the police were quick to dismantle the makeshift tents, speakers, and lighting equipment. The government also hired people to hurriedly paint over the graffiti and posters that had been put up in the area as the sanitisation of the space from all remnants of the protest became the state’s priority. While the organisers encouraged continuing the protest symbolically through the social media hashtag #Inquilabliveson, there was an increased realisation that the state would actively resist any return of the protestors at Shaheen Bagh. As a result, this period marked increased conversation about the relative success and failure of Shaheen Bagh.

Sanjay Kumar, a professor at the Center for Study of Developing Societies, spoke about the supposed failure of Shaheen Bagh and said, ‘It (the protest) did not achieve anything. The pandemic and social distancing norms cut short the protest. It ended in a dramatic manner’ (Lama, 2020). On the other hand, Mohammad Ayob, Emeritus Professor at Michigan State University, had called for the end of the protest in February. He believed that while the protestors had proven their resolve against the state, now ‘they have increasingly become pawns in the electoral game being played in the national capital.’ He believed the protest had achieved its objective in as much as ‘they (the protestors) have squarely registered their dissent against the CAA and successfully linked the discussion of the CAA with the National Register of Citizens’ (Ayob, 2020). How do we make sense of these competing claims about the success or failure of Shaheen Bagh? How do we assess Shaheen Bagh as a form of political activism, an incipient social movement, and a protest site? In what ways did Shaheen Bagh engender alternative imaginations of political participation and democratic futures?

While Kumar believes that the inability to have the laws repealed meant the protest failed, Ayob thinks marking an opposition to the laws was sufficient. We believe these instrumental readings of the protest at Shaheen Bagh fail to account for its generative potential. A focus on studying Shaheen Bagh through the narrow lens of means and ends overlooks the emancipatory and transformative aspects of the protest and their impact on the protestors. Thus, we suggest that studying Shaheen Bagh as a case of prefigurative politics allows us to account for its fragmented, contradictory, and contested forms. Carl Boggs defined prefigurative politics as ‘The embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture and human experience that are the ultimate goal’ (Boggs, 1977: 100). Thus, prefigurative politics entails ‘activists



Figure 3. A sign board in Shaheen Bagh covered with posters of prominent leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi, freedom fighter Bhagat Singh, and Dalit leader Dr B. R. Ambedkar. 2019. Photo by author.

directing effort into performing now their vision of a “better world” to come’ through ‘organization, design, architecture, practices, bodies, or something as simple as a gesture or demeanor’ (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2021: 643).

In the analysis below we study Shaheen Bagh as a case of prefigurative politics by focusing on the elements of radical experimentation and alliance building that defined the period of the occupation at Shaheen Bagh. This is relevant because as Luke Yates shows, what distinguishes prefigurative formations from other political logics like instrumental thinking, is that ‘to prefigure is to anticipate or enact some feature of an “alternative world” in the present, as though it has already been achieved’ (Yates, 2015: 4). In developing such alternatives, prefigurative politics allows protest movements to emerge as ‘social laboratories for the production of alternative democratic values, discourse, and practices’ that actively contest with and move beyond mainstream ideals (Juris, 2008: 3). We believe the subaltern alliances forged at Shaheen Bagh along with the pedagogical elements of the protest represent a clear and important instance of prefiguration. These aspects were integral to the emancipatory potential of the protest along with its ability to sustain an opposition to Hindu nationalism beyond the period of the occupation.

Subaltern Alliances at Shaheen Bagh

One of the defining images of the protest at Shaheen Bagh was the Republic Day celebrations on 26 January. The occasion is ordinarily marked by the hoisting of the national flag by the Indian Prime Minister at India Gate in Central Delhi and the accompanying parade. The protestors at Shaheen Bagh hosted their own flag hoisting ceremony, marked by a tremendous scale of public participation. The flag was hoisted jointly by Bilkis, one of the eldest protestors at the site, Radhika Vemula, the mother of Rohith Vemula, a Dalit student who died by suicide after allegations of casteism against the university administration, and Saira Bano, mother of Junaid Khan, a 16-year-old who was lynched to death in a communal incident. The event was concluded through a tableaux parade, along the lines of the official parade, which saw local artists and students decorate e-rickshaws and parade them in the nearby areas.

This ‘alternative’ celebration of the Republic Day was reflective of the prefigurative nature of Shaheen Bagh. The presence of Radhika Vemula and Jignesh Mevani, a Dalit MLA from Gujarat, was representative of the alliances and networks of solidarity that the protest had helped engender, particularly among the subaltern groups in India. To gauge the significance of this coalition, we need to contextualise the shifts in the Indian public sphere under the BJP and its associated right-wing organisations that are driven by the ideology of Hindutva, which understands India as the historical and religious homeland of Hindus. As argued above, this is used as a basis to paint Muslims as ‘invaders,’ ‘foreigners’ or ‘anti-national’ and systematically exclude them from the public sphere.

Since 2014, this has manifested in a wave of vigilante violence, legislative exclusion, and the consistent demonization of Muslims in public discourse. While the CAA and NRC legislations are one example of this process, there are other facets to this as well. There have been numerous instances of mob lynchings of Muslims over suspicions of transporting beef or cattle for slaughter (Frayer, 2019). In 2015, Muhammad Akhlaq was killed by a mob over purportedly storing cow meat in his fridge (Kumar, 2017). Multiple states in India have introduced laws that criminalise inter-faith marriage over purported fears of ‘love jihad,’ a conspiracy about Muslims marrying Hindu women to convert them to Islam. Muslims in Gurgaon, a city on the outskirts of Delhi, have been attacked and stopped from offering Friday prayers in public areas (*Al Jazeera*, 2021). These are just some examples that highlight the precarity of Muslim existence in contemporary India.

In such a context, the inter-faith solidarity and cross-cultural support for the protest at Shaheen Bagh were remarkable and reflected a key prefigurative element. A vital aspect of the ‘alternative world’ that defines prefigurative politics is its ability to reconfigure the sense of being for participants. Writing in the context of the Occupy Wall Street protests, Gitlin argued that the communal self that emerged as part of the identity of the protestors was ‘prefigurative in that what it “stood for” was the virtue of encampment itself, assembly as a way of life, a form of being’ (Gitlin, 2013: 9). This renewed sense of being and thinking is relevant in how it allows a reframing of the idea of community and solidarity for participants. In their work on the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, Acar and Uluğ argue that ‘burgeoning solidarity between disadvantaged groups in a collective action setting’ has been shown to lead to prejudice reduction, both during and after the protests (Acar and Uluğ, 2016: 167).

We see significant evidence of such transformative social relations at Shaheen Bagh, including the Republic Day celebration cited above. The community kitchen run by volunteers through the supplies donated by visitors was an undertaking of radical experimentation. There was an uninhibited inter-mixing of people of all gender, religious, caste, and class backgrounds in the preparation, distribution, and consumption of food at the protest. This is in stark contrast to the segregationist outlook that many Indians hold towards food. According to a Pew Research Center survey, 51% of Hindus say ‘they would *never* eat food in the home of someone whose religion has different rules about food than theirs’ (Pew Research Center, 2021). Thus, gastronomical choices have long served as a barrier within social relations in India and have been used to exclude groups like Muslims or Dalits that have low rates of vegetarianism.

While the targeting of Muslims on suspicions of eating beef was outlined above, Dalits in India have also been attacked by upper-caste groups through the practice of ‘untouchability’ that persists despite being outlawed by the Indian constitution. Under the logic of casteism, the mere presence or touch of a Dalit is seen as polluting by the upper castes. There have been numerous instances of Dalit cooks in public schools being sacked after upper-caste students refuse to eat food prepared by them. In stark contrast to this, Sikhs are renowned for the practice of *langar*, i.e., free community dining at *gurdwaras* (Sikh places of worship) for people from all backgrounds. The community kitchen at Shaheen Bagh, run by Sikh farmers and volunteers, embraced the principle of *langar* and offered food to all the protestors with an empathic disregard for caste and religious norms that regulate inter-dining. In making religion and caste identities redundant, the protestors came together in a clear repudiation of regressive practices that dominate social life in India.

In addition to the community kitchen and the ‘alternative’ Republic Day celebrations, there were other efforts at building and reforming social relations at the protest. The social media handles of Shaheen Bagh posted consistently about issues that went beyond the concerns of the protest site or the CAA-NRC legislations. On 7 January 2020, they posted in solidarity with the students at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) when right-wing mobs attacked the campus and injured multiple students (@ShaheenBaghOfficial, 2020). This solidarity was not transient or one-sided and was reciprocated by other groups. The JNU Students Union called upon students to mobilise in support of the protestors after a shooting incident in February 2020, which created a climate of insecurity at the protest site. Sikh farmers travelled in large numbers from the state of Punjab to join the protestors and volunteered at the community kitchen. Women’s organisations such as the student led *Pinjra Tod* (Break the Cage) helped organise similar sit-ins in other areas of Delhi by offering organisational support and coordinating resources. It is relevant to note that the state was cognisant of this emergent solidarity and punished the participants heavily. Umar Khalid, Sharjeel Imam, Devangana Kalita and Natasha Narwal, all students from JNU were among the many arrested and jailed under the draconian UAPA over unsubstantiated claims of inciting violence and sedition. A number of these students and activists, primarily Muslims, continue to remain in jail without trial.

Protest as Pedagogy

One of the ways in which prefigurative political formations engage with local communities is through the notion of ‘social centres’ understood as ‘practical movement projects organized by social and cultural movements’ for the purpose of ‘political, educational and leisure activities’ (Yates, 2014: 5). According to Yates, these practices within social centers ‘demonstrate how the testing, expression, and prefiguration of political meaning takes place in the

course of everyday life' (Yates, 2015: 238). This can involve 'the sharing of associated knowledge and competence among participants relating to the pursuit of social change' and enabling 'quotidian socializing that take place in and around social centers' to help manifest and solidify group networks (Yates, 2015: 238). These practices are defined as 'alternative' because they might not be directly linked to a protest's goal and are instead geared towards developing processes of future political conduct and being.

The Fatima Sheikh Savitri Bai Phule library that emerged at Shaheen Bagh was one such social centre at the protest. Mohammad Asif, an AMU student, started the library to create a constructive space for local people, particularly Muslim women, at the protest site to read literature, engage critically with political ideas, and raise questions. The library was based out of a bus stand and was named after two revolutionary women. Savitribai Phule and Fatima Sheikh were social reformers who advocated for women's education and pioneered the movement for girls' education in mid-19th century India. The library founders emphasised the vital contribution of these women to the field of education and characterized the library as 'a form of resistance' that drew on their legacy to represent 'the idea of free education, the idea of being rational, the idea to question the establishment' (Fatima Sheikh - Savitribai Phule Library, 2020). The celebration of the historically overlooked legacy of Fatima Sheikh was a gesture that communicated an effort to historicise acts of resistance by Muslim women. The politically conscious choice of naming the library was followed by the decision to inaugurate the library on 17 January 2020 to commemorate the fourth death anniversary of Dalit scholar Rohit Vemula. By invoking this subaltern heritage of resistance, the protest communicated its belief in reinforcing social ties among the most marginalised social groups in India.

The library housed several books and pamphlets on authoritarianism, the constitution, the Indian freedom struggle, democracy, feminism, religion, Dalit, and queer literature, among other things. The diverse range of topics is indicative of the kind of diverse political exposure and social justice awareness that the organisers were trying to raise among the people of Shaheen Bagh. This was reflected in the organisation of the library as a free and accessible space for all protestors and visitors to the protest site. They also asked for donations of specific titles in Hindi and Urdu to ensure that these political ideologies and historical accounts could be accessible to the non-English-speaking locals. The success of the adult library in Shaheen Bagh also led to the construction of a children's library and gallery named 'Read for Revolution' by some students from JMI.

In this sense, the library at Shaheen Bagh endorsed Ambedkar's dictum of 'Educate. Agitate. Organize' and highlighted the importance of developing critical faculties. Beyond the pluralistic and inclusive ideas of education, rights, and identity that the library sought to propagate, it also symbolised resistance and solidarity with the students of Jamia. The police attack on JMI involved a shocking incident where riot-gear police entered the university's library and brutally beat up students with batons. As a result, the university was shut down for an indefinite period, leaving students without any accessible spaces to study. Thus, the library also served as a tool for reclaiming lost spaces and recreating centers of learning that had been seized from the students.

The library at Shaheen Bagh subtly linked education to resistance by carving out a physical sphere of knowledge within the protest site. The appropriation of space to build a utopian world of uninhibited exchange of ideas, free expression, and revolutionary philosophy within the library space was an important endeavour that communicated an alternative and idealistic vision. It is important to note that Muslims have historically had the lowest literacy rate among any religious community in India, in large part due to their socio-economic marginalization (Sinha and Chowdhury, 2016). As a result, the library was a small effort to address this relative deprivation by emerging as a community space for learning and making education accessible. Along with giving people a space to read, the library regularly hosted movie screenings, recitals of protest poetry, political discussions, and lectures.

Various political leaders, university professors, filmmakers, journalists, and other intellectual figures were invited to the library. This was unprecedented considering that most intellectual activities and public discussions in Delhi occur in either the university spaces or premier cultural institutions located in the wealthy neighbourhoods of Central Delhi. While technically open to all, these institutions act as intellectual gatekeepers accessible only to those with socio-cultural capital. In this context, it is essential to underscore that the library disfigured these hegemonic spaces of knowledge and power by enabling people across gender, age, and differing social statuses to learn, interact and engage with each other. In doing so, the library served a unique pedagogical function within the protest and fulfilled its role as a 'social centre.'

CONCLUSION: SHAHEEN BAGH BEYOND SHAHEEN BAGH

While studying Shaheen Bagh as a prefigurative political formation with its stress on alternative world building allows us to move past 'means and end' dichotomies, and instrumentalist frameworks, it still requires us to ask: how is Shaheen Bagh memorialised and remembered by the protestors? What are the ways in which Shaheen Bagh and its emancipatory potential underpin the contemporary political landscape in India?



Figure 4. An outline of the Indian map with the words, ‘We the people of India reject the CAA, NPR, and NRC’. Photo by author.

One way we can assess this is by looking at how Shaheen Bagh and its ‘protest culture’ became a catalyst for other protests. As detailed above, the protest at Shaheen Bagh inspired Muslim women all over India to come out and protest with sit-ins in all parts of the country. In November 2020, after months of protest against a string of new legislation, farmers primarily from Haryana and Punjab decided to march to New Delhi to pressure the central government. The farmers were stopped at the Delhi-Haryana border, where they then proceeded to camp in protest by occupying the highway in a demonstration that lasted for over a year. The farmers established camps on the occupied highway with tents to sleep in, daily *langar*, CCTV cameras, a medical centre, a temple, and a library. Speaking on the widespread presence of women in the farmer’s protests, one protesting farmer said, ‘the historical protests at Shaheen Bagh gave us the inspiration and courage to protest,’ while another added that ‘the women at Shaheen Bagh didn’t end their protest until the government used the threat of coronavirus, we will also not go back until the laws are repealed’ (*The Wire*, 2020). When the government repealed the laws after the protest, Nuzhat, a participant in the anti-CAA protests, said, ‘I view it as our victory’ and added, ‘I am overjoyed, and my bravery has grown as a result of their resistance’ (Raj and Singh, 2021).

These statements and incidents reflect the impact of Shaheen Bagh in marking the first instance of mass protest against the BJP government and its emergence as a seminal event in the history of women’s political participation in India. Speaking on the second anniversary of the protests, Shubhasini Ali, president of the All India Democratic Women’s Association, said the women protestors of Shaheen Bagh ‘no longer cared to obey the men at their homes or outside, and came on the road in thousands to join the movement because it was a question of their children’s fate and about the nation’ (Basu, 2021).

The ‘politicising’ effect of participation in these protests on Muslim women was also significant. Speaking on the impact of the protest on her everyday life, Zeba, a participant at the sit-in inspired by Shaheen Bagh in Uttar Pradesh, said, ‘We never imagined we’d be fighting a cop in the middle of the night. We now understand our strengths and weaknesses, and we know who we are.’ She adds, ‘I merely noticed the injustices that were occurring throughout the world, but now I don’t just see them; I ask why they are occurring and why they should not’ (Raj and Singh, 2021). Nuzhat, another participant, reflected on the movement’s future when she said, ‘If they implement NPR, NRC, and CAA, we will fight back. We may lose our lives, but we will not sit on the sidelines’ (Raj and Singh, 2021).

These sentiments reflect the transcendental nature of the Shaheen Bagh protests and their enduring impact on the political imagination of the participants. In his analysis of the protest, Irfan Ahmad echoes this belief and calls the protest ‘an interrupted future’ and believes that the protests are not over and sees them as having laid the groundwork for ‘something to come: that which is the horizon of the future’ (Ahmad, 2021). This future and its divergent possibilities were starkly visible at Shaheen Bagh. On the one hand was a mock layout of a detention centre, the kind that the Indian government has started building to house those found without proper citizenship documents under the NRC. The replica was a reminder of the political future that Muslims in India have been forced to confront in the face of rising Hindu majoritarianism. On the other hand, was a model of the India Gate located in Central Delhi. This model was a memorial dedicated to all of those who had lost their lives during the anti-CAA protests. Those lives were lost in resistance to the dystopia of tomorrow for Muslims and other minorities in India. In commemorating those lives, Shaheen Bagh reinforced the call made symbolic by the protest anthem written by Aamir Aziz, ‘*Sab yaad rakha jaayega* (We shall remember everything).’ Thus, Shaheen Bagh and its celebration of democracy and its fraternal ideals, reaffirmation of secular principles with their promise of coexistence, and emergent solidarities, held within it hope. It showed that popular resistance retains the power to oppose the erosion of India’s democracy and institutional collapse in the face of Hindu majoritarianism.

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