

TIF - 'We are the True Inheritors of the Nationalist Legacy!'

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May 1, 2020



An art installation of paper boats with the text of the poem 'Hum Dekhenge' at a protest site in Shaheen Bagh
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Shaheen Bagh, like other sites of protest against the CAA and NRC, was more a consciousness than a mere physical space. The protesters' ways of imagining religion and nationalism to meet progressive ends offer lessons for a new politics.

For over four months, Indian Muslims, flanked by non-Muslim allies, had been sitting on streets across the country, most spectacularly in Delhi's Shaheen Bagh. They sat through record-breaking cold waves, brutal police crackdowns, and one of the worst riots in recent memory, protesting against a law that could ultimately strip them of their citizenship. It took a global pandemic to finally uproot them. When the government cleared Shaheen Bagh, the very first thing they did was erase its murals and graffiti. The spectacle of the State painting over artwork in the midst of a pandemic might have otherwise seemed bizarre. It made perfect sense here. Shaheen Bagh, like other protest sites, was less a physical space and more a consciousness. It was that consciousness that needed to be stamped out.

What exactly was that consciousness that animated a flood of revolutionary songs and slogans, and moved ordinary people into months of dogged political action. What did it achieve?

Exorcising Partition's Spectres

These protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC) represented the most forceful attempt yet by Indian Muslims to shake off the guilt of Partition and exorcise the spectre of Pakistan. The message was simple: 'we will define our own Indian-ness, on our own terms, and in our own language, and we refuse to be held hostage to any expectations in this regard'.

Ever since Partition, Muslims have always carried the stigma of that 'original sin'. Even under supposedly secular regimes, the ghost of Pakistan haunted Indian Muslims.

The immediate trigger for these protests was the passage of the CAA, which combined with the NRC, conjured up dark fears of loss of citizenship and internment in detention camps. But that would be a shallow reading of the meaning of the protests. It was an accumulation of perceived wrongs and an existential dread that spilled over into the streets.

This was, fundamentally, a protest against the last five years of complete powerlessness under the Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government. The protests took everyone by surprise because Indian Muslims are not given to organised protest. The broad view was that Muslims had resigned themselves to their fate, and exited the political system. The eerie silence of the community—on everything from the Babri Masjid judgement to the triple talaq law to the spate of lynchings—was interpreted as submission to the new order. Even otherwise, barring a few regional parties, Muslims have not in the past even organised themselves politically.

The reasons are simple. Ever since Partition, Muslims have always carried the stigma of that 'original sin'. In the nationalist imagination, any Muslim movement carries within the same seeds of separatism that had partitioned the country. This suspicion was baked into Indian nationalism right from the outset, with Muslims symbolising the anxieties and insecurities of Indian nationalism. Even under supposedly secular regimes, the ghost of Pakistan haunted Indian Muslims.

The way these protests built up solidarities between Muslims and non-Muslims, organically from the bottom up, was remarkable. It also spoke to the shared understanding that attempts to subvert the Constitution threaten all of us. It was also down to the extraordinary political imagination of these protests that it made everyone feel it was their own movement.

These protests were borne out of desperation, but ended up becoming a symbol of hope—that democratic, secular India can still be salvaged. But it was not just some woozy hope of naïve idealists. The protests embodied a clear headed, effective politics that can provide a few timely lessons for oppositional politics, as I will explain later in this piece.

A New Muslim Consciousness

In the Nehruvian era, Muslims overwhelmingly backed the Congress. The Indira era frayed this 'special relationship,' through a steady erosion in Congress' commitment to minorities, including the excesses of the Emergency. The deeply regressive Shah Bano protests had the conservative religious leadership assert its primacy in the community, at a time when Muslims were moving away from the Congress. After the Babri Masjid was demolished, many Muslims deserted the Congress in favour of regional parties, particularly in UP and Bihar.

Through all these changes, Muslims held on to a degree of political power. They were grossly underrepresented

in the civil services, the police, and the army, but found reasonable representation in elected assemblies. That representation has now plummeted to historical lows. Parliament has just 5% of Muslim MPs, down from 9% in 1980. In Uttar Pradesh, home to more Muslims than any other state, only 25 Muslims were elected to the 404-member-strong legislative assembly in 2017, the lowest in 25 years. In many parts of India, the votes of Muslims have lost their value. The BJP does not even ask for Muslim votes.

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It is this political disempowerment that set the stage for the new Muslim upsurge. Without any leadership, tens of thousands of Muslims, cutting across divides of language and class, thronged the streets to protest their new second-class status. Like earlier protests during the Congress' rule, these were also a response to new political realities, but were entirely unprecedented in philosophy, method, aesthetics, and language.

This was in part down to a self-conscious effort to make these protests different from the Shah Bano agitation. The lasting damage caused by that agitation in fuelling Hindutva seems to have seeped into the collective understanding of Muslims. In place of the extra-constitutional tenor of the Shah Bano agitation, where the sharia was invoked as above the Constitution, the anti-CAA protests had the Constitution as the central motif and the ultimate objective. The traditional Muslim leadership of clerics was made almost irrelevant.

Perhaps most dramatically, the bearded men on the centre stage had to give way to hijab-clad women. It was deliciously fitting that Muslim women were to lead this charge against Hindu majoritarianism. These same Muslim women, painted as passive and helpless, were long used by the BJP as a convenient rhetorical crutch to malign the community. The BJP's objective in doing so was twofold. One, in the guise of gender justice, it provided a politically sanitised way of projecting notions of backwardness and 'medieval'-ness on Muslims. Two, in exclusively highlighting the victimhood and oppression of Muslim women and by portraying Muslim men as fundamentalist aggressors, the BJP's rhetoric sought to obscure the oppression of the community as a whole. The protests might have finally consigned this deviously hollow trope of 'victim Muslim women' and 'Hindu saviours' to the dustbin of history. Muslim women showed that marginalised communities do not need the patronising gestures of saviours, just spaces to make their voices heard. Once that space was provided, the voices of 'voiceless' Muslim women reverberated around the country.

A Fresh Language of Resistance

Even more important than the discrediting of certain symbols and images was the reclaiming of others. The extravagant use of nationalist imagery and appropriation of national icons like Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Bhagat Singh was an unobvious way of saying—we are the true inheritors of the nationalist legacy, it's you who are the impostors! A truly remarkable feature of the protests was the unabashed flaunting of both nationalism and religiosity, the seamlessness with which both Indian and Muslim identities were interwoven and displayed. The protesters would chant "*la ilaha illallah*" and "*samvidhan zindabad, jai bhim*" in the same breath. That perpetual question which greets every Muslim—"are you a Muslim first or an Indian first?"—was dissolved into irrelevance. These protests constituted a powerful visual representation of what should have been an obvious truth—the two identities were always complementary and not implacably opposed to each other.

The lasting legacy of the anti-CAA protests might be its new ways of

This effusive use of nationalism often troubled left-wing supporters of the protest, much like the use of religious symbolism discomfited certain liberal supporters. In both these areas, the ordinary residents of mohallas seemed to display a more fertile intellectual imagination and savvier political acumen, than the Marx and Mill quoting metropolitan intelligentsia.

That might be the lasting legacy of the anti-CAA protests. At a time of increasing despondency, it not only gave us a method of resistance, but also a language of resistance. Akeel Bilgrami captured it beautifully when he wrote: "They (protesters) are fashioning through their struggles a theoretical framework that brings together practices and abstractions; and thereby instructing us into the habits and dispositions of democracy, which the Constitution's abstractly formulated laws and principles always had as their deeper underlying historical source."

Lessons for the Future

The immediate political impact of anti-CAA protests, in terms of party support and electoral outcomes, is negligible. This was always expected and is not a signifier of failure. I have had no cause to revise my earlier judgement that the majority of Indians stand with the government on the CAA. But it would be a grave error to view this movement through these narrow lenses.

The hegemony of the BJP can only be countered with a fresh political imagination. The old politics of secularism, Mandal, and (to an extent) regional identity have largely run their course. The Hindu right has adapted to them and society has evolved. At a time when the older politics of coalescing different identity groups with patronage, without any interweaving ideological framework, is being rendered irrelevant by the march of Hindutva, the lessons of the anti-CAA protests is timely. Though they have a limited social base, these protests constitute a lodestar that indicates how such a new political imagination might be constructed.

Specifically, the movement provided new ways of imagining religion and nationalism towards progressive ends. These are two fundamental concepts on which the BJP has established a firm ownership, and which constitute the essential sources of its political dominance. The ideological hegemony of the BJP has been built on decades of efforts of co-opting and refashioning these concepts in the pursuit of their majoritarian purposes. This hegemony will not be reversed soon. A serious political challenge will have to be built on a long-drawn ideological challenge, not fleeting political calculations.

There are lessons here for the parties borne out of the Mandal agitation and the older Dalit parties, once a powerful antidote to Hindutva. Coalitions based purely on narrow appeals to identity will progressively become unviable. India has evolved beyond the 1980s and 1990s. So must the politics to take on the BJP, which is no longer just a Brahmin-Bania party. The BJP now a modern party based on cross-cutting ideals of hawkish nationalism and a certain discourse of development, whose politics galvanises people to rise beyond their immediate identity of caste and region. The opposition parties need a new imagination to articulate the ideals of social justice.

The protests will remain a powerful antidote to defeatism and fatalism. What started with a few Muslims coming out ended up in several states disowning the CAA and the NRC.

Where do we go from here? The struggle for the constitutional rights of Muslims is likely to go on for the foreseeable future, in one form or another, so long as the Hindu right is in power. The only other alternative is acceptance of their second-class status, since there is little possibility of rapprochement with Hindutva. The Hindu right has shown an extraordinary capacity to adapt to the demands of lower caste groups, women, and the poor, and has dramatically expanded its social base. However, the political project of Hindutva necessitates the constitution and reinforcement of the Muslim 'other'. This is a daily process, in television studios, on social media, in public spectacles such as lynchings, and around events like the detection of a number of cases of Covid-19 in a Tablighi Jamaat congregation in the capital in March. Unlike other marginalised social groups, there is no prospect for Muslims to work out a grand bargain with the new social order.

The anti-CAA protests will remain a powerful antidote to the paralysing allure of defeatism and fatalism. What started with a few Muslims coming out in their mohallas ended up in several state governments officially disowning the CAA and the NRC. This was purely the power of resolve of a committed section of people. The protests succeeded only partly in going beyond Muslims. So long as most ordinary Hindus remain influenced by the idea of majoritarian nationalism, the promise of the protests will only partially be realised and the Hindu right will be unassailable.

The Delhi pogrom in February was a stark reminder of the gruesome punishment that would be visited on acts of resistance. It was also a demonstration of the extent of radicalisation among the majority community, and brought home the hard reality that Muslims alone can do little to alter the broader trajectory of India. The continuing demonisation of Muslims as being responsible for the spread of the coronavirus only reinforces this reality.

The politically committed Hindus who participated in these protests must now take the message of Shaheen Bagh to their own spaces, to their housing colonies, offices, and families. There is still a chance to take forward the anti-CAA protests and salvage our democratic freedoms and guarantees.

For that to happen, the protests must recruit ordinary Hindus in the fight for our collective future. The next Shaheen Baghs, Bilal Baghs, and Ghanta Ghars must happen in Hindu localities.

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