

Kisi Ke Baap Ka Hindustan Thodi Hai: Citizenship Amendment Act Protests, Hashtag Publics and
the Enlargement of the Public Space

The oppositional protests against the Citizenship Amendment Bill burst into international consciousness mainly mediated by urgent digital publics on platforms like Twitter on 12th December following police brutality within two historically Muslim university campuses in North India. As campuses throughout the country along with other public gatherings organised local protests in solidarity with students of Jamia Millia Islamia and Aligarh Muslim University, video recordings and photos of police inflicting violence on students were key in the trending of hashtags #AMUagainstCAB, #JamiaagainstCAB, #CABProtests and #CAB2019. The controversy around the Citizenship Amendment Act was therefore linked from its beginning on Twitter with images of student bodies victimised by the Indian State. My main argument in this article is that the affects of rage (#RageResistReject) arising from these online engagements not only marked a key milestone in the enlargement of the existing Indian publics and displacement of boundaries between public and private, political and domestic, and a re-distribution of power between these spheres (Ranciere, 2014: 55). Here the mediatised urgency around bodily violence affectively propels the framing of the issue as structural and juridical violence (Clarke, 2017: 365). Themes of rage against minoritisation and marginalisation of certain issues leads to questioning of the ways in which neoliberal internationalism is continuous with violent quelling of dissent and protests by a nation-state like India.

They don't speak for us

The iconised photo of student Ayesha Renna confronting police beating up her male friend (#JamiaagainstCAB) read alongside the victimised bodies of police violence mobilised on social media challenges the Hobbesian narrative of violence of a protectionist state that the State forwards in its framing of the amendment of citizenship laws. The figure of this non-state actor protecting a fellow activist by issuing a challenge to the police is political as a symbol of public actors pushing back against a privatised and militarised State body which seeks to dominate public space and discourses through use of force. The slogans and posters saying 'Kisi ke baap ka Hindustan thodi hai'

(India does not belong to anybody's father) give words to this claim, challenging both the representational legitimacy of the State and its failure to accord equal citizenry to all its people. As the movement gained ground within India and abroad, the protests held outside the geopolitical borders of India, and co-ordinated over Facebook and Twitter, drew a comparison between peacefulness of campus gatherings elsewhere and those within BJP controlled states where police brutalities were witnessed and recorded. The right to peacefully gather in public to protest enshrined in the Indian Constitution was further linked to the internet bans, metro closures, and arrest and detention of journalists and activists like Akhil Gogoi, as well as the clampdown of communications and movement in Kashmir, undertaken by the State. Whereas within Kashmir the slogan of *azaadi* originated as a demand for secession from the State, as the movement mobilised publics around atrocities in Uttar Pradesh and Delhi, the sentiment took on a different meaning, one where beaten down minorities pushed to the periphery of public life were reclaiming their voice as equal participants.

They won't speak for us

On 15th January 2020, British Sociological Association tweeted a statement condemning the Indian government's silence about the incidents of police brutality in two Muslim universities in North India. When a sociologist questioned the statement by the UK-based body as a colonial act of interfering in international politics, Mirna Guha pointed out that the statement was a result of campaigning from South Asian academics in solidarity with their colleagues within Indian universities and campuses. Indian diasporic as well as scholars with an interest in South Asian geopolitics and history therefore not only utilised the hashtag to spread awareness, build networks of support and educate others, they also capitalised on the occasion to challenge academia's neoliberal investments in multiculturalism and their discipline's complicity with the violences of an authoritarian state (Gupta, 2019). In calling for international solidarity these scholars centre their expertise on a particular local context while calling out academia's privatisation of education and its departure from the public domain. The claims of the sector to be global centres of knowledge then is shown to not only be hollow, as its academics are revealed as domesticised as wage-earners operating within a global capitalist market dominated by

private interests of the wealthy, but also complicit in the violences against minorities meted out by these state.

They must speak to us

There was a distinct divide initially between what the women-spokespersons at Shaheen Bagh, a protest site in Delhi which inspired many others across the country, said about the goals of the protests and that of various newspaper and other commentators. Whereas the latter would have liked opposition parties to step in and support the protests, the former focused their demands on the withdrawal of the CAA-NRC laws. This demand was expressed in two key ways: first, the women wanted Modi-Shah to hold direct talks with them and reassure them; second, the women also issued strong warnings to the ruling party that if they are ignored they would unseat Modi-Shah. The women-spokespersons have never been quoted as saying anything at all about AAP, Congress, or other political parties, and although some workers rights organisations and Dalit leaders have spoken at the platform at Shaheen Bagh, there is no presence of other political representatives. A relative subversion of the branded logic of activism is obvious when following the hashtag #ShaheenBagh on Twitter, as certain identities which had provincialized and particularized people's experiences, as Hindus, upper caste, experts or professionals, are de-prioritised in relation to the collective act of coming together and being welcomed as an equal *l'homme publique* within a make-shift public space where democracy beyond representative politics is being put into action.

At Shaheen Bagh, representation itself is being put up for questioning in terms of its relationship to democratic actions and demands (Ranciere, 2014). For the Indian elite and intelligentsia, many of whom are on Twitter, this movement marks a shift in their role as translators and transmitters of knowledge about the Indian working class and the poor to global publics. They are no longer called upon to speak for marginalised voices; instead marginalization of voices is seen to be a result of the oligopoly of private interests within the public sphere under the shroud of 'representative politics' which prevents full participation of all members within the body politic. Digital protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act paves the way for an effective way in which middle class urban and

diasporic citizens can be instrumental in subverting the privatizing logic of these platforms in order to enlarge the space in which international solidarity around public rage against an authoritarian neoliberal national regime can be mobilized.

References:

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