Article

Feminists against Fascism: The Indian Female Muslim Protest in India

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Abstract: This article explores contestations around ideas of India, citizenship, and nation from the perspective of Indian Muslim female university students in Delhi. In December 2019, the Hindu majoritarian government introduced new citizenship legislation. It caused widespread distress over its adverse implications for Muslims and a large section of socio-economically deprived populations. In response, millions of people, mainly from Dalit, Adivasi, and Bahujan backgrounds, took to the streets to protest. Unprecedentedly, young Muslim female students and women emerged at the forefront of the significant public debate. This situation disrupted the mainstream perception of oppressed Muslim women lacking public voice and agency. Drawing on the narratives of the Indian Muslim female students who participated in these protests, this article highlights their conceptions of, and negotiations with, the idea of India. In doing so, this article reflects on the significance of critical feminist protest as a form of "public pedagogy" for citizenship education as a powerful antidote to a supremacist, hypermasculine, and vigilante idea of India.

Keywords: citizenship in India; anti-CAA protests; Muslim women; public pedagogy; Hindutva

1. Introduction

In recent years, universities have seen a global surge in student activism [1]. Apple and Buras [2] p.n.d. note that they are sites where various forms of power operate and "in which subaltern groups act to reassert their own perceived identities, cultures and histories". Likewise, when four young female students of Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi courageously stood up to the policemen to protect a Muslim male student, they not only disrupted the mainstream perception of subaltern Muslim women who lack public voice and agency, they also asserted alternative ideas of the nation, democracy, and citizenship. The feminist "public pedagogy" of protest led by Muslim female students and women offered a powerful rebuttal to the "vigilante citizenship" advanced by the current ruling party. In doing so, they modelled what an anti-oppressive public citizenship education looked like, against the backdrop of rising hyper-nationalism. To make sense of this overarching argument, I will first explain the wider context.

In recent times, many parts of the world have seen a surge in a particular version of far-right nationalism. Stanley, in "How Fascism Works" [3], observes that there is a standard technique by which democracy is undermined and xenophobic discourse is advanced, in which hatred, apathy, and violence become normalised. It dehumanises particular social groups, leading to their brutal treatment from the restraining of freedom, and mass incarceration, to eviction. In extreme situations, it can lead to genocide. According to him, the list of these countries includes India along with Russia, Turkey, Poland, Hungary, and the United States.

In a similar vein, the Hindutva ideology is being normalised in India. Patnaik [4] describes the Hindutva ideology as fascist in its ideology, class support, methods, and program (p. 70). It borrows from, fascist notions of ethnic cleansing in Western, industrialized contexts. It aligns with the racist "alt-right" movements and political campaigns of "Hindus for Trump" [5]. Since the 1980s, the Hindutva ideology has reared its ugly head with the

Bhartiya Janata Party's (BJP) arrival in the context of neoliberal globalization. It privileges the politics based on religious and caste-based supremacy over the constitutional ethics of equality and justice. Moreover, the Hindutva ideology is deeply Islamophobic. (There is a long history of elite efforts to polarize Hindu and Muslim populations in South Asia. It is important to note that the use of religion for polarization should not be interpreted as a clash between Hindus and Muslim populations, but a political manipulation to advance narrower imagination of the "self" of the nation. Though the religion-based citizenship discourses are deployed distinctly in the postcolonial period, it is crucial to recognize the colonial politics and legacies of religion. Bhagat [6] (p. 435) notes that the 1872 census that asked people to classify themselves according to their religion played a huge role in "raising Hindu-Muslim consciousness and their relationship in a new form in both colonial and postcolonial India." The resulting demographic data made religion central to political claim-making. It is in this context, the "Two-Nation" theory was invented and naturalized by the British Empire to project Muslims and Hindus as two distinct and mutually antagonistic nations [7]. Religion was made a hegemonic paradigm through which a minority of powerful, and mainly British-educated, nationalists claimed that Hindus and Muslims deserved their own autonomous political status [7,8]. The polarizing discourses have led to severe consequences including the partition of India and Pakistan, genocide, and mass displacement [8]. In postcolonial India, people on both sides have suffered at least three wars and numerous military skirmishes. The Kashmir issue continues to incite strong violence on both sides, affecting fate of over 15 million people of Kashmir. The right-wing nationalist elites of both countries have continued to manipulate history and education to serve their agendas, endangering ordinary Hindu and Muslim minorities on either side. Since the 1980s, the BJP has accentuated the use of religion in politics. It suits the goal of, as Lall [9] and Kamat [10] note, transferring anxieties of ordinary people emerging from neoliberal globalisation to entrench power and legitimacy). It learns from anti-Muslim narratives promoted in the West, China, and Israel [11–13]. The BJP has also used the post-9/11 securitization of Muslim identities to establish its backing in the USA [14]. It also has ties with Islamophobic alt-right movements in the West [5].

When it returned to power with a majority in 2019, the BJP initiated even more aggressive anti-Muslim policies [15]. In December 2019, it passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which claimed to give citizenship to persecuted religious minorities from India's neighboring countries. It mentions Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, and Parsees, and notably excludes Muslims. Under the act, for the first time in India, religion becomes a basis for granting citizenship. In conjunction with a nationwide citizenship verification process through the proposed National Population Register (NPR) and National Register of Citizens (NRC), aimed at identifying "illegal migrants," the CAA enables only non-Muslims to regain lost citizenship [16]. Women, poor, and marginalized communities are also likely to be disproportionately affected due to a lack of access to documentation [17].

Inevitably, the legislation caused widespread anxiety over the adverse implications for religious minorities, socio-economically deprived populations, women, the secular vision of India, and social cohesion [16,18,19]. The law is deemed "fundamentally discriminatory" by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [17] (p. 28). The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has expressed "a risk of statelessness" for India's minorities [17] (p. 4).

In response, massive protests erupted across the country. Thousands of students took to the streets, campuses, and neighborhoods to dissent. The legislation was met with widespread opposition across India. The anti-CAA-NRC agitations took their most recognised shape as peaceful daily mass sit-in protests, roughly in the period from November 2019 to late March 2020, when the COVID-19 lockdown brought the demonstrations to an abrupt halt. In an extraordinary turn of events, Muslim women and young female students rose as the unlikely "sheroes" who led the most sustained, civil-society mobilization in utter defiance of brutal state, police, and Hindutva violence.

It is crucial to situate the dynamics of student protests in the broader framework of Indian polity. In recent years, India has witnessed a dramatic upsurge in student protests influencing the wider debate on questions of democracy in the age of neoliberalism [20]. In 2014, *Hokkolorob*—a new movement—emerged in Kolkata's Jadavpur university, questioning the power system that sustained violence across the university space [21]. The Dalit student leader Rohith Vermula's "institutional murder" in 2015 in Hyderabad University sparked massive student unrest [22,23]. In 2016, the arrest of Kanhaiya Kumar, a PhD scholar and student leader from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, snowballed into major student agitation. Mazumdar [24] notes that these protests have emerged because of neoliberal transformations in the Indian education sector. In this broader context, besides questions of citizenship, identity, and constitutional values, the anti-CAA-NRC-NPR student protests also embraced the whole gamut of student issues around issues of equity and social justice [25].

It is also necessary to see student protests in the global context. Chaudhury and Vally's [1] critical edited volume, written by students and staff members who are at the forefront of struggles in a dozen diverse countries, including Canada, Chile, France, India, Mexico, Nigeria, Occupied Palestine, the Philippines, South Africa, Turkey, the UK, and the USA, shows that higher education campuses worldwide have become intense sites of struggle. Student and staff protests are agitating for decommodification of education, democratisation, and the decolonisation of education. Their protests are also offering radical alternative possibilities for a fairer world.

It is against this wider global and local Indian context that the article explores the tug-of-war between two ideas of India: one that was negotiated in the streets, led by mainly Muslim female and students; and the other advanced by the Hindutva-BJP elites. In doing so, the article makes three key contributions to the current scholarship on citizenship in India. First, it illustrates how subaltern consciousness and resistance responds to vexing questions of gender, state, religion, identity, and citizenship in today's India. Second, it reflects on contestations around ideas of India, citizenship, and nation in an era of rising right-wing authoritarianism. Finally, it interrogates how a feminist "public pedagogy" of dissent offers possibilities for re-imagining anti-oppressive public citizenship education. The article also reflects on its implications for higher education in promoting or resisting government agendas and notions of citizenship.

This article has three main sections: first, I explain the "vigilante" idea of citizenship advanced by the BJP-Hindutva forces. Next, I show the main theoretical framework and research methodology employed in this study. The final section offers an integrated treatment of findings and discussion. I conclude with how female-led student protests can contribute to anti-oppressive citizenship education in an era of rising right-wing authoritarianism, and reflect on its implications for higher education.

2. The Vigilante Idea of India

This section explains the "vigilante" idea of citizenship championed by the BJP-Hindutva forces. The "Hindutva" political creed believes in Hindu supremacy [26]. First articulated by Savarkar in 1922 [27], and inspired by Hitler and Mussolini, it hopes to consolidate the Indian population under a homogenized category of "Hindus". It calls for actual violence against Muslims and other minority groups, along the lines that the Jews (and the Romas, sexual minorities, mixed-marriage couples, dissenters, and human rights activists) suffered [4]. M. S. Golwalkar, the second president of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological parent to Modi's party, wrote in We or Nationhood Defined [28] (p. 105):

> *The non-Hindu peoples in Hindusthan ... entertain no idea but those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture ... in other words they must cease to be foreigners, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less preferential treatment—not even citizen's rights.*

This ideology was banned after Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindutva sympathizer in 1948. The idea of India determined at independence by the architect of the Indian Constitution, Bhimrao Ambedkar and the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, imagined an inclusive and secular nation-state that did not discriminate between citizens on religious or ethnic bases [29].

Since the 1980s, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) has made the Muslim identity hyper-visible through anti-Muslim media and political discourses [30]. When it returned to power with a majority in 2019, the BJP initiated even more aggressive anti-Muslim policies [15]. First, it stripped India's only Muslim-majority state, Jammu and Kashmir, of its status as a semi-autonomous region in August 2019 [31]. Next, in December 2019, it passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Under the act, for the first time in India, religion became a basis for granting citizenship—however, it excludes Muslims. In conjunction with a nationwide citizenship verification process through the proposed National Population Register (NPR) and National Register of Citizens (NRC), aimed at identifying "illegal migrants," the CAA has led to the fear of millions of Indian Muslims being potentially stripped of their citizenship rights. Women, poor, and marginalized communities are also likely to be disproportionately affected due to a lack of access to documentation [17].

The BJP-Hindutva elites use a combination of hate speech, and social and mass media to produce "vigilante citizenship," meaning public sensibilities that inflict "unimaginable violence against Muslims, Christians, Dalits and working-class/lower caste Hindus" [30], (p. 333). In this vigilante paradigm, dissent is viewed as "anti-national", and violating those who dissent against the government or its policies is viewed as patriotism [30] (p. 334). Justifications are sought through a sense of perceived historical suffering and victimization of this Hindu majority, allegedly by a homogeneous Muslim minority. The Hindutva's "banal nationalism" also appears in the constant signaling of the Hindutva-centric discourses in the media through a particular use of language. It upholds the moral and cultural superiority of the Hindus over Muslims, Christians, Dalits, Adivasis, Sikhs, and other minorities; reframes history to portray the "Hindu-victim/Muslim-aggressor"; and denounces peace and diversity as threats to the "pure" Hindu nation.

The rewriting of history under the BJP agenda has also branded Muslims as "foreign invaders" and "outsiders" who have pillaged the nation and blocked its advance [9,32–34]. Educational textbooks misrepresent Muslims, and disavow casteism in India [35]. The BJP uses religion to maintain political control, cultural majoritarianism, and caste hierarchy [36]. The "banal nationalism" of the BJP-Hindutva also operates through measures such as renaming streets with Hindutva symbols, revising history textbooks, and issuing other controversial legislation [36,37].

Furthermore, the BJP has actively tried to redirect the frustrations of socioeconomically underprivileged Hindus towards Muslims [14]. This situation exists even though the Sachar Committee Report [38] shows that Muslims, the majority of whom hail from "lower caste" backgrounds, suffer from higher socio-economic and political deprivations. Commentators note that representation of Muslims as the national "enemy" seeks to obscure the control of wealth at the hands of dominant caste elites, and legitimize the BJP's use of violence against Muslims for political gain [38]. Consequently, there are increasing cases of anti-Muslim physical violence, including mob-lynching, extra-judicial killing, racial profiling, and even massacres [17,39]. It has also facilitated pogroms in Gujrat in 2002, and in North-East Delhi in 2020 [39–42].

The new citizenship legislations are steps towards what Appadurai [43] calls a "statizens" approach to citizenship. One is a citizen based on the documents sanctioned by the state. One's ancestry, territorial belonging, or roots in the country lose legal recognition. Under the BJP-Hindutva ideology, the "statizen" model of citizenship means measuring up to the Hindu supremacist idea of citizenship.

It is against this broader context that I investigate how the idea of India that was negotiated on the streets, led by the Indian Muslim female students, counters the vigilante idea of citizenship promoted by chauvinist Hindutva-BJP elites.

3. Theoretical Framework

The term "public pedagogy" has been frequently deployed as a theoretical lens in educational research to study the process, politics, and practices of education beyond formal schooling [44]. Critical-feminist and critical theorists have increasingly utilized this theoretical construct, since the mid-1990s, to question discourses of citizenship beyond schools, hegemonic ideas in popular culture, dominant cultural discourses, and social activism [41]. In *Feminisms and Pedagogies of Everyday Life*, Luke [45] identified popular culture as a site of public pedagogy. They argued that gendered identities were constructed, reinforced, and resisted through a range of sites and practices that compose "everyday life". Giroux [46,47], drawing upon insights from Hall [48], Gramsci [49] and Freire [50], notes that popular culture is "a site of negotiation where hegemony is struggled for yet not always necessarily won". It can contribute to "a democratic politics that addresses the relations of power between youth and adults" [44] (p. 8).

Said [51], Gramsci [49], and Giroux [52] call upon academics to exercise their capacity to widen public understanding of social issues for the greater public good. On the other hand, others have highlighted communities as sites of knowledge. Hooks [53], Dittmar and Annas [54], and Dentith and Brady [55] have studied public pedagogies of communities and marginalized actors in engaging in informed activism, and bringing about social change. For the black feminist scholar, bell hooks [56] (p. 341), marginality is "more than a site of deprivation". It is "also a site of radical possibility, a site of resistance". Similarly, in "Learning activism" Chaudry [57] (p.n.d.) argues:

> *"Some of the most radical critiques, understandings, and theories about the world we live in, its power structures and dominant ideologies, and the fragility of the environment—and indeed the most powerful visions for social change—emerge from ordinary people coming together and working for such change."*

In this sense, public pedagogy is inevitably about political dissent which is educational. Students and ordinary members of the public discover their political agency through their experience of injustice, marginalization, and dialogue. In view of these scholarly-activist debates, listening to the knowledge produced by Muslim female students is valuable for this article. This is because, in bell hooks' words, "it offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine new alternatives, new worlds" [58] (p. 341).

4. Research Methodology

Since the voices of Indian Muslim female students and women are central to this study, I use a case study approach as a qualitative methodological base. I focus on the epicenter of Muslim female-led protests in Delhi: Jamia Milia Islamia (JMI) and its neighborhood, Shaheen Bagh. Together, Shaheen Bagh's Muslim women and Jamia's students went on to launch a powerful female-led anti-CAA/NRC resistance in India. Events in these two sites galvanized thousands of students and academics from across India and abroad to protest in solidarity. I distinguish the category of "students" and "women" because women, in this case, are housewives and professional women, and distinct from the female students who are included under the "student" label. It is not possible to offer proportions of protesters along the gendered spectrum as such a data does not exist.

Jamia is considered as one of the highly prestigious and progressive institutions of education in India. In Arabic/Urdu, *jamia* means "university", and *millia* stands for "national". Headed by a female chancellor and vice chancellor from Indian Muslim backgrounds, JMI offers courses from nursery through to PhD, to students from diverse backgrounds and genders, and ranks among the best central universities in India. Many of its alumni, especially female, have achieved high-profile status in diverse fields. JMI is particularly renowned for anti-colonial student protests [25]. Concerned about the educational needs of Muslims, JMI was born in 1920. It was founded by a group of dissenting students and teachers from Aligarh Muslim University, in response to Gandhi's call for non-cooperation of educational institutions with the British administration [59].

Jamia's students were among the first to oppose the CAA in India. The state police and right-wing groups brutalized them using tear-gas, sticks, and stun guns. Horrific images of students being seriously injured went viral instantaneously. Hundreds of students from universities in Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, Ahmedabad, Varanasi, Mumbai, and several other cities erupted in protest against police brutality. Within days, over 10,000 academics, scholars, and students signed a petition to condemn the police violence against students [60]. Many of Jamia's female students and alumni emerged as the faces of protests, including Safoora Zargar, Ayesha Renna, Ishrat Jahan, Arfa Khanum, Barkha Datt, and Ladeeda Farzana.

JMI is intimately involved in the life of Shaheen Bagh, a mixed-income neighborhood in Jamia Nagar in Delhi. Many of its staff and students live in the area. It also runs many outreach programs within local communities. Hearing of the treatment of students, residents and parents, many of them mothers and grandmothers of Jamia's students, rushed to save them. Their agitation metamorphosed into the longest female-led civic movement in India's history [61,62].

At this point, it is vital to acknowledge my positionality. Santos' [63] metaphor of the "abyssal lines" offers a helpful lens to clarify where I stand in the geopolitical economy of knowledge production. I *speak with* the anti-oppressive feminist social movement from *the other side of the line*, as a fellow female-Muslim-anti-CAA protestor from India. I am a "subjective self" [15] in historical shifts occurring in India. The legislation entails potential harm also for my families and social networks for being Indian Muslims. I received several videos of violence occurring against students at JMI in real-time on 15 December 2019. Students studying at the UCL Institute of Education in London, where I teach, had forwarded these videos to me. Suddenly, my social media spaces exploded with heated debates and exchanges. I also began receiving a torrent of abuse and hate speech from old friends, ex-colleagues, and strangers. For some, I, overnight, went from being a childhood friend to a "Muslim", a suspect, and a "Pakistani". But I also forged new friendships with individuals located in India and the Indian diaspora, and came to appreciate India's contradictions at a much deeper level. Anxious, I also became part of anti-CAA demonstrations in London. I also organized and spoke at public events in solidarity. My approach, thus, bridges academia and activism [64].

I employed multiple sources of evidence to understand the experiences of Indian Muslim female students in their own terms going beyond my subjective self. I have been engaging with the developments happening in India via "digital publics" [15]. The ongoing online immersion from 13 December 2019 until 15 July 2021 via social media helped in garnering a richer understanding of events both in real-time and over a period of time. I also actively searched and collected data from social media sites, such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and public webinars, that included Muslim female voices from Shaheen Bagh and Jamia. I used a purposive sampling technique to identify Muslim female students who were prominent on social media during the movement. I was also a co-panelist with some of them in webinars on CAA-NRC. I reviewed the existing literature on the protest, and read the online blogs and newspapers that generated conversations around anti-CAA protests. I also kept a tab on political speeches made by BJP-affiliated politicians. In addition, I utilized two semi-structured interviews with female participants who had participated in Shaheen Bagh/JMI, collected for other research with due permissions (xx, et al. forthcoming). The language of data was a combination of Urdu, Hindi, and English. The interviews helped explore experiences directly from the protesters themselves. I have also used social commentaries by Muslim feminist intellectuals and nearly all publications so far produced on female Muslim participation in the protest.

Although my broader understanding is shaped by a more extensive engagement as explained above, this article uses the following sources of data (see Table 1). I have changed names due to the ethical concerns explained towards the end of this section.

Table 1. Demographic details of participants.

Sr No.	Name	Demographic Details	Study Details	Data Used in This Article	Additional Notes
1	Safoora Zargar	Student activist leader, from Kashmir, in her 20s	M. Phil student, also completed MA Sociology at JMI	Safoora's interview published on 20 January 2020 in Deccan Digest https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=il5we19Leig (accessed on 15 February 2020) Interview with JMI alumna Arfa Sherwani published on 7 March 2021 by online news outlet the Wire https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBfaH7FHKmA (accessed on 7 March 2021)	Safoora was arrested on charges of conspiracy to uproot the democratically-elected government and cause riots
2	Ayesha Renna	Student activist, from Kerala, in her 20s	BA history student at JMI	Ayesha's speech on 21 December 2019, published by One Channel on 22 December 2019 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGvhUmeCKyA (accessed on 31 December 2019) Ayesha's interview by famous journalist Barkha Datt, alumna of JMI, on 16 December 2019 https://www.scoopwhoop.com/news/meet-ayesha-renna-ladeeda-farzana-the-women-who-became-the-brave-faces-of-the-jamia-protests/ (accessed on 31 December 2019)	Ayesha shot to fame after the video of her defending a male student from police brutality at JMI went viral
3	Ladeeda Farzana	Student activist, from Kerala, in her 20s	BA 1st year Arabic language student	Ladeeda's speech on 4 February 2020 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iq-4kHMbh18 (accessed on 3 March 2020)	Ladeeda shot to fame after the video of her defending a male student from police brutality at JMI went viral
4	Nabiya Khan	Student activist, poetess from Delhi, in her 20s	History student	Talk on *The Criminalisation of Student Activism* delivered on 23 January 2021 at a public webinar organised by International Solidarity for Academic Freedom in India https://youtu.be/CcNqH-B74A8 (accessed on 28 February 2021) Nabiya's poem "Ayega Inquilab" (Revolution will come) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLjGC6T-Hj0 (accessed on 28 February 2021) Nabiya's poem "You are fire", dedicated to JMI's students at the National March organised by Women, queer and transgender communities, published on 17 June 2020 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6v2dPnX8z8&t=24s (accessed on 19 June 2020)	Nabiya's poem "Ayega Inquilab" went viral during the anti-CAA movement, and some of its verses became popular slogans at Shaheen Bagh
5	Sofia	Student activist from Delhi, in her 20s	BA student of media studies	Interviewed online for an hour in April 2021	Interviewed for other research; used with due permissions
6	Afsha	Student activist from Delhi, in her 20s	MA student of political science	Interviewed online for an hour in April 2021	Interviewed for other research; used with due permissions

The research question that orients this paper is: how do these female protestors navigate contestations around ideas of India, citizenship, and nation? I use a critical feminist approach to analyze data. I also use the term "protesters" in this research instead of "interviewees" where possible, to recognize their agency in the protests. I transcribed, coded, and thematically mapped the data using Boyatzis' [65] definition of code. This study cites the exclusion of the perspectives of pro-CAA-NRC students in India as a limitation of this article, and a vital area of further investigation.

The Indian government has used the pandemic to arrest anti-CAA and NRC protesters and students under allegations of sedition and terrorism [66]. Many of Jamia's and Shaheen Bagh's young people have been arrested under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. The government has also introduced extreme censorship and online surveillance, effectively turning India into an electoral autocracy [67] Given this situation of vulnerability, I have erased interviewee details from all devices, and have no way to re-trace them. The article uses pseudonyms, unless data already exists in the public domain. I also experience a sense of vulnerability and fear of reprisal as an engaged researcher, and seek solidarity in anti-oppressive social movements.

5. Findings and Discussion

The overarching proposition of this article is that the conceptions of nation and belonging which Indian Muslim women and students negotiated on the streets presented an alternative possibility to imagine a more intersectional, pluralistic, and transformative "idea of India". I explore this key argument through three interconnected themes that emerged from the data. First, I examine how female Muslim students negotiated hypermasculine "vigilante citizenship". Secondly, I interrogate how they practiced the public pedagogy of critical citizenship education in their interaction between higher-educational space and community. Finally, I interrogate their negotiations of nation, religion, and identity. Together, these themes speak to the significance of a feminist "public pedagogy" of citizenship education, as a powerful antidote to a supremacist, hypermasculine, and vigilante idea of India.

5.1. Confronting a Hypermasculine Vigilante Citizenship

"The most distinctive feature" of the anti-CAA protest was, as Nabiya, a poet and a history student, put it, was that it was overwhelmingly "a Muslim female-led" movement. It showed how to collectively subvert hypermasculine vigilante citizenship through the pedagogy of public protest.

The most emblematic image of this movement is the widely circulated illustration named "The One Finger Revolution" (Figure 1).

It is inspired by the incident of Jamia's female students shielding a male student from police brutality, and forcing their aggressors to retreat [68]. The hijab-wearing students standing up to the state and Hindutva violence came to define the entire national debate. Ayesha Renna, represented in the illustration, spoke about the rights and agency of women, and Muslim women, in the anti-CAA debate:

> *If you see any injustice in this society . . . Just get out, raise your voice. Many will make you sit inside, slow down your voice, because women are always told and they are always nurtured by telling them: keep noise very low, respect men; but no, raise your voice . . . It is your right. It is your voice. No one is going to have control over that.*

Sofia invoked similar sentiments: "We were standing up against the state. We were standing up against authoritarianism". Zoya Hasan, a Professor Emerita of Jawaharlal Nehru University, who has researched and published extensively on the socio-economic status of Muslim women (e.g., Unequal Citizens: A Study of Muslim Women in India and Educating Muslim Girls: Comparison of Five Indian Cities), noted [68] (p.n.d.):

> *The active participation of Muslim women in the anti-CAA protests was the defining feature of this movement. It shattered many stereotypes about Muslim women. It put*

rest to the pervasive belief that the average Indian Muslim woman is an uneducated and burqa-clad figure who has no voice and is suffering under patriarchal oppression. Muslim women were in the vanguard of the anti-CAA protests. They were the life and soul of resistance against CAA. Their support has sustained protests in multiple locations in dozens of cities and metropolises. No one would have expected such significant and sustained participation of Muslim women who led from the front.

Similarly, Tolliver [69], a Christian leader and activist in India, heralded the rise of "young, educated Muslim women who articulate their patriotism and opposition to the Citizenship Amendment Act" as the new hallmark of the Indian political landscape.

Source: The image is widely available on social media.

The sketch by the artist Ponavannan is widely available on

Figure 1. "The One Finger Revolution".

The mainstream media represents Muslim women as victims of patriarchy and religion as the norm, while treating critical feminist voices as exceptions [15]. Jamil [70] observes that two discourses about Muslims pervade India's imagination. Either discussions revolve around "Islamic" fundamentalism and terrorism, or low socio-economic development indices of Muslims. Both discourses center men, and Muslim women's voices are drowned out. They are mostly discussed and researched as passive, helpless, and voiceless victims without agency. Also, progressive Muslim male voices are silenced and only heard when they reproduce the dominant image of curtailing Muslim women's rights and freedom. In doing so, Bhatia and Gajjala [15] (p. 6295) note that "Hindu men are applauded as the saviours who are tasked with the responsibility of rescuing Muslim women by abusing, oppressing, and even violating Muslim men." Jamil [70] notes that these strategies also make it possible for right-wing Hindu nationalists to co-opt discourses of gender inequality to vilify Muslims more broadly. Their care for the Muslim woman ends when they can no longer demonize Muslim men.

The anti-CAA protests, Salam and Ausef [62] (p. 7) note, "tore to pieces many an image of coy, speechless and powerless Muslim women". They punctured the narrative of elite Hindu men as the saviors of Muslim women. Ayesha asked:

Last Saturday there was a brutal attack on campus. The Modi regime pretends to be the saviors of Muslim women by passing various bills. But I want to ask all the people of BJP: Are they going to protect us by beating us?

The visibility of Muslim women in the public space also provided a counter-narrative to the heteropatriarchal and Western trope of the oppressed Muslim women who need

saving. Muslim women emerged as saviors: of oppressed Muslim men, from oppressive men. They put themselves at the center of conversations about the nation.

The question is why and how Muslim women emerged at the helm of the protests. Bhatia and Gajjala [15] observe: "Muslim women deployed care as a resistance strategy to mitigate threats embedded in deeply gendered structures of political protests." BJP-led institutions and Hindutva networks have disproportionately targeted Muslim males, which has resulted in surge in Muslim males being abused, detained, criminalized, and lynched. Nabiya, a history student and poet, explained the reason behind the extraordinary feminist face of the protest:

> *These protests were first initiated as a reaction to violence used by police on students of Jamia on 13th of December.*
>
> *I was there in the campus. Police was mercilessly beating people. And one of my friends told me that a policeman tried to choke him with his own shawl and when they thought that he has died. One of the policemen said, "chalo chalo ab mar gaya hai" (let's go, let's go, he has died now), then they left my friend and they left from there. So that was the kind of brutality that students of Jamia faced that day. So, women came out in large numbers to protest. If men would have gone out and protested, they would have met the same fate as that of the students. We all know that Muslim men are more and more vulnerable as the state has been trying to criminalise them continuously.*
>
> *So, as a shield, as a protective shield, women started protesting the atrocities of the police against the Jamia students. It was like a do or die for them.*

The popular notion within feminist social movements is "personal is political". The attacks on the students in universities spurred many mothers to political action. This offered lessons for how to rethink the separation between higher education and community, and between public and personal. Shaheen Bagh's women initially came out to the streets to rescue students. They were anxious for the safety of their children and grandchildren studying in Jamia. They could not see their daughters, sons, and young students facing this battle by themselves. Even the "nanis" and "dadis" (grandmothers) of Shaheen Bagh went viral. Substantial numbers of Muslim women in their 80s and 90s also occupied the public space, as younger Muslim women also experience abuse and sexual threats at the intersections of gender, religion, and caste identities. The movement thus also challenged ageist ways of defining female agency. Nabiya, Jamia's student, explained:

> *I spoke to so many women (at Shaheen Bagh) and most of them told me that when universities, spaces where our kids go for education, when they have become so unsafe for our kids: What can we say about this country? So, we are here to demand a safer and dignified life for our community, and for us.*

Similarly, another protestor said [61] (p. 118):

> *I am a mother, I hurt when those children were beaten. I have to secure home for my children now. I will sit here until they assure me that.*

The testimonies of Shaheen Bagh's women suggest that they had come out on the streets to safeguard young men and young women, their homes, their rights as citizens, and their country. They felt they had gone about their lives quietly so far, weathering anti-Muslim discourses, practices, and policies [61,62]. However, now with CAA, NRC, and NPR, they feared that their and their children's future were fundamentally at risk. The new citizenship legislations were an existential threat that they could no longer ignore.

In a patriarchal system, wherein women are expected to remain confined within homes, they rewrote the definition of womanhood. The hijab and bangles became symbols of revolution [71,72]. At the height of the Shaheen Bagh protests, Ishmeet Nagpal [72] (p.n.d.), who identifies herself as a social activist, poet, theatre artist, and writer, asserted in her blog:

> *When you threaten our rights, we will fight, and we will not back down. Our Burqas, Bindis, and Bangles will be the symbols of our protests. These are our lives, our families, our communities, our bodies. Will India accept us without our pedestals?*

These words seek equality in a patriarchal social order, take pride in women's agency to make a social change, and allude to the diverse identities of women, with the words: burqas, *bindis,* and bangles.

For Bhatia and Gujjalla [15] (p. 6291), the very "visibility of Muslim women at the Shaheen Bagh protest site is subversive because it challenges the commonly observed practices of women's participation both in politics and in public . . . fraying the edges around dominant patriarchy." Their analysis suggests the patriarchal, hyper-masculinist logic dominates the public sphere such that it drives out women, "especially those from the marginalised communities to the fringes" (p.6292). However, through protests, Muslim women and students were directly confronting the patriarchal and aggressive ideas of citizenship and nation, and demanding these to become inclusive for people rendered in the margins. The protest, thus, gained a broader significance by disrupting "business-as-usual" for the patriarchy and its divisive political agenda.

The educational value of Shaheen Bagh's students and women protest is enormous for public citizenship education. Women's pedagogy privileged a shared relationship to soil, home, and family over bureaucratic documentary requirements to prove citizenship via property ownership and descent from male ancestors—both of which disadvantage women more than men [73]. Simultaneously, they contested the aggressive, austere, and puritan model of masculinity that underlies the Hindu-right ideology, best represented through Prime Minister Modi, who presents himself as "fakir" (mendicant), and the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Ajay Mohan Bisht (Yogi Adityanath), who calls himself a monk. Against this extremely conservative model, the women and students of Shaheen Bagh presented relationship, home, and family as a mode of being citizens and belonging. India was seen as a big home, in which migrants and refugees were also *atithi* (guests) deserving of kindness and hospitality.

Butler illustrates that the body is exposed to even greater violence in contesting gender norms [74]. Many BJP-Hindutva supporters derided them as "anti-national" and "Pakistani hooligans" (66). They called Shaheen Bagh a paid protest and "a global conspiracy by Muslim countries against India" [75]. Another BJP leader called protestors "rabidly indoctrinated Islamists" [17] (p. 8). One BJP lawmaker went so far as to say that Shaheen Bagh protestors "will enter your homes, they will pick up your sisters and daughters and rape and kill them" [17] (p. 8). The vigilante disciplining of female and Muslim bodies also manifested in targeted violence against Muslims. Gunmen fired at protestors at JMI and Shaheen Bagh [75–77]. A pogrom in a poorer Muslim-Majority neighborhood led to the death of over 53 people, mostly Muslims. Muslims' houses, shops, and mosques were burned and looted [42]. Many students and protestors have been imprisoned under The Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act and Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act [63]. Violence is an act of disciplining bodies that dissent.

We can find an explanation for this chauvinistic discomfort in Bhatia and Gajjala [15], (p. 6297). They observe that "The body politic of India inheres a Hindu-patriarchal ideology (Banaji, 2018; Udupa, 2018), wherein the presence of Muslim women, claiming their political rights on the streets, disrupts the hypermasculine body-politic of Hindu India and creates immense discomfort." Dissent is a transgression that is humiliating to the patriarchal caste-elites, and deserves punishment. Ladeeda expressed her experience of being abused by the Hindutva and BJP-supporting social networks:

> *This is the strategy of fascist regime . . . They want to publish that Ladeeda Farzana . . . is supporting this Muslim terrorist . . . In any kind of BJP media, online or offline, they will publish some videos, or nuisance narration, like, . . . they (Muslims) are anti-nationalist, they're not believing in secularism; they are not believing democracy. They don't want to live in this country, India. They will publish like that in every Muslim's case.*

Many BJP and Hindutva supporters justified violence through victim blaming. Modi declared [77] that those who are igniting fire can be recognized by their clothes, hinting at veiled Muslim women at Shaheen Bagh.

Despite the extreme sense of vulnerability and fear for their lives, Shaheen Bagh and Jamia disrupted vigilante-citizenship through the non-violent stance of the protest. When BJP's Anurag Thakur, the Minister of State for Finance, chanted slogans inciting people to shoot "traitors to the country" [78], they responded "shower flowers on everyone". Their posters read: "Aao baithen, baat karen (come, let's talk)" [76]. Students and women continued to weather the harsh cold of Delhi, day and night, chanting slogans, reading poetry, exchanging information, singing in chorus, and swaying to "Azaadi" (Freedom) songs. Women helped each other with babysitting, domestic chores, cooking, supporting children's homework, knitting, and tending to unwell relatives in public spaces, as home and street blurred. They also managed public relations through their hospitality, sharing tea and food, extending care and support.

Bhatia and Gajjala [15] (p. 6300) view these acts as "the practice of care and nonviolence". According to them, it serves as "a strategic background against which the violence and discrimination of the government and the supporters of the CAA and the NRC become visible". In this sense, the protests opened a window into what a critical-feminist approach to public-citizenship education looks like in the face of a hypermasculine vigilante state. It is fundamentally subversive. Rooted in the ethics of care, non-violence, and the courage to stand up to injustice, it is also a multigenerational movement that makes the personal political, and disrupts the binary of university and community.

5.2. Public Pedagogy of Protest as a Practice in Critical Political Agency

The feminist pedagogy of the protest inevitably enhanced protestors' political consciousness and agency. They developed new political vocabulary, and became more articulate. As Mustapha [61] writes: the longer they protested, the more they had time to recognise the connection between secularism and their safety.

Students and women helped each other understand how their lives intersected with the broader socio-cultural, political, economic context of India and the world. They explained to each other how they were exercising their active citizenship by upholding their constitutional right to freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly. Sofia and Afsha observed that the protest pedagogies made them feel more politically aware. They developed a greater awareness of their anti-colonial history and of contemporary geopolitics. The protests also widened their understanding of various issues: neoliberalism; fees hikes; sexism; inequalities; climate; heteronormative patriarchy; casteism; regional marginalization in Kashmir, the Northeast; the economic crisis; and the migration crisis. They also discussed wider frustrations, such as demonetization, GST, unemployment, inflation, lynching, farmers' suicide, police brutality, rising inequalities, and corruption. They also talked about Islamophobia, the lynching of Muslim men, the difficulty in renting accommodation, biased educational textbooks, and constant public humiliation for over 1000 years of history [79,80].

In this sense, the anti-CAA-NRC protest sites provided a counter-hegemonic space for their learning, different from their formal schooling. It was a mainly female-led educational intervention that crossed academia, activism, and community. Bell hooks' [58] "Teaching to transgress" speaks of "education as a practice of freedom" as a way to expand each other's wellbeing, freedom, and political agency. Within this ethos, the protest spaces facilitated peer-to-peer learning in an environment of caring, healing, understanding, and building solidarities. Unlike formal schooling, the protest sites respected their needs and priorities, and provided flexibility, agency, and choice. Students, local residents, artists, singers, writers, musicians, painters, lawyers, and teachers saw themselves as political agents. Their feminist pedagogy and language of creative resistance included: posters; theatre; music; storytelling; games; graffiti; Rangoli; literature; talks; book launches; songs;

dance; creative slogans; autobiographies; visuals; exhibitions; paintings; humor; cartoons; pamphlets; films; and other art forms.

According to Zoya Hasan, Muslim women are over-represented among the poor, with little social mobility. Yet, there has been a glaring absence of their voices in public policy [68]. Through their counter-hegemonic civil movement, however, they occupied the political space currently dominated by the male bourgeois-elites, and challenged the dominant power-structure like no other protests in India [80]. Nabiya's verse below became a popular protest slogan:

Ayega Inquilab Pehenke bindi, chudiyan, burqa, hijab

(Revolution will arise dressed in bindi, bangles, burqa and hijab)

Nabiya's juxtaposition of bangles, *bindis,* and *hijab* with revolution reclaims them from symbols of weakness to symbols of strength. Students and women reminded each other of the contributions of Savitri Bai Phule and Fatima Nafees, and how their contemporary resistance builds on women's historical anti-colonial struggle. They also reflected on the long struggle against patriarchy, bigotry, and misogyny internationally, in public and private spaces. Shaheen Bagh thus became a model of the power of women.

They held the government and their community leaders politically accountable with an immense sense of responsibility. These mostly first-time female protesters took center stage, organized the movement: they gave interviews, handled social media, sat to agitate, and told their stories on their own terms [61]. Young women and students used social media to disrupt the hegemonic narrative and tell "herstories" of struggle. These alternative narratives cast doubt on hegemonic versions, and also defied capitalist logic and government censorship [15].

Muslim women and students recognized that the legislation could endanger the legal recognition of Indian Muslims, and thus, render them stateless. They were also aware of the NRC fiasco in Assam, a state in northeast India, which rendered over 1.5 million people stateless because they could not meet documentation requirements [81,82]. Protestors expressed fears of violence, genocide, lynching, losing their rights and privileges, and potentially being exiled to detention centers [83]. To them, therefore, the protest signified critical citizenship that resisted oppression and injustice. Sofia observed:

My ancestors and I were born here. This is our home. Citizenship is our right . . . I will never give up the fight for my rights . . . They say "do not be political, focus on your education". What is the meaning of our education if we were sent to the detention centre? I used to think I was safe from being lynched. CAA and NRC can lead to genocide . . . send people inside the concentration camps . . . We have to save ourselves from such an end.

Real political action involves "a practice of calling the status quo into question by interrupting its logic" [84] (p. 55). Protestors turned Modi's logic of giving humanitarian citizenship to refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh on its head by asking why they were not offering the same humanitarian treatment to Rohingya in Myanmar, Uyghur in China, Ahmadi or Hazaras from Pakistan, or Tamil from Sri Lanka. Safoora questioned:

When we already have a law of citizenship in this country, why was the need to change it? If you are saying to give citizenship to refugees, if you are doing a humanitarian effort, we are with you. But why are you leaving out one particular community? As a citizen of India, I have a right to question that.

Protesters viewed the citizenship law as part of a bigger sinister scheme by Modi's Hindu-nationalist government, for the eventual exclusion of Muslims from statehood. They spoke of Myanmar's citizenship laws, which excluded the Rohingyas, and thus, prepared the ground for genocide against the Rohingya. Many called CAA "India's Nuremberg moment", and drew parallels with the exclusion of Jews from citizenship as a step towards extermination [79]. They also talked about how Israel discriminated against

the Palestinians based on religion. For many, like Ayesha and Ladeeda, the protest was thus *a matter of existence:*

> *First in Kashmir. At that time, we kept quiet. We kept peace mode. Then came the Babri verdict and we lost our faith over the judiciary in that verdict. Later on, it came to the CAA. We are certain that next they will be targeting the whole India. This time it was only confined to some, but the next time they will target whole India.*

With the CAA, came recognition that under CAA, citizenship was a privilege of a few, and not a right [79]. Women also recognized that as the lower-caste and poorer Muslim women, they were also likely to be the worst affected victims of the patriarchal, casteist, and classist bureaucratic mechanisms of CAA.

In response, they rebelliously chanted *Hum Kagaz Nahi Dikhayenge* (We will not show you our identity papers). A poem that acquired particular popularity was: *Kisi Ke Baap Ka Hindustan Thodi Hai* (India is not anyone's father's personal property). This poem was a gendered rejection of a patriarchal claim over India. Afsha narrated the songs that made an impression on her and inspired her. The songs *Azadi* (Freedom), *ye mera chaman* (This is my garden), *Tarana of Jamia* (Song of Jamia), *hum dekhenge* (We will see), and *sab yaad rakha jaega* (We will remember everything) were some of those played again and again that gave her courage. The song *Aise dastoor ko main nahi manata* (I don't believe in this tradition) was also widespread and made an impression on her. A popular refrain at Shaheen Bagh entailed someone shouting, "BJP, what's your name?" The chorus would respond: "Islamophobia". In Afsha's view, these songs and slogans reflected a strong determination to fight against injustice, inequalities, and oppression. They also expressed longing for a safe space that believes in diversity, rights, and just co-existence.

These critical-feminist approaches to public-based citizenship education, in the words of Nabiya, were empowering as a Muslim woman:

> *So, this whole anti-CAA movement not only helped Muslim woman reclaim their spaces but also to redefine their roles . . . [and] has helped women to seek equal participation in political and socio-religious affairs within the community as well as outside of the community. It literally challenged the offering of progressives to save Muslim women . . . They have led the whole anti-CAA protests and they did it on their own terms. Women protected each other. They were sharing their experiences with each other and grasping many of the values of a dignified and democratic life . . . So many Shaheen Baghs emerged out of the Shaheen Bagh.*

They also distanced themselves from traditional male religious and political leaders [85,86]. Zoya Hasan [68] (p.n.d), noted:

> *In fact, in some cases, they have come out in defiance of clerical advice as in Deoband. They rejected the advice of the Vice-Chancellor of Darul Uloom Deoband who had advised them to give up their protest for the time being during a meeting with the district administration. Clerics and community leaders were kept out. That's no small achievement. This enabled a discussion of wider issues which has contributed to a broadening of the notion of rights.*

In doing so, the protesters joined other Muslim-feminist pioneering movements for equal rights and the equal citizenship of Muslim women in India. Zakia Soman and Noorjehan Safia Niaz, co-founders of Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan, write about ordinary women leaders who call out conservative religious leadership, elected representatives, and "certain feminists" for failing to ensure gender justice, and for jeopardizing ordinary Muslim women's efforts to achieve equality [86].

Thus, the anti-CAA-NRC protest sites provided a counter-hegemonic space for students and Muslim women to practice their critical-citizenship agency and expand their public voice. It also provided a counter-narrative to the heteropatriarchal, elite-Hindu male, and Western trope of oppressed Muslim women who need saving. Instead, they demanded political accountability. By shifting the power from the dominant male actors to

the widespread solidarity of the women and students, they amplified subaltern voices to be heard across India and globally.

5.3. A Pluralistic Idea of India: Burqas, Bindis, and Bangles

The protestors fundamentally altered the critical national debate on the very idea of India. The protests wholly rejected Modi's "uniquely muscular, aggressive form of nationalism" [59] by placing women from diverse backgrounds as central to a peaceful, democratic, and just nationhood. Even more significantly, they turned the discourse around new citizenship-legislation on its head as an assault on the very idea of India, with Muslim women as central to defending it. The sketch below sums up the spirit of the protest: veiled Muslim women were saving no less than the country itself from the chauvinist-Hindutva ideology (Figure 2).

Source: The image is widely available on social media.

Figure 2. Muslim women saving India.

Ayesha, who is represented in this sketch, asserted:

This is not just the fight of Ladeeda and Fatima, this is not just the fight of Jamia and Aligarh University, this is the fight of the people of the whole India. The Constitution begins with "we the people". The struggle is to represent all people of India. We are here to protect the Constitution against the Hindutva agenda.

Their fight was no longer about the CAA-NRC-NPR. They were defending the Constitution, community, and secular nation as their civic duty. With an extraordinary clarity, young students and women articulated an idea of India that espoused values of the Constitution, of humanism, of peace, of inclusion, and of justice [87]. In Modi's India, a loyal citizen is the one who can "liberate" the country from age-old, inefficient, liberal-democratic politics, and install a "truly patriotic" Hindutva [88]. Conversely, protestors defined India as a secular and democratic country, as enshrined in its national Constitution. Mothers and grandmothers reiterated that they were ensuring that the secular India envisioned at independence remained real for younger generations [89].

Constitution became a protective layer for the liberty, equality, and security of minorities [79]. "Save the secular Constitution" was the rallying call. An art installation depicted the Constitution as home, and boldly declared: "this home belongs to people of all religions" [76]. National symbols, such as the flag, anthem, Constitution and Preamble, photos from the independence movement, and other icons of nationhood inundated the protest site at Shaheen Bagh. Street libraries reclaimed public space for people to read the Constitution, and deliberate on constitutional values of equality, dignity, and liberty. Women and students also led public readings of the Preamble of the Indian Constitution, and reinforced the discourse of "secularism, equality, socialism and sovereignty as the core values".

This popular protest anthem, written by Jamia's history student Nabiya, sums up the tug-of-war between the two ideas of India:

Tum Uthao zamane pe talkhiya (you point a finger at the world)

Savarkar ka paigam banke (by becoming the messenger of Savarkar)

Woh Phul bachata chalega (they will spread flowers)

Ambedkar ka sanvidhan banke (by becoming Ambedkar's Constitution)

The poem says that though the BJP-Hindutva spew hatred as messengers of Savarkar, the protestors will counter it by spreading flowers as an embodiment of Ambedkar's Constitution. For many protestors, this was a fight to save Ambedkar's Constitution from *Manuvad/Brahmanvad*, an ideology that sanctifies caste hierarchies. They saw the CAA as a disciplinary tool for ensuring subservience from historically oppressed castes (Dalits, Adivasi, and a majority of Muslims and Christians) to dominant caste groups [62].

The hypervisibility of veiled Muslim women in the public sphere holding flags, the Constitution, and slogans of secularism disrupted the mainstream representation of veiled, subaltern women as standing in an uncomfortable relationship with the secular Constitution of India. National symbols have frequently been appropriated by the BJP-Hindutva ecosystem as tools to question the patriotism of Muslims and advance majoritarianism [62]. However, by making the CAA battle about saving the Constitution, the women and students reclaimed these national symbols from the clutches of fascism.

This transforming of the image of Muslims from potentially "doubtful citizens" to saviors of India is no mean achievement. Women and young students defended the entire community at risk of exclusion from India's secular and democratic structure. Zoya [68] noted:

> *This protest has shown that Muslim women can speak for themselves and for others as well . . . They have dared to speak despite the threat of facing vilification, physical attack or boycotts for disagreeing with the dominant narrative. Importantly, this time women weren't responding to the call of male leaders. It was clear that they do not need saviours. Instead, they were the saviours of the idea of India, of the Constitution and of equal citizenship.*

The Shaheen Bagh thus showcased the public pedagogy of participatory democracy, coexistence, and secularism. Their marginality was a site of conceiving the idea of India from the perspective of the vulnerable. Theirs was the face of India that showed how to establish "rule of the people, by the people and for the people" [71]. People also acknowledged multigenerational contributions of intellectuals from historically oppressed backgrounds in shaping the inclusive ideology of India. The foremost space was given to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the architect of India's Constitution, with the words "We, the People". Alongside, they talked about Fatema Nafees, Savitribai Phule, Hasrat Mohani, Bismil Azimabadi, and Faiz Ahmed Faiz to remind people of the important contributions of Muslims and Dalits in the struggle against inequality and injustice. They also drew inspiration from diverse sources: from Frantz Fannon; Malcolm X; Arundhati Roy; Gandhi; Ambedkar; Tagore; and Nehru; to writers from various regions. They taught people about detention, through art installations of a mock detention-camp, and commemorated the lives of those killed in the nationwide anti-CAA protests, on the mini replica of India Gate, Delhi's famous World War I monument [89]. A 10-metre-tall installation of the map of India read: "We the people of India say no to CAA, NCR, NPR." Through their conversations, discussions, and debates, they were re-imagining and performing a secular, pluralistic, and inclusive idea of India.

The protest sites became safe spaces to explore the relationship between religion and secularism within the idea of India. The accentuation of Muslim religious-identity was not necessarily voluntary for all. For some, the divisive political discourse foisted it upon them against their will. Sofia suggested that though they had to mobilize support using their Muslim identity so that "Muslims could not be taken for granted in the country, this singular idea of identity felt suffocating". On the other hand, Ladeeda Farzana saw her

assertion as "Hijabi Indian Muslim woman" was political and tied to her experience of feeling persecuted as a Muslim:

> *I will talk about my identity, because my brother got arrested because of our identity; my community, my people, is targeted because of their identity, because of their faith. So I will talk about my identity.*

Ladeeda felt that she was able to say, "*Salam walekum, Inshallah and Allahu Akbar*" because of the democratic and secular character of the Constitution. She even questioned those interpretations of secularism that view expressions of religious symbols in public spaces as being in tension with secularism. Others expressed discomfort with the chanting of slogans such as "Allahu Akbar" (God is Great) and "La ilaha illallah" (There is no God but Allah) because it meant fighting Hindutva communalism with Muslim communalism. Yet for others, since Muslims were being targeted on account of their religious identity, they were responding using that identity. Safoora felt agitated that, "People say "why you made it about identity issues?" This is because you are targeting an identity." According to Mahmoodabad [79] (p. 4), a targeted minority in India has the right to defend oneself, both as an Indian and as a minority. Some wondered whether one could be both a Muslim and a citizen of India, while the mainstream public-sphere remains dominated by the dominant-caste Hindu discourse [83]. Others acknowledged that anti-CAA protesters from various religious backgrounds had joined them in solidarity on the grounds of humanity, respect for diversity, social justice, and to defend India's secular Constitution.

The protest sites represented a pluralistic idea of India through everyday cultural practices. Educational policies introduced under BJP rule envision cultural identity as static and not as "a hybrid, fractured, shifting, and political" [71]. Whereas in the perception of the protestors, their identities were indeed complex, contextual, diverse, and political. Their secularism was based on recognizing religious diversity, but also its intersection with their identities as students, women, mothers, grandmothers, daughters, poets, artists, writers, lawyers, Indians, friends, workers, and citizens. The ethos in these protest spaces countered the "hidden curriculum" of citizenship delivered by BJP-Hindutva ideology, which reproduces the colonial discourse of mutually antagonistic religions and nations of Hindus and Muslims [90]. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi implied that Muslims could be identified by their clothes, Muslim women posted photos wearing jeans and bindi, and Hindu women turned up in headscarves asking him to recognize them by their clothes [85]. A poster at the site read:

> *I am Bhagat Singh's Courage, Ashfaq's Resolve, Bismil's Song; Rulers of the People, Look me into the Eye, I am Shaheen Bagh!*

In articulating their struggle about the idea of India, Shaheen Bagh's young students and women made it about everyone's struggle. They sang:

> *We have set out the save the country, come walk with us*
>
> *We have set out to save Jamia, come walk with us*
>
> *We have set out to save the Constitution, come walk with us*

So compelling was the feminist pedagogy of Shaheen Bagh of an inclusive India, that within days Shaheen Baghs popped up in over a hundred places across India and abroad [71]. Thousands of students and women from all religious, caste, and class backgrounds, and people from many different regions of India and abroad hit the streets of Shaheen Bagh. Activists from gender-justice, climate-justice, sexual minorities, refugee and human-rights movements, and liberal and secular-minded networks also became involved. The footfall jumped from about 15 women on day one to nearly 150,000 people [71]. Shaheen Bagh rose to fame as "pilgrimage" site for women's participation in the political process. The Shaheen Bagh movement became a multi-layered fight against religious victimization, casteism, inequalities, patriarchy, statist oppression, etc. In Gramscian terms, subalterns of all types came together to overthrow the hegemony [80]. Ayesha saw this shift as a defining feature of the politics of the future:

> *This solidarity of all marginalised people defines the politics of the coming generation, which defines the politics of the future. These marginalised [populations] include the Muslim community, the Adivasis, the Dalits and all the minorities of India, who this government is ultimately targeting to.*

Thus, the public pedagogy of the protests provided learning and hope in its collective resistance. It also paved a way to realize interconnected identities, and the need for justice in times of crisis.

6. Conclusions

This article examined the female-led movement by students and Muslim women that are geared towards the subversion of hegemonic ideologies of nation and citizenship. It employed a case study approach as a qualitative methodological base, focusing on the epicenter of Muslim female-led protests in Delhi: Jamia Milia Islamia (JMI), and its neighborhood, Shaheen Bagh. Though multiple online and offline sources of evidence shape my broader understanding of the context, I have used two in-depth semi-structured interviews and four publicly delivered speeches by four Indian Muslim female students. I have used a purposive sampling technique to identify Muslim female students who were prominent on social media during the movement. I have also considered social commentaries by Muslim feminist intellectuals and nearly all publications produced on female Muslim participation in the protest between December 2019 and July 2021.

The key conclusion of the article is that Muslim female protesters posed a strong challenge to the vigilante project led by BJP-Hindutva, which uses public institutions and public discourse to enforce a vigilante idea of citizenship. As explained earlier, the political elites of BJP-Hindutva use spaces within and beyond schools to promote religious and caste supremacy, whereas public pedagogies by students and Muslim women disrupted these from the margins. Public pedagogies of the ruling elites reproduce asymmetrical power structures, whereas the public pedagogies of anti-CAA resistance caused an interruption. Resistance was deployed as a form of power.

The Indian female students and women stood up for more pluralistic, diverse, anti-supremacist, and egalitarian notions of citizenship. Though the BJP-Hindutva alliance has increasingly sought to roll out a rightist revision of history, and an authoritarian and neoliberal moral order [7,9,90], the young students used the protest as a pedagogy for public debate and contested narratives of history and identities. Participants used their civic agency to read more, know more, and learn to challenge the colonial "divide and rule" legislation. Young female students from universities stood up to aggression. Mothers and grandmothers occupied public space to protect their children. They used the Constitution as a shield against hate and polarization. Violence was not an option. They invoked their "satyagraha" (resistance for truth), not about them, but about the principles of dignity, liberty, equality, and fraternity. They led an unprecedented nonviolent, creative, caring, intersectional, and inspiring movement in solidarity with those who cared against fascism, based on Constitutional values.

The most significant implication for citizenship education that emerges out of the anti-CAA-NRC protests is the very concept of citizenship in the context of hypermasculine, vigilante citizenship. Protests emerged as historically significant public pedagogy to counter the Hindu-right's efforts to redefine the terms of belonging to the "national culture" along religious lines, with bureaucratic documentation to prove one's citizenship. Pedagogies of protests are also crucial to countering identity-based violence against Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims from becoming routine and a "new normal". In this sense, these protesters show a new form of public-sphere-based citizenship-education that is essential to peaceful, egalitarian, and democratic social life.

The Indian female students and women in this study engaged in more emancipatory forms of citizenship education that stand against the perpetuation of unequal power-relations, bigotry, and discriminatory politics of hate and division. This practice was rooted in action, which resonates with bell hooks' "teaching to transgress". The protests, thus,

served as sites for developing political consciousness, solidarity against injustice, and anti-oppressive practices. This situation is indeed a historical testament to a critical-feminist arrival in mainstream Indian politics, reshaping ideas of gender, nation, citizenship, and belonging. The pandemic-lockdown forced the protesters to withdraw the sit-in protests. Yet, their resistance continues, as students and community-based protesters fight the state in the courts, and in online and offline spaces.

The feminist protests also showed the possibility of creative, inclusive, and public-space-based approaches to civic and citizenship education. They advocated an active role for citizens in the transformation of political, economic, and socio-cultural structural inequalities. In this "activist" sense, they practiced a mode of public civic education that focused on questioning, debating, and taking individual and collective social action as a powerful antidote to a supremacist, hypermasculine, and vigilante idea of India. This article is "herstory" of their collective rebellion against an anti-people and anti-planet agenda.

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