

Indian - Citizenship: What Women from a Slum Near AMU Can Teach CAA-NRC Protesters

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The women of Jamalpur are ensuring their protest stays inclusive.

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AMU Protests

The residential quarters of Aligarh Muslim University are segregated by the boundary wall of the campus from a large mixed mohalla of mostly pasmanda Muslims—washer-men, barbers, tailors, gardeners, etc—and some Hindus. On 17 December, three women from Jamalpur, a widow and her two daughters, both AMU students, visited my home. These women, who earn their living by sewing and darning, had not come to deliver the usual stitched or mended item but to register their protest against the teachers of AMU and their families.

The women held a grudge that teachers and their families had not resisted the recent evacuation of AMU students by the state police, aided by the university administration. They were disappointed that teachers and their families had not helped sustain the student's struggle against the draconian all-India National Register of Citizenship or NRIC and the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 or CAA.

The three women directed their rage against middle class Muslims, whom they accused of being status-quoist, despite their privileged positions. They said that many residents of their mohalla had also protested on 16 December against the detention of students by the police [1]. They wanted to persuade the families of AMU employees who live on the campus to organise dharnas within the residential quarters, if not elsewhere.

As an AMU insider, I can confirm that the few university teachers who did join these protests did not get the Aligarh Police to release the detained students. They were released because of the pressure from these subaltern women of Jamalpur [2], along with the women of Jiwangarh and Upper Court, two other mohallas of Aligarh town.

All day long on 16 December, the protests in these localities had kept the police on their toes. They staged massive sit-ins in on the roads near their neighbourhoods and they also organised a gherao of the Collectorate. The three mohallas had worked in close coordination. When protests receded in one locality, the next neighbourhood held the baton and staged a protest. They kept the Aligarh Police running from one mohalla to the other.

This innovative and peaceful civil disobedience made policing very tough [3]. Late on the night of 16 December, the police had to release the detained young men, who had been brutally thrashed in custody.

From 18 December onwards, the hostels were evacuated [4] but the students from Aligarh, again mostly women, continued the dharna on the campus. The two young women students from Jamalpur who visited my house joined these protests. The protesting students are awaiting the evicted students to return to campus next week [5], and resume their protest.

Many observers are struck by how visible Muslim women are in the ongoing protests against the discriminatory citizenship law and the nationwide NRC. Video clips circulating on WhatsApp groups testify to how students, professionals and even home-makers of all ages are fiercely articulating their opposition to the NRIC and CAA across the country [6]. In English and other local languages, they are expressing an unambiguous confidence.

Women are asserting Constitutional values in precise language and they clearly understand the implications of the CAA, NRIC and the National Population Register. Many of the women protesters have been clearly articulating the distinction between the decennial Census, the NPR 2010, NPR 2019 and the NRIC. They know about the status and conditions of detention camps and the problems that documentation poses for most Indians, especially the poor and new middle classes.

The protesting women have clearly articulated why the demand by the state for every individual to produce documents proving the date and place of their parents' or ancestors' birth is unreasonable. They have candidly exposed the contradictions in statements made by various government ministers. The more these leaders have sought to 'clarify' the government's position on these hot-button issues [7], the more the protesting women have exposed their unpreparedness.

The ruling political class has made a mockery of itself in the process, which has helped the protesters overcome their fear. The fear among them was perpetuated mostly by the spate of orchestrated lynchings that took place across the country ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government came to power in 2014.

All subaltern groups, of all religious identities, are worried about their lack of documentary proof to confirm the precise date and place of birth of their parents. Yet, the all-India NRC, which comes close on the heels of the CAA—which excludes Muslims—has rattled the Muslims most.

More women lack proper documentation than men. After the Home Minister, Amit Shah, declared that no existing documents, not even Aadhaar, are admissible as proof of citizenship, people have grown even more anxious and desperate and they have started resisting the government's plans. This is how a large number of women protesters, who have the power of both clarity and conviction, have broken the class, gender and religious-cultural ceilings to reclaim the constitutional space in the republic.

These protests are not pouring out in isolation. They represent the socio-economic churning that Indian women in general, and Muslim women in particular, have undergone in recent decades. Students had rebelled against Indira Gandhi's regime in 1974 as well, but the participation of

women in those protests was not comparable. (One reason is that the nerve centre of those protests was Bihar which was, and remains, intensely patriarchal.)

In recent decades, there has been a continuous rise in the numbers of Muslim women students enrolling in universities. Now, in postgraduate courses in many states, women outnumber men. This has to do with rising awareness and a growing affluent section among Indian Muslims. The economic migration of male Muslims within India and abroad, and their remittances from Gulf countries, are responsible for these changes in a big way.

A big chunk of Muslims have always practised artisanal or other skills, becoming motor mechanics, drivers, puncture-fitters and so on; or waiters in restaurants, masons, tailors, painters, welders, electricians, plumbers, carpenters, vendors, construction workers, salespersons, running motor spare-part shops, and so on. The liberalised economy has created huge economic inequalities, but at the same time created opportunities for those who have such skills.

MALE MIGRATION AND WOMEN'S UPWARD MOBILITY

The first wave of migration of Indian Muslims to Gulf countries came in the 1980s and 1990s. This consisted largely of subaltern professionals. Having gained affluence, they invested in education of their children, who went to Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) or got diplomas or degrees in engineering, marketing, management and so on. They then got better-paying jobs in the Gulf countries than their fathers did. This socio-economic mobility drew more and more Muslim men and women into education.

For, when men migrate, many women-headed households also migrate to urban centres, seeking better education for children, improved healthcare, and other services. This has engendered a certain kind of social transformation. This can be called a flight of rural 'middle' classes to urban spaces. It is also triggered by the rising crime rates in rural India, including of a political nature, accentuated by the pelf and power-play that increasingly defines elections to Panchayati Raj Institutions. Also, agricultural labour is scarce and expensive, which has encouraged a section of farmers who cannot afford labour to migrate away from farming or convert their land holdings into orchards.

The result is that more and more women now operate family bank accounts, and have greater freedom in their new urban locations. This has made them more confident, and new information is at their fingertips, thanks to social media. Besides, the pressures of modern schooling are such that mothers and older siblings need to be educated to monitor the youngest family members. Thus, social investment in modern education is increasing; and the enrolment of Muslims in colleges and universities is keeping pace with this change. Today, more Muslim males prefer an education that leads to employment, while women are gravitating towards the liberal arts and seeking higher degrees.

SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE TEACH WOMEN WHEN TO FIGHT

All these changes have created a large number of women students, parents, teachers and educated home-makers among the Muslims (and other communities). The trend of educated women being confined to a small section of elites has changed. Over the last few years, these women have watched with horror the victims of state-backed lynching pile up. They saw how, even when spectacularly video-graphed, these attacks on Muslims mostly failed to convince the judiciary of the

need to severely punish perpetrators.

When on 9 November 2019 the apex court pronounced a deeply flawed, contradictory and weak judgment on the Ayodhya dispute, in which the site of the demolished Babri masjid was allotted to those who had demolished it, they reached a breaking point. Women in homes, workplaces and on campuses felt the pinch of these events like never before.

The unspeakable and under-reported state-led atrocities in Kashmir since 5 August, and in Uttar Pradesh and elsewhere since 15 December, further fuelled desperation and anger. Night searches of homes, vandalised kitchens, trashed household items and women, children and old men abused and beaten by police further strengthened the resolve of women to fight it out. The absolutely unjustified entry of police into campuses, where they committed terrible atrocities against the students, finally pulled women students out on the streets.

It requires no stretch of the imagination to conclude that these women have realised that their silence did not satiate the majoritarian lust for persecuting them. They realised that the police and paramilitary will only scale up atrocities against them. In this context, the police repression of students worked like the fat-coated bullets of May 1857; the spectre of a majoritarian state snatching their citizenship left them no other option. Women know that these unfolding events put them and their families' existence at stake. So they have valiantly taken to the protests.

APPREHENSIONS AND CONCERNS

While socio-economic mobility has raised the number of Muslim women in campuses, and in the protests, both phenomenon have created fault-lines and apprehensions as well. One predominant concern is whether this movement of students will turn exclusivist and confine itself to Muslims, therefore alienating the non-Muslims. This uneasiness is on account of the slogans that have been raised at some of the protests sites, and by the affiliation of some of the women protesters to Islamist student organisations, both of which have been highlighted in the media.

The 2012 India Against Corruption (IAC) movement backed by Anna Hazare eventually turned out to have the support of saffron forces. Despite warnings from intellectuals such as Prabhat Patnaik and Arundhati Roy, the rightwing forces were able to rise as a hegemonic force in the aftermath of the IAC. The present-day suspicion is also to be understood in the context of the past: the eventual rise to power of the RSS-affiliated Bharatiya Jana Sangh in the years following the anti-Indira movement of 1974. Now there is academic and popular acknowledgement of how the RSS has repeatedly attracted power by raising the emotive issue of corruption, while cleverly guarding its core majoritarian agenda.

Edward Anderson and Patrick Clibbens, in their 2018 essay, 'Smugglers of Truth': The Indian Diaspora, Hindu Nationalism, and the Emergency (1975-77' published by Cambridge University Press in the journal *Modern Asian Studies*, shows how networking among the Gujarati diaspora aided the RSS' rise in Indian society and politics. It also explains aspects of Modi's role as an ABVP leader during the Emergency and how he organised the Gujarati diaspora. The irony of a regime that traces its rise to a student resistance and is now using the same repressive and authoritarian measures—with an added dose of persecution of Muslims—is not lost on anybody.

There is, among the Muslim protestors, a thin thread of those who are keen to assert their identity. They need to understand that they must draw the line before alienating others. This would not just be wise and pragmatic. Rather, their commitment and conviction about the secularism enshrined in the Constitution will be tested along this fault-line. At the same time, even the liberals need to be

cautious when addressing questions around the participation of Muslim women. After all, most of these women are protesting for the first time in this manner.

For example, the Congress Member of Parliament Shashi Tharoor, who wears his own Hindu identity on his sleeve, but wants Muslims to shun their identity, is not making a useful intervention. There is a distinction between Islamic symbolism and Islamism, just as there is distinction between Hinduism and Hindutva. It is important that the Islamists are marginalised in the ongoing movement but the historic opportunity of progressive-pluralist Muslim women leaders fighting this existential battle should not be lost in the process.

Some of the women protesters already harbour the misgiving that after their do-or-die protests are over, patriarchy will domesticate and confine them once again. There is a need to allay this foreboding. This is why the ongoing movement, led by many women, needs the social justice forces to join. These forces should debate, then persuade, their social bases to join the struggles on a larger scale. Remember, the subaltern non-Muslims are no less threatened by the double blow of the NRIC-CAA than the Muslims.

The Muslim women of Jamalpur are taking their Hindu counterparts along [8]. They are not getting swayed by Islamism. This is a lesson that can turn a hard-boiled pessimist into an optimist. This is one moment where a 'slum' is teaching a university campus how to lead the way.

Mohammad Sajjad

P.S.

- NEWSclick. 03 Jan 2020:
<https://www.newsclick.in/What-Women-from-Slum-Near-AMU-Can-Teach-CAA-NRC-Protesters>
 - The author teaches modern Indian history at Aligarh Muslim University. The views are personal.
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Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.newsclick.in/police-crackdown-jamia-unauthorised-unjustified-excessive-fact-finding-report>
- [2] <https://www.newsclick.in/Dozens-AMU-Students-Missing-Police-Crackdown-Claims%20Fact-Finding-Team>
- [3] <https://www.newsclick.in/i-was-illegally-detained-while-i-was-unconscious-amusu-president>
- [4] <https://www.newsclick.in/AMU-Students-Injured-Police-Violence-Hostels-Being-Vacated>
- [5] <https://www.newsclick.in/Faced-Police-Attack-Ones-Thrown-Streets-Chilling-Cold>
- [6] <https://www.newsclick.in/protest-women-shaheen-bagh-continues-2020>
- [7] <https://in.reuters.com/article/india-citizenship-modi/modi-contradicts-amit-shah-over-citizenshi>

[p-register-as-he-tries-to-douse-protests-idINKBN1YR16R](#)

[8] <https://www.newsclick.in/amu-police-brutality-brings-aligarhs-muslims-hindus-closer>