

India: #CAA NRC protests: Solidarity and after

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How long can a movement sustain itself without a distinct leadership and an organised agenda of protest?

It is, indeed, the best of times, and the worst of times. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government has pushed a Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and now hopes to impose a National Register of Citizens (NRC) that many fear seeks to isolate Muslims. And to counter that, the country has witnessed one of the most moving and extraordinary displays of solidarity in recent history.

Forced to stand up in cinema halls to sing the national anthem — as they juggled their popcorn and burgers — to prove they are patriots, people are now doing so with pride and feeling at protest rallies. In some places, they even brought in the New Year with a rendition of Tagore's hymn to the nation. The Constitution is now the new Holy Book; the national tricolour the only standard before which "We, the People" are willing to bow.

The fear that held people back from freely expressing their views for five-and-a-half years has vanished. Indeed, no one can any longer doubt the success of the peaceful, countrywide demonstrations, or the resolve of the protesters, first against the NRC and CAA, and, more recently, against the brutal attack on Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) students and faculty members, who had opposed a fee hike.

And yet, two questions are beginning to trouble its supporters: Will JNU overshadow the citizenship protests? And, how long can what is essentially a students' movement sustain itself without a distinct leadership and an organised agenda of protest?

The JNU episode no doubt gave more ballast to the anti-CAA protests because it touched people across the country. It highlighted the poor condition of public universities, the slash in the government's education budget, the cut in funds for research, the flight of better-off students to private universities, and, finally, the lack of the sort of education that could improve the employment prospects of the youth — the last a key issue that had seen first-time voters stamp the lotus symbol in the hope of "Achhe Din" in 2014. It also drew more support because, unlike the citizenship protests, it could not create communal fodder for the government.

But to suggest that a particular issue will recede into the background because of another would be to incorrectly read the current unrest. The NRC/CAA was not the only issue of concern when the protests commenced; it was just the last in a long line of issues — the proverbial last straw.

In mid-December, many young demonstrators at Delhi's Jantar Mantar had stressed this aspect. We didn't protest, they said, when the government banned currency notes, a move which destroyed the unorganised economy, or introduced a flawed Goods and Services Tax which hit small and medium traders badly. We did not protest when it abrogated Article 370 without consulting the people of Jammu and Kashmir, and when the Supreme Court ruled that a Ram temple would be built in

Ayodhya. If we don't protest now, we will all be finished, was the leitmotif.

The dam has burst. People say they are no longer prepared to tolerate a government going from one undemocratic act to another. Further, it had neither created jobs nor fixed a failing economy.

As activist and former IAS officer Harsh Mander says, "It is clear that the motivation for the attack on JNU was different from that at Jamia Millia Islamia and Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), and the people's responses were also different." But the assertion of solidarity, he says, is the same in both cases. "It is to challenge a political project and it is a cumulative response to the effort to divide us. There is a slogan I just heard: 'You divide — we multiply.' There is the notion that we will grow," he tells *BLink*.

The collective anger is, therefore, now being directed not just at a discriminatory citizenship law or the slow destruction of public universities but at what the protesters view as a high-handed government that has made the police an instrument of repression; a government which thinks nothing of changing the Constitution or dividing the people to achieve its ends. People are no longer willing to sit quietly as the government justifies all it does in the name of national security, especially as it has made clear that it is not prepared to listen, or to have a dialogue with its critics.

The solidarity is also born of the consciousness of suffering elsewhere. At Delhi's Shaheen Bagh, Gulbano, a Muslim housewife, draws comparisons between the attacks on co-religionists in Yogi Adityanath's Uttar Pradesh and those by the BJP-led Akhil Bharatiya Vidhyarthi Parishad (ABVP) on students at JNU.

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi says '*Beti padhao, beti bachao* (Teach your daughters, save your daughters)', but how can we support him when his government is brutalising our daughters," she asked, referring to an attack on JNU students' leader Aishe Ghosh. "He thinks he can divide us just before the Delhi elections but we are all united."

But what will be the outcome of this solidarity? Conversations with those who were a part of the Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) agitation in the 1970s — the last time students in such large numbers were seen on the streets protesting against the government of the day, then led by Indira Gandhi — suggest that the anti-CAA protests are still evolving. But all agree that the movement requires leadership to give it direction and focus.

The current crop of political parties can support the movement, they hold, but their frontline leadership cannot provide it with the direction it requires; at best, it can work to keep public opinion alive.

On January 11, the Congress Working Committee demanded that the CAA be withdrawn and the process of the National Population Register (NPR) be stopped, as it accused the BJP government of imposing a "divisive and discriminatory" agenda. It also passed a resolution on "suppression of the voice" of the youth and students of India.

"The Modi government has unleashed the entire might of the brute state power to suppress, subjugate and stifle the voice of the youth and students across the country. The prime minister and the BJP government have betrayed the trust of the youth," it said.

Two days later, it called a meeting of Opposition parties on the same issue. The Aam Aadmi Party, the Trinamool Congress, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the Shiv Sena chose not to join the deliberations because of differences with the Congress, but they are all backing the anti-CAA protests. Most Opposition parties are also opposing the NPR. Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, whose Janata Dal (United) is in alliance with the BJP, is among the dissidents.

But these are not the parties that are likely to lead the movement now taking shape. The leadership must not come from the established parties or their frontline leaders who are already marginalised, argues sociologist Anand Kumar, who was a part of the JP movement, and was the second president of the JNU students' union.

"There will be a new leadership with a new idiom, perhaps from among the new student leaders, a few intellectuals, some people of substance," he says.

Established political parties, he adds, can also play their role but not if their goal is to rehabilitate their discredited leaders. "The chief ministers of non-BJP ruled states can play their part by listening to the grievances of the students in their universities. The universities are key, because they are the gateways to upward mobility."

JP provided the students' movements in Bihar and elsewhere with "a source of new legitimacy", Kumar points out. The socialist leader gave the movement "a doctrine of youth power" — a progressive code of conduct in a casteist, patriarchal and violent society, and urged politicians to "curb" their egos, he says.

"That stage is not visible (here). Everyone is working to their own script. Let us see who the majority of the people listen to eventually."

Thus far, the Modi government believes that the movement will fizzle out eventually as it has no leadership and consists of "Muslims, intellectuals and urban Naxals", a term it uses derogatorily for the largely liberal brigade. It also feels that the more adamant it remains, the more it will consolidate the Hindu vote. Kumar, along with some other former activists of the JP movement, agrees that a consolidation of Hindu votes will happen if political parties and other protesters fail to explain to the people how the CAA and NPR will directly impact non-Muslims.

"During the Emergency, people said 'democracy *khatrein me hain*' (Democracy is in danger). It had no impact till a sterilisation drive started in Delhi. It united slum dwellers across north India. So it has to be explained as an issue that will affect the daily survival of the people," Kumar stresses.

A senior RSS member, who also played a key role in the JP agitation, says, "If I was involved, I would have organised meetings of students' unions affiliated to various parties, first at the central level and then at the state level. The senior leaders should take a backseat. Otherwise, it will go into the hands of the Leftists or fundamentalist Muslims, which suits us very well."

Of course, the movement shows no signs of flagging. If the lead was taken by students at Jamia and AMU, there is virtually no part of the country today that has been left untouched, thanks also to the power of social media.

Starting mid-December, the protests have grown and spread, attracting new groups and snowballing by the day. The demonstrations — which have seen a remarkable burst of creativity, including poetry, songs, slogans, dance, art — are not confined to big metros such as Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bengaluru and Chennai, but spread to the smaller towns as well. And it is the women who have been on the frontline — from the students of Jamia, JNU and Kolkata, to the mothers of Delhi's Shaheen Bagh, who have braved the worst winter in a century, night after night.

The Modi government has sought to portray the protests as being driven by Muslims, "people whom you can recognise by what they wear"; Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Adityanath has sought to underscore this message by sending state police to beat up and jail protesting Muslims, even vandalise their homes. But the fact is these protests against the NRC/CAA, police brutality on the campuses and the shocking role of the BJP's student wing, the ABVP, in JNU have drawn supporters

from most sections of civil society.

Right activists are travelling across the country to address protesters. Scientists, scholars and retired civil servants are backing the movement, as are Nobel Prize winner Abhijit Banerjee and (to an extent) Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella. The icing on the cake, of course, was actress Deepika Padukone expressing solidarity with the students of JNU, standing with folded hands in front of Ghosh, even as Kanhaiya Kumar — former JNU student leader and now with the Communist Party of India — spoke to a cheering crowd.

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