

## **“Hum Kaagaz Nahi Dikhayenge” (“We won’t show our papers”): The Narratives of Bodies and Belongings at the Anti-CAA Shaheen Bagh Protests 2019-20**

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**Abstract:** The Shaheen Bagh protests of 2019-20 were a nation-wide performance of dissent against the Indian citizenship laws CAA, NRC and NPR that would religiously discriminate against Muslims. Began and led by Muslim women from the neighbourhood of Shaheen Bagh in Delhi, the protests engendered critical conversations around the nation, the gendered body, space, history, and legal citizenship. The essay is a critical exploration of the counter-narratives the protestors performed against the State’s discriminatory, divisive and violent narratives, through the lens of performance studies. The bodies of the protestors became spaces of dissent and the bearers of the multiplicities of the nation, the corporeality of the individual, the domestic space, the Muslim neighbourhood, and the protest space expanded, encompassing, and even creating, the nation itself. The essay, thus, argues that as the protest site became a space of multiplicities, the protestors built the nation(s) of their secular imagination and their disidentifications presented the excess that the State could never fully regulate.

**Keywords:** Shaheen Bagh; India; protests; belonging; Muslim women’s movement; Hindu Nationalism

### **Introduction**

In December 2019, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), re-elected in the same year to form the

central government of India, passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), a discriminatory law that would allow only non-Muslim persecuted communities from neighbouring countries to seek refuge and citizenship in India. The Act was then combined with the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and National Population Register (NPR), which further endangered the citizenship of those already living in the country, demanding certain documents for the proof of their legitimacy as Indian citizens. (Vaid 2020) These laws violate the secularism and equality promised by the Indian Constitution as they discriminate on the basis of religion. The introduction of these Acts was, thus, met with large-scale protests and demonstrations across the country.

Since the election of BJP in 2014, there has been a significant rise in the Hindu-nationalist ideology and violence against Muslims, Dalit communities, trans communities and other marginalised peoples in the country. (Bansal 2020, 52)

In the Hindu nationalist project, there is no room for those who differ; indeed, Hindu nationalists would like to either assimilate or eliminate Indian minorities such as Muslims [...], as well as those Hindus who do not agree with the Hindu nationalist version of Hinduism. (Bacchetta 2000, 260)

Even prior to the introduction of these laws, there had been several nation-wide reports of individual occurrences of hate crimes rooted in religion and caste-based discrimination. (Naseem 2019; Sangam 2019) In addition to these individual cases across the country, the brutal violence that the police inflicted on the students of Jamia Millia Islamia, a University in the vicinity of Shaheen Bagh, protesting these Acts seemed to have ignited a spark of anger and desperation amongst the women of Shaheen Bagh, since many of their children attended this University and were injured in the violence. (Mustafa 2020, Introduction) This violence was both physical and ideological. Their bodies were not simply brutally violated in the attacks but were also being divided, regulated and mapped through the imposition of the intensely scrutinising laws. It was a hyper-visibilisation in order to systematically regulate and eventually invisibilise their bodies.

Gayer and Jaffrelot (2012, 2) bring attention to the years of distrust that the Muslims of India had been enduring since the tensions that intensified during Partition. '[T]heir loyalty has

been continuously questioned by sections of the state, of the media and of the political class.’ These laws were, and are, a decisive attempt to delegitimise these bodies, citing safety and protection of ‘legitimate Indians’, namely, upper-caste Hindus. (Basu 2021, 169) Thus, even without the introduction of NRC and NPR, the CAA was indicative of this distrust. These laws would authorise this distrust and violence against Muslims through a false narrative of a potential victimisation of the Hindu majority. The Shaheen Bagh protests, therefore, started in response to this State-sanctioned violence when some of these women, mothers of the students of Jamia Milia Islamia, came together and ‘occupied a road, staging a public protest for the first time in their lives.’ (Mustafa 2020, Introduction)

The Prime Minister Narendra Modi publicly denied that CAA was discriminatory on religious grounds, ‘I want to clarify it to my 130 crore Indians. The CAA will not have any effect on any religious community, be it Hindu, Muslim, Sikhs or Christians.’ (Vaid 2020) Nonetheless, the people understood from the example of Assam that CAA alongside NPR and NRC would make their status precarious and would be a direct violation of their fundamental rights, as stated in the Constitution. In Assam, the laws had left out 1.9 million people out of the citizenship register and many of those without documentation were sent to detention camps set up by the government, or were deported. (Osterman 2020)

Furthermore, these laws did not only affect the Muslim citizens and refugees, but threatened all those who would find it difficult to produce legal documents of birth certificates and land-ownership to prove their citizenship. Dalit communities, women, poor people, trans and queer communities, all would be impacted by the implementation of these laws. Realising that these laws would exacerbate the hierarchies amongst them further dividing them on the basis of ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ bodies, several of these communities mobilised together to organise protests across India. Their complex intersections of identities and their mobilised protest performances engendered counter-responses to the ones imposed by the government’s laws. As the Muslim neighbourhood of Shaheen Bagh became one of the major epicentres of these protests, the narratives produced and performed through this resistance movement became increasingly complex, strategic, and powerful in their response to the violence of the State. Although the protests themselves came to an end without succeeding to force the government to meet their demands, the strength, and possibilities they imagined and

demonstrated through such alternative socialities, built a movement of hope encouraging more and more people to produce such counter-narratives.

This essay will seek to investigate these narratives produced as these communities performed their resistance through creative interactions between bodies and space. In order to do this, the essay will follow a thematic structure to explore the different forms that the body takes in its social construction and how each of these constructive aspects is exceeded by the body as it resists the State's regulation. It will examine these interactions as they reconfigure the power relations between the State, the minority communities and the individual, through depictions of alternative models of relationalities.

### **The Legal Body**

After the Partition, the Muslim communities across several cities of India have been segregated based on religion and caste. These segregations remain unwritten but formulate the demarcations of the cities. Jaffrelot problematises the 'category of the "Muslim ghetto"' and 'distinguish[es] these "neighbourhoods of exile" from more benign forms of enclosing.' (Gayer and Jaffrelot 2012, 13) These demarcations differ based on the local contexts and power dynamics of the Muslim communities in each different city. Such enclosures did not restrict movements for either of the communities but marked an area dominated by a certain population, building small zones with the majority of a certain people and their culture. However, due to the overall majority of the country being Hindu, such enclosures were meant for the marginalised peoples. These centres could be viewed as spaces of confinement but also of cultural preservation and safety in numbers for these marginalised communities. Shaheen Bagh, in Delhi, is one such demarcated Muslim neighbourhood, whose

inhabitants [are] educated to varying degrees, politically aware and sensitive to media narratives [and] the locality represents that section of Indian Muslims who are more progressive than most believe them to be, but who still struggle to rise up the social ladder. (Khan 2020, 1247)

Owing to many of the students of historically significant Jamia Milia Islamia, who had been attacked by the right-wing Hindutva assailants, the site became the epicentre for the protests.

These protests, however, completely remapped the spatial relations of this locality as it became a site for collective organising.

The Muslim communities across India are not singular and neither are their living conditions and experiences. By marking all Muslim communities as suspicious and dangerous through these laws, these communities are being reduced to a singular entity. With the laws of CAA, NRC and NPR, these individuals would be reduced to bodies, objectified and made legible through two-dimensional documents, containing markers of their religion, age, gender identities, economic status and caste status. The documents become the identity of the individual, their bodies and voices, testifying on their behalf, reducing their complexities to social and legal categories.

Required to provide proof of being legal citizens of India having entered the country on or after July 1, 1987 or proof of a parent being born in India before that year, the lives of these individuals are rendered precarious. (Acharyulu 2020) The process of being recognised as a 'legal citizen' of India becomes a process of being recognised as having a birth-right to the land, a birth-right determined not simply by the place one was born in but by the privilege they hold to be able to provide documents of one's birth, parentage and land-ownership. The acknowledgement of an individual and the value of their life is removed from the immediacy and corporeality of their being and shifted to the space around them which determines the circumstances of their existence. It allows the State to hold power over who is determined to become a legal citizen and who gets the status of 'illegal,' thus limiting the power of certain communities against others. These categories then determine the rights, access and position available to this person in the society. They mark out a space, figurative, but in many cases also physical, that the individual is permitted to inhabit.

Simultaneously, these documents 'preserve' and record these objectified bodies for the purpose of the State to exert control and surveillance over these individuals. Michel Foucault's analysis in *Discipline and Punish* (1995, 184) of the functioning of the examination system is appropriately applicable in this situation. He writes: 'The examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalising judgement. It is a normalising gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and

judges them.’ The demand of the documentation with certain requirements is the examination system here and the State holds the power of judgement. These documents ensure that the individual becomes indelible and inseparable from the State system, demonstrating Foucault’s conception of “embedding” (“encasement”) these bodies under the State’s ‘spatial “nesting” of hierarchised surveillance.’ (Foucault 1995, 171-172) However, unlike Foucault’s argument that the State’s power is built in a format so as to not be seen, in this case, the State wanted to showcase its power. (Foucault 1995, 171) The State may have disguised its narrative as one of ‘safety’ but simultaneously overlooked those who terrorised and inflicted violence upon its citizens. The violence at Jamia Milia Islamia and the pogrom of Muslims in Delhi’s Muslim neighbourhoods both were carried out in the presence of elected officials and the police. (Matthew 2020) The State wanted its power to be seen in order to instil fear among the protestors.

Hence, even if they are able to provide proof of their ‘legality’ as citizen, the State has asserted its power, displaying its authority over these communities. This authority, the gaze of the State which carries out the surveillance, would be enough to bring these individuals’ bodies under their regulation. Moreover, since these bodies hold several such identities together, the State is able to expand their range of regulation and make it more insidious through the process of monitoring and recording of bodies, and the categories they fit into.

When Shaheen Bagh protestors occupied and blocked the road connecting Noida and Kalindi, reasoning through the Preamble of the Indian Constitution was a central aspect of their resistance. (Puranam 2020) The Constitution, written by the revered anti-caste movement leader Dr B. R. Ambedkar, which established secularism and equality for all was being violated through the introduction of these laws. The resistance, therefore, invoked one form of documentation against another. This may, at the outset, be perceived as being subsumed by the same narrative of legal documents as the government. There remained, however, a key difference in the impact of these documents upon the bodies of the citizens of the country.

While the CAA, NRC and NPR demanded documents to register and regulate these bodies as subjects to the State, the Preamble centres the power of the formation of the nation in the hands of its people: ‘We, the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a sovereign socialist secular democratic republic and to secure to all its citizens: Justice,

social, economic and political; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship [...]’ (“Preamble” 1950) The two documents present an entirely opposite power relation between the State and its peoples. The Constitution acknowledges that the body of the nation is constituted through the multiplicity of the individuals who reside in it. In the process, the two-dimensional document does not limit the body but addresses its complexities and fundamental rights for a dignified life. This notion of the individuals constituting the body of the nation then seems to form the cornerstone of the corporeal structure of the Shaheen Bagh protests.

By distinguishing between individuals based on their social categories and the markers of ‘legal’ and ‘illegal,’ determining the spaces they occupy, the State would hold power over ensuring a dissolution of possible solidarities and the State’s sustained power over the segregated communities. The Shaheen Bagh protests were organised to display this very solidarity that was forged in the face of State oppression. Zeyad Masroor Khan (2020) draws attention to the stark contrast in the slogans of solidarity by the protestors and the statements made by the Hindutva supporters of the discriminatory law. The slogan of ‘Awaaz do, hum ek hain’ (Say it out loud, we are one) echoed the support, care and solidarity performed at Shaheen Bagh when people of all religions, ages, genders and classes came together at the site. A local Hindu resident who fired a gun at the protest site, on the other hand, shouted ‘Is desh mein sirf Hinduon ki chalegi, aur kisi ki nahi’ (Only the will of Hindus shall prevail in this country). (Khan 2020, 1221) The Preamble of the Constitution, and the rights it assured, were key to the demands of the protestors – to restore and uphold the democracy of the country. As individuals from all sections of society came together to lay claim to their rights to the nation, the protest site of Shaheen Bagh itself was transformed into a microcosm of India: ‘[It had] Musalmans and Hindus, hipsters and *dharam walas*, secularists and post-secularists, photographers and film-makers.’ (Zaidi and Pani 2020, 974) Yet, this microcosm transcended an immediate representation of the nation as it continually rebuilt itself through the vision of the protestors who stood in solidarity, bringing into existence the nation(s) they envisioned.

The protest site was a ‘sit-in, [it was] a candlelight march, [it was] a women’s space, [it was] a library, [it was] a metro station [...], [it was] a hangout zone, [it was] a bus stop, [it was] a night market, [it was] an outpost.’ (Zaidi and Pani 2020, 970) Women remained the founders

and the carriers of the protest as it took several forms, embodying the multiplicity of demands and desires that the protestors joined in with. The site itself became a multiplicity, a challenge to the idea of a singular, homogenous nation of Hindus that the State was attempting to impose. Asserting their fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution, the citizens became the makers of this microcosm of India, organizing, managing, and expanding the protest, which held their complexities and contradictions together, as opposed to the State, which imposes control and demands submission. In the process, they demonstrated that the State and the nation are not synonymous and undermined the power of the government, destabilising their power, and asserting their own.

Through the formation of these microcosms and reinforcing the power of the Constitution, the people called into question the role of the government and the power of the state. They brought attention to the idea of the nation and who constitutes it. By publicly reading the Preamble of the Constitution and countering it against the laws that the government wanted to impose, they used the government's own jargon of rights, legality and documentation to challenge the discrimination and violence that was being carried out. Consequently, they built alternative visions of the nation at the protest site and expanded the boundaries of the 'enclosed Muslim neighbourhood' to encompass the entirety of the nation. As the protest spread across the country, several pockets of such women-led sit-in protests arose in many Muslim neighbourhoods of major cities. (Basu 2021, 170) These protests then became the 'Shaheen Baghs' of these cities. The borders and limits of the enclosed space dissolved as the protest expanded in its corporeality. This figurative expansion of the Muslim enclosure, fundamentally altered the spatial segregation of the country and seemed to have opened up the possibilities of redesigning the social and spatial relations among communities across the country. The body, therefore, both asserted its legitimacy through the law while concomitantly exceeding the law and rejecting its reduction to the labels of 'legal' and 'illegal.' As the corporeal living body was framed against the two-dimensional legal body, the individuals asserted their rights to it by actively expanding their corporeality through the space while resisting the contraction and restriction that the laws sought to inflict upon them.

Such multi-dimensionality of the body was not simply asserted through physical space by the protestors, but also found relief and strength in its expanse over history and time. The persecution and discrimination against Muslims have been justified through the Hindutva



narrative of Muslims as invaders of the country while ‘Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains are considered Indians as India was the birthplace of their religions.’ (Hameed 2020, 31) The CAA, NRC and NPR functioned through such rhetoric of historical birth-right to the land through religious and/or family heritage. As their citizenship was questioned on these temporal grounds, their resistance was also performed across histories and futures. The following section explores these spatial and temporal dimensions interweaving with the protestors’ narratives of dissent, responding to the State by overturning their own rhetoric.

### **The Historico-Spatial Body**

The category of being the ‘minority’ has marked the Muslim identity in India for decades, resulting from both colonial and Hindu-nationalist discourses. This colonial and nationalist history of antipathy lead to the Partition that spatially divided Muslims and Hindus into Pakistan and India, leaving Muslims who remained in India a minority. This rhetoric of minority against majority is itself principally disempowering in a majoritarian politics of ‘democracy.’ It plays on the notion of visibility and invisibility of certain communities and the access to rights they have based on these identities. It reduces individuals to numbers, objectifying them to merely bodies occupying (limited) space.

There is an intricate interplay of visibility and invisibility here. By acknowledging that a community holds a minoritarian status and is largely invisible in comparison to the majority, the State brings selective visibility to the community *as the minority*. This embeds the community in a power hierarchy in relation to the majority. They are, thus, brought under the gaze of power and surveillance and framed as the ‘other’ in a majoritarian public space. This status is insidiously alienating, both for the community and the individuals belonging to this community.

In this case, therefore, this historically minoritarian status has been utilised by the Hindutva fascists, who ‘used the democratic route to assume power’, to question the Muslim peoples’ rights to claim India as their homeland. (Hameed 2020, 33) The CAA, in conjunction with NRC, imposes this notion of historical right to citizenship. Foucault explains the functioning of such power, stating that the laws ‘render visible those who are inside it [...] to act on those

it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them.’ (Foucault 1995, 172) This visibilisation is, therefore, not simply the minority being made visible, but put under surveillance. The very demand for rights, for a certain kind of acknowledgement, as a result, becomes the State’s opportunity to extend its power over these ‘invisible’ peoples, visibilising them. The minoritarian community then might gain access to some of their needs, but is eventually subsumed into the homogenising power of the State. This homogenisation has been a constant Hindu nationalist tactic using historical and spatial narratives to expand their powers.

Bacchetta’s article on the Hindu-nationalist agendas of asserting Hindu political supremacy through either assimilation or eradication of other groups in India offers a detailed insight into the historico-spatial strategies used to further this purpose. She explains that for Hindu nationalists, the notion of a Hindu nationalist territory is foundational to the idea of the Hindu nation, ‘under which other categories are subsumed’ and which is ‘conceptualised as a chaste Mother goddess.’ (Bacchetta 2000, 276) Through this identification of the land as the ‘Mother goddess’, the land itself is inculcated into the structured narrative of the family and the sacred, a significant aspect of making it a prerogative for Hindu nationalists to ‘protect’ this mother from being violated by ‘Others’. Since Brahmins, upper-caste Hindus, are claimed to ‘have been in India “since time immemorial” and were the “first-born” of the land’ according to the Hindutva ideology, no one else has a legitimate claim to this land. (Bacchetta 2000, 274) Muslims, the largest minority in India who the Hindu nationalists deemed ‘barbaric and aggressive’, thus naturally became their ‘enemies’. (Bacchetta 2000, 273) Alongside the legal narrative discussed in the previous sections, this is the historico-spatial narrative of the State used to propagate violence against marginalised communities.

The Shaheen Bagh protestors were constantly and consciously navigating these discourses of history and lineage. Several of the older women protestors aged between seventy-five and ninety repeatedly boasted of being able to name nine generations of their families. (Salam and Ausaf 2020, 94) They recalled the mundanity of their lives inscribed in the streets of the nation. Entire families joined the protests. Sarwari, a seventy-five-year-old protestor, alternated attendance through the day with her daughter and daughter-in-law. (Salam and Ausaf 2020, 87) They protested for their children to live free lives in their homes, and not the detention centres which haunted the imaginations of the protestors as their future. They had

set up a 'miniature detention centre to remind the visitors what awaited them in case they failed to oppose the new trilogy [of laws].' (Salam and Ausaf 2020, 20) Their protest spanned generations. Through such assertions of familial care and lived memories in the homeland, they fundamentally countered the Hindu-nationalist discourse of ownership and claim to land with the narratives of belonging and home. The protest embodied this sense of belonging.

Ziya Us Salam interviewed another woman, Noorun Nisa, at the protest site who contrasted the care and community experienced at Shaheen Bagh from the loneliness of the detention centres which await them under these draconian laws. She said '[...] either sit here with thousands of other sisters with tea flowing all the time, samosas coming for all, and biryani for dinner. Or else, prepare to sit in that jail [detention centre] where there will be no comfort, no family member.' (Salam and Ausaf 2020, 90) These individuals had no choice but to join the protests. Their bodies, through the visibilisation of the minority and the introduction of these laws, are constantly under the gaze of the State. They do not have the privilege of being invisible to the State even in their own houses. The protest in the public streets, on the other hand, allows them the safety in community.

At the protest site, the multiplicity of bodies which united for dissent created a community where safety and survival became shared responsibilities. Shaheen Bagh was a site of display of such care for each other: 'There was a camaraderie, a politeness, a hospitality that never lost its edge as men stood aside while women made their way through the crowds, and strangers smiled and wished each other in recognition of each other as India's citizens.' (Mustafa 2020, Introduction) Instead of limiting the responsibility of such care to family, defined by Hindu-nationalists in terms of one's religious legitimacy and legacy, the protestors extended the notion of family and kinship to everyone at the protest site, even those they were protesting against. The elderly women who lead the protests were referred to as 'nanis/dadis' (grandmothers) by all other protestors. Noorun Nisa, one of these Muslim women, even asserted her wisdom by saying that she was Mr Modi's mother's age, so she '[knew] better.' (Salam and Ausaf 2020, 90) These kinships are formed beyond the restrictive notions of religion and blood-lines. The notions of purity of lineage and religious legitimacy were deconstructed through these protests. Hence, the protestors who were sharing the familial bond and respect, disregarding religious differences, became responsible for each other's safety.

These familial bonds were, moreover, performed in the hyper-visibility of Shaheen Bagh. Not only were these notions of family and individual restructured and expanded in the public space, but the domestic aspects of a familial home were also relocated to the public space. They prayed, ate, slept and nurtured their children in the same public space for a hundred days. Most of the women at the protest site were homemakers. Several of them brought knitting needles and knitted mufflers and sweaters for the people there, free of cost, to stay warm in the biting cold of Delhi winters. These traditionally domestic tasks were juxtaposed with these women shouting slogans of ‘Azaadi’ (freedom) and educating their children about the freedom fighters and activists who fought to free India of the British colonisers. (Salam and Ausaf 2020, 17) In these complex performances of their resistance, where the domestic and the public space were woven together, multiple subversive narratives were engendered.

Firstly, the surveillance of the State was challenged. Through the introduction of CAA, NRC and NPR, the State would be able to invade domestic space and the familial relations of the marginalised communities. Many would be displaced, deported, or even have families separated in detention centres. The State’s control would therefore not be limited to their visibility in the public space but could lead to their displacement from their homes. By relocating the domestic into the public space, especially in a small Muslim neighbourhood, the protestors asserted their right to call the nation their home. The memories they recounted of living in the streets of country as children asserted a birth-right to the country, against the birth-right that the government demands be proven through birth-certificates. Their narratives of belonging could not be limited to the two-dimensionality of the documents but were inscribed in the nooks and corners of the country.

Additionally, these kinships were based on solidarities and recognition of each other as equal citizens of India. As these alternative cross-community solidarities were formed at the protest site, the categories of majority and minority which ensnared the communities in hierarchised power relations were dismantled. Even as they fought for democratic rights, they critiqued the representational politics of democracy simultaneously. (Basu 2021, 171) As discussed in the previous chapter, the protest sites spread across the country and were attended by people of all backgrounds. As the hierarchies broke down, these solidarities at Shaheen Bagh rewrote the interdependence of community formation and spatial structures, and found new

possibilities of building both communities beyond space and spaces suitable for these new possibilities. The enclosed zone of Shaheen Bagh as a Muslim neighbourhood became an expanding space of belonging and comfort for all. The space which was threatened as its people were at risk of displacement, became a space of strength and belonging as the protestors made it their home, one larger than any individual structure of a house.

This physical vastness of the protest was also significant to its power. The laws implemented by the government would make the marginalised communities visible for surveillance. These laws would reduce these individuals to bodies, mapping them as numbers. The protestors challenged this by choosing their own form of visibility through the performance of their protest. They used the rhetoric of numbers, the power of having over tens of thousands of 'bodies' coming together in a single space, to visually illustrate that these bodies hold agency and power to form a collective large enough to overwhelm the State. Furthermore, by collectively singing the protest song 'Hum Dekhenge' (We shall see) in such large numbers, they both literally and metaphorically, inverted the gaze of the State as they claim their agency and right to witness and resist the injustices of the State. They, thus, demonstrated that as solidarities are built, the State's identification systems of legal and illegal, recognition and regulation fail.

Secondly, although Shaheen Bagh became a space for formation of communities and solidarities, the individual was not subsumed into the whole. Despite the hyper-visibility of the public space, resulting from being an active participant in resistance, the individual found safety by becoming unrecognisable and inseparable in a collective of bodies. The laws implemented by the State would, reduce each individual to a body, understood only through one aspect of their identity – their religion or the privilege they hold. The perception of those markers would also be reduced to stereotypes. Zaidi and Pani (2020, 1007) describe the anguish of being trapped in such a system as the 'singularity of a madman': 'With no forms of insurance left on our identities, we are caught in a fixed code, where we cannot be anything else, except the enumerated self of our names, our parents' birthplaces and our religious identity.' Regulated by the state and made knowable, the people are made two-dimensional. In this moment, the same identities they are fighting for become restrictive, pre-defined and delimited.

It may be inferred that a body would only become a citizen if they showed their documents to the State and met their normative standards. But, a body, a citizen, would surely become an individual at the protest site as they become a part of the community, an active participant of dissent. At Shaheen Bagh, the individual was not subsumed into the community, but became a part of the body of the protest. To achieve this individuality, the protestors actively performed disidentifications through the protest.

José Esteban Muñoz conceptualises disidentifications as ‘descriptive of the *survival strategies the minority subject practices* in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship [my emphasis].’ (Muñoz 1999, 4) This protest was such an act of survival. The multiplicities of identities at the protest site meant that the success of the protest hinged upon a collective unity which held together multiplicities. Resisting the notions of representational politics, the protestors needed to ensure that the solidarities engendered were all held together without coercing them into the same reductive singularity which the State intended to impose. They needed to cross the limitations of identities and bodies to explore survival. Living at intersections of multiple identities, religious and gendered, Muslim women from different backgrounds formed the grounds for such strategies of disidentification to resist the ideologies that could subsume them into the same narratives that they were aiming to resist.

A crucial reason for the success of these protests was that the protest was initiated and led by Muslim women. Every article or book discussing these protests writes of the shock felt by the audience who saw these women, stereotyped as ‘coy, speechless and powerless’ home-makers lead a protest for a hundred days which shook the country. (Salam and Ausaf 2020, 10) Women often clad in *burqas*, *hijabs* or *niqabs* took to the streets to defy these notions and portray their strength to assert their right to their homeland. They held the contradictions of becoming visible and remaining hidden together. This, consequently, became an act of conscious disidentification with other’s ideas of their womanhood and moved towards creating their own performances of a national citizen.

In another major instance during the protest, the prime minister and home minister had allegedly made statements ‘about recognising the protestors with their clothes,’ suggesting

that the protestors would be those wearing recognisable Muslim garbs of *burqas* and skull-caps. As a response, the protestors made a painting of a woman with a 'tricolour wrapped around like a hijab, and *bindi* on her forehead, challeng[ing], "Now recognise with the clothes.'" (Salam and Ausaf 2020, 82) The *bindi* is a common part of the dress of a married Hindu woman, while the *hijab* is that of a Muslim woman. She is wearing the tricolour *hijab* to lay claim to it as her home, while the tricolour also becomes a symbol of the nation standing with her in solidarity. The religious, gendered and national identities overlapped each other in this created body, preventing the separation and reduction to any singularity or stereotype. This is an evocative performance of collective disidentification. Labelled as 'Others' being Muslims and women, they recognise that these identities are performative. They both confine and define them. They acknowledge that their individualities lie both within such bodily identities and beyond them. They, thus, playfully reshape the performative aspects of it to create such witty symbolic performances of defiance.

Through the creation of the domestic in the public space, the women are seen fulfilling their domestic 'duties' as they fight for their rights. Wearing their *burqas* while attending mediatised protests, managing domestic tasks while simultaneously writing poetry on protest posters, these women refused to identify with the binaries that they had been framed in historically. One may interpret this as an inescapability from their 'womanly tasks.' On the other hand, locating this in the context of the tactical organisation these women showcase, it would be more appropriate to understand that they are centralising home-making as a symbolic representation of the making and survival of a nation and its peoples. They are simultaneously disassociating with the traditional narrative of the home-maker as being hidden and passive, and fusing it with their active engagement in strategic political decisions in their acts of nation-building. These disidentifications, moreover, are continually shifting and practiced in responsive ways to always exceed the State's regulations. Clever responses to jibes by politicians and active refashioning of the protest's corporeality as setbacks were faced, are examples of such responsive and strategic practice. The *process* of constructing these acts of disidentifications exposes the agency and playfulness of the performers in self-fashioning of their identities and narratives. These acts are an assertion of active and continual subversion and slippage through the cracks of the State law. By constantly defying the fixed narratives of the State, the protestors are never completely subsumed into the law and their identities always remain in progress, unable to be restrained by the State.

Through such complex intergenerational occupations of space, relocation of the domestic in the public, dismantling of hierarchies through kinships, and through constructions of identities which cannot be fixed in space or time, the protestors employed powerful and witty strategies using their bodies and space to continually escape and slip through the discourses and laws propagated by the State.

## **Conclusion**

From the analysis of the Shaheen Bagh protests in this paper, it may be inferred that the strength of a protest hinges on the relationships navigated between the body and the space. These protests acknowledged that the individual is already inscribed within multi-layered historical, spatial and legal discourses, which are normalised through the structures of the everyday such as the dominant notions of community, identities and fundamentally the body. In order to resist these confining normalised narratives, the protest must itself embody and perform these alternatives to bring them into visual realisation. Just as the State functions through the power of the gaze, of visibility and invisibility, the protestors must overturn those narratives through active building of alternative forms of kinships, individualities and spatial realities and make the State a witness of their defiance.

Through the arguments drawn here, it may be observed that even as the thematic distinctions of legal, historical and spatial attempted to fully define the body and its protest, the individual continually escaped these limited conceptions of the body. The individual, not limited by the social discourses also cannot be limited by the singular discourse of the body as a corporeal entity. The protestors' narratives were powerful in their dissent since they brought attention to the body as it exceeded its corporeal limits. It defied labels of identity, located itself in spaces and across time, and built communities which became a corporeal entity of its own. The individuals, therefore, converted the protest site into a living corporeal body and simultaneously made the body itself a site of resistance, as domestic processes of corporeal survival became symbolic of the process of nation-building itself.

A protest, thus, is the performance of an excess. It displays an excess of the body as it encompasses the space around it without losing its integrity, while also being within the



space. The dialectical relationship it explores becomes a display of the vastness and fluidity of one's being. The individual accepts one's inscription within historical, spatial and legal discourses but refuses to settle comfortably into them. The protestor continues to create history and spatial realities and defines them in their own terms. The protest, hence, is a process of overwhelming the State by displaying the failure of its attempt to regulate its people.

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