

# Love and Resistance in Delhi's Shaheen Bagh

FATHIMA M and SHARONEE DASGUPTA

**M**OST Delhiites probably hadn't heard the name of Shaheen Bagh until when, on December 14 last year, scores of women, majorly Muslim, sat in to protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) introduced by the Narendra Modi-led Indian government.

The Citizenship Amendment Act was passed in parliament on December 11, 2019. The act states that religious minorities practising Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity and Sikhism who have fled from the neighbouring states of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh before December 2014 will be given Indian citizenship. However, it exempts Muslims from the act. Coupled with the NRC, this has sparked protests for discriminating against Muslims and the poor who do not have access to valid proofs of citizenship. And the women have been at the heart of this movement.

In exactly a month and a half since, Shaheen Bagh ("Shaheen" means falcon; "bagh", garden) has become synonymous with resistance against this draconian law. It is an idea and a lived reality that has inspired women from different parts of India to organise sit-in protests. The women come in every morning after completing their household work and either come with their children or with friends and sit. At the protest site, different activities are organised throughout the day. Even when Delhi's temperature dropped down to 2 degrees Celsius, the spirit of the women didn't dampen, and the number of protesters have just been increasing each day. On New Year's and Republic Day, lakhs of protesters turned up at Shaheen Bagh to be part of the celebrations and part of history. But what really makes Shaheen Bagh unique?

Muslim society has always been perceived to be conservative and their women were thought to be repressed, yet one finds more and more ordinary women at the forefront of



A protester at Shaheen Bagh.

PHOTO: DANISH SIDDIQUI/REUTERS

these demonstrations and protests everywhere. Post-1947, for the first time, Muslim women have come out in such large numbers to protect the constitution of India, all while breaking the everyday shackles of patriarchy. Before this, we did see women come out to protest for the Triple Talaq Bill and Shah Bano case. Yet this is history in the making, wherein women are shouting the slogans of Ambedkar, Gandhi, Bhagat Singh, and demanding "Azaadi" while asserting their rights.

Inspired by Shaheen Bagh, women from Hussainabad, Lucknow Park Circus Kolkata, Khureji, Nizamuddin, Seelampur, and Hauz Rani Delhi have also organised sit-in protests. The above mentioned places are all Muslim ghettos that are marginalised pockets in large, segregated Indian cities, and many lack proper access to basic amenities. The counter-narratives suggest that the movement should call off the protests as it has created inconveniences for commuters. However, the shops around Shaheen Bagh are all run

by middle class people who have come out to support the women, knowing very well that their households are dependent on their source of income.

Curiosity about the phenomenon of Shaheen Bagh led us to visit the place. As we got off an electric rickshaw and started looking for ten rupees inside our bags, the rickshaw puller told us, "chalega, koi baat nahin" (it's fine, you don't have to give the money). As we walked across the protest site, we found a reading space—a bus stand turned library—titled Savitribai Phule and Fatima Sheikh Pustakalaya. We found Hindi, Urdu and English books of Karl Marx, Premchand, Shaheed Udhham Singh, Ramachandra Guha, B. R. Ambedkar, Bhagat Singh, James Baldwin and Ismat Chughtai, among others. The books have all been donated by different people. Anyone can sit and read in this library.

As we walked around the place, we could not miss the various posters hanging from the foot overbridge. As we strolled around

Shaheen Bagh, we came across Lucknow Biryani, a small restaurant where we decided to have lunch. The shop owner told us that on Republic Day, 40 kilos of keema (kababs) had been sold and on other days, up to 15 kilos of kababs were cooked, which is much higher above the usual consumption. We also found garment shops, small eateries and tea stalls on both sides of the road. Tea stalls and chaat stalls have also been put up close to the sit-in protests. As we joined the women there, we saw young boys sweeping the area to keep it clean.

The map of India there with the text "We, The People of India, Reject CAA, NPR, NRC" is a beautiful reminder of all that India stands for—inclusion and tolerance. It is no surprise that it attracts many visitors, as it is suggestive of an all-inclusive India that shields everyone without excluding a particular community. The map has also become a backdrop of many photos clicked by visitors and a symbol of patriotism in opposition to the

highly discriminatory hyper-nationalism that excludes everyone who interrogates the ruling party.

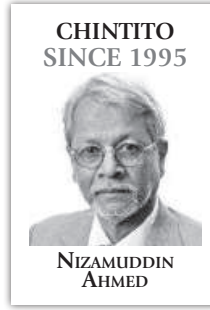
The most striking feature is perhaps the peaceful nature of the protests. Women there are well-informed about what they want and they stick to it. Their fight is with the ideology of fascism, not with individuals. There is no hate speech directed against anyone, which is remarkable given the alienation people have been facing under the current regime. Women at Shaheen Bagh have transformed their anger into one of the most peaceful protests, making the site a cultural space for resistance.

Women, many clad in burqas and scarves, are asserting their rights and fighting against the current regime in their own way. There is a huge crowd of people from other religious groups as well, who come in solidarity against the unconstitutional othering of Muslims. The stage is open to anyone who wants to express their views pertaining to the ongoing movement, provided no hatred or communal violence is instigated. The presence of a library, "Aazadi" chants (which the fascists always confuse with sedition), and freedom of speech sans any provocation—Shaheen Bagh represents a functioning and vibrant democracy. Contrary to the allegations that the protesters are paid Rs 500 to 700 to stay there, Shaheen Bagh is a space for the oppressed, by the oppressed, and of the oppressed, devoid of any monetary factors or religious fundamentalism.

In the history of modern India, Shaheen Bagh will be remembered for its strength, tolerance and the subversion of stereotypes associated with minorities. At the end of our trip, we bought a small Indian flag—a glowing *trianga* that a little boy was selling. Shaheen Bagh, on a personal level, was an educational and eye-opening experience—a fierce reminder of the tenets of our constitution and the strength of our womenfolk.

Fathima M is a research scholar at the Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Sharonee Dasgupta is a Research Associate at Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi.

## Not only Mayors, we need to make promises too



CHINTITO SINCE 1995

**E**LECTION time is full of promises. Wowed by the vows, some of us are the happiest. Many of us are steeply sceptical; we suffer the most. Most of us believe the rhetoric, or pretend to, otherwise candidates would not have been spewing material for

us to build castles in the air, election after election.

Then there are those who make life complicated by their self-inflicted choices. They believe there should be a DWCC and a DECC to make city life more bearable. Actually, to accommodate more mayoral aspirants. What? Also a DNNWCC?

In this climate of fragmentation, some still stand by the unification theory that Dhaka should return to its former glory of mosquitoes and waterlogging under one Mayor. We have been told that the major menace of the city, traffic jam, is not a CC matter. *Chee Chee!* Then who?

Some promises are believable. For instance, it is indeed possible for a Mayor to attend office every day of the year. Although exaggerated, that is a commitment to serve, perhaps necessary too. Ambiguity however remains about his location on the 366th day.

Committing beyond the corporation's agenda is excusable on grounds of overenthusiasm. Nevertheless, resolving the traffic problems of Dhaka city within three

months is a mayoral candidate misquoted. I hope. The promise nevertheless is not as ludicrous as it sounds in mainstream print.

Given elusive funds and illusive efficient management, a Mayor shall indeed be able to solve all the issues related to traffic movement that are under the jurisdiction of others. For example, keeping the roads free of municipal garbage, and the pavements clear. The real issue remaining is whether we the people shall move according to his plans.

There are overhead bridges we are too *ayeshi* to use. After pedestrians rejected even escalators at Banani overbridge, and continued to jaywalk, the only option left now, it seems, is to carry all pedestrians over the bridge on our shoulders to save them from being run over.

Underpasses have failed too due to our misdeeds. The one at Karwan Bazaar has become a cesspool. Had more people frequented the underground crossing, there would not have been the privacy to urinate or go beyond. One thing for sure though, Mayors need to work on many, many more public toilets in the capital to keep the air stench-free.

The underground crossover at Gulistan is more of a mall with hundreds of small shops, and I fear designers and merchandisers have compromised fire safety in lieu of commercialisation. We are waiting for an impending fire disaster. The Mayor has a role to play here because he grants the trade license without which no one can do business within the City Corporation.

The city has very few toilets, separated by

*There are overhead bridges we are too ayeshi to use. After pedestrians rejected even escalators at Banani overbridge, and continued to jaywalk, the only option left now, it seems, is to carry all pedestrians over the bridge on our shoulders to save them from being run over.*

miles, and they too are generally unusable, even when charging for a short visit. Often the rent collector goes off duty, probably to use a cleaner toilet somewhere else at a distance. Free toilets could have been a winning pledge of a candidate, but maybe they could not find the right words.

There are parks, green or not, but occupied by scruffy shops, greasy vehicles, and dirty occupations, under oath to musclepersons and part-time politicians. Mayors have tried

repeatedly to shoo them away, albeit half-heartedly, but they come right back under the very nose of law enforcers and municipal minders.

Revelling picnic parties loaded on buses, including voters, are notorious for off-loading everything from banana peel to half-eaten sandwiches, from diapers to plastic bottles, on to the public road, adding to the Mayor's daily garbage. It is unfair to blame the Mayor who is not even on that bus.

Wrong, double and triple parking is the norm in malls and business areas. It is our doing. We would not park at a distance and walk to our destination, the same many of us, who do so happily in countries where there is public awareness and conscientiousness. It is not always done by policing.

Chaos in front of most schools is the result of the luxury parents choose to enjoy at the cost of public nuisance. Some of them alight from their vehicle, blocking the traffic behind, only after the driver alights to open the rear side door. Again, after a child has been collected, the driver does the difficult job of shutting the rear side door before getting in. The child clearly learnt nothing at school because you can see things thrown out of the window, live.

Garbage will dump anywhere and everywhere, especially rivers and waterbodies, usually across from our own house. The problem is the neighbours opposite who do the same.

Cough we will everywhere, into other people's faces and the street; they are both the same to many lordly citizens. This issue

we can readily resolve without the help of any city corporation employee. Options are to stop smoking, avoid catching cold, cover our mouth when coughing, and calculate the expanse between us and the nearest person.

Painting political slogans and sticking posters on someone else's wall, vehicle, door and window, is something we consider our "right". There have been almost none lately because of the just-concluded city corporation elections, possibly due to stakeholders abiding by Election Commission directives. However, the points earned there have been heavily lost due to a barrage of laminated posters of candidates, hung over many streets. There was a court order to remove them, but I guess removing would be tantamount to claiming responsibility of creating the environmental disaster, and so no one removed them.

Unless we the people choose to practice civic behaviour and stop depending on five municipal workers to clean the rubbish of five lakh others, this city will continue to become increasingly unmanageable. No mayoral 24/7 office hours, and no strongly worded manifesto shall work. As an example, we have seen what happened to the nearly seven thousand waste bins installed in yellow and blue by the two city corporations in 2016. They were abused, misused and stolen.

Mayors can only do that much. It is also up to us to present a successful Mayor.

Dr Nizamuddin Ahmed is a practising Architect at BashaBari Ltd., a Commonwealth Scholar and a Fellow, a Baden-Powell Fellow Scout Leader, and a Major Donor Rotarian.

**ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY**

**FEBRUARY 3, 1990**  
**Nelson Mandela released**

South African President F.W. de Klerk lifted the 30-year ban on the African National Congress, resulting in the release from prison of Nelson Mandela and marking the beginning of the end of apartheid.

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Flag feature
- 5 Not barefoot
- 9 Do a Thanksgiving job
- 10 Drew
- 12 African lilies
- 13 Degrade
- 14 Cinema snack
- 16 Acapulco aunt
- 17 King of France
- 18 Hardy hen
- 20 Foot parts
- 22 Mineral sources
- 23 Texas player
- 25 Fight memento
- 28 Put one over on
- 32 Opposite of peaceful
- 34 Wallet bill

**DOWN**

- 1 Bar
- 2 Global line
- 3 Opposition of "sans"
- 4 Fixes shoes
- 5 Informal talk
- 6 Center
- 7 Stump figure
- 8 Want
- 9 Blue Grotto setting
- 11 College VIPs
- 15 Make good as new
- 19 Owl output
- 21 Hind's mate
- 24 Go crazy
- 25 Cleans the deck
- 26 Line of work
- 27 Mysterious
- 29 Courting
- 30 Like a street urchin
- 31 Looks after
- 33 Start
- 37 Down
- 39 Battleship letters

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO [dsopinion@gmail.com](mailto:dsopinion@gmail.com).

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

R	O	O	F	P	A	I	D
U	S	O	A	A	B	N	E
N	I	T	R	O	S	I	N
I	R	E	C	U	T	T	E
N	I	R	V	A	N	A	R
S	M	I	T	E	C	H	E
S	O	N	E	M	O	E	
B	A	N	E	B	O	M	B
L	E	G	D	E	S	E	R
I	R	O	N	A	G	E	I
M	I	L	A	N	Y	O	D
P	A	I	N	E	S	L	E
L	A	O	S	E	S	P	

**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott