

CAA: Analysing the role of women protestors

(By Shallu Jaglan)

On Dec 12, 2019 the draft of the already contested Citizenship Amendment Bill was passed by Rajya Sabha and what followed this, was to make headlines for the next couple of months- the nationwide anti-CAA protests. Perhaps an important aspect here is to analyze how it not only stirred mass dissent but also changed its face. Newspapers, TV journalists were struck by one peculiar aspect of these protests, i.e., their collective feminine leadership, challenging the typical 'feminine' itself.

The days following Dec 12 saw popular mobilization in Delhi's Jamia Milia Islamia and UP's Aligarh Muslim University. The protests then were in their nascent stage which changed after the police crackdown in Jamia on Dec 14. A group of women on the following day sat on an indefinite strike in Delhi's Shaheen Bagh, an area near Jamia college. Since a number of students studying in the University are from the same locality, many see the Shaheen Bagh sit-in as the spillover of outrage over police crackdown. However, what started as an immediate repercussion, took the form of sustained sit-in movements spearheaded by women. Initially, these women felt the possibility of similar action upon men and came out protecting them, but the long timespan of this protest surely says that it needs to be examined from a number of dimensions, other than this.

Shaheen Bagh was not the only example of women being at the forefront of anti- CAA protests. In line with this, a number of protests were organised around the country in Lucknow, Bengaluru, Mumbai to name a few. Remarkable was the student participation and more remarkable was the substantial presence of female students in them, be it Delhi university, Jadavpur university, AMU or Jamia. From tearing copies of CAA, reading the Preamble, handing roses to police persons to the reprimanding finger of Jamia's Ayesha Renna, women were present in every frame. Now the question is what led to this and were these protests first of their kind?

These certainly were not the first to record the presence of women protestors. Women have been involved in prominent movements like the Independence movement, Narmada Bachao Andolan, protests against dowry, sati and the anti-liquor movements across the country; the notable Chipko movement in Uttarakhand was also spearheaded by women. But there has been a general understanding that women tend to agitate only when the issue in question attempts to impact them. CAA did put women in a worse scenario than men, as the need to produce documents can become daunting in an extremely patriarchal setup. However, what was evident in CAA protests was the women's stand for all and not just for themselves. Numerous journalists and researchers intrigued by them enquired protesting women for their reasons and what they had to say was similar across- their movement was to save the constitution. It was this that made Ambedkar's portraits an inevitable presence throughout the protest sites. Another facet that makes the anti-CAA protests different from various earlier movements was the fact that these women were

not responding to calls by any leader or any male leader, it was a movement led and formed by them. What did this 'woman face' do to the anti-CAA protests? The very first aspect was the way it confused the police forces on how to deal with the protestors, as surely teargas or lathis didn't seem options anymore. Even though the fear of police crackdown did loom large over their heads, it never did become reality for most of them. Some scholars also take it for granted that women's presence tends to give a humanitarian approach to any movement, which owes to years of gendering and social conditioning that typically makes violence a misfit for women. Years of gendering have also been years of oppression equipping women in return to understand oppression in some of its most ugly forms, which is why they smell it earlier than men do. Another and perhaps the most crucial facet is the tendency within them to associate based on their shared experiences and fears. This camaraderie was at play in anti-CAA protests as well, where beginning with few, several women started urging others to join as well, giving the movement its mass strength. This aspect is highlighted by the leader of the 'Save Narmada Movement' Medha Patkar, she says, "the speciality of women-led movements is that they can be sustained longer, women don't give up. You need women if the fight is going to belong." Patkar further adds "India considers women to be shields, but they are swords." It was this factor that gave the anti-CAA protests, especially the Shaheen Bagh sit-in, a time span of more than 100 days only to be dispersed by a pandemic. The 'woman face' altered the nature and language of the protest. But did it just change the protest or the women participants changed as well?

As a Chinese historian rightly said 'influences are exchanged in a two-way traffic, given and taken simultaneously'. The language of dissent, thus, must have altered the dissenters as well. Like any other system, patriarchy also rests on some pillars. One of the profound ones is the public-private distinction in which the ideal domain for women is the private to be protected by the 'men of the household'. However, men can juggle freely between private and public and any change in this is bound to create conflict. This pillar shook a little when women went out on streets not only during the day but in the odd hours of the dark as well. Fine evidence was the "guidelines" they received from the clergy, just like the one by Vice-Chancellor of Darul Uloom Deoband to retreat within the four walls, but the women politely rejected by saying "we didn't take their permission before coming out, then why would we go back after their advice".

They weren't just fighting the new law, they were up against something very old, familiar and till now very rigid. The protesting women reclaimed the long denied public space, a corner initially, by pitching a tent making it into the new centre stage. Ayesha Munira, Professor of English at AMU puts it aptly when she says that there is a tendency among men to describe women discussing something as 'Chen Chen (less important, just noise) but this changed CAA protests when Chen Chen became men's voice as well. Two researchers writing for News 18, analysing the sociological aspect of these protests emphasised how these taught women the language of dissent, the nuances of democratic and dignified life. Just the sheer realisation that their voices were being heard, was enough to not choose silence as an option every time. The absence of men

from these sites had its implications as the movement became a collective women's responsibility. It is portrayed by the Shaheen Bagh protest well, here the protestors were driven by shifts in which some would go and finish the household chores first followed by others. The absence of their so-called 'protectors' - though some men did keep a watch from distance- made women each other's shield. This long stretch of dissent made one thing certain to women protestors as well as their onlookers that withdrawing to the domestic realm and falling back upon the facade of 'comfort' would no longer be the only path for them to tread.

Today, the impact of CAA protests might have died down but the precedent it has set and the mark on memory that has been left would be indelible.

References

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