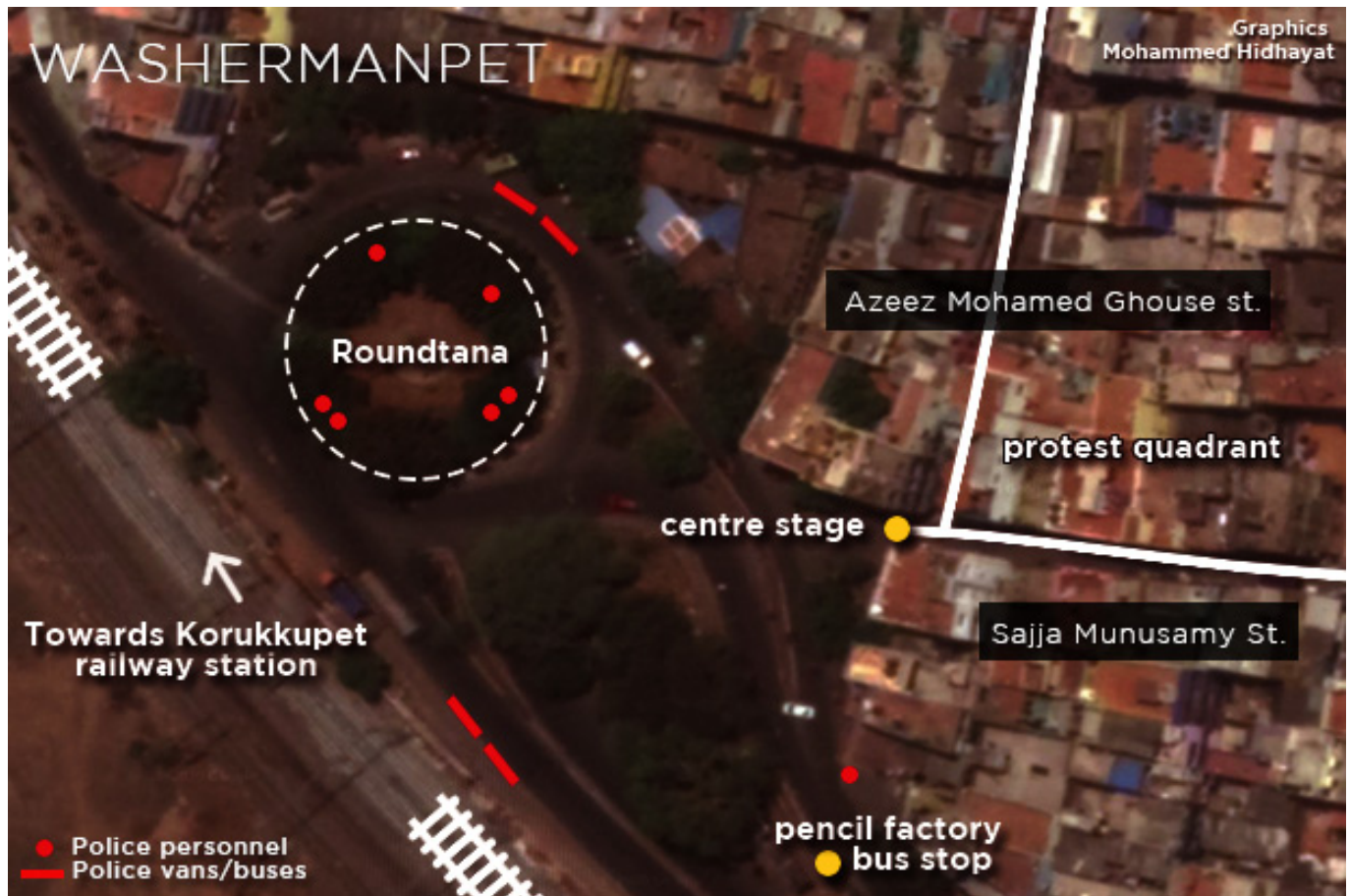


Mapping Chennai's own Shaheen Bagh

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The crowd at Washermanpet showed no sign of relenting as the sit-in protest against the contentious citizenship law entered the fourth day. Hundreds of demonstrators, most of them women, nestled at two streets in the Lala Gunda area to stage an indefinite stir against Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), National Register of Citizens (NRC) and National Population Register (NPR).



Satellite image via Google Earth (Edited by Mohammed Hidayat)

Chennai: Chennai's Old Washermanpet on Friday witnessed an impromptu sit-in protest after police action precipitated major demonstrations throughout the state. Social media was already abuzz with comparisons to Delhi's Shaheen Bagh.

The locals here prefer to go by 'Shaheenpettai'; as one would say Washermanpet in Tamil - 'Vannarapettai'.


The epicentre of this people movement is across a roundtana near the Pencil Factory bus stop in Korukkupet. Chants of 'azadi' (freedom) and 'inquilab zindabaad' (long live, revolution) dominate the scene as one gets down at the bus stop. And if you forget the address, just ask the auto drivers, because these days, all roads lead to Washermanpet.

While one side of the roundtana is occupied by police personnel, protestors engulf the other side with media personnel clamouring to get a view. As activists speak on stage about the new citizenship law and seek its withdrawal, youngsters spread pamphlets regarding NRC and ask crucial questions as to why one should produce documents to prove their citizenship. Holding placards and waving the tricolour, burqa-clad women with children amongst them (adorned in T-shirts, head bands and face tattoos) have become the heartbeat of this citizen rebellion.



The continuous stir, despite claims of plunging the neighbourhood into a standstill, has so far caused no traffic issues or disruption of public life owing to the volunteers' steadfast role in crowd control. Although, shops in the primary protest area (Saja Munusamy and Aziz Mohamed streets) are closed.

A small group of middle-aged men constantly videographed the venue of the protest, its surroundings and uploaded video status on WhatsApp to dispel rumours of water cannons being used by police at Washermanpet. Curbing misinformation plays a major role in enabling a safe, unintrusive protest. Apparently, fake news travels faster and these men were tasked with the duty to repel such motives.

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Political leaders took turns to preside over the centre-stage. M H Jawahirullah, President of the Manitheneya Makkal Katchi (MMK), condemned Friday's lathicharge that led to a chain reaction of demonstrations at different cities throughout the state. The protests at Washermanpet had intensified since then. Congress MP Karti Chidambaram accused the Modi-led BJP government for using the Public Safety Act (PSA) to detain elected representatives and IAS officers, instead of terrorists. He also made a case for Dr. Kafeel Khan who was arrested under NSA.

While many lamented that they had no documents to verify their date of birth, the MMK chief took a jibe at Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Palaniswami and said that even he had no birth certificate. "What is the need for this CAA when there is so much else to talk about the country. No employment, fluctuating economy and we still haven't banned the NEET exams," a protester argued. Demanding the central government to scrap the newly amended citizenship law, several protestors disagreed with the idea of showing documents to prove their citizenship.



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Washermenpet sit-in continues for fourth day.

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The jam-packed streets witnessed a constant supply of food items every two hours with volunteers dispersing bottled drinking water, tea, biscuits and fruits. When asked about the trail, many said that numerous well-wishers readily donated their savings.

Even as the sun set down, people stepped out of share-autos and buses to join-in. With the size of the protesting crowd growing significantly, police have been deployed around the clock.

Once in a while, there is a lull in the agitation but there seems to be no relenting as slogans of dissent seep into the night.

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