

The resistance strikes back: women's protest strategies against backlash in India

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The resistance strikes back: women's protest strategies against backlash in India

Deeptha Chopra 


ABSTRACT

The Shaheen Bagh site epitomised the longest sit-in intergenerational protests in India since Independence. Especially novel about these protests was the presence and leadership of first-time Muslim women protestors. Shaheen Bagh also inspired other sit-ins across the country, including several across Delhi. Yet, nowhere except Shaheen Bagh did the struggle last as long, with the participation of as many over a continuous and significant period of time. This article will explore who these women of Shaheen Bagh were, and how and why they came together to protest a proposed change in India's citizenship rights. It will draw on interviews, field observations, and published material, to delineate the new forms of protest and strategies used by the women in Shaheen Bagh in response to what I term 'cyclical' backlash by the state. The article will underscore the organically evolving nature of the strategies that women in Shaheen Bagh adopted, and highlight how the use of physical, digital, and figurative space became the hallmark of women's organising in this protest. In light of continuing state intolerance and shrinking space for civil society, this article concludes with reflections on lessons that future feminist resistance and organising can draw from this analysis, to be able to strike back against this backlash.

Le site Shaheen Bagh a symbolisé les plus longs sit-ins de protestation intergénérationnels qui ont eu lieu en Inde depuis l'indépendance. Un aspect particulièrement inédit de ces protestations était la présence et le leadership de femmes musulmanes protestant pour la première fois. Shaheen Bagh a aussi inspiré d'autres sit-ins aux quatre coins du pays, y compris plusieurs à travers Delhi. Or, c'est à Shaheen Bagh que la contestation a duré le plus longtemps, avec la participation d'un très grand nombre de personnes sur une période longue et ininterrompue. Cet article examinera qui étaient ces femmes de Shaheen Bagh, et comment et pourquoi elles se sont rassemblées pour protester contre un changement proposé en matière de droits de citoyenneté en Inde. Il s'inspirera d'entretiens, d'observations sur le terrain et de matériel publié, afin de définir les nouvelles formes de protestation et stratégies utilisées par les femmes de Shaheen Bagh en réponse à ce que je désigne comme la réaction hostile (*backlash*) « cyclique » de l'État. Cet article souligne la nature en évolution organique des stratégies adoptées par les femmes de Shaheen Bagh, et met en relief la manière dont l'utilisation de l'espace physique, numérique et figuratif est devenue la marque de l'organisation des femmes dans le

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Feminist protests; care; Shaheen Bagh; Citizenship Amendment Act; women's activism; feminist strategies

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cadre de cette manifestation. Au vu de l'intolérance dont l'État continue à faire preuve et de l'espace de plus en plus réduit pour la société civile, cet article se conclut par des réflexions sur les enseignements que la résistance et l'organisation féministes futures peuvent tirer de cette analyse, afin de pouvoir riposter face à cette réaction hostile.

El sitio Shaheen Bagh se convirtió en el paradigma de las protestas de sentada intergeneracionales más largas en la India desde la Independencia. Lo más novedoso de estas sentadas fue la presencia y el liderazgo de mujeres musulmanas que protestaban por primera vez. Asimismo, Shaheen Bagh inspiró otras sentadas en todo el país, entre ellas, varias en Delhi. Sin embargo, en ningún otro lugar, excepto en Shaheen Bagh, la lucha se extendió por tanto tiempo, con la participación de tantas personas durante un periodo de tiempo continuo y significativo. Este artículo examina quiénes eran las mujeres de Shaheen Bagh, cómo y por qué se unieron para protestar contra un cambio propuesto en los derechos de ciudadanía de la India. A partir de entrevistas, observaciones sobre el terreno y material publicado, delinearé las nuevas formas de protesta y las estrategias utilizadas por estas mujeres para responder a lo que llamo la reacción "cíclica" del Estado. Subrayo la naturaleza orgánica de las estrategias adoptadas por estas, destacando cómo el uso del espacio físico, digital y figurativo se convirtió en el distintivo de la organización de las mujeres en esta protesta. A la luz de la continua intolerancia del Estado y la reducción del espacio para la sociedad civil, el artículo concluye realizando ciertas reflexiones sobre las lecciones que la resistencia y la organización feministas futuras pueden extraer de este análisis, para que sea posible contraatacar estas reacciones adversas.

1. Introduction

Bol ki lab azaad hain tere (Speak, for your lips are yet free). (Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Pakistani Marxist poet)

I entered the Shaheen Bagh protest site with two colleagues in February 2020, intending to research how women were countering the backlash they had already experienced in the first few weeks of the protest against the government's proposed Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) – acts that were discriminatory to the rights of Muslims (Bhushan 2021) and would lead to their disenfranchisement.¹ My expectations were shaped by social media, newspaper articles and interviews on the radio and TV. I was excited and, yet, apprehensive, about stepping into this seeming hallowed place for women-led movements. But my interactions with women protestors more than met expectations. The energy, collective spirit, and moreover, the expression of love, care, warmth, solidarity, and acceptance of diversity has remained with me since those visits.

The Shaheen Bagh protests against the CAA/NRC policies epitomised the longest sit-in intergenerational protests since Indian Independence. They saw the participation of thousands of women for four continuous months, blocking a main road in Delhi and capturing imaginations across the country. Starting in the Delhi winter, December 2019,

these sit-ins lasted for 101 days before demolition because of COVID restrictions in March 2020. Shaheen Bagh became the face of women's organising and remained an inspiration to many other protest sites across Delhi and India.²

In this article, I examine the identities of these women protestors and reasons they came together in a sustained manner for a continuous period, in an environment of prolonged state repression and increasingly vicious backlash against the minority Muslim community in India. This provides an important part of the answer to the article's main research question: what were the strategies used by the Shaheen Bagh protestors to counter the backlash that they faced? A focus on these strategies becomes important for drawing lessons for future feminist organising, in light of increasing intolerance towards protests, a shrinking space for civil dissent, and continuing state reprisal against feminist activists in the Indian context. A key aspect I highlight is how the women of Shaheen Bagh made use of physical, digital, and figurative spaces in defining innovative and performative strategies of resistance. I argue that framings in the Shaheen Bagh protest evolved mostly during the course of the protest, rather than being intentional or deliberate. Thus, what is novel here is my analysis that sheds light on new forms of strategies that emerge and evolve from the everyday lives of women, which include diffuse leadership, care, and solidarity as key organising principles of the protest.

1.1. Methodology

This article draws on interviews and field observations carried out in Shaheen Bagh in February and March 2020, plus media articles, news clippings, and TV discussions and other articles on the protest, to understand reasons behind the protests. Data were collated and analysed with an events calendar, starting from when the protest was initiated and ending March 2021 – thereby encompassing the aftermath of Shaheen Bagh, continuing weeks and months after the site was demolished. This temporally wide analysis reveals what I term 'cyclical backlash' by the state against feminist activists, i.e. intentional backlash that comes in cyclical episodes over time, rather than being continuous.

I start with outlining the diverse make-up of Shaheen Bagh protestors in Section 2 – which, I argue, influenced the strategies women used. Section 3 presents an analysis of strategies and discourses that women in Shaheen Bagh used to contest and retain their position against episodic and cyclical backlash – which is elaborated in Section 4. Section 5 concludes with reflections on how, as the context against which gender justice activists have organised has become more dangerous, there are important lessons that can be learnt from the Shaheen Bagh case by feminist resistance and organising to strike back against backlash.

2. The women of Shaheen Bagh

Bodies that assemble together, speak, even when they are silent. (Judith Butler)³

In this section, I highlight the varied, intersectional identities of the protestors, going beyond their media representation as 'first-time Muslim women protestors who had

stepped outside their homes'. I show below, how the Shaheen Bagh protest was both intergenerational as well as intersectional – and that this assembly of bodies acting in concert (Butler 2015) impacted on the strategies that were adopted by the Shaheen Bagh struggle.

The scale of the protest was monumental – as many as 2,000 women gathered most days (Hameed 2019). While the main tent remained a 'women-only' domain, with young men distributing food and water occasionally, it was surrounded by male gatherings around the main tent (Hameed 2019) – a patriarchal division of space between men and women.

The women who came to the protest were of all ages – from grandmothers (*dadis*) to women with young and old children, and young girls. These octogenarian '*dadis*' became world-famous for speaking up for their rights and leading the fight (Dash 2020); while women of all ages and classes from the locality rubbed shoulders with renowned Indian feminists as well as women from other religions, castes, classes, and regions of the country who had come to support and learn from them. While some had been in other protests, the majority of the protestors were first timers. The majority were Muslim – but not exclusively so, with Hindus, Christians, agnostics, and atheists joining the site daily. This signifies the diversity of the social groups coming together at Shaheen Bagh, to become agents of inclusion and performativity (Butler 2015).

It should be noted that in a context of patriarchy and women's limited mobility (especially after marriage) into public spaces, most women, whether married or not, came with the full support of their families – with alliances between women of different generations and different families forming a tight support and solidarity network. One woman expressed the energy that carried them through the protest: 'We were not stopped by our men. Even if we were stopped, we would come' (Kumar 2020). Night after night, day after day, women sat on vigil for all 101 protest days – most 'rotating' at the site throughout the 24 hours as they balanced care-work responsibilities – cooking and cleaning at home – alongside sitting at the protest. This was often done intergenerationally: 'I come to the protest site, while my mother-in-law looks after the children. Then when I go home for a bath, she comes, sometimes with my daughter' (interview with protestor and local resident, Shaheen Bagh, February 2020).

Some women had paid jobs in a variety of occupations – we met daily labourers, lecturers at the nearby university/college, school teachers, and women doing small economic activities from home. Many women were home-makers – concentrating energies on their household and children. A similar diversity was seen in geographic location. The majority of women were residents of Shaheen Bagh (a south-east Delhi lower/middle-class locality) and lived within walking distance. There were, however, significant numbers pouring in from other parts of Delhi National Capital Region – the nearby cities of Noida, Gurgaon, and Faridabad – but also from other states. Some, like the group of adolescent girls and women from Punjab I spoke with, had decided to stay on for the protests while visiting their maternal homes; others came explicitly through organisations and unions that had organised visits for specific durations. Most remarkable were our conversations with women who had

seen the protest on TV and decided that we wanted to come and join our sisters in this protest. We should also raise our voice, not just the women living here. It is a very important cause, and we want the government to listen to us and remove the CAA. (Discussion with woman protestor from Jalandhar, Shaheen Bagh, February 2020)

The reasons these women came in large numbers to protest as captured by media reports, our interviews, articles, and two books on the subject (Mustafa 2020; Salam 2020) pertain to protesting potential discrimination against them and their children by the CAA/NRC. The immediate trigger was police brutality against students in Jamia Milia University – the nearest university to Shaheen Bagh, with many students resident in the locality. With police brutality erupting on the night of 15 December came voices of protest from students' mothers and grandmothers. A handful of women (and men) at the start, this quickly spread to a large number of women in the area, who came in large numbers to ask the government to repeal the CAA/NRC.

The Shaheen Bagh women understood these laws threatened the Indian Constitution and represented an 'ominous fraying and unravelling of ... pluralism and diversity' (Gopal Jayal 2019) – an attack on the terms of their membership to the Indian polity, and a threat to their and their children's future. In coming together, they redefined Indian nationalism – and this was an important strategy, as I explore in Section 3 below. Protest repertoires at Shaheen Bagh included nationalist songs, photographs of B.R. Ambedkar (author of the Indian Constitution), speeches and calls towards unity in diversity, and solidarity in the face of religious bigotry – these became a hallmark of the protest.

It is important to underline how protestors expressed reasons to participate in the protest: 'this affects everyone who does not have papers, not just us ... we did not come out then [in response to why they did not protest against other atrocities against Muslims, including the Babri Masjid, Kashmir, etc.] because that would be seen as a religious issue ... this is wider than that'; as another woman added 'yes, this is about our Constitution, not just our families' (two woman protestors, Shaheen Bagh, February 2020). The indomitable spirit of these women was reflected in their passionate stance. As one woman said, with tears in her eyes: 'we have papers, but we will not show them ... why should we show ... who are they to ask us?' (Kumar 2020). There were considerable negative feelings against Modi and Shah, with emotions running high among protestors when talking about their citizenship rights. One *dadi* who was interviewed by leading TV channel NDTV named her Indian forefathers seven generations ago and challenged Modi–Shah to do the same! (NDTV 2020).

The above discussion has highlighted that while there was vast diversity amongst women protestors in terms of religion, age, caste, engagement in paid work, unpaid care work responsibilities, organisational affiliation and location, the 'conditions to act' (Butler 2015, 16) lay in their understanding of the CAA/NRC laws to accelerate their already precarious status. Further, while these Intersectional identities were subsumed under the umbrella of first-time 'hijab and burqa-clad' Muslim woman protestor (Kuchay 2020) by the mainstream media, diverse identities played a strong role in delineating and developing the strategies of struggle – discussed in the next section.

3. The strategies of Shaheen Bagh

Log saath aate gaye, aur karvaan banta gaya (People kept joining, and it became a caravan). (Majoroo Sultanpuri, Indian poet)

The repertoire of strategies undertaken by Shaheen Bagh women – and how these evolved organically, rather than as intentional, strategic decisions – was in keeping with decentralised and diverse, intersectional leadership. The strategies women adopted showcase innovative uses of space: physical, digital, as well as figurative spaces of protest and resistance.

One early, intentional strategy was to have women at the forefront of this struggle – this active decision was made post the Jamia incident (Section 2 above). A logical step, it followed continued repression and violence against Muslim men in India in past months (Singh 2020c). This would, it was hoped, deter police from physical violence; a strategy followed by several other women-led movements within and outside India (Basu 2018), where state repression against men, especially young men, has been strong – e.g. the Meira Paibis of Manipur⁴ – (Chakravarti 2010; Nepram 2020). It was only by chance that older Muslim women joined the protest – according to Bilkis *dadi* (a grandmother at the forefront of the struggle), she ‘overheard her neighbours making plans to attend protests ...’ and ‘knew she had to join them’ (Tarrant 2021). From a few hours, her engagement grew alongside other elderly women, to spend entire nights at the protest, realising they could do that without concurrent household responsibilities.

Another intentional strategy pertained to location – continuing the tradition of non-violent movements, initially 10–15 women of Shaheen Bagh decided to stage a 24-hour protest on the Kalindi Kunj Road, a six-lane highway connecting Noida and Delhi – to bring their protest to the notice of government. While women’s movements and other groups in India over the last two decades have largely used Jantar Mantar, an open area site close to the Houses of Parliament in Delhi (Manoj *et al.* 2020), as protest sites, the women of Shaheen Bagh decided to block a main road, erecting a protest tent and cordoning off a road.

This strategy worked in very different ways – the government noted the demonstration quite quickly (Khan 2020c); the Supreme Court asked protestors to relocate (NDTV 2020). Secondly, it spurred a media debate – pitting irate commuters and the middle class needing to take a much longer route to work, against other, more supportive commuters and surrounding communities (BBC 2020). Thirdly, unexpectedly, it drew the attention of many other local women, and women’s organisations across Delhi and beyond. This was combined with social media and word-of-mouth messages. One woman recalled how she came to know about the protest from WhatsApp groups and Facebook posts, and decided to come from the early days (discussion with protester living in Shaheen Bagh, February 2020). This initiated the large swell of women coming to protest on a regular basis.

Soon, the Shaheen Bagh site became a place filled with hundreds of women and children. The energy and excitement became akin to a *mela*⁵ or a festival. A stage, erected a

few days into the protest saw impassioned speeches and participatory slogans about the nation-state; and women started organising themselves in ways that allowed them to balance other responsibilities with their participation at the site. I examine these gradually emerging strategies and the use of different physical and conceptual spaces by the women in the sub-sections below.

3.1. The stage of Shaheen Bagh: using secular ideals through a diffuse leadership

While there was a loose group of women at the core of the organisational core, it seems from my analysis that most of the stage planning took place organically, with volunteers managing the stage each day. Speakers, poets, artists, leaders of other movements – all turned up and waited their turn on stage. Each was given due credit – with volunteers introducing speakers one by one.

Most speakers referred to nationalist ideals of the Constitution; drawing on the secular sentiment of the protest. Slogans were made and raised, revolutionary poetry and dance filled the evenings, and women (as well as men standing outside the main tent) shouted back slogans and raised fists to join in. Readings of the Indian Constitution and discussions around relevant excerpts were frequent. On occasion, the people outside the main tent waved lights from mobile phones, to show solidarity with the women protestors. The crowds were specifically large on days like New Year's Eve, when 2020 was welcomed at midnight with singing of the national anthem, and several prominent people from civil society groups on stage (Singh 2020c). On 26 January, India's republic day, crowds gathered to see the flag unfurled by the *dadis* of Shaheen Bagh (Kuchay 2020), while on 8 March, women flocked to commemorate International Women's Day (Singh 2020b).

Framing the speakers, the stage was decorated with anti-CAA/NRC slogans and posters of Mahatma Gandhi (father of the nation), B.R. Ambedkar (author of the Constitution and Dalit leader), and other secular leaders such as Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (freedom fighter) and Jyotiba Phule (educational reformist and anti-caste leader). Like other protest sites, Shaheen Bagh saw a huge influx of protest art – artists decorated access routes and the site itself with posters, banners, and wall and floor graffiti (The Indian Express n.d.), making it an 'organic, living site for political dissent' (Ghosh 2020, 2). Installations of a mini India Gate with names of people who had lost their lives during the anti-CAA campaign, a map of India, and an overbridge decorated with artwork and painted slogans on its steps were emblematic of the protest.

Speakers on stage were bound by a commitment to secularism and citizenship of a secular nation-state. This was significantly opposed to the Modi–Shah-led BJP's right-wing Hindu nationalism, which had manifested in growing anti-Muslim sentiment in the country, and intolerance of secular ideas. Speakers who digressed and tried to give the protest a religious colour were quickly and efficiently stopped by the women, who were not afraid of interrupting mid-sentence. As one woman expressed: 'Anyone can come here and speak. You can come and speak. But this is not a religious issue. This affects everyone. We are here to protect the Constitution, this is not a Muslim issue' (discussion with woman protestor, Shaheen Bagh, February 2020).

This strategy of using secular symbols and civic idioms over religious identity was successful on two counts. Firstly, it drew women of very diverse identities and backgrounds together in a fight for their and their children's citizenship rights. Secondly, this strategy warded off this becoming a Muslim issue – with subsequent rifts that right-wing opposers could have exploited on religious grounds. Instead, drawing from Benford and Snow (2000, 616–17), this can be analysed as an expression of claims made by protestors as citizens, with prognostic framing of the injustice of the CAA/NRC policies as primary motivation.

Political party leaders were absent on stage. Women disassociated the protest with any particular party – this was especially relevant with the BJP blaming the mobilisation on opposition parties. In fact, this was an early manifestation of state backlash – against which women vocally and publicly reasserted their independence from party affiliation – thereby being exemplars of what Molyneux (2002, 226) called 'autonomous' or 'independent ... [of] the governance of other political agencies'. In some interviews, it was clear women protestors were let down by this party leaders' absence: 'no one has come to talk to us ...' (Kumar 2020). While their main demand was for Modi–Shah to hold direct talks (Basu 2021), they did not want this protest to become a political party battleground: 'there is no [political] party leadership here ... we are ourselves the leaders' (Kumar 2020). This strategy of diffuse leadership was successful in two ways: firstly, it gave everyone a chance to speak and express views; secondly, lack of visible leaders made state machinery unable to target and vilify the leadership.

3.2. The rhythm of Shaheen Bagh: building rotational, shared space

The site had its own 24-hour rhythm – while in the evenings, crowds swelled and the main tent and stage filled with people from both Shaheen Bagh and outside, during the day and late nights the site emptied, with some staying behind. The main tent area was never empty. Women said they 'rotated' through the day, some finishing household tasks in the morning to be able to come for the rest of the day; while others went daily to their jobs and joined the vigil early mornings and late nights. The *dadis* rose to prominence because of their age and spirit of resistance, but also because they stayed entire nights at the protest site (Tarrant 2021). We must take cognisance of this as a deliberate strategy of resistance – especially in the biting cold of Delhi's winter months, December and January. Yet, I draw from my analysis, this also evolved organically – beginning as a few days of sit-ins, to a sit-in for as long as the government did not speak with them.

The 24-hour sit-in drew out women's need to balance paid work and presence in the vigil with unpaid care work responsibilities. Prominent here were two aspects: child care and cooking meals. In both, women's solidarity and ethos of mutual care came through, with women helping each other in domestic responsibilities, and 'claiming public spaces as an extension of domestic life' (Faisal 2020, 771). Women usually kept very young children (below 5 years) around themselves in the tent area, leaving only to bathe and change. For older children (5–15 years approximately), there was a 'reading corner' set up

(explained in Section 3.3), where women could safely (in sight of the main tent) leave children.

As the protest grew in size, so did community support. Most prominent was support by shopkeepers for food – cooked food like *biryani* was regularly distributed, alongside fruit, crisps, and water. Donations by local shopkeepers were supplemented by groups such as Sikh farmers coming from Punjab to set up a *langar*⁶ facility. It was hard to go hungry if sitting in the main tent. During visits, we witnessed regular distribution of food to women and children – and were even pressed to accept food while having our conversations. This was the only time that young men of the area (distributing food and water) were allowed to enter the main tent area which was an exclusively female (and young children) space.

3.3. The side-tents in Shaheen Bagh: growing an ethos of care in the space of resistance

Support of local shopkeepers in food provisioning as well as erecting the main tent and the stage has been noted above. While the main tent remained a domain of women and young children, men often came to the site, surrounding the tent but staying outside the area that women sat in.

In proximity of the main tent was a ‘reading corner’ for children – constructed to give children a safe space to play, read, and make artwork. In this area, individual volunteers as well as volunteers from various organisations taught them art, craft, music; explained about the issues concerning the protest; worked with them to make drawings that expressed their discontent with the proposed laws (Ara 2020); and even helped with homework. Children’s artwork was displayed around this reading corner and around the protest site, showcasing women’s strategy of growing an ethos of care for themselves and their fellow protestors – a strategy that evolved as the protest grew in time and duration. The reading corner also reflected women’s utilisation of the physical space occupied for the protest so as to be able to meet their needs to balance care responsibilities alongside participation in the protest.

In addition to this, we saw three other smaller tents,⁷ operational throughout the day and evenings: a legal tent, a protest library, and a medical tent. In the medical tent, set up by local doctors (Sengupta 2020), women protestors and their children got free medicine for ailments, cuts, and other small medical needs. In the legal tent, a team of lawyers gave protestors legal advice – especially relevant for giving legal replies (Patel 2020) or lodging petitions; a few months after the protest site was demolished, a group of Shaheen Bagh women filed a petition in the Supreme Court against its verdict that protests can only be held in designated spots (The Wire Staff 2020). These tents reflect, once again, the ethos of care that the women of Shaheen Bagh cultivated during the protest, manifested in specific use of the protest’s physical space in order to meet their care needs towards themselves and their fellow protestors.

The third tent, the protest library, was the most interesting, and while this reflects again the innovative use of physical space to further protest requirements, the purpose

of this tent was slightly different. Converted from a bus stop, this started as a small collection of books donated by young students (Singh 2020a). The Fatima Sheikh Savitribai Phule Library (named after two women education reformers) soon grew into a symbol of protest (with even a Facebook campaign launched for book donations), with a separate library for children. A huge poster outside depicted an Indian meme of the iconic 'We can do it!' image⁸ with modified caption: 'we read, we lead'. Pillars of the erstwhile bus stop were covered in protest artwork – blending it with the main tent and surroundings seamlessly. Inside was a massive collection of books – in Hindi, Urdu, and English (Gupta 2020). With an ethos of 'educate, agitate and mobilise' (poster seen inside the library), this library, like counterparts in other parts of Delhi, was seen as a space for alternative learning and for building informed dissent. People from all walks of life participated in 'reading for resistance' – they would write, draw, or even sing about the 'fight to reclaim individual rights, free space and free thinking' here (Roy 2020).

These tents continued throughout the 101-day protest, and highlight how women used the physical spaces of the side-tents to build specific strategies of resistance. They also imbued the figurative spaces of their resistance with an ethos of care, through the setting up and running of these side tents.

3.4. Garnering support from within and beyond Shaheen Bagh

Building coalitions and forming alliances are common strategies of social movements. In the Shaheen Bagh protest, women mobilised support from their own community networks – especially through Facebook and WhatsApp. This allowed the protest to spread to other networks of women. However, unlike many women's movements of South Asia, there was no door-to-door canvassing and, in fact, as women said in interviews, there was no need for this; issues and messages resonated with all families living in Shaheen Bagh uniformly, irrespective of positionalities.

While initially, it was locally resident women who thought of and initiated a peaceful sit-in to make their voices heard, this became the locus of several women's rights organisations who helped organise the protest day by day. The Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA), Pinjra Tod, and the National Women's Association were among organisations that joined and collaborated with the Shaheen Bagh women – explicitly mobilising respective members to come and protest.

This depicts an interesting change in the way the Shaheen Bagh protest mobilised support – instead of women's organisations or grassroots groups initially mobilising women for their cause (Everett 1983; Subramaniam 2006), women's organisations were mobilised to come to the site after hearing about protests staged by the local women. While leaders of these organisations were welcome to give speeches on stage, or work backstage in the day-to-day organising of protest tents, the protest remained led by a diffuse set of women. In line with this, every organisation that participated remained deferential to this strategy of the protest being not led by them, but their presence and 'volunteering' for various tasks remaining an act of solidarity. This underscores the Shaheen Bagh protest as autonomous and 'independent' (rather than 'associational') – where 'women organise on the

basis of self-activity, set their own goals ... [and its] authority resides in the community' (Molyneux 2002, 226). This support stretched the inhabitants of the protest tents beyond local, Muslim women, to a wider range of supporters, all lending further strength and credibility to the protest. Without the Shaheen Bagh women asking, support came from other parts of the country too. Farmers from Punjab were most notable in setting up a *langar* just outside the tent and supplying women protestors with free food (Nagpal 2020).

Significant support also came from young women students from Pinjra Tod, who liaised using modern technologies to track any threat of backlash and warn women in advance of this. In February and March 2020, when we visited, the threat of eviction by the Delhi police, as well as the threat of violence from right-wing extremists, had grown substantially. We witnessed how WhatsApp groups set up by younger (mostly student) supporters of Shaheen Bagh were key in warning women about potential trouble. We heard of drones tracking movements of a particular right-wing Hindu group, news of whose congregating and creating trouble for the Shaheen Bagh women had been obtained through WhatsApp. We were ourselves warned, through WhatsApp, to stay away on specific days given news of trouble or high tension.

The strategies and the framings women used evolved organically, and were continuously reconstituted and adapted as the protest evolved over time – this is in contrast to most social movement literature that focuses on 'strategic processes' of more deliberate framing (Benford and Snow 2000, 624). It also differs from the 'pragmatic decision making' that feminist movements are required to undertake to build wider coalitions (Nazneen and Sultan 2014, 21) – not the purpose of these strategies. The next section deepens this analysis by examining how the responses from the Shaheen Bagh women evolved in the face of backlash.

4. Women's strategies against backlash

Are we going to speak out now, or look away? (Sophia Karim)⁹

The Indian state, under the BJP regime, is increasingly reducing civic space towards any dissent. State intolerance towards anti-CAA protests across the country can be deduced from reports of violence and police brutality in breaking up protests (DW News 2019; Kuchay 2020), despite chief ministers from 11 (opposition-ruled) states openly condemning the CAA (Pandey 2019). Much of the brutality explicitly targeted Muslim-dominated areas – by entering households, breaking things, and roughing up occupants. This 'explicit violence or threat of violence' (Sen *et al.* 2017) was especially prevalent in BJP-ruled states Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka – where several people were killed by police (Sengupta 2020). Therefore, peaceful resistance in Shaheen Bagh, in the face of state prejudice and vitriol, was a 'powerful gesture of strength' (Rai 2021, 267).

Women used a range of strategies to counter the backlash that was levelled against them during this protest. One such was to co-opt back the language and symbols that were used against them – in Benford and Snow's (2000, 617) words, a tactical, 'prognostic

framing’ that re-appropriated the counter-framing being adopted by their opponents. While the BJP IT cell tried to make the issue religious and anti-national – through media reports and social media posts (Chaudhuri 2020) – the protestors adopted civic symbols, and developed their own ‘nationalism’, by close association with the Indian Constitution and the national flag. Women protestors evoked widespread understanding of the spirit of the Constitution through images, songs, poetry, and slogans. While women’s movements had played an important role in nation-building during Independence (Basu 2000), Shaheen Bagh reclaimed notions of what it meant to be a citizen. This reversal of what ‘nationalism’ meant was a critical strategy in overcoming backlash from right-wing forces that had, in recent times, established a very narrow definition of that term, relegating dissenters as ‘anti-national’. Women at Shaheen Bagh insisted on symbols related to the flag and the Constitution, re-appropriating citizenship and nationalism in the Indian context. Thus, Shaheen Bagh protests redefined ‘the very definition and character of the political ... in Indian women’s movements’ (Roy 2020a).

The Delhi police’s surveillance through facial-recognition technologies to identify ‘habitual protestors’ (The Wire 2019) was an attempt to identify and stigmatise the leadership, another common backlash strategy (Flood *et al.* 2018; Sen *et al.* 2017). In response, protestors wrote their names on posters, willingly photographed each other at the site, and circulated these through social media (Banerjee 2020). Attempts to vilify the women as ‘uneducated, poverty stricken’ (Scroll.in 2020) and claiming that they were paid INR500 a day to sit in the protest (Salam 2021) and eat free *biryani*, were countered in the same tone through similar social media outlets. Women protestors gave media interviews (Kumar 2020), some vehemently denying this as a ‘bribe’, while others served a defamation notice against the chief of the BJP IT cell who had alleged that they were being paid to sit in (Patel 2020). Women also said they ate *biryani* every day and did not need to come to the site for that. A social media post showing an elderly woman scolding TV anchors about this rumour, and saying she would pay Prime Minister Modi INR1 Lakh if he came and spoke with them,¹⁰ went viral. This diffused the malignant threat to being no more than a joke.

More dangerous forms of backlash were of women protestors being labelled as ‘terrorists’, with BJP senior leaders like Yogi Adityanath (also the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh), adding that ‘terrorists should be fed with bullets, not *biryani*’ (Petersen 2020). These statements stoked anti-Muslim sentiment, especially during the BJP’s campaign for Delhi’s concurrent elections. These fear-mongering statements led to anxiety and tensions, as protestors geared up to face violent repression from the police, and also face right-wing groups. The community was on edge for days. There was an incident in early January 2020, where a man fired a shot at anti-CAA protestors outside Jamia University, shouting ‘*Yeh Lo Azaadi*’ (Here, take freedom), ‘*Azadi*’ being a common refrain and slogan of anti-CAA protests across India (Wani 2020).¹¹ At Shaheen Bagh as well, we heard slogans raised by the women as ‘*Ham kya chahte: azadi! Zor se bolo: azadi!*’ (What do we want: freedom! Shout loudly: freedom!). Yet despite these tensions, peace at the site was continuously maintained, and a hallmark feature of women’s response to all this fear and anxiety was steely resilience and determination to continue their protest. Strategies

like joking away a potentially harmful and divisive threat, offering flowers to the police, offering up names, showing their faces, and inviting Prime Minister Modi for tea, emerged as effective strategies to counter violent and maligning sentiments. The same resilience and commitment to non-violent demonstrations enabled the Shaheen Bagh women to weather the incredibly stressful and anxious week during which anti-Muslim violence broke out in north-east Delhi (Dhingra 2020). While this created anxiety, anger, and fear in Shaheen Bagh, reinforced by false rumours of violence in areas near the site, protestors and volunteers came together to monitor the situation and ensure the community and protestors of Shaheen Bagh were protected. Women showed an incredibly positive spirit of resistance, taking this as a ‘conspiracy to get us to move ... we have only one option: to keep on protesting [non-violently]’ (Daniyal 2020).

Violent forms of backlash came not directly on Shaheen Bagh, but on supporters – especially the student community. On 5 January 2020, students in one of Delhi’s leading universities, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), were violently attacked by a right-wing student organisation – the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), while the police looked away (Gupta 2020). This backlash against students can be understood ‘as if to say ... if you cannot hit the mothers of Shaheen Bagh, seek out their real and metaphorical children’ (Sengupta 2020). In response, the women of Shaheen Bagh reached out to students: the WhatsApp group of supporters received this poignant message: ‘... to all JNU students and their well wishers, if anyone needs medical treatment or refuge, please contact us immediately, we can reach you’ (Sengupta 2020). This shows high mutual solidarity and the continuation of women’s strategy to build an ethos of care between Shaheen Bagh and the students.

The final backlash to the protest came in terms of regressive administrative reforms and ‘procedure’, usually used to silence women’s movements (Sen *et al.* 2017). As COVID-19 spread throughout the country in March, protestors were asked to leave the site. Initially, protestors managed with social distancing, lesser numbers at the site, masks (The Indian Express 2020), and even benches to accommodate protestors at an acceptable distance from each other (Khan 2020b). However, the backlash continued with calls for site demolition; and even the hurling of a petrol bomb (Sinha 2020). Delhi police finally cleared the protest on its 102nd day, with announcement of a lockdown and enforcement of Section 144 in Delhi. Some protestors were detained, and the site was razed. This signifies the COVID-19 crisis was used as an excuse for further backlash – as protesters had already complied with precautions set out by the government, and yet, police resorted to ‘ruthless dismantling and thoughtless destruction of the markers of our physical protest’ (The Hindu 2020). While this meant that the women had no physical space to protest, they turned to social media – through readings, posts, and even recordings of slogans raised on balconies (Seal 2020).

While the most immediate forms of backlash are those most often talked about, this is often accompanied by insidious and less-visible backlash, with a longer time arc. One type of this repression occurs through discourse around what issues can be validly raised; but also, what sort of identity is acceptable for a protester. At Shaheen Bagh, the notion of who a protestor could be was opened up by active participation of women with disparate

and intersectional identities, as described in Section 3.1. This was met by backlash that percolated through discourses promulgated by prominent state personnel. Three different streams of this discourse can be identified:

- (1) Patriarchal sentiment regarding the role of women as good mothers and good wives, and therefore to stay inside the house. Yogi Adityanath mocked the protest, asking ‘Where are the men? Why were the men of Shaheen Bagh sleeping under the quilt while women were pushed forward?’ (Khan 2020a). At a much later date for the farmers’ protests, the then Chief Justice of India S.A. Bobde made a comment about ‘why old people and women are *kept* in the protests’ (Das 2021), showing how even someone as senior as the chief justice considered women had no agency, and were being told by men what to do and how to protest.
- (2) Religious discourses reinforced by religious texts such as the Quran and Manusmriti regarding the spaces that women should occupy – to remain within the confines of their homes, obey men, and rear the progeny was what a ‘good woman’ did; while also being protected by men (Shukra Raj Adhikari 2020).
- (3) Neo-nationalist discourses about citizens versus outsiders. These discourses aligned to create an atmosphere of prejudice against the protestors, especially amongst the mainstream media, who depicted the Shaheen Bagh women as creating chaos in society by transgressing the notion of the ‘good woman’ (Khan 2020c).

Another type of backlash that was not just episodic and immediate (Faludi 1991; Mansbridge and Shames 2008) – in terms of intimidation, violence, ignoring women protestors, vilification, and use of administrative procedure – but as an instrument of long-term repression of dissent, continues months after demolition of the Shaheen Bagh site. Young feminist activists from Pinjra Tod, Devangana Kalita, and Natasha Narwal, plus several other youth activists from other organisations supporting Shaheen Bagh, have been targeted and jailed for ostensibly inciting violence in north-east Delhi in February 2020. It is no co-incidence, these same youth feminists were the most active volunteers in Shaheen Bagh, and also in mobilising women for the other anti-CAA sit-ins that sprang up over Delhi. They participated and spoke on stage in Haryana, Delhi, and several other places – praising the women for their courage and dedication. They were initially arrested in May 2020 (The Wire 2020), and while Delhi High Court gave bail to several because of lack of clear evidence of them inciting violence in the ‘Delhi riots’,¹² they were subsequently booked under India’s draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA)¹³ – and have only recently been bailed after over a year in jail.

Both these instances of backlash, through discourse and through repression/incarceration, have taken place over a longer time period than the immediate protest. This reflects a strong intentionality of the state to use its mechanisms to repress and incite fear against further protests. This kind of backlash is unprecedented, and highlights the long memory and vindictiveness of the state. Theoretically, these instances point to backlash being

more than just episodic (Faludi 1991; Mansbridge and Shames 2008) but rather, cyclical over time and space, yet also distinct from continuous misogyny faced by women in their everyday lives. In light of this cyclical backlash, women's movements and feminists must build on their strengths, learning new strategies of mobilisation, dissent, and countering backlash from the Shaheen Bagh case, as is discussed in the closing section.

5. Conclusions: lessons for striking back

The claim of equality is not only spoken or written, but is made precisely when bodies appear together, or rather, when through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being. (Butler 2015, 89)

This article has highlighted how women of Shaheen Bagh used a range of strategies and framings to counter the backlash that they faced. Re-framing of citizenship, and re-appropriating narratives of being national, as well as deploying art as resistance (in the form of poems, songs, wall murals, posters, etc.) are some important protest repertoires that the Shaheen Bagh protest adopted. In drawing out these framings, this article has underscored two important aspects that contribute to social movement literature. Firstly, that the framings and strategies were not always intentional, but instead, were primarily constituted and reconstituted over the lifetime of the protest. The strategy of putting women at the forefront of the protest that blocked a main road in India's national capital was pre-planned; but the use of the stage and tent as a pro-constitutional, non-religious space; the rotational 24-hour sit-in and the use of side-tents to facilitate women to carry out their care responsibilities; all came about organically as the protest grew in size and duration. Similarly, the women's strategies of using digital space in the form of social media and their personal communication networks to galvanise support, as well as establishing a symbiotic relationship with student groups, evolved over time – thereby making these very different to the strategic framing (Benford and Snow 2000) or planned performances to a 'script' that are 'pragmatic and actor-centred' (Cadena-Roa and Puga 2021, 104). The organic evolution of these strategies were impacted by (1) the varied identities of the women protestors; and (2) the changing nature of backlash that they faced.

Secondly, this article highlighted that across the variety of strategies adopted in Shaheen Bagh, the use of space in creative ways was primary – including as physical space, digital space, and figurative space. Women used the physical space of a main road as their protest site, thereby calling attention to their cause and building solidarity. Physical space was used innovatively in the ways the main tent was set up, the use of art in the protest site, and in the setting up of side-tents that represented specific strategies of resistance, such as the ethos of care and building informed dissent. The use of physical space here signified both the 'repertoires of performance' (Rai 2014, 3) that the protestors adopted organically, as well as the 'embodied and plural performativity' (Butler 2015, 22) of the protests in order to enact, and oppose the deepening of the precarity of their existence as Indian citizens.

While physical protests have now been made impossible by the spread of COVID-19, virtual protests through social media, virtual get togethers, WhatsApp, and signal groups have found their place alongside singing on balconies (Bhatia and Gajjala 2020; Seal 2020) and prolific media writings (Mustafa 2020). In fact, social media was an integral strategy used to draw out support and attention locally, nationally, and internationally, and to 'challenge the discriminatory protest discourses circulated by the mainstream national/local media channels' (Bhatia and Gajjala 2020, 6300). Thus communication technologies were able to make 'an ongoing show' of the struggle 'that can be retained, recycled and renewed' (Cadena-Roa and Puga 2021, 114) over time and space.

Women also came together to reimagine how protests could take place, imbuing the figurative spaces of their struggle with three aspects: (1) diffuse leadership; (2) the resilience, resolute presence, and agility of the women protestors towards countering backlash; and (3) their ethos of care towards their families, fellow protesters, allies, and even those who stood in opposition to them. It is clear from the discussion of the cyclical and intentional backlash that has come from the Indian state that the ways organising can take place in the current Indian context has shifted to a much more dangerous terrain than before. This necessitates a shift in strategies for feminist organising. There are important lessons that can be learnt from the Shaheen Bagh protests that pertain to these three aspects, as discussed below.

Firstly, the diffuse leadership of the protests showed how a wider base of leaders could develop as and when necessary, with alliances across intersectional and intergenerational identities. Social movements, especially women-led movements in India, have had a direct and clear leadership,¹⁴ which has been critical in mobilising women, even within grassroots movements (Subramaniam 2006). The same was true of student protests against CAA – where students were mobilised through unions and student organisations like Pinjra Tod. However, in Shaheen Bagh, there was no clear organisation,¹⁵ and no specific leadership. This diffuse leadership became a strength, with women from a range of backgrounds owning the struggle. This diffuse leadership can be critical for feminist movements to organise and mobilise a diverse set of women and allies, and to circumvent the 'thorny questions' and power dynamics regarding representation of collective issues through voice, prevalent in more mainstream feminist activism (Nazneen and Sultan 2014, 6). More importantly perhaps, this article shows that diffuse leadership is effective in countering backlash by widening the repertoires of strategies that evolve and are drawn upon by diverse protestors: avoidance of targeting and vilification of individual leaders; opening up a range of responses to malignant backlash (e.g. turning a rumour into a joke); and mobilising support to counter violence and intimidation.

Second, the resilience of the women at Shaheen Bagh has been critical in inspiring present and future generations to claim their rights. Not only have they brought their own children to the protest sites, but also inspired young students and others to engage in a conversation about what the Constitution stands for, debates on the nature of this citizenship, and the importance of rejecting an exclusionary, paper-based notion of citizenship. Their resoluteness has inspired those of us that had lost hope for a check to India's right-wing Hindutva forces. The agility of the protestors to counter backlash teaches future

feminist movements that patriarchal, neo-national, and religious discourse can be countered through everyday conversations, readings, and understandings of the same documents and books. Expansion of and counter-appropriation of the narrative of nationalism was an extremely effective strategy of the protests. The women remained open to learning, to adapting, and to reaching out in unprecedented ways (making jokes, offering flowers, etc.) to those who stood in opposition. They galvanised other sit-ins, transcending immediate geographical borders of their community. Despite the site being demolished, the legacy of Shaheen Bagh lives on in the realm of ideas. It has inspired strategies by the farmers' protests about a year after the Shaheen Bagh protests – including notions of protest libraries (Harshvardhan 2021) and protest art for a deep critique of the anti-intellectualism garnered by right-wing Hindutva forces. The Shaheen Bagh protest not only widened women's spaces in other movements (Chougule 2020; Salam 2021; Shamshad 2021), but importantly, broke 'the myth of muslim men (and Islam) as their oppressors', being successful in 'creating an audience for their self-representation' (Jamil 2020).

Finally, the Shaheen Bagh women reflected a strong ethos of care at the protest site and beyond, creating an atmosphere that was non-violent and welcoming. 'Care was ... a strategy' – women came to protect their children and fronted the movement to protect their men from police violence (Bhatia and Gajjala 2020), similar to international movements like Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina (Sidwell *et al.* 2006). The ethos of care was reflected in how the women balanced and juggled their responsibilities with family members in flexible ways so to be able to support the protest. Children were safe to learn and express feelings regarding the proposed Act; open conversations and debates were held around women's daily routines; and no one was left hungry or thirsty. Women protestors reached out to offer care to students affected by violence and state repression. They forged solidarities with various groups – students,¹⁶ LGBT groups, Dalit activists,¹⁷ farmers, and worker's unions, etc. – extending their ethos of care towards all such groups that had been marginalised by growing right-wing forces. The prime minister and his government were invited to talk over a cup of tea; thereby reflecting the same ethos of care. In the early days of COVID-19, the protestors worked out how to retain their protest alongside complying with state regulations and public health advice, and the spirit of Shaheen Bagh has touched everyone who has engaged with the protest – whether for one day or for the entire 101 days of the sit-in. This spirit is best captured as assertion of inclusionary citizenship, the claim to which is 'built on the nurturing experience of life, not a stamp on a paper' (Sengupta 2020). The Shaheen Bagh women brought their nurturing life experiences to the protest, thereby redefining how everyday politics of resistance is played out. This, perhaps, is the biggest lesson for future feminist organising and resistance in India – the adoption of a strategy of care, even while striking back through non-violent means in the face of violent backlash ensured not only the longevity of the Shaheen Bagh protests, but more critically, the longevity of the message of the protests – that of building an inclusive, diverse, and caring society.

Whether Shaheen Bagh changed the lives of protestors in the long run, or whether they will succeed in keeping the CAA/NRC policies at bay, is a topic for future research. In the short term, their participation brought about changes in individuals in terms of the confidence levels. Women recounted how this feeling of joining the protest gave them the agency to express their citizenship: '*hamein laga yahan aake ki hamne apne desh ke liye kuchh kiya, hamare bachon ke liye kuchh kiya*'¹⁸ (Kumar 2020). Even the *dadis* got confidence to go to different places, without 'permission' or sanction of family members (Tarrant 2021).

At the same time, the protests also heralded the building of solidarity amongst different groups whose voices are traditionally marginalised – building of intergenerational alliances between the young student and the elderly grandmother; and the coming together of queer groups, sex workers, itinerant workers, Dalits, farmers,¹⁹ and immigrants. These cross-sectional alliances have been shown as being crucial to 'sustaining feminist voice and activism' (Nazneen and Sultan 2014, 23), and may yet mean a revival of the Shaheen Bagh protests. Whether or not these mobilisations are able to effect policy change, will depend on a number of aspects, including the political opportunity structures (Tarrow 1996) within India.

Even in the light of presently shrinking civic space, we should not be disheartened. It should be remembered that state policies have, in the past, led to the resurgence of women's activism – as happened post emergency period in India (Basu 2018, 9; Phadke 2003). The Shaheen Bagh example shows how women can make use of physical, digital, and figurative spaces of resistance in new and renewed ways, using strategies that are constituted dynamically as the backlash against them also evolves. Further, whether or not women's activism has been motivated by gender discrimination *per se* or wider economic or political issues, their 'organising experiences' have been instrumental in realisation of their marginalised gender identities over time, as witnessed in the Chipko movement (Heuer 2015, 26). This then, is the final lesson that Shaheen Bagh teaches us for future feminist organising – that striking back against backlash is crucial in of itself. Especially when 'conditions for acting together are devastated or falling away' (Butler 2015, 23), women's coming together and speaking out in unified, progressive ways is imperative – as *our lips are indeed free* – and this itself can herald new opportunities for change today and for future generations – at individual, group, community, and institutional levels.

Notes

1. The CAA was introduced in the Indian parliament by the home minister of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, Amit Shah, in December 2019. This Act amends the original Indian Citizenship Act, to accept all illegal migrants except Muslims, as citizens, if they entered India before 2014. To be implemented alongside the CAA is the NRC – which is a record of all legal citizens of India created after Indians have produced a prescribed set of papers to prove their citizenship. These policies are discriminatory to the rights of Muslims, the poor, and women – who would be rendered stateless in the absence of correct documents to prove their identity. The Acts have been criticised for their attempts to disenfranchise and segregate Muslims in

line with the ethnonationalistic Hindutva (Hindu Nationalism) ideology of the BJP government. The BJP, led by Narendra Modi, the current prime minister of India, since its rise to power seven years ago, has followed a hard line of promoting right-wing extremist ideologies, and building India's identity as a majoritarian Hindu nation (Leidig 2020). The Modi–Shah duo were the main architects of the CAA and NRC policies. For details of the political motivations behind the passing of the CAA, see Bhushan (2021, 202–3).

2. This is evidenced in the springing up of similar protest sites around Delhi (Khejuri, Turkman Gate, and Nizamuddin), Calcutta (Parck Circus), Allahabad (Mansoor Ali Park), Patna (Sabzi Bagh), etc. (Sengupta 2020).
3. In an interview, published at <https://unphilosophe.com/2016/12/19/interview-with-judith-butler-the-freedom-of-assembly-assumes-that-bodies-can-assemble/> (last checked 14 September 2021).
4. The Meira Paibis or women torch bearers of Manipur is a women's social movement that started in 1977 against human rights violations committed by the Indian armed forces against the Manipuri people (Lalzo 2013). In 2004, the women invoked a unique form of protest by standing naked in front of the Indian Army headquarters and urging the men to come and rape them – this protest was against the violent rape and killing of Manorama Devi, a suspected maoist insurgent (Chakravarti 2010).
5. A *mela* is a fair, characterised by the selling of ware related to the fair's theme, food stalls, and general camaraderie between people of various ages that are present at the fair.
6. A *langar* is a community kitchen, usually operational in a Gurudwara (Sikh temple), which offers free meals to everyone, irrespective of religion, caste, gender, etc.
7. There was also a media desk established in early February as a response to misreporting and heckling of reporters (Khan 2020a), although this was not operational at the time of our visits.
8. The 'We can do it!' image was created by artist Howard Miller during the Second World War for Westinghouse Electric in order to motivate their female workforce. It became famous in the 1980s, and has been associated with American feminism and empowerment, as the image is of a strong, female worker.
9. Inspired by Shaheen Bagh, UK artist Sophia Karim set up Turbinebagh, a joint artists' movement to support the resistance through demonstrations involving art, writings, and protest songs that she planned at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall (www.sofiakarim.co.uk/turbinebagh, last checked 14 September 2021).
10. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRCGv0R73f4 (last checked 14 September 2021).
11. The slogan of *azadi* or freedom was initially raised in Kashmir as a separatist slogan, but the anti-CAA protests have reimagined and re-interpreted this slogan to mean freedom from authoritarianism and discrimination, and freedom to protest (Wani 2020).
12. The way that this incident is written about differs as per the political orientation of the author. I refuse to use the term 'Delhi Riots' which hides the fact these were pre-meditated attacks on Muslims in the north-east of Delhi (Malik 2020).
13. The UAPA is India's counter-terror law, aimed at prevention of activities that are a threat to the country's integrity and sovereignty. It makes bail difficult, with up to six months of custody possible without a charge sheet. While its arbitrary application by the BJP government has come under scrutiny recently by various courts, lots of Indian activists and journalists are still languishing in jails, with the Act being applied as a political weapon to silence dissent (Kuchay 2021).
14. This leadership has been clear irrespective of whether the mobilisation has had a clear agenda towards gender justice (e.g. the Gulabi Gang – a vigilante group working to counter violence against women, including domestic violence), or arisen out to address economic conditions of failed development policies, e.g. the Chipko movement or the Dasholi Gram Swarajya Sangh (DGSM; or the Dasholi Society for Village Self Rule) (Heuer 2015). Mobilisation through leaders

has also been the hallmark of both autonomous and affiliated women's movements (Ray 1999, 14–16).

15. This is significant given the continuing trend of 'NGOisation' that has been characteristic of much feminist mobilising in South Asia (Roy 2012).
16. The strong reciprocal solidarity between the Shaheen Bagh women and the student community has been termed 'amniotic, umbilical' (Sengupta 2020). Mothers had come out in support of their children – attacked by the Delhi police in Jamia; and correspondingly, the students had stepped up as volunteers and artists to support their mothers' vigil. The students faced violence, as a repercussion of their support; and continue to be incarcerated by the Indian state under false allegations.
17. The leader of the Bhim Army, Chandra Shekhar Azad, visited Shaheen Bagh and received a warm welcome (Scroll Staff 2020).
18. Translates as: 'We felt that by coming here, we have done something for our country, we have done something for our children.'
19. The support of rural farmers from the Punjab was reciprocated by the women when the farmers' protests began, with asking for a joint hearing with the farm laws (SabrangIndia 2021) and Bilkis *dadi* standing up publicly to back protests (Tarrant 2021).

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