

The Shaheen Bagh Strike: Muslim Women and Political Protest in Contemporary India

by Moumita Biswas

Abstract: The Shaheen Bagh protest in New Delhi highlighted the changing dynamics of Muslim women's participation in socio-political movements in India. This paper argues how Muslim women proved themselves to be concerned citizens while protesting against the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) and other forms of social discrimination. The paper analyses the Shaheen Bagh protest from an intersectional perspective to understand how Muslim women voiced their political opinions negotiating with gender and religion-based discrimination; they had to fight the multiple forms of patriarchy of Indian society while protesting against hypermasculine Hindutva politics. The Shaheen Bagh protest can be called a feminist strike of Third World women for the rights of their religious community in a particular socio-political context.

Keywords: feminist strike; intersectional feminism; multiple patriarchies; Shaheen Bagh

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What is the Shaheen Bagh protest?

The women's protest in the Shaheen Bagh of New Delhi, which began in 2019, represented the changing dynamics of women's participation in socio-political movements in India. The movement was initiated by students in New Delhi against the long-debated Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 (CAA). The act aimed to provide citizenship to non-Muslim migrants and refugees in India, but at the same time it was seen as a tool to deprive Muslims in India of citizenship. The community members of Shaheen Bagh, a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood in New Delhi joined the protest from December 15, 2019, onwards (Salam 2020, 28).

In the Shaheen Bagh strike, women responded to different issues threatening the integrity of democratic values enshrined in the constitution. The participants of the movement were demonstrating against the discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). This controver-

sial bill discriminates against people for their religion, thus opposing both the right to equality and the prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of religion specified in Article 15(1) of the Indian constitution. The protesters at Shaheen Bagh also opposed the institutionalised casteism of the university administration, by paying tribute to Dalit student activist, Rohith Vemula (Wire 2019). They responded to socio-economic discrimination by highlighting the alarming rates of farmer suicide and farmer agitation in response to controversial amendments in the farm laws (Krishnan 2022). Their homage to the martyrs of the Pulwama attack of 2019, in the form of artwork, conveyed that Muslim women are patriotic citizens demanding justice for the martyrs of the Indian state (Salam 2020, 37). They demanded the rights of the Muslim community, agitated against social discrimination, and dismissed the stereotypical image of anti-national Muslims.

Women took a central role in Shaheen Bagh. Their slogans included *Hum Dekhenge* (We Will See), *Hum*

Kagaaz Nahi Dikhaenge (We Will Not Show Our Documents), and *Inquilaab Zindabad* (Hail Revolution). In many ways, the movement celebrated “the idea of India” and was an assertion of overcoming the psychology of fear perpetrated by Hindutva politics (Salam 2020, 16). The women of Shaheen Bagh were fighting against the fear of being the minority in a time of majoritarian politics and patriarchy that emanates from hyper-masculine nationalism (Salam 2020, 59). In addition to Muslim women, many sympathetic people joined the protest. The national flag was hoisted on the 71st Republic Day by a group of older women, and the preamble to the constitution was read in English, Hindi, and Urdu to represent and support the pluralistic ethos of India (Salam 2020, 37). The movement showed how the majoritarian politics of Hindutva ideology threatened the integrity of the Indian nation-state, and as concerned citizens, Muslim women took responsibility to protect the inclusive values enshrined in the constitution.

The Political Voice of Muslim Women in India

The movement of Shaheen Bagh was politically motivated, but it had certain important aspects in terms of women’s representation in the socio-political realm. It was one of those key moments in Indian politics when women from marginal communities came to the forefront and challenged the state’s role in the marginalisation of their community. Such an assertion opposed the Indian state and challenged society’s predominant view of Muslim women as backwards in terms of political representation.

Indian society is comprised of multiple patriarchies (Sangari 1995, 3287). For Muslim women, patriarchal oppression comes from religious, ethnic, and linguistic communities, and they are oppressed by the state for being Muslim and for being women. Indian society is divided on issues like caste, class, and gender, where upper-caste/class Hindu men or Brahmins dominate the society (Chakravarti 2018, 33). Lower caste and minority women are located at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and their voices are silenced in many ways. Therefore, the oppression of Muslim women must be understood from an intersectional perspective, as they are oppressed for their religious identity as well as gender identity in a society governed by the Brahmanical patriarchy. The Indian state has adopted personal laws which are based on religious practices; these laws regulate issues such as the

family, inheritance, marriage, maintenance, and adoption. Personal laws are practised as a measure to preserve the pluralistic ethos in the country, but this concept of preserving heterogeneity in the form of maintaining personal laws has not been supported by all political factions (Sangari 1995, 3289). For example, the Hindutva ideology has never supported the continuation of personal laws, which began as a strategy of governance in the colonial period (Lateef 1994, 39).

The majoritarian Hindutva politics argues that a uniform civil code is needed to safeguard the interests of women from the minority community and emphasizes how majority communities have equal rights ensured by the Indian Constitution, but Muslim women are deprived of those rights. Instead, Muslim women are forced to follow regressive personal laws. Certain personal laws for the Muslim community indeed prefer the values of Sharia customs, depriving women of many rights ensured by the secular constitution, but the question of a uniform civil code remains a debatable topic because the uniform civil code tends to prefer a majoritarian voice, even at the cost of oppressing the minority (Sangari 1995, 3296). Therefore, the image of the Indian state trying to save Muslim women from debilitating community customs appears to be an opportunistic one. As a result, Muslim women must negotiate between different kinds of power structures and layers of patriarchal oppression within and outside of their community.

The majoritarian Hindutva politics controls the minority community by exercising power over the minority women. For example, in communal violence, the bodies of minority/other women become the targets of physical and sexual violence for the majoritarian community (Sangari 1995, 3294). In the Indian context, the majoritarian groups try to control the lower caste and religious minority groups by subjugating women from those communities. In these ways, the women of marginalized communities are disproportionately and systematically made vulnerable. Majoritarian politics also tend to emphasize the patriarchal control within the community to portray the community as backwards in terms of women’s empowerment, but they forget to mention how the politics of vulnerability helps to maintain the status quo by marginalizing minority women.

The voices of women in the public protest of Shaheen Bagh have challenged the politics of governance through the production of vulnerability, and highlighted that Muslim women are active agents in the political domain

capable of overcoming the fear perpetrated by majoritarian politics. Their protest to ensure the rights of the Muslim community is a feminist assertion, and although the protest in Shaheen Bagh focused on the rights of one religious community, their demands emphasized the needs and experiences of women from different minority groups. They did not subscribe to the idea that women from all socio-political domains have similar problems or experiences, and therefore should seek justice against oppression following a singular political trajectory. Instead, the protest highlighted the experiences of Muslim women in India who had a particular problem in a given socio-political scenario under the rule of majoritarian Hindutva politics. Such a protest should be analysed from an intersectional perspective. Women in Shaheen Bagh negotiated with multiple patriarchies while articulating their political voice, and the protest revealed the changing dynamics between Muslim women, religious patriarchy, and the Indian state.

Why is Shaheen Bagh a Feminist Strike?

The term “feminist strike” evokes the international women’s movement for eradicating inequality in personal and public spaces (Gago 2018, 662). In India, women from the upper-class and upper-caste Hindu backgrounds were able to formulate a feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s; however, women from lower castes and minority religions did not have a chance to voice their opinion or experiences in the movement led by those Savarna feminists (Rege 1998, 39). It is not enough for women from the Dalit or minority section to fight only against gender-based discrimination; Dalits and other marginal women must recognize and resist different layers of exploitation in Indian society. In this way, the movements of marginal women from the so-called Third World diverge from the second-wave feminist strikes led by white feminists and are better understood through an intersectional lens (Crenshaw 1991).

The Shaheen Bagh protest can be analyzed as a women’s political movement concerning the issues of the Third World, where women from different backgrounds and age groups participated and stressed multiple concerns. A few protesters at Shaheen Bagh were homemakers, but working women from different age groups were also engaged. It was the grandmothers or *Daadis* who led the movement. The protest was not limited to Delhi but spread across different cities of India, namely Lucknow,

Prayagraj, Kolkata, Bengaluru, Chennai, and Patna (Salam 2020, 130).

The Shaheen Bagh strike was aimed at a political goal, to stop the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 by bringing the concerns of Muslim women to the masses. The women were aware that the Muslim community was becoming the target of discriminatory Hindutva politics for their religious identity. The protesters of Shaheen Bagh also understood how Dalits and other marginalized communities would face discrimination in the future for the political gain. Therefore, the Shaheen Bagh event became a symbolic protest against hyper-masculine Hindutva politics to protect the rights of minorities, Dalits and other marginalized sections.

In this strike, Indian women were exposing and resisting layers of patriarchal oppression to defend the democratic ethos of the Indian nation state. Analyzing the Shaheen Bagh strike from an intersectional perspective makes it possible to understand the nuances of Indian Muslim women’s protest actions in a country that subjugates them for their religious and gender identity. Shaheen Bagh is a feminist strike for the rights of Indian Muslim women who have to challenge multiple patriarchies; while doing so they re-emphasised the values written in the constitution of secular democracy. Indian Muslim women’s attempts to protect and reinforce the rights of their religious community under majoritarian politics is a political struggle as well as a feminist strike of contemporary times.

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