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## Art as Resistance in Shaheen Bagh

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“It was the photograph of a mother holding a 20-day-old baby at Shaheen Bagh. She is sitting there. And below the photo were the following lines from the anthem: Ghoro timiro ghano nibiro nishithey / Peedito murchhito deshey / Jagrato chhilo tobo abicholo mongalo natonayane animeshey / Dushwapney aatankey rakkha kariye ankey / Snehamayi tumi mata (‘In the bleakest of nights when the country is wilting away / you, the compassionate mother, kept unwavering vigil, blessing and protecting us’)...It was like a pieta.”

- Moushumi Bhowmik

In December 2019, the Indian government passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which would provide non-Muslim asylum-seeking minorities from neighbouring countries an opportunity to claim Indian citizenship. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) gives power to the government to seek proof of citizenship from civilians and identify their ‘legitimacy’ through the provision of certain key documents. The strong anti-Muslim overtone of this Act, which would make Muslim migrants ineligible to seek asylum, galvanized public dissent, which had been simmering because of the divisive politics and policy-making of the ruling government, and started a series of protests all across India. To curb dissenting voices as well as anti-CAA marches, the police was deployed on peaceful protestors which led to numerous scuffles, the most widely publicized being the police brutality faced by students of Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi. On December 15th 2019, as an aftermath of police brutality on peacefully protesting students, the residents and locals of the adjacent neighbourhood of Shaheen Bagh started an indefinite sit-in. Shaheen Bagh thus became the locus of peaceful political dissent, with its brave women as its fearless leaders. Students, activists and protestors from all across Delhi would go to Shaheen Bagh to participate in the sit-in, where artists, singers, poets, musicians, and young emerging political voices would come together in solidarity. Shaheen Bagh became an organic, living site for political dissent where people would sing of revolution, create art and murals on every surface to mark the protest, and would read the preamble of the Indian Constitution as a reminder that India is a democratic country, and most importantly, a secular one.

Even before reaching Shaheen Bagh, where the women sat with their daughters and grand-daughters in silent, powerful defiance against the political violence of Hindutva which aims to divide the country on religious lines and caste-based atrocities, one is introduced to Shaheen Bagh through the numerous murals. The street art guides you – there used to be graffiti, everywhere. Artists had drawn and stencilled the walls of every blank surface at Shaheen Bagh, installed pieces such as a cage (evoking the concentration camps that were being built in states such as Assam) as well as the India gate, the map of India, all reinstating the sentiments of the importance of secularism, democracy and freedom of speech.

There used to be an open library in the middle of the protest site, named ‘The Fatima Sheikh-Savitribai Phule Library’ after two iconic activists who triumphed over every obstacle despite belonging to spheres of domesticity and marginalised communities, and championed education for women. Their struggles were far greater because they were ‘doubly-othered’, firstly because they were women, and secondly because neither of them belonged to the upper-class, upper-caste, Hindu majority that held the power to make changes in the education sector. The library had works by B.R. Ambedkar, Mannu Bhandari, Rabindranath Tagore, Arundhati Roy and Gauri Lankesh, Bhagat Singh's jail diary as well as political treatises from Gandhi, Nehru and Kalam. Shaheen Bagh was not only about politics, but it was also about art and education, and about the women who braved the Delhi winter and sat with strangers in solidarity against the iron fist of the government, its propaganda, its brute force and its divisive politics of hatred.

The makeshift stage was used by local children and seasoned politicians alike for making speeches, singing protest songs, offering prayers to gods in every religion and re-affirming their sense of belonging by celebrating dissent. Faiz Ahmad Faiz's ‘nazm’ Hum Dekhenge was deemed ‘anti-national’ because of its subversive lyrics, and was misinterpreted to have religious overtones instead of being a defiant criticism of oppressive regimes, but it became the anthem of these protests, as did renditions of the popular Italian protest folk song Bella Ciao, but the one slogan which became the sound for these protests was – azadi.

This slogan was borrowed by Kamla Bhasin from women activists from Pakistan who wanted freedom from oppressive shackles, and was immensely popular in Kashmir where azadi became the ubiquitous chant for empowerment in the valley. However, being adapted from the Kashmiri pedigree and context, this slogan first became sensational when student activists from Jawaharlal Nehru University were arrested on charges of sedition and the use of this chant was banned as ‘anti-national’. However, as the likes of Kanhaiya Kumar and Umar Khalid have increasingly popularized this chant for freedom, it has become a vehicle to voice dissent. Azadi, thus can be from any vice, any corruption – from jaatwad (casteism), manuwad, (Manusmriti), bhookmari (hunger) – and has transcended from being a political cry into

popular culture. It has been used by both folk protest singers, such as Sheetal Sathe of Pune's Kabir Kala Manch who sang, "Azadi hamaara khwaab hai, yeh gulab nahin inquilaab hai" (Azadi is our dream, this rose is the revolution) as well as by hip-hop artist Dub Sharma. In 2014, the rapper used Kanhaiya Kumar's notorious speech and used it in his anthem against corruption, officially introducing Azadi into the mainstream, which was used by Zoya Akhtar in her latest movie Gully Boy, popularizing the concept of the azadi slogan further. From N.W.A to Kendrick Lamar, to nascent Indian and Russian artists, hip-hop has emerged as a form of protest music, giving dissenting voices a platform to express their disappointment and make demands for better policy-making.

In March, when COVID-19 made its presence felt throughout the nation, the indefinite sit-in was disbanded after a hundred days. Shaheen Bagh had seen numerous forces, from armed goons, open firing, policing by the State, but it was not moved by intimidation. However, because of COVID-19, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain social distancing while occupying public spaces, especially occupying spaces as a form of protest. The world has since last year been quarantined, but it has also come down to the streets to speak against atrocious racially-motivated crimes. In 2014, the 'Lennon Walls' had emerged has signs of protests all across Hong Kong; inspired by the Umbrella Movement, walls around Hong Kong were filled with sticky notes with messages in support and solidarity for Hong Kong's demand of universal voting franchise. However, as I write this, the notes have been taken down because of fear caused by Beijing's new anti-protest laws. Nevertheless, the protestors have replaced the previously vocal sticky notes with blank ones. After Shaheen Bagh was cleared, the government was swift in re-painting the walls, replacing the graffiti-laden walls with a never-ending white. However, both the blank sticky notes and the white walls of Shaheen Bagh are symbols – of oppression, of erasure and of resistance. Some symbols are removed by governments out of fear that they might thwart the status quo; some monuments and statues are protected by governments out of fear that history might be re-written, or re-claimed. Thus, it depends on us, who are the resistance, to choose what history we might write for ourselves, and the legacy we might want to leave behind.

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### **Author Biography**

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Adrija Ghosh is currently pursuing her master's degree in Comparative Literature at the University of Edinburgh. Her primary research interests are postcolonial theory and studies, world cinema and film theory, adaptation studies, Intermediality, poetry and comparative literature. She is currently working on her dissertation which revolves around intertextuality, feminist criticism and modernity in India.