

An Introductory Note

Footage of the 2019 Indian people's protest movement has lived several lives. First, it flashed across social media as evidence of state brutality: shaky, unstable photographs and videos taken on smartphones of students and activists confronted by police and army officials in riot gear flooded our screens. It was later repurposed, entering courtrooms and charge sheets as key evidence against a group of unarmed young activists who were involved in the protests. This essay tracks some of this footage; it is an attempt at writing a history. Many of this history's protagonists—young women, activists, academics—are currently incarcerated, in pre-trial detention, or living under the fear of arrest. The protest sites have been demolished. The public space that had held the critical conversations produced by the movement—conversations that questioned words like “democracy” and “citizenship”—are now more intensely surveilled. The images that remain as proof of this time are being

manipulated and reframed. As viewers, we have become forensic examiners, we stay with the small details, those that testify to the collective acts of resistance and their brutal suppression. These details provide a system of accountability, they are record and document, but also something else, something more abstract and intangible: their analysis affords us certain powers, powers that are necessary to counter the state's looming enormity, its absolute control. We are being asked to forget, but this essay is an attempt to remember.

In late November 2019, students in Guwahati, a valley city in India's northeastern state of Assam, took to the streets, holding flickering bamboo torches. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's central government was about to introduce two new laws in parliament that effectively legalized religious and caste-based discrimination. The first was the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 (CAA), a revision to the Citizenship Act of 1955, which added new conditions to the granting of Indian citizenship. Modi's update included a religious classification—when granting asylum to religious minorities, it excluded Muslims. The second law was a National Register of Citizens (NRC), an addition to the National Population Register (NPR), which required Indians to provide documentation, if and when asked by local state authorities, as proof of ancestry. This targeted indigenous and lower-caste communities, who are often undocumented, with no rights to the land they occupy or work on. The two laws are designed to work in tandem: one in determining who gets to call themselves Indian, and the other in imprisoning those whose definition the state finds lacking. Detention centers were readied; in Assam, people had already been taken in under the NRC. The students of Guwahati and beyond were leading protests against the

II.

The CAA and NRC's intentional targeting of Muslims was the latest in a slew of policies and paperwork that sought to alienate, and eventually obliterate, the Islamic history of the Indian subcontinent. The Mughal-era was being removed from school textbooks by state orders, and fake news circulated that attempted to revise that same history as violent and oppressive to Hindus. Denying India's vast and diverse Muslim legacy was also an act of negating the contemporary lived experience of Indian Muslims. The Modi regime was being systemic: erasing a past only to set the precedent for the erasure of futures to come.

But the passing of the CAA and NRC proved to be a tipping point, and a movement bloomed across the country. India was energized by a revolutionary spirit. Muslim, Dalit, and Adivasi students, activists, writers, musicians, and poets addressed crowds at twenty-four-hour sit-ins and occupations of public space. People shared snacks, and held hours-long debates about the intention of words like "citizenship" and "democracy." In large part, the protests were led by Muslim women who centered their activism on building community spaces. Women who were still required to attend to the invisible labor of the

household before they could come to the protest sites; women whose children looked on, inspired by their actions. It was not a movement of patriarchs, or individuals, but a tender, lively intimacy. Small libraries and day-care centers were constructed, where adolescents and teenagers read the writings of revolutionaries who had come before them. They recorded what they saw, making drawings and watercolors of the protest sites. The children produced portraits of their mothers, whom they depicted standing alongside magical animals and hybrid machines. Their artworks were pinned onto walls and fences, lined bus stops and metro stations; they became a living, imaginative record of the movement as it grew.

At dawn on January 17, 2020, a forty-foot-tall iron sculpture was installed by students under a footbridge on the Delhi-Noida highway, which passed through a protest site in northeast New Delhi, Shaheen Bagh. It was an outline of the map of India, and inscribed within it was a slogan: "Hum Bharat ke log CAA-NPR-NRC nahi maante." *We the people of India, say no to CAA-NPR-NRC.* Made by artists Pawan Shukla and Veer Chandra from West Bengal, the sculpture was a decisive gesture: towering and monumental. India's borders were illuminated by a flickering red neon light. The sculpture mimicked the grandstanding nature of the Modi regime's own architecture and public artworks, which are characterized by

enormity and ostentation. A basket of onions was placed in front of it. That week, the price of onions had reached an all-time high. It was a simple juxtaposition to remind viewers of how the country—in particular, its agrarian labor force—was battling exorbitant and escalating inflation, news of which had been overshadowed by the citizenship laws and ensuing protests.

Not far from this iron map, another group of students installed a ten-foot cardboard replica of India Gate. The monument, located on the eastern edge of the “ceremonial axis” of New Delhi, was formerly known as the All India War Memorial and first unveiled in 1931 in memory of the 90,000 soldiers who died in service of the British Army during World War I and the Third Afghan War. Designed by Edward Lutyens—the colonial English architect responsible for the political corridors of New Delhi, its parliament house, and grand promenades—India Gate was intentionally left without any religious iconography. Its dusty red walls, made from sandstone quarried in Bharatpur, Rajasthan, are inscribed with the names of fallen soldiers. At Shaheen Bagh, the cardboard version was propped up on kiln bricks, a small Indian flag fluttering at its top. Inscribed in black marker pen down the sides, was a list of the protestors who had so far lost their lives. It was made from flimsy paper, and fought against strong wind. This seemed to capture the reality

of the situation: these were the names that would not be commemorated, these were the names that the state was committed to forget.

The Modi regime led a coordinated effort to brand the protests as unlawful and violent. Tensions ran especially high in New Delhi. In February 2020, violence raged through the city’s northeastern neighborhoods. Muslims were targeted by Hindu mobs, as groups of masked civilians burned down shops and threw cooking-gas bombs through windows, and at cars. Rather than stopping the bloodshed, footage from the scene showed the police watching on. Hundreds were injured, and at least seventy people are known to have died. In March 2020, the New Delhi Police filed a case claiming that the attacks were the result of a conspiracy led by a group of young activists, and a series of arrests were made in what is now known as the “Delhi riots case.”

After COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic, the central government announced a nationwide lockdown. One day after it was implemented, public officials were sent to demolish protest sites. They painted over slogans on walls; removed the artworks; destroyed the libraries and makeshift clinics; stripped away the rugs and bedding that had been carefully laid out to keep attendees warm through the long nights. The protests had built

solidarities between the urban elite and those that had been on the frontlines of dissent for years previous; between people of different genders, ethnic identities, and religious beliefs. This upset the Modi regime's positioning of the Hindu nation-state as the only antidote to India's decades of communal violence and corruption. The Hindu nation-state proposed that India may only be unified under the aegis of a single identity; the protests showed that Indians thrive in the recognition and caring negotiation of their difference. That women and young students were leading the protests only further articulated the desire of many Indians to build a different future, to imagine a different system of community. This was a deeply ideological threat, one that undermined the foundations of the Modi government, and its arsenal began to do everything in its power to counter it. Systematically, the non-violent and discursive nature of the movement was reframed as riotous by the central government, state-controlled media, and a concerted spread of fake news. Many of the movement's leaders are still being held in pre-trial detention at maximum-security prisons across the country. They continue to file petitions; they are rarely granted bail.

III.

On September 16, 2020, a group of independent journalists, activists, and academics held a conference in the tree-shaded courtyard of the Press Club of India in New Delhi. A pre-recorded video was switched on. "If you are watching this," said the lone figure on the screen, "it means I have been arrested." Umar Khalid, a young Muslim activist and scholar of indigenous histories, had been taken into custody three days prior. After being interrogated for eleven hours by a special cell of the Delhi Police—assembled to investigate the Delhi riots case—he was booked under sections of the Indian Penal Code, the Prevention of Damage to Public Property Act, and the Arms Act. He was charged with rioting, conspiracy, murder, and arms trade. Allegedly, the evidence incriminating Khalid ran to a hundred thousand pages. "What is the risk I pose?" he asks in the video, continuing, "Is it that I claim this country to be as much mine as it is yours?" Dressed in a pale cotton shirt, seated in front of a blank, white wall, Khalid is speaking from the past with a warning for the future. As he talks, he gesticulates with one hand, his movements punctuating what he says: "They are trying to trap you in their lies."

Images



Guwahati, India, December 11, 2019: Police fired teargas to demonstrators while protesting against the government's Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB).



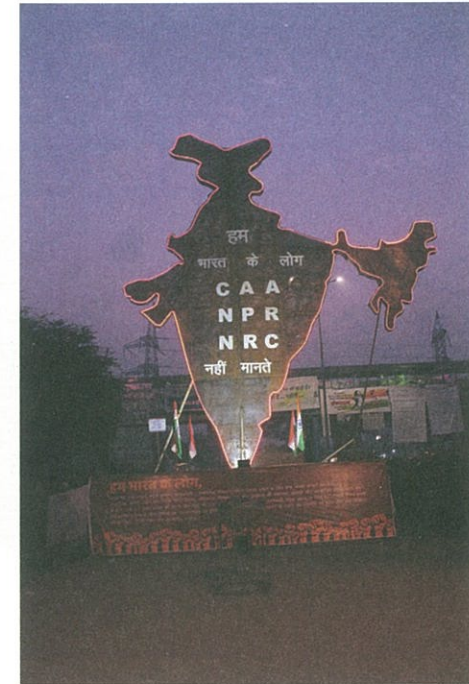
Guwahati, India, December 11, 2019: Police use water cannons to disperse demonstrators during a protest against the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB).



Shaheen Bagh area, New Delhi, India, January 23, 2020: An NGO by the name of India Reads, India Resists set up a study and painting area for the children whose mothers were taking part in the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC).



Shaheen Bagh area, New Delhi, India, January 23, 2020: An NGO by the name of India Reads, India Resists set up a study and painting area for the children whose mothers were taking part in the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC).



New Delhi, India, January 21, 2020: An art installation, "Map of India," with slogans against the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and the National Population Register (NPR) was erected in Shaheen Bagh.

