

Anatomy of a Protest

In this account of the protests in Chennai against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and National Register of Citizens, important questions about the nature of dissent and who is allowed to protest are brought to the fore.

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When we look back at our history, with India at the cusp of two decades, we will recall this political moment as one marked by a deep schism in our polity in response to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC). Lakhs of Indians have come out onto the streets to register their protest against the relegation of Muslims and indigenous tribes to second-class citizens. These (largely peaceful) protests have been met with violent repression and detainment by the police across Indian cities. In light of these political developments and the brutal violence of the past month alone, there are important questions to be answered: who is this country for, who is allowed to protest, and what is the nature of dissent at this critical juncture?

In Chennai, the first major public protest happened on 16 December 2019. We gathered with placards and slogans, and watched politicians speak about the injustice of the CAA while also pillorying their adversaries. The beat of the *parai* drum was electric and the chief sloganeer led us to animatedly raise our voices to decry how the CAA and NRC combined can affect its own citizens. The slogans simultaneously expressed outrage, hurt, and importantly, unity. The feeling of people coming together suffused the air with a brief optimism that the situation might turn out differently.

The next day, there was a student-led protest at a university campus. Some of us went to show our solidarity, but the gates had already been closed, and a battalion of policemen and policewomen had gathered with their vans, lathis, and the deterring effect of their uniformed presence. In a surrealist twist, right as we arrived at the university, a policeman was doling out plates of biryani to the other 20-odd personnel, standing around with their lathis sticking out like a first warning. When we joined up with the student protestors who were behind the gates, the biryani was abandoned for an interrogation about our identity cards. Denied entry on account of not being students of the university, we stood outside with our placards and slogans. Three chants in, the police encircled us and declared that we were under arrest. It had been less than a minute since we had assembled there.

The policeman in charge announced that we had “broken a law.” We argued that Section 144 had not been imposed, making his argument, that people could not assemble in groups of more than four, void. But the police van began to pull up, and we tried to get away as he threatened to detain us. A man in plainclothes video-recorded this entire interaction. A few days later now, the video is trending on Twitter among

right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party supporters who claim that the group of women in the video were “paid” protestors, not really students, and were stirring up trouble for no reason. Other comments are far more vitriolic, urging the police to identify the people in the video, enact violence, lock the women up.

Beyond the misogyny of the comments, the aggression appears to stem from the threat and affront presented by the image of a young woman raising her voice at the policeman threatening to arrest her, not only refusing to oblige, but also calling him out on furnishing a court order that did not exist. As a result, in the comments, she is a liar, she is a fake protestor, and paid by the opposition to be there. There is something about this moment that has allowed for the weaponisation of the power of social media and selective visuals.

What are the optics of a protest? We protest because we want to be seen by the agents of the state as registering our dissent, and we hope that the media will portray our struggle accurately. At the same time, a protest also allows for grandiose performances of “wokeness” and social grandstanding to claim that one is socially aware and “awake” (hence, the pop-culture term “woke”). Though being seen as dissenting is part of the protest, hollow rhetoric

has no place in a fraught political moment. Finally, being seen can be the very thing that is turned against a protestor by those who want to discredit that protest. In capturing partial and misleading visuals, and doctoring videos or photographs, those supporting the CAA and NRC can misattribute violence to protestors, discredit their legitimacy, and “out” the protestors to those that might turn their vitriol against them: parents, relatives, and neighbours. Young students are a vulnerable group whose agency can be undermined by familial control, social surveillance, and the fear of retribution.

What can unsettle authoritarianism more effectively than undiluted outrage, hurt, and dissent? In the fight against a “saffronising” India, students are targeted because they represent a threat to a state that is smug in its own moral authority. Here are two groups laying claim to different futures, knowing there will only be one outcome. Political parties enjoy the protection of the police—they can easily obtain permissions, and the organisational work follows a clear and established chain of command. Students, on the other hand, have no vested interest in furthering their hold over vote banks or other stakeholders. In fact, the repercussions for them are the greatest should they be detained, misrepresented, or outed to their families. Yet, despite these risks, they show up

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on the streets to stand in solidarity with other citizens being killed, shamed, and edged out of the democratic pie, if there is one at all. And herein lies the power of student protests that presents a threat to the supporters of the CAA and NRC as well as to an authoritarian regime.

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