

# Nationalisms by, against and beyond the Indian state

Rahul Rao

On 26 January 2020, thousands of people cheered as four women hoisted the Indian flag in Shaheen Bagh, a predominantly Muslim locality in New Delhi, which had become the epicentre of protests against the highly controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) that was passed in December 2019. Three of the women referred to as the *dadis* (grandmothers) of Shaheen Bagh – Bilkis (82), Asma Khatoon (90) and Sarvari (75) – were leading figures in the sit-in protest in this locality that began soon after the law was passed and that has inspired scores of similar protests in other cities. The fourth, Radhika Vemula, is the mother of Rohith Vemula, a Dalit student whose suicide in January 2016 triggered widespread protests against caste discrimination. The flag hoisting, accompanied by the singing of the national anthem and other patriotic songs, marked India's 71st Republic Day, which commemorates the coming into force of the Indian Constitution.<sup>1</sup> It offered a popular counterpoint to the annual state-orchestrated military parade in the centre of New Delhi that is typically the focus of public attention. On the same day in the southern state of Kerala, seven million people formed a 620 kilometre-long human chain stretching from one end of the state to the other and took a mass oath to defend the Constitution against what they saw as the CAA's 'attempts to subvert and destroy it'.<sup>2</sup>

The demonstrations in Shaheen Bagh and Kerala were two of thousands that rocked India for nearly three months since mid-December 2019, when the CAA was passed. The Act offers a fast track to citizenship for non-Muslims fleeing religious persecution in predominantly Muslim Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Its opponents argue that in introducing a religious qualifica-

tion for Indian citizenship for the first time, it strikes at the root of the Constitution's commitment to secularism. The Act follows on the heels of an effort to compile a National Register of Citizens (NRC) in the northeastern state of Assam, responding to long-running protests by the state's majority ethnic Assamese population against immigration from neighbouring Indian states as well as from Bangladesh.<sup>3</sup> This registration exercise, justly described as 'one of the largest purges of citizenship in history', required all people in the state to demonstrate proof of their citizenship.<sup>4</sup> While the Assamese agitation has historically been directed at all non-Assamese immigrants regardless of religion, India's ruling Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has championed the demand for the NRC (and has promised to conduct it on a countrywide basis) on the assumption that the exercise would disenfranchise mostly Muslims. It did not bargain for the possibility that many of the 1.9 million people (in a state with a population of 33 million) who failed to meet the onerous documentary requirements of the Assam NRC would be Hindus. The CAA is widely believed to be an attempt to offer a safety net for non-Muslims who fail to demonstrate proof of citizenship in the NRC exercise, putting in place a legal regime that will target primarily Muslims for detention and deportation.<sup>5</sup>

Numbers cannot adequately convey the scale or ferocity of the agitation against the NRC/CAA, which has drawn people from all communities and which commentators have described as the most significant upheaval since the Emergency of 1975–77. Within three weeks of the passage of the CAA, protests had taken place in 94 of India's 732 districts across 14 of its 29 states. Thousands of people were arrested. 31 were killed in an initial



wave of police repression mostly in BJP-ruled states.<sup>6</sup> Events took a darker turn in February 2020. The sit-in at Shaheen Bagh had inspired scores of similar protests in other cities. When one of these sprang up in Jaffrabad in northeast Delhi, local BJP leader Kapil Mishra invited his followers to clear the protesters off the streets if the Delhi police did not do so within three days.<sup>7</sup> His ultimatum was widely seen as a call to violence to which Hindu mobs responded with a brutality not seen in the city since the anti-Sikh riots of 1984.<sup>8</sup> 53 people, mostly Muslims, were killed, and Muslim-owned properties and mosques vandalised, while the police looked on and by some accounts even participated in the violence.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout this period protests against the CAA continued, drawing thousands of people onto the streets in marches and sit-ins and into conversations on social media where protest memes offered a running commentary on the intricacies of the law as well as the state's response to the movement that it had brought into being. The protests were remarkable as much for their peace-

fulness as for their earnest deployment of a repertoire saturated with symbols of national identity, which is the subject of my inquiry in what follows. Protesters wrapped themselves, quite literally, in the national flag. Images of leaders in the struggle for independence from British rule such as Gandhi, Bhagat Singh and especially B. R. Ambedkar – the foremost Dalit leader and chairperson of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution – became talismans of the movement. Mirroring the leading role that Muslim and subordinate caste women have played in the anti-CAA protests, the pavement library that sprang up at Shaheen Bagh was named after Fatima Sheikh and Savitribai Phule, both pioneering nineteenth-century social reformers and educationists from these communities.<sup>10</sup> Protesters sang the national anthem and embraced the Constitution of India on a scale and with an affective intensity that is unprecedented, engaging in mass readings of its Preamble and lingering over its promise to constitute India into a 'sovereign socialist secular democratic republic'. Much of this came as a sur-

prise even to seasoned analysts of Indian politics. Until recently it was thought that India did not have a tradition of constitutional patriotism akin to the United States.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the aural ubiquity of the pledge of allegiance and the visual omnipresence of the stars and stripes, until 2002 the Flag Code of India prohibited the use of the flag by private citizens except on national holidays and until 2005 the flag could not be displayed on clothes. Commentators have remarked on the alacrity with which pious Muslims have adopted secular nationalist symbols to affirm their belonging alongside visible markers of religious identification.<sup>12</sup> In this article, I want to try to make sense of the reasons for the widespread adoption of a nationalist repertoire of protest in the current moment, before turning to a critical evaluation of its potentials and limits.

## Nationalism by the state

The frisson inherent in the protesters' take-up of nationalist symbols derives in part from a recognition that they were being seized back from a Hindu Right which has deployed them as a stick with which to beat its opponents. The coercive imposition of a state-authorized nationalism has been central to the BJP's wider political and cultural agenda since its return to power at the federal level in 2014. The Shaheen Bagh sit-in was initiated by women who were outraged by the police brutality unleashed on students protesting on the campuses of the historically Muslim Jamia Millia Islamia and Aligarh Muslim University in mid-December 2019, immediately after the CAA had been passed. In early January 2020, masked members of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of the BJP, physically attacked students and faculty at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in retaliation for their protests against the CAA, while the police looked on. Long considered the intellectual bastion of the left, JNU has over time become a microcosm of national politics with the rise of the ABVP on its campus mirroring that of the BJP on the national stage.<sup>13</sup> The ABVP attacks were reminiscent of similar provocations in 2016, which triggered widespread student resistance. On that occasion, ABVP harassment in collusion with authorities at the University of Hyderabad drove Dalit activist Rohith Vemula to take his life. Around the same time, ABVP activists accused communist student leader

Kanhaiya Kumar, then president of the JNU students' union, of sedition in connection with a Kashmir solidarity event that he had helped to organise, and instigated the Delhi police to file charges against him. The state has made enthusiastic use of the draconian sedition law to crack down on dissidents of all stripes.

In addition to invoking the full wrath of the law, the state also responded to the 2016 protests on university campuses in an emphatically symbolic register. At a meeting with the Minister of Human Resources Development, whose portfolio includes the governance of universities, the Vice-Chancellors of 42 central (federal) universities agreed to fly the national flag from 207-foot high masts to counter what they perceived as a rising tide of anti-nationalism sweeping across their campuses.<sup>14</sup> (So there was a poignant irony in Radhika Vemula hoisting a flag of her own four years later.) In 2017, the Vice-Chancellor of JNU – widely perceived to be sympathetic to the Hindu Right and to have facilitated the latest round of ABVP violence – requested the government install a battle tank on the JNU campus as a way of inculcating in students a spirit of patriotism and an appreciation for the sacrifices made by soldiers.<sup>15</sup> Between 2016 and 2018, as a result of a Supreme Court ruling that was subsequently reversed, the playing of the national anthem was made compulsory in every cinema before a film was screened. It was not uncommon during this period to read news stories reporting vigilante attacks against people who were unable or unwilling to stand for the anthem.<sup>16</sup>

In her account of the visual politics of Indian nationalism, Srirupa Roy argues that 'the reproduction of the nation-state rests not on the existence of individuals who identify with the nation but rather on their ability to identify the state as the nation's authoritative representative.'<sup>17</sup> She suggests that this ability is acquired through repeatedly encountering rather than necessarily believing in the official imagination of nationhood. As she explains, 'the sights and sounds of the nation-state clutter public space, and it is their familiarity or pervasiveness rather than their persuasiveness that engenders public recognition.'<sup>18</sup> Recognition of the state as the authoritative representative of the nation is a complex affective transaction shot through with fear of state violence, gratitude for its benevolence, enchantment at its spectacle and boredom with its familiarity. Importantly, Roy's account of the institution of nation-statist ideology

in India focuses not on its most recent iteration under the Hindu Right but on the early postcolonial decades of what is typically referred to as the 'Nehruvian' state. This begs the question of what might have changed given the intensification of the deployment of this ideology as a disciplinary apparatus under the current ruling dispensation. How are the emotional valences of symbols transformed in a context in which the state seeks to saturate public space with them in an attempt to repair what it sees as a deficit in public recognition of its ability to represent the nation? What happens to the affective and political capital of symbols when the state cares more about their pervasiveness than their persuasiveness?

One answer is suggested by Lisa Wedeen's landmark study of the cult of Hafez al-Assad in Syria, which, she argues, engendered a politics of public dissimulation in which subjects behaved as if they revered the leader even if they patently did not.<sup>19</sup> Importantly, Wedeen argues that the spectacles that constitute the authority of the cult anchor politically significant ideas that ground political thinking and frame the way people see themselves as citizens, even if their claims are not taken literally, providing a visual and aural language for *both* complying with and contesting the regime.<sup>20</sup> Separately, Lacanian psychoanalysts have developed the notion of overidentification to describe how people living under authoritarian regimes might attack the norms by which they are governed not with a direct and straightforward critique but rather through a rabid and obscenely exaggerated adoption of them.<sup>21</sup> As Slavoj Žižek argues, by taking the norms of the system more seriously than the system itself does, overidentification lays bare the hollowness of regnant ideologies and their claims to obedience.<sup>22</sup>

Neither of these scenarios for living under authoritarianism fully describes what is unfolding in India. Anti-CAA protesters appear deeply invested in the very symbolic apparatus that has been used to discipline them. At one level this can be explained quite straightforwardly: the protesters wrap themselves in national symbols to obviate the state's all-too-predictable charge of anti-nationalism. Yet the deployment of these symbols is far from simply instrumental and defensive. The exuberant profusion of their creative reconfiguration, the evident sincerity with which they are invoked, the febrile pitch of contemporary public discourse and the sheer scale on which all of this is unfolding suggest that the protesters

retain a faith in the power of these symbols to shield them from the violence of the state even when they patently do not. (A widely circulated video from the Delhi riots shows policemen beating a group of protesters, one of whom subsequently died, and taunting them by forcing them to sing the national anthem.<sup>23</sup>) This begs the question of how national symbols have managed to retain a degree of subversive critical potential despite their deployment as a disciplinary apparatus by the state.

## Nationalism against the state

I suggest that the protests against the CAA are better understood as an instance of what David Lloyd has called 'nationalisms against the state'.<sup>24</sup> Lloyd reminds us that even as they seek to saturate the field of subject formation, anticolonial nationalisms are articulated in a variety of ways with social movements organised around other logics such as class and gender. When nationalism becomes annexed to the territorial state, the processes of articulation that maintain nationalism as an element of broader, more complex and internally antagonistic social fields are brought to an end. Yet these other movements are never fully absorbed into state-oriented nationalisms, persisting as a potentially disruptive excess over the nation and its state. As Lloyd explains, 'the possibility of nationalism against the state lies in the recognition of the excess of the people over the nation and in the understanding that that is, beyond itself, the very logic of nationalism as a political phenomenon.'<sup>25</sup> This 'excess' grows in those historical conjunctures in which the state becomes increasingly unmoored from the nation or at least from key constituents of it, as is evident in the BJP's unwillingness to consider Muslims a part of the nation and in its determination to subordinate and/or expel them from a reimagined Hindu nation-state.<sup>26</sup> In such moments, nationalisms against the state marshal the symbolic repertoire of nationalism to shame the state for its betrayal of the nation, with a view to repairing the disconnect between state and nation.<sup>27</sup>

This seems precisely to be the import of, for example, Varun Grover's defiant poem that in the few short weeks since it was composed at the start of the protests went viral, mutating into song and graffiti.<sup>28</sup> One stanza reads:

Hum samvidhan ko bachaenge,  
Hum kagaz nahin dikhaenge,



Hum jan gan man bhi gaenge,  
 Hum kagaz nahin dikhaenge.  
 We will save the Constitution,  
 We will not show [NRC] papers,  
 We will sing Jan Gan Man [the national anthem]  
 We will not show papers.

Participants in the leaderless movement against the NRC/CAA have taken on the pedagogical task of reminding both the people and the state of the nation's founding ideology. Musicians have resurrected the less well known verses of the longer poem by Rabindranath Tagore from which the national anthem is extracted, poignantly drawing attention to lines that affirm the national belonging of Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, Parsis, Muslims and Christians – as if to underscore the betrayal inherent in the CAA in singling out one community for removal from the nation that the anthem sings into being.<sup>29</sup> It is an enduring irony that the man who wrote the anthem (as well as the song that became the national anthem of Bangladesh) was, for much of his life, a fierce critic of nationalism. In his 1917 lectures on nationalism, Tagore describes the idea of the nation as 'one of the most powerful

anaesthetics that man has invented' under the influence of which 'the whole people can carry out its systematic programme of the most virulent self-seeking without being in the least aware of its moral perversion – in fact feeling dangerously resentful if it is pointed out.'<sup>30</sup>

The trope of 'saving the constitution', literalised in the names of political action groups such as the Samvidhan Suraksha Samiti and the Dastoor Bachao Committee that have sprung up recently, likewise represents the Constitution as endangered by the state and therefore requiring the protection of the nation. In his book *A People's Constitution*, the legal historian Rohit De attempts to unsettle the conventional view of the Indian Constitution as the discursive preserve of state and civil society elites. He opens the book with an image of the Constituent Assembly being 'flooded with telegrams, postcards, and petitions from schoolboys to housewives to postmasters, staking claims, making demands, and offering suggestions' while it went about its work of drafting the Constitution.<sup>31</sup> The story he tells about the Constitution in its first decades of existence is one of a document produced through elite consensus but enlivened by the use

made of it by ordinary litigants, many from unpopular minorities whose rights were not always assured by the majoritarian institutions of the state. But it is still a story about litigants invoking the Constitution before a court that they hope will rule in their favour. The CAA's critics, in contrast, do not sound like they are waiting for a court ruling, convinced as they are of the incompatibility of the CAA with the Constitution and indeed of its potential to undermine it. It is as if the people have sought a direct relationship with the text of the Constitution, insisting on their right to interpret it unmediated by the authority of a secular clergy whose recent judgments have not always inspired confidence.

The Supreme Court is, at the time of writing, considering over 140 petitions challenging the constitutionality of the CAA. While it would be imprudent to anticipate its conclusions, it is sobering to recall that the Court has often chosen not to restrain the executive's majoritarian excesses, notably in three recent cases that implicate central elements of the Hindu Right's vendetta against Muslims. First, in November 2019, the Court brought to a conclusion the long running dispute over the Babri Mosque that had been demolished in 1992 by Hindu mobs claiming that the sixteenth-century mosque had been built on the ruins of a temple that marked the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram. After decades of litigation, the Court awarded the disputed site in its entirety to the Hindu parties despite acknowledging that the demolition of the mosque was illegal.<sup>32</sup> Second, in August 2019, the Modi government drastically altered the position of India's only Muslim-majority province, the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir, by revoking the autonomy guaranteed to it by article 370 of the Constitution and downgrading its status to that of a territory ruled directly by the federal government in New Delhi. The move was accompanied by draconian measures including curfews, the incarceration of virtually the entire political class and the longest Internet shutdown ever imposed in a democracy. In January 2020, the Court ruled that the indefinite suspension of the Internet violated fundamental rights but inexplicably declined to pass any specific orders mandating relief.<sup>33</sup> Third, the NRC exercise in Assam – the results of which, recall, provided the impetus for the CAA – was conducted after much stonewalling by politicians as a result of the zealous oversight of a Supreme Court bench headed by the then Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi

who is himself Assamese. Indifferent to the obvious conflicts of interest at play, Gogoi's political views as an Assamese nationalist heavily shaped decisions about the constitutionality and conduct of the NRC.<sup>34</sup>

Faced with a fascist executive that commands a supermajority in the legislature and is unrestrained by a supine judiciary, the anti-CAA movement's nationalism against the state seeks to reiterate and protect an endangered vision of the moral values of the nation and ultimately to persuade or force state institutions to uphold those values. Unreliable as it has been as a guardian of minority rights, the Supreme Court has shown itself to be attentive to public opinion – for better and worse. For example, the outcry that greeted the Court's 2013 judgment upholding India's colonial-era anti-sodomy law may have played some role in persuading it to change its mind five years later.<sup>35</sup> In quite a different vein, upholding the death sentence awarded to Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri convicted for his alleged involvement in an attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001, the Court justified its decision on the ground that 'the collective conscience of the society will only be satisfied if capital punishment is awarded to the offender'.<sup>36</sup>

## **Beyond nationalism against the state**

Nationalism against the state aspires to strengthen the hyphen between nation and state to make the state representative of the nation from which it has become unmoored. This is the source of both its power and limits. Because it looks forward to a re-hyphenated nation-state, it cannot in good faith be accused of anti-nationalism or even anti-statism, even if it throws the full weight of its anger at the current incumbents of the state apparatus. Yet the presumption of 'good faith' in the debate over the CAA itself betrays a naïve Habermasian faith in the possibility of consensus on the rules of communicative reason. Nothing in the nationalism of the anti-CAA protesters protected them from the viciousness of the bad faith accusations of anti-nationalism that were hurled at them by the state and its acolytes. The most popular slogan of the Hindu mobs rampaging through north-east Delhi was 'desh ke gaddaron ko, goli maro salon ko' (shoot the traitors). In the face of such murderous disingenuousness, the imperative of solidarity with the victims and survivors of this pogrom and with their de-

mands for justice is clear. What follows is offered less in the register of critique of the normative imaginary of a movement that could not *not* have appealed to a certain kind of nationalism in its struggle against the state, and more in the spirit of a search for what lies beyond this imaginary, circumscribed as it is by the telos of the idealised nation-state. If the very possibility of nationalism against the state lies in the recognition of the excess of the people over the officially constituted nation, then the performance of this nationalism generates excesses of its own. In this section, I offer some illustrations of such 'excesses' whose claims are difficult to advance even within the more capacious imaginaries enabled by nationalisms against the state.

First, the question of Kashmir brings the limits of this discourse into stark relief. While the struggle for self-determination in Kashmir has been ongoing for decades – since the late 1980s in some reckonings and the inception of independent India in others – it has taken on a particular urgency since August 2019 in the wake of the repeal of article 370, the abrogation of which fulfils the BJP's cherished ambition of integrating this Muslim-majority state more firmly into the Indian Union. In this regard, calls to defend the Constitution can be construed as a demand to restore the constitutional status quo ante vis-à-vis article 370. Yet to demand this is not to demand very much at all: by the time the provision had been formally abrogated, it had become a shell of its former self, hollowed out by successive Congress and BJP governments in New Delhi. There is something disingenuous in the sudden resurgence of left-liberal interest in Kashmir, newly rediscovered as a weapon with which to attack the BJP, given the historically bipartisan insistence on its status as an 'integral part of India'. Many Kashmiris resent how Kashmir has been drawn into the anti-CAA protests (if it is remembered at all) as one issue among many with which to criticise the government, bristling at the manner in which their demand for *azadi* (freedom) has been appropriated and resignified to express a plurality of other demands in the slogans of the current movement.<sup>37</sup> The tension arises from the fact that the desires of those protesting their forced inclusion in the nation (in places like Kashmir) are fundamentally different from those protesting their forced exclusion from it (in places like Assam), even if both processes are manifestations of the BJP's coercive nation-building. Calls

to protect the Constitution cannot mean much to those who do not wish to be governed by it – unless the Constitution can contemplate a process by which it will no longer be applicable to unwilling subjects. But this is typically where law ends and politics begins.

Second, not enough attention has been paid to how *adivasis* (indigenous peoples), who constitute 8.6% of the Indian population, are likely to be disproportionately and differentially impacted by the NRC-CAA. While the politics of indigeneity – specifically the 'fear' of powerful ethnic groups of being reduced to minorities in their homelands – has underwritten the NRC, the demand for documentary proof of citizenship that it has entailed will be especially difficult for *adivasis* to meet given the greater likelihood of their being poor, rural, landless and nomadic and/or displaced.<sup>38</sup> The CAA is unlikely to function as a safety net for *adivasis* given that many do not identify as belonging to the major religious groups to which it promises citizenship. Indeed the combined effect of these exercises in governmentality might be to incentivise *adivasis* to become Hindus, a process that the Hindu Right already encourages through campaigns of coercive inducement that it calls '*ghar wapsi*' (return home). Some of the most powerful moments in the protests against the CAA have arisen from gestures of everyday fraternity between religious groups – as when Hindus have formed protective cordons around Muslim protesters offering prayers, or when Sikhs have set up *langars* (community kitchens serving free meals typically at *gurudwaras*). Moving as they have been, the very ontology of these gestures – in which communities divided by something that can be identified as 'religion' nonetheless make common 'political' cause – can feel analytically incommensurate with what Alpa Shah calls the 'sacral polities' of *adivasi* lifeworlds in which distinctions between religion, politics and economics have never been very meaningful.<sup>39</sup> In such lifeworlds, the constitutionalism of the current nationalism against the state can seem presumptuous. In recent years, a movement known as *Pathalgadi* has spread particularly through *adivasi* villages in the state of Jharkhand. Responding to the threat of dispossession posed by land acquisition legislation, the movement has made itself visible through the erection of gigantic stone plaques quoting extracts from the Constitution that protect *adivasi* rights at the entrances to villages. Yet *Pathalgadi* evinces a paradoxical

constitutionalism, asserting the exclusive sovereignty of gram sabhas (village assemblies) while in the same breath denying the sovereignty of other levels of government.<sup>40</sup> As some participants in the movement explained to journalists: 'We have all descended from nature and we worship it. We don't believe in the Indian Constitution, nor do we recognise government officials.'<sup>41</sup>

Third, the reference to nature invites us to think beyond the humanist discourses of liberal constitutionalism to consider how relationships between people and the environment have produced the current conjuncture. In the preparation of the Assam NRC, a xenophobic and arbitrary adjudication process has conspired with the paucity of record-keeping by people who are poor, illiterate, and have often had to move frequently as a result of war, partitions and environmental displacement, to deprive nearly two million people of citizenship.<sup>42</sup> As Arundhati Roy writes, the very impermanence of the nearly 2500 shifting, silty 'char' islands in the river Brahmaputra on which many of the most marginal farmers live has meant an absence of land deeds and other documentation that might establish their connection to the land as demanded by the NRC.<sup>43</sup> Whatever fences and border regimes are put in place, if current projections of climate-induced displacement in the region are correct, we must expect migration only to grow. It is estimated that by 2050, one in seven people in Bangladesh will be displaced by climate change, with up to 18 million people having to move because of a rise in sea level.<sup>44</sup> This will offer grist to the mill of the Hindu Right, which for decades has used the spectre of 'illegal migration' from Bangladesh to whip up anti-Muslim hysteria in India.

Nowhere in the world are the forms of international cooperation necessary for better management of land and water resources or indeed the mitigation of the global climate crisis adequate to the scale of the task that they face. But these processes are particularly deficient in South Asia which remains one of the least integrated regions in the world thanks to the bitter legacies of Partition, war, contested borders, a lack of complementarity between economies, and the mistrust that comes from the sheer disparity in size between India and its neighbours.<sup>45</sup> There has been little consideration, even within the anti-CAA movement, of the international effects of an Indian law that presumptively declares the country's Muslim-majority neighbours to be persecuting states

while setting itself up as a refuge for the non-Muslim victims of such persecution. In February 2020, a 20-year-old woman named Amulya Leona took to the stage at an anti-CAA rally in Bengaluru and attempted to lead the crowd in a chant that began with the words 'Pakistan Zindabad!' ('Long live Pakistan!'). It was unclear where she was going with this because she was violently taken off the stage by event organisers and police before she could finish; we hear her repeat the Pakistan slogan several times interspersed with cries of 'Hindustan Zindabad!' ('Long live India!').<sup>46</sup> A Facebook post by her from several days earlier suggests that she was trying to articulate a position of pan-South Asian fraternity.<sup>47</sup> Such views cannot easily be accommodated even within the discursive and affective realm of nationalism against the state. The Hyderabad MP Asaduddin Owaisi, who was on the stage at the time and has been the leading Muslim political voice in the anti-CAA protests, immediately distanced himself from Leona, undoubtedly mindful of the portrayal of Indian Muslims in Hindu rightwing propaganda as fifth columnists sympathetic to Pakistan. The police filed charges of sedition against Leona, Hindu vigilantes offered a bounty for her murder, and even her own father was publicly critical of her actions.<sup>48</sup> And yet, in the fraught international context produced by the NRC-CAA, the politically naïve slogans of a young woman with a terrible sense of timing may be the thing we most need to hear.

## Nationalism in the time of COVID-19

What threats, litigation and even the Delhi pogrom could not do, COVID-19 has accomplished. A hundred days and nights after it first began, the sit-in at Shaheen Bagh and other anti-CAA protest encampments in New Delhi and elsewhere were cleared by police as part of the lockdown imposed by the government in the wake of the spread of the coronavirus. As Raghu Karnad put it, political togetherness had yielded to the inexorable logic of social distancing.<sup>49</sup> Popular responses to the pandemic have sometimes been troubling, featuring racist anti-Chinese tropes and caste supremacist claims about the putative superiority of the traditional Namaste as a form of greeting that does not involve touching. The state's initial response has tilted heavily in the direction of securitisation (curfews and lockdowns) with rather less consider-



ation given to the welfare of people disadvantaged by these measures.<sup>50</sup>

Leading these responses has been the figure of the Prime Minister himself, whose own discourse has been heavy on symbolism and citizen duty rather than state responsibility.<sup>51</sup> In what seems to have been a trial-run for a subsequently ordered 21-day lockdown, Narendra Modi asked people to observe a 14-hour curfew on 22 March 2020, as part of which he urged them to beat on pots and pans to demonstrate their gratitude for the efforts of medical and emergency workers. Many appear to have ignored, forgotten or misunderstood the instructions on physical distancing, congregating on balconies and in streets to participate in the moment with enthusiasm. Whatever superficial resemblance the gesture might have borne to spontaneous demonstrations in Italy, Spain and elsewhere, many who witnessed the moment first hand described it as evoking the soundscapes of Hindu ritual especially as people also took to blowing the horn-like conches commonly used in temple worship. The Leader had ordered and the People had obeyed. The last Indian able to stage such impressive shows of symbolic conformity might have been Gandhi.

Rahul Rao is Senior Lecturer in Politics at SOAS University of London and author of *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality* (2020). Photo credits: Chris Moffat.

## Notes

1. 'In Photos: Republic Day at Shaheen Bagh', *The Wire*, 27 January 2020, [thewire.in/rights/in-photos-republic-day-at-shaheen-bagh](https://thewire.in/rights/in-photos-republic-day-at-shaheen-bagh).
2. Siddharth Premkumar, 'Kerala Forms 620 Km Human Chain Against CAA, NRC on Republic Day', *Outlook*, 26 January 2020, <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-kerala-forms-620-km-long-human-chain-against-cao-nrc-on-republic-day/346282>.
3. For an account of how the politics of Assam has shaped successive amendments to Indian citizenship law, see Anupama Roy, *Mapping Citizenship in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), chapter 2.
4. Rohini Mohan, 'Inside India's Sham Trials That Could Strip Millions of Citizenship', *Vice News*, 29 July 2019, [news.vice.com/en\\_us/article/3k33qy/worse-than-a-death-sentence-inside-indias-sham-trials-that-could-strip-millions-of-citizenship](https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/3k33qy/worse-than-a-death-sentence-inside-indias-sham-trials-that-could-strip-millions-of-citizenship).
5. Arundhati Roy, 'India: Intimations of an Ending', *The Nation*, 22 November 2019, [thenation.com/article/archive/arundhati-roy-assam-modi](https://thenation.com/article/archive/arundhati-roy-assam-modi).
6. Sumant Sen and Naresh Singaravelu, 'Data: How many

people died during anti-CAA protests?', *The Hindu*, 6 January 2020, [thehindu.com/data/data-how-many-people-died-during-anti-caa-protests/article30494183.ece](https://www.thehindu.com/data/data-how-many-people-died-during-anti-caa-protests/article30494183.ece).

7. Sukirti Dwivedi, "'We'll Be Peaceful Till Trump Leaves,' BJP Leader Kapil Mishra Warns Delhi Police', *NDTV*, 24 February 2020, [ndtv.com/delhi-news/bjp-leader-kapil-mishras-3-day-ultimatum-to-delhi-police-to-clear-anti-caa-protest-jaffrabad-2184627](https://www.ndtv.com/delhi-news/bjp-leader-kapil-mishras-3-day-ultimatum-to-delhi-police-to-clear-anti-caa-protest-jaffrabad-2184627).

8. Hannah Ellis-Petersen, 'Delhi protests: death toll climbs amid worst religious violence for decades', *The Guardian*, 26 February 2020, [theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/26/delhi-protests-death-toll-climbs-amid-worst-religious-violence-for-decades](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/26/delhi-protests-death-toll-climbs-amid-worst-religious-violence-for-decades).

9. Jeffrey Gettleman, Sameer Yasir, Suhasini Raj and Hari Kumar, 'How Delhi's Police Turned Against Muslims', *The New York Times*, 12 March 2020, [nytimes.com/2020/03/12/world/asia/india-police-muslims.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/world/asia/india-police-muslims.html).

10. Sneha Bhura, 'The story behind the library at Shaheen Bagh', *The Week*, 18 February 2020, [theweek.in/news/india/2020/02/17/the-story-behind-the-library-at-shaheen-bagh.html](https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2020/02/17/the-story-behind-the-library-at-shaheen-bagh.html).

11. Srirupa Roy, *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 6.

12. Rajeev Bhargava, 'The return of the secular', *The Hindu*, 26 December 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-return-of-the-secular/article30397647.ece>; Rahul Rao, 'Test of Faith', *The Caravan*, 29 January 2020, [caravanmagazine.in/politics/cao-protests-shake-old-bounds-indian-secular-morality](https://www.caravanmagazine.in/politics/cao-protests-shake-old-bounds-indian-secular-morality).

13. Ankita Pandey, 'Keeping India's Universities for the Rich', *Jacobin*, 27 January 2020, [jacobinmag.com/2020/01/jawaharlal-nehru-university-india-fee-hike](https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/01/jawaharlal-nehru-university-india-fee-hike); Samanth Subramanian, 'How Hindu supremacists are tearing India apart', *The Guardian*, 20 February 2020, [theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/20/hindu-supremacists-nationalism-tearing-india-apart-modi-bjp-rss-jnu-attacks](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/20/hindu-supremacists-nationalism-tearing-india-apart-modi-bjp-rss-jnu-attacks).

14. Anuradha Raman, 'National flag to fly at all Central Universities', *The Hindu*, 18 February 2016, [thehindu.com/news/national/hoisting-of-tricolour-to-be-made-mandatory-in-all-central-universities/article14086309.ece](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/hoisting-of-tricolour-to-be-made-mandatory-in-all-central-universities/article14086309.ece).

15. Staff Reporter, 'JNU VC asks govt. to install a battle tank on campus', *The Hindu*, 24 July 2017, [thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/jnu-vc-ask-govt-to-install-a-battle-tank-on-campus/article19341486.ece](https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/jnu-vc-ask-govt-to-install-a-battle-tank-on-campus/article19341486.ece).

16. BBC News, 'India national anthem no longer compulsory in cinemas', 9 January 2018, [bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-42618830](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-42618830).

17. Roy, *Beyond Belief*, 14.

18. Roy, *Beyond Belief*, 18.

19. Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 6.

20. Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, 19–24.

21. Stephen Shukaitis, 'Overidentification and/or bust?', *Variation* 37 (Spring/Summer 2010), 26, [nictoglobe.com/new/articles/V37overident.pdf](https://www.nictoglobe.com/new/articles/V37overident.pdf).

22. Slavoj Žižek, 'What the hell is Laibach all about?', last modified 11 March 2009, [youtube.com/watch?v=1BZI8ScVYvA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BZI8ScVYvA).

23. Anumeha Yadav, 'Ground Report: Delhi Police Actions Caused Death of Man In Infamous National Anthem Video', *Huffpost*, 1 March 2020, [https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/delhi-riots-police-national-anthem-video-faizan\\_in\\_5e5bb8e1c5b6010221126276](https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/delhi-riots-police-national-anthem-video-faizan_in_5e5bb8e1c5b6010221126276).
24. David Lloyd, 'Nationalisms Against the State', in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, eds. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 173–97.
25. Lloyd, 'Nationalisms Against the State', 192.
26. The most authoritative exposition of this ideological worldview remains V. D. Savarkar, *Hindutva: who is a Hindu?* (New Delhi: Bharti Sahitya Sadan, 1989), originally published in 1923.
27. See Pheng Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 38–40, for an argument along similar lines.
28. The full text of the poem can be found at <https://lyricsraag.com/hum-kagaz-nahi-dikhayenge-varun-grover/>.
29. Moushumi Bhowmik, 'The Art of Resistance: Unsung verses of India's national anthem shine a light on the idea of India', *Scroll*, 7 January 2020, <https://scroll.in/article/948836/the-art-of-resistance-unsung-verses-of-indias-national-anthem-shine-a-light-on-the-idea-of-india>.
30. Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1917), 42.
31. Rohit De, *A People's Constitution: The Everyday Life of Law in the Indian Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 2.
32. *M. Siddiq (D) Thr Lrs v. Mahant Suresh Das and others*, Civil Appeal Nos. 10866–10867 of 2010, [sci.gov.in/pdf/JUD\\_2.pdf](http://sci.gov.in/pdf/JUD_2.pdf).
33. 'Status quo SC likely to continue in Kashmir; SC avoided primary responsibility of judicial review', *Firstpost*, 10 January 2020, [firstpost.com/india/article-370-jammu-and-kashmir-supreme-court-verdict-on-restrictions-petitions-updates-latest-news-today-foreign-envoys-visit-7885211.html](http://firstpost.com/india/article-370-jammu-and-kashmir-supreme-court-verdict-on-restrictions-petitions-updates-latest-news-today-foreign-envoys-visit-7885211.html).
34. Arshu John, 'Sealed and Delivered: Ranjan Gogoi's Gifts to the Government', *The Caravan*, February 2020, 26–55.
35. Compare *Suresh Kumar Koushal v. Naz Foundation*, (2014) 1 SCC 1, and *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India*, WP (Crl) No. 76 of 2016.
36. *State (NCT of Delhi) v. Navjot Sandhu @ Afsan Guru*, Appeal (crl.) 373–375 of 2004, <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1769219/>.
37. Listen especially to Mehroosh Tak, 'Hindutva and the University', Teach-in at Queen Mary University of London, 22 January 2020, [thepolisproject.com/hindutva-and-the-university](http://thepolisproject.com/hindutva-and-the-university).
38. Ananya Singh, 'How Will CAA and NRC Affect India's Tribal Population?', *The Citizen*, 31 December 2019, [thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/9/18101/How-Will-CAA-and-NRC-Affect-Indias-Tribal-Population](http://thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/9/18101/How-Will-CAA-and-NRC-Affect-Indias-Tribal-Population); Jawar Bheel, 'Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and the Tribal Community (Adivasi)', *Round Table India*, 18 Dec. 2019, [roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=9773](http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9773).
39. Alpa Shah, 'Religion and the Secular Left: Subaltern Studies, Birsa Munda and Maoists', *Anthropology Of This Century* 9 (2014), <http://aotcpress.com/articles/religion-secular-left-subaltern-studies-birsa-munda-maoists/>.
40. Nandini Sundar, 'Pathalgadi is Nothing But Constitutional Messianism So Why is the BJP Afraid Of It?', *The Wire*, 16 May 2018, <https://thewire.in/rights/pathalgadi-is-nothing-but-constitutional-messianism-so-why-is-the-bjp-afraid-of-it>.
41. Amarnath Tewary, 'The Pathalgadi rebellion', *The Hindu*, 14 April 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/the-pathalgadi-rebellion/article23530998.ece>.
42. Mohan, 'Inside India's Sham Trials'.
43. Roy, 'India: Intimations of an Ending'.
44. Environmental Justice Foundation, 'Climate Displacement in Bangladesh', [ejfoundation.org/reports/climate-displacement-in-bangladesh](http://ejfoundation.org/reports/climate-displacement-in-bangladesh).
45. P. V. Rao, 'South Asia's retarded regionalism', in *Indian Ocean Regionalism*, eds. Dennis Rumly and Timothy Doyle (London: Routledge, 2016), 37–53; Pratap Bhanu Mehta, 'SAARC and the Sovereignty Bargain', *Himal Southasian* 18:3 (November/December 2005), 17–21.
46. Amulya Leon speech, 20 February 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUOcHVw9Evg>.
47. Rohini Swamy, 'Student who shouted "Pakistan Zindabad" on Owaisi stage had praised Modi hours before', *The Print*, 21 February 2020, [theprint.in/india/student-who-shouted-pakistan-zindabad-on-owaisi-stage-had-praised-modi-hours-ago/368917](http://theprint.in/india/student-who-shouted-pakistan-zindabad-on-owaisi-stage-had-praised-modi-hours-ago/368917); K. P. Sasi, 'Sedition for Peace! The Curious Case of Amulya Leona', *Countercurrents*, 25 February 2020, <https://countercurrents.org/2020/02/sedition-for-peace-the-curious-case-of-amulya-leona>.
48. D. P. Satish, 'Let Her Rot in Jail, Says Father of Amulya Leona, Arrested For Raising Pro-Pakistan Slogans', *News18*, 21 Feb. 2020, [news18.com/news/india/let-her-rot-in-jail-says-father-of-amulya-leon-arrested-for-raising-pro-pakistan-slogans-2509445.html](http://news18.com/news/india/let-her-rot-in-jail-says-father-of-amulya-leon-arrested-for-raising-pro-pakistan-slogans-2509445.html); Manu Kaushik, 'If released, we will kill her in encounter: Ram Sena man offers Rs 10L bounty for Amulya's head', *Times Now*, 22 February 2020, [timesnownews.com/india/article/if-released-we-will-kill-her-in-encounter-ram-sena-man-offers-rs-10l-bounty-for-amulyas-head/556634](http://timesnownews.com/india/article/if-released-we-will-kill-her-in-encounter-ram-sena-man-offers-rs-10l-bounty-for-amulyas-head/556634).
49. Raghu Karnad, 'Farewell to Shaheen Bagh, as Political Togetherness Yields to Social Distance', *The Wire*, 24 March 2020, [thewire.in/politics/farewell-to-shaheen-bagh-as-political-togetherness-yields-to-social-distance](http://thewire.in/politics/farewell-to-shaheen-bagh-as-political-togetherness-yields-to-social-distance).
50. Pranav Kohli and Prannv Dhawan, 'Covid-19 and India's Hindu-Fascism Outbreak', *NewsClick*, 22 March 2020, [newsclick.in/index.php/covid-19-and-indias-hindu-fascism-outbreak](http://newsclick.in/index.php/covid-19-and-indias-hindu-fascism-outbreak).
51. Vidya Krishnan, 'High on talk, low on substance: Modi's speech showed India is ill-prepared for COVID', *The Caravan*, 20 March 2020, [caravanmagazine.in/health/high-on-talk-low-on-substance-modi-speech-showed-india-ill-prepared-covid](http://caravanmagazine.in/health/high-on-talk-low-on-substance-modi-speech-showed-india-ill-prepared-covid).