



CURRENTS: INDIA'S CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS

Hindu majoritarianism, forms of capital, and urban politics

The making of a new ordinary citizen in India

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This article explores the remaking of ideas of the “ordinary citizen” in India in the context of Hindu majoritarian politics and changing relationships between the state and private capital. Focusing on one of India’s largest privately developed townships, DLF City, which adjoins Delhi, the article explores the ways in which activities by middle- and upper middle-class residents of DLF City produce new narratives of “ordinariness.” Within them, socioeconomically privileged groups come to be represented as “the common people,” contesting the postcolonial state’s historical focus on the welfare of marginal populations. The article suggests that contemporary narratives of ordinariness in India require an understanding beyond its deployment in critical social science literature where it is posited as a politics of speaking truth to power. The appropriation of ordinariness by the privileged in the Indian context is part of a new politics of class, caste, and majoritarianism.

Keywords: India, protests, Shaheen Bagh, Gurgaon, citizenship, Raahgiri, Hindu nationalism

The south Delhi locality of Shaheen Bagh is fairly typical of a very large number of settlements in the city that have the feel of informality about them. A maze of lanes overhung with electricity wires and television cables that snake around the neighborhood; a Unani (Perso-Arabic) doctor’s clinic offering treatment by blood-sucking leeches; streets choked with irregularly parked vehicles and overlaid with a cacophony of blaring horns; a variety of “coaching institutes” for the competitive examinations for jobs and university admissions; food stalls; buildings with impossibly narrow facades and multiple stories; and a large open drain that runs incongruously alongside the ultramodern metro rail system. Between December 15, 2019, and March 24, 2020, however, this visibly informal space became the site of a protest movement that sought to preserve the sanctity of that most formal of the documents of national life, the Indian constitution.

Shaheen Bagh is a Muslim-majority area, and the most immediate provocation for the protests was the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) that became law after being passed by the legislature on December 12, 2019. The

Act was an amendment of the Citizenship Act of 1955 and paved the way for the rapid granting of Indian citizenship to illegal immigrants who fled Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan on the grounds of religious persecution. However, while the CAA identified Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsis, Jains, and Christians as potential beneficiaries, there was no mention of Muslims from these countries. The Act was widely seen as an anti-Muslim measure of the ruling Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Along with the National Register of Citizens (NRC) that requires stringent proof to establish citizenship, the CAA is widely perceived to further strengthen the anti-Muslim narrative on which the BJP has based its election strategies. A representative view of the protests at Shaheen Bagh is captured in the description by the online news portal *The Wire* which noted that the locality had become “the symbolic heart of the pro-constitution protests sweeping the country.”¹ Quite significantly, the protests were largely led by women.

1. <https://thewire.in/rights/in-photos-republic-day-at-shaheen-bagh>. Accessed April 23, 2020.



That the protesters at Shaheen Bagh were engaging with debates on citizenship and constitutional rights was also an important visual metaphor at the site. Artworks based on excerpts from the constitution and its cover and images of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956)—Chairman and architect of the constitution—adorned the protest venue and became as much a talking point in the media as the protest itself (Figures 1 and 2). Shaheen Bagh proved to be a catalyst of sorts, with similar protests being held in other Indian cities, including Mumbai and Lucknow.

The popular sentiment that “something” has changed since the formation of the two BJP-led governments (in 2014 and 2019) has taken strong root. However, just as palpably, there is the perception that “ordinary” citizens—such as those at Shaheen Bagh—have begun to raise their voice against the dilution of constitutional ideals that, putatively, guide the conduct of governance and relationships between the state and its citizens. “Constitutional values” and their defense by “ordinary”



Figure 1: Protesters at Shaheen Bagh. Photo by Sanjay Srivastava.

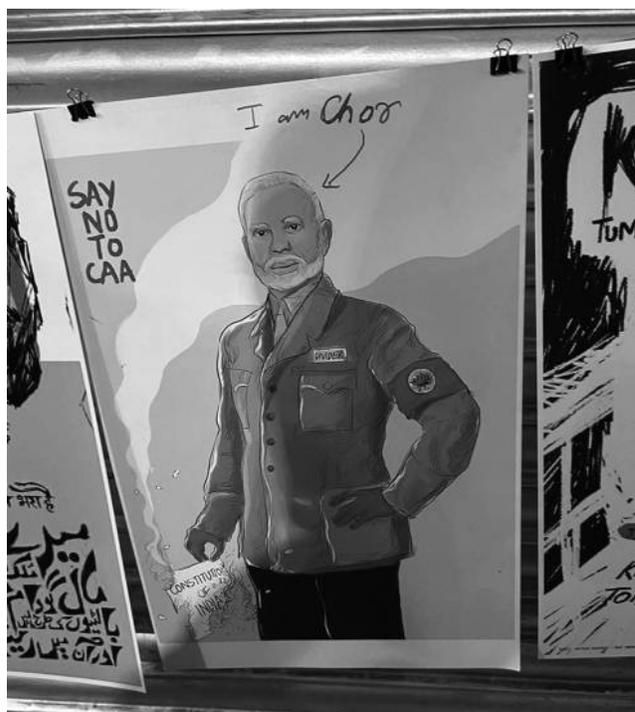


Figure 2: Artwork at Shaheen Bagh: “I am a thief.” Photo by Sanjay Srivastava.

citizens are at the heart of a hopeful liberal discourse regarding the future life of the Republic.

I suggest in this article that there is a broader process of the *redefinition* of the idea of “ordinariness” that has emerged from the economic and social ferment of the last three decades. The liberalization of the economy since the late 1990s (Sengupta 2008) has generated new ideas about forms of citizenship, changing relations between the state and private capital, and relations between the state and different categories of citizens. These contexts, I further suggest, are significant in any discussion of the shift of the political and public mood towards the political and religious right. In particular, I suggest that while liberal opinion cleaves to an idea of ordinariness that derives from the discursive universe of a preliberalization economy and polity, there is another, altered, sense that provides a fruitful entry into understanding the politics of our times.

This mutating sense of the ordinary stands in direct contrast to the imagined ordinariness of the Shaheen Bagh protesters and is a challenge to it, supplanting it with the claims of another class and religious fraction. My exploration of ordinariness is, however, different from invocations in social science literature that refer to either

“everyday life” and ordinariness (de Certeau 1988; Robinson 2006) or “the people” (Laclau 2005) as concepts that interrogate privileged models of social and political life. Specifically, I wish to point to instances where the term is deployed in both majoritarian and neoliberal politics to institute a “representative” of the people that obfuscates its own lineage within networks of power and privilege. I explore these ideas through ethnographic vignettes based upon fieldwork in the privately constructed DLF City that lies in the district of Gurgaon (recently renamed Gurugram) in the state of Haryana. The 3500-acre DLF City adjoins the southern borders of Delhi and is a significant site of the remaking of ideas of ordinary citizenship. This, as I explain below, relates to the activism of its middle-class residents as they seek to engage with forms of state governance and the practices of private capital.

Remaking cities and the duties of the citizen

DLF City was built by the Delhi Land and Finance corporation (DLF), India’s largest real estate company. The company began to acquire land in the early 1980s in what was earlier the rural hinterland of Haryana. DLF City, with its gated communities, shopping malls, and offices of multinational companies, is regarded in a variety of writings as a crucible of consumer cultures and new identity politics of middle classness (Jain 2001; King 2004; Dupont 2005; Brosius 2010; Srivastava 2015).

As a new space of habitation that displays stark distinctions between the rich and the poor, DLF City is the site of considerable debate regarding the future of social and political life in a rapidly urbanizing country² (Gururani 2012; Oldenburg 2018; Bakshi 2020). In addition to academic and media analyses, the “Millennium City” (as it is frequently referred to in DLF’s advertising and media reports) has also witnessed a number of residents’ initiatives that engage with ideas of how different types of residents—those within gated communities and the migrant labor working as domestic help and private security guards, for example—might relate to each other as citizens. As Veena Talwar Oldenburg points out,

A new burgeoning middle class of young professionals, retirees fleeing the congestion of Delhi for more spa-

cious accommodation, Indians returning from abroad and looking for creature comforts to which they are accustomed, have flocked to Gurgaon. . . . Public vigils, protests and activism of all sorts have enlivened a formerly moribund space and given it the profile of a bustling city. (Oldenburg 2018: xii)

The idea of civic engagement in “new” Gurgaon has primarily manifested through discourses on the responsibilities of the relatively privileged towards socioeconomically disadvantaged populations. And, as part of this, one of the most interesting aspects of urban life in Gurgaon relates to the ways in which the street has become a symbol of assertion of middle-class identity. From being a space that was marked by chaos and the “lower classes,” it has increasingly become one where multiple dramas of middle-classness are played out. The streets of DLF City are increasingly home to bicycling, walking, and fitness activities that are part of a new politics of leisure that is intrinsic to performances of identity (on leisure and middle-class identity, see Baas 2020). As Doron and Raja point out, in India, “the filth endured in public spaces . . . has to do with the neglect of spaces people share with those beneath them in the caste hierarchy,” but that “the tolerance for filth in public spaces . . . declines with the rise of the new middle class, which is no longer as inclined to retire to the interior spaces of the home as it is intent on claiming public spaces for its private consumption” (Doron and Raja 2015: 7).

While space does not permit me to fully elaborate on the complex manner in which the street relates to middle-class identity, I will utilize ethnographic accounts from an event known as Raahgiri to provide some indication of the link between the changing nature of ordinariness and the broader political context.

Raahgiri (Streetness) is based on similar “open streets” events that are held around the world and whose origins lie in the Ciclovía movement that began in the mid-1970s in the Colombian capital of Bogotá. Ciclovía “started as a citizen protest that the city was becoming too car-focused.”³ Raahgiri was first held in 2013 and is promoted as a “citizen’s initiative” to “take back the streets.” The event started as a collaborative venture between two local

2. For the first time since census operations started in India in 1872, the 2011 Census reported absolute urban growth to be higher than the rural one (Pradhan 2017).

3. <https://www.citylab.com/transportation/2018/10/how-bogotas-cycling-superhighway-shaped-a-generation/571900/>. Accessed April 27, 2020.

nongovernmental organizations (NGOS; one involved in environmental issues and the other working with the poor), a bicycle-riding group, a company that provides “corporate wellness” programs, and a global consultancy company that focuses on sustainable cities. This group works in consultation with the Gurgaon city administration (for traffic arrangements, for example) and the DLF corporation. The following description is drawn from my ongoing fieldwork in the locality.

It is a cold Sunday morning in Gurgaon. On several stretches of roads that run through DLF City’s Phase Four—along which lie some of the DLF’s earliest and most prestigious gated communities—there are red plastic cone barriers in place. The roads have been blocked off to vehicular traffic. There are families with children, dogs, children on bicycles, elderly couples, grandparents pushing prams, and women in exercise clothing.

The area near the popular Galleria Market shopping complex is buzzing with activity. First off, there is a Nike-sponsored yoga class with mats for each participant. The female instructor sits in front on a dais. Behind her is a board that advertises Nike’s “Yoga Gear.” Next, there is another Nike-sponsored area where people of different ages and genders are exercising to music. There are instructors on stage in colorful clothing. Beyond this, there is an area sponsored by the *Hindustan Times* newspaper where free jackets are being given away. The jackets are inscribed with the logo of the newspaper as well as “I Love Gurgaon.” The give-away is part of a competition. An excitable compere is geeing up the crowd. “Anyone wearing Adidas shoes, or Lotto shoes or Nike Shoes . . . Benetton clothing. . . ?” he calls out on the microphone. Each time, one such wearer is invited onto the stage. After gathering five people the game begins. It is a version of “Simon Says” and the contestants must carry out a particular action when the compere calls out “Hindustan” and “Times.” All contestants introduce themselves. There is a man who works as an advisor with KPMG consulting firm and another who works with a similar Indian company (Figure 3).

Further along, there is a mini soccer ground, sponsored by a local soccer coaching business. It displays the banner of a European football club that has a tie-up with the company. Groups of children are also playing badminton. Along various footpaths, there are small billboards of various corporate sponsors. Among them there are some that say “*Hindustan Times* Raahgiri,” while others proclaim “*Times of India* Raahgiri.” Other groups have also joined in the crowds taking part in aer-



Figure 3: Raahgiri participants, Gurgaon. Photo by Sanjay Srivastava.

obics and yoga, soccer and badminton. There is one group marching around with Narendra Modi masks, shouting “Long Live Narendra Modi!” There is another demonstrating against the real estate developer BPTP, which has been accused of not completing its projects according to schedule and hence causing financial and other hardship to individual buyers.

This is a performative space, sponsored by corporate interests and one where (upper) middle-class families feel comfortable. The cordoned-off stretch and its revellers in a variety of branded sportswear are the new signals of class and cosmopolitanism. Physical exercise—bicycle groups, yoga classes, aerobics, Pilates, Zumba workouts, among others—are the accompaniments to new spaces of habitation and leisure, the rhythms of new life and performances of new style. Sports bicycles are being checked out (they are free to borrow, sponsored by a national newspaper) and their riders career through the crowds; the Nike-sponsored aerobics class has enthusiastic participation from slim young women in Lycra suits, children and middle-aged men and women, all of whom step up onto mats placed in front of them, eagerly following instructions from the female instructor and her assistants on stage, each with a remote microphone. Bodies move in erratic unison to the music



from the stage festooned with the Nike logo, including on the persons of the instructors.

A short distance away from the Pilates section, an NGO that calls itself “We the People” (echoing the opening line of the Preamble to the Indian constitution) has set up a “Citizens Café.” It consists of a group of middle-class women and men talking about the constitution. Participants have been given copies of the Preamble. There is discussion regarding “individual responsibility”; “being a good citizen,” someone says, “is a 24/7 job.” A man adds that “we need to be compassionate towards our servants. We demand various facilities at our own work place—such as holiday, sick leave, etc.—but deny these to our servants.” Another participant interjects that “compassion” has a “gandh” (smell) that he does not like. The organizer—a woman—says that there are laws regarding domestic work that ought to be applied. There is a debate over this as another woman says that she doesn’t care whether there is a smell or a fragrance: she thinks “compassion” is an appropriate word to use. A woman talks about “everyday democracy”: about how in her locality middle-class children are encouraged to play with those of the “labor class.”

But there is another set of bodies that are also present at Raahgiri. They are not part of the Nike group. These bodies, instead, line the footpaths along these streets of activity. They are clothed in an assortment of garments that smell of compulsion. Shiny trousers, worn mufflers, torn beanies, fraying sarees, and cracked footwear is the fashion of the footpath. They look on at the performers on the streets (Figure 4). The men and women stare and children strain to break away from the handgrip of their guardians. Some have, indeed, managed to make good their escape and have joined the Nike-fueled crowd; but they remain some distance away from the main group, at the back. They make erratic and frenetic movements, throwing up their hands and stretching limbs at will, dancing to this music but also out of sync with it.

This crowd that watches consists of domestic workers, rickshaw-pullers, private security guards, and a variety of people who sell peanuts or make a living from other informal businesses. There is also a scattering of curious policemen and policewomen. Everyone is watching. In the bright winter sun, it makes for a great spectacle.

Raahgiri is one of several sites where ideas of ordinary citizenship and “the people” are being redefined in the postliberalization period. It acts, as I suggest in the concluding section, as a counterpoint to the ordinariness staged at Shaheen Bagh. Historically, the Neh-



Figure 4: Raahgiri and its Others. Photo by Sanjay Srivastava.

ruvian state—with development as its *raison d’être*—identified the poor farmer, the slum-dweller, and members of socially and economically disadvantaged minority groups as “the people.” However, within a postliberalization discourse there is a new constitutional subject that is imagined as the ordinary man (sic), namely, the middle- and upper middle-class urban resident. Here, the street is one of several sites of manifesting an ordinariness that, in other contexts, has implied demands upon the state regarding the “welfare” of the previously ignored class fraction. The appropriation of the street—cleansed of social and material filth through private sponsorship—is part of a middle-class statement regarding the nature of the public that belongs in public places.

The emergence of the middle-class person—“honest,” “hard-working,” and putatively sidelined in the state’s imagination of the nation—as the representative public has, as I will suggest later, a specific role in the making of the present political moment. However, before I outline this, there is one more context of the transformation to be considered.



Redefining “civil society”

The making of ordinary citizens and a new public is also part of a process that is signified by new relationships between capital and the state. In the example I discuss below, capital, in effect, actively produces its own citizens such that the notion of separate and autonomous spheres of the state, citizens, and capital becomes untenable. What we are left with, in fact, is the simulacrum of autonomous spheres.

Many services within privately developed townships in Gurgaon—such as upkeep of roads and external security—are provided by the developers, rather than the Municipal Corporation of Gurgaon (formed in 2008). The fees that residents pay for these are known as “maintenance charges.” These are paid to the real estate company that has constructed the locality.

In the late 1980s, some residents of DLF City combined to form a Residents Welfare Association (RWA 1). RWA 1 demanded that, as required by the Haryana Development and Regulation of Urban Areas Act of 1975, private companies hand over “their” townships to the government. Its members filed court cases, petitioned the government and even fought in assembly and municipal elections. An office holder of RWA 1 described the situation to me as follows:

Developers do not want to hand over their townships to the government and the government is not interested either: for as long as the developer has control, it can use the land within its areas in an arbitrary fashion . . . by simply changing original planning agreements. The government does not wish to change anything because of the massive amounts of under-the-table money that it gets from private developers.

In the early 2000s, another RWA—RWA 2—also appeared on the scene. It was an umbrella body that claimed allegiance from nearly two hundred different individual RWAs. RWA 2 was, in fact, created by the DLF corporation to counter what it perceived to be an association of residents that was hostile to its interests (RWA 1), in particular the demand that the company hand over the township to be administered by the Haryana government. RWA 2 operates from an office in the same building as many of DLF’s offices. The company had also taken legal measures which resulted in RWA 1 going into liquidation. RWA 2, as one of its

office-holders put it, primarily acts “as a bridge between the real estate company and residents of the locality built by it.”

I provide the above vignette by way of pointing to the significant renegotiations in the relationship between the state, private capital, and the citizens that forms the context within which a great deal of RWA activity redefines notions of “civil society.” Contemporary discourses connected to RWA activity—such as those related to Gurgaon’s RWA 2—point us to a context where private capital, discomfited by actions in the public realm, is able to produce its own civil society and “people.” The changing relationship between the state and private capital is the broader context for a process where civil society and citizenship are no longer linked to the rights-bearing citizen (see, for example, Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001). Rather, the ideas of the ordinary citizen and a functioning civil society in the shape of RWAs relate to the new cultures of corporatization of the state and the state-like transformations of private capital in India.

Conclusion: The political present

My discussion has suggested that a significant aspect of the contemporary moment in India is the process of the remaking of the idea of the ordinary person and publicness. And that, in turn, this also constitutes a refashioning of the relationship between the state and the people such that the former is increasingly imagined as a “friend” of the middle classes; even the vanquished RWA 1 was formed with the idea that the state will pay heed to a body representing middle-class interests. This, I have suggested, is a change from the earlier period of postcolonial history.

The making of ordinariness in a time of consumerist modernity has specific consequences: it unfolds through differentiating “good” consumers from the “bad” ones and, in turn, identifying the “good ordinary citizen” from his or her antithesis. More specifically, in the context of this discussion, the ordinary citizen becomes synonymous with the upper-caste, middle-class Hindu subject, foregrounding a historically privileged group at the cost of others. For, over the past three decades or so, this is the most clearly identifiable beneficiary of the liberalization process, as well as the most vocal complainant against the perceived “minority appeasement,” the popular term for special provisions for socioeconomically



marginal groups, by the state.⁴ Political parties, it is now commonly suggested, have favored certain groups—the poor, lower castes, and Muslims, for example—over the “rightful” claims of a class fraction that has contributed its might to the making of a “new” and “globalized” India. The transition from the Nehruvian state to the liberalization of the economy also coincides with a shrinking public sector and fewer number of government jobs. This has further fuelled resentment against minority appeasement of various kinds.

The consequence of the above is the augmented capacity of the Hindu Right to speak in the name of a new ordinary person who provides an alternative to the older one. Hence, the claims of the protesting women of Shaheen Bagh to marginality—in terms of gender and religion, as well as socioeconomic status—and “commonness” are subject, in light of the growing discourse of the new ordinary, to scrutiny and contestation. The production of multiple ordinaries is, in effect, an appropriation of the historical experience of suffering and discrimination by the privileged from the marginalized. In the present context, the alternative discourse of ordinariness is also grist for the mill for the religious Right and has been well utilized to undermine many of the constitutional rights guaranteed to the most vulnerable in Indian society, including religious minorities. This has been done, in keeping with the narrative of the new ordinary, in the name of chastising a pampered minority who have putatively benefited at the cost of a silent—common—majority.

Finally, as I have tried to demonstrate through the example of RWA 2, as the relationship between the state and private capital transforms, it gives birth to an idea of civil society that is delinked from constitutional rights and responsibilities. Rather, it reflects the depoliticization of the state and its privatization through the emergence of a citizenship ideal based on the demands of private capital. This privatized model of citizenship contributes to a context where other versions—

4. There is a longer history of protests against special provisions for disenfranchised groups such as during the so-called Mandal agitations of 1990 against the recommendations of the government-appointed Mandal Commission on job “reservations.” What is specific to the present moment is the rise of a “new” middle class, the consolidation of Hindu majoritarian politics, and the extensive incursion of private capital into the realms of the state that did not exist in the same way during the earlier period.

those that seek to reinstitute the public nature of the state through interrogating its stance on religious equality, for example—come to be labeled as anti-state and anti-national activities. For they question the naturalization of the new form of the state and nation. These are the long-term processes, I suggest, that form the groundwork for the making of the contemporary political moment in India.

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