

Over the past month, lakhs of Indian citizens, including me, have peacefully protested across the country (and also internationally) against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC). Despite these protests, the Ruling Government has categorically stated that there would be no change in their stand with regard to the CAA, or the proposed National Population Register (NPR). In fact, the Government and its propaganda machinery has been working overtime to label protestors as misinformed, and has instead accused them of creating an unnecessary atmosphere of fear. Meanwhile, the Union Government through its Ministry of Information & Broadcast has issued strict orders to prohibit broadcast of any content which promotes “anti-national attitudes”.

The Central Government, after weeks of ignoring the peaceful protests against the CAA and publishing false facts in mainstream media against the protests, announced that it would be launching a campaign in support of the CAA – an Act which has already been passed by both Houses of the Parliament. On 5th January, 2020, the Home Minister of India, Mr. Amit Shah embarked on a pro-CAA rally with a door-to-door campaign in Lajpat Nagar in the heart of South Delhi.

We are - or rather, were - residents of the same locality. When we became aware of the pro CAA rally led by Mr. Shah, we exercised our constitutional and democratic right to peacefully protest against the same. As a common citizen, this was the perfect opportunity for me to register my dissent in front of the Home Minister himself. I sincerely believe that if I had failed to do so, I would have failed my own conscience.

To register our peaceful protest to the CAA and the NRC and to make our point that not all onlookers to this Government parade were in support of the same, my flatmate and I displayed a home-made hand-crafted banner from our apartment balcony, just as the rally led by Mr. Amit Shah was passing through our lane. The banner contained the following slogans and messages:

- Shame (*in large capital letters*)
- CAA (*crossed out*)
- NRC (*crossed out*)
- Jai Hind
- Azaadi
- #NotInMyName

A conscious decision was made on our part to ensure that there were no derogatory/rhetoric words or phrases directed against or towards Mr. Shah, or any other members of the ruling dispensation. This is in direct contrast to the violent slogans that have been raised against the protestors by certain elements within the ruling party, such as “*Desh ke gaddaron ko, goli maaro saalon ko*”. In addition to unfurling the banner, I also raised certain slogans verbally to express my disapproval of the CAA and the NRC, such as “We reject CAA”, “We reject NRC”.

Upon noticing our protest, the members of the rally started getting enraged and visibly agitated, and proceeded to verbally harass and intimidate us by shouting out threats and derogatory/misogynistic remarks. It was clear to us that they were working themselves into a rage. A mob of around 150 people collected on the street below our apartment. They were evidently enraged and threatened by the simple act of two girls protesting peacefully to tackle what they perceived as an obvious ‘threat’ to their propaganda parade. The protest banner that we had hung from our balcony was torn and taken away. A group broke apart from the mob gathered downstairs and forced their way up the stairs which lead to our residence and threatened to break down the door if we did not let them in. Not anticipating such a strong and violent reaction to a peaceful protest, we feared for our lives and safety and locked ourselves into our home, while they kept violently banging at our door and shouting until the police intervened. However, our ordeal was not over yet.

The common entrance which led to the stairway of our house was locked and bolted by our landlord (who was part of the angry mob) and we were trapped in the house and unable to leave. Terrified, we called our friends to come help us. When they arrived at the scene, the angry mob pushed them around and threatened them with more physical violence and refused to let them enter the house to come meet us. The fervent pleas of our friends that we should be allowed to peacefully leave the house were ignored by the frenzied mob. For 3-4 hours, we were trapped inside the house with an angry mob outside our house. In the meanwhile, our landlord (who was visibly livid) informed us that we had been evicted from our residence.

After a long period of time and multiple interventions by the police and our friends, my father was allowed to enter the premises along with a police officer. The police recorded our complaint against the criminal behavior of the unruly mob.

After a period of 7 hours, the door of the stairway was finally unlocked and we were allowed to leave the premises under the protection of the police. We packed our essentials and left.

Over the course of the last 48 hours, we have feared for our lives and for our safety; our character and upbringing have also been questioned (as is now customary when any Indian woman speaks out against the BJP). We have also been accused of craving media attention – only for exercising our constitutional right to dissent peacefully.

We are privileged, educated young professionals living in the heart of the national capital of the country, and if this is what we had to undergo for exercising our rights, I shudder to imagine the atrocities being perpetrated on the defenseless and voiceless millions across Kashmir, UP and interior India in our name, and who are deliberately and systematically excluded from the lens of the mainstream media. These voices are being actively stifled by the government, and in some cases violently so, and have no means of telling their stories.

It is imperative at this time that State Governments from all political colours, and especially those who have come out and opposed the CAA openly, take a firm stand and allow these voices of dissent to be heard loud and clear. I applaud the collective effort of rival parties in Kerala to come up with a resolution opposing the CAA, and urge other States to do the same.

As a part of the legal system, I beseech the judiciary to take stock of the unprecedented situation that India is facing, and to safeguard and defend the constitutional rights of citizens. The intent of our founding fathers while drafting the Constitution was to protect the liberty of individuals against the abuse of power by the state. The Supreme Court of our country has played an important role over the years to protect the constitution and must continue to do so, now more than ever.

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