

# **The Struggle Against the Citizenship Amendment Act in India: Recovering the Insurrectionary Praxis of Critical Pedagogy**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper locates the emergence of critical pedagogy (CP) as praxis in the protest movements in New Delhi, India, against the new citizenship amendment laws that were brought about by the Indian government. The ruling government in India brought amendments to the existing provisions for citizenship, such that persons from Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian religious communities from neighbouring Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan were allowed Indian citizenship. Muslims, however, were excluded from this. This exclusion, coupled with the national project established for finding illegal immigrants in India – called the National Citizenship Registry project – affects the Muslim communities in South-Asia and has been widely resisted across India, by Muslims and other social and political organisations. This paper traces the development of such a struggle in Shaheen Bagh, New Delhi, and proposes that CP as a critique of the social, emerged from the specificity of the Shaheen Bagh movement. Shaheen Bagh gives critical insights into rethinking CP whenever its foundational tenets seem to have been lost or are merely subsumed by disciplinary compartments within academia. This struggle offers us insights toward returning to the insurrectionary character of CP, by locating CP within the context of such struggles. At the same time, this study of Shaheen Bagh and the specific form of CP*

*that emerged in that context, also shows us the limitations of contemporary social movements to take CP to its logical conclusion where oppressive class relations are undermined.*

**Keywords:** *Critical pedagogy, Citizenship Amendment Act India, Muslims in India, National Citizenship Registry in India, Shaheen Bagh movement, social movements*

Following the 2019 parliamentary election victory of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) under the leadership of Narendra Modi, the Government of India (GoI) implemented the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Along with CAA, GoI also planned to undertake the National Citizenship Registry (NRC) across the country to find out who truly belong to the Indian state. CAA aimed to amend the existing Citizenship Act of 1955 such that Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians from the neighbouring Muslim majority countries of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh could now become citizens of India (Government of India, 2019). The Act categorically excludes Muslims for consideration as citizens via this route and excludes minority groups from other neighbouring countries including Sri Lanka and Myanmar who were fleeing their country due to ‘religious persecution or fear of religious persecution.’ The amendments relaxed the technical difficulties including time and residence requirement for this section of migrants, and all those non-Muslims who entered India before December 31, 2014, were brought under the authority of this Act. The NRC, on the other hand, is an exercise that GoI intends to expand to all of India where the burden of proof that one belongs to India, or that one’s ancestors lived in India and is not an illegal immigrant, lies with the individuals. The state checks the necessary documents of all the people and in case there is not enough proof that one is not an illegal immigrant, (s)he will be sent to detention centres that were being built across India.

CAA-NRC targeted the Muslim community in India, first by excluding Muslims from citizenship rights in CAA and then by shifting the burden of proof to individuals, which in cases like in the North-Eastern state of Assam was affecting Muslim community the most. At the same time, it was argued that CAA-NRC as a twin exercise was aiming to target more than Muslims, like in the case of Assam against West Bengal, both bordering Bangladesh, and was in violation of international laws that aimed to protect immigrants as well as poor (Raj, 2020). The NRC exercise in Assam, which is ruled by a BJP coalition government, already had excluded 1.9 million people from the citizenship list which curiously also includes Hindus, though Muslims form a sizeable portion (BBC, 2019).

It is in this context that the anti-CAA-NRC protests began in various parts of the country and while the protests across India cut across religious and political lines, it was the occupation movement at Shaheen Bagh, New Delhi, which began in December 2019, that caught the national attention and is the site of inquiry for the purpose of this paper. The theoretical ground of the paper follows the collective inquiry undertaken by *Citynotes*; the New Delhi based political collectivity that investigates the possibilities of going beyond capitalism. As part of the inquiry, *Citynotes* had brought out political pamphlets aimed at inquiring into the internal dynamics of the occupation, including participation of various segments of the working class and its political-economic connection with various other struggles happening in Delhi and across India at that point of time. I was a co-researcher in this task and this paper uses the insights gained as part of the co-inquiry. *Citynotes* had used participant and non-participant observations, unstructured interviews, and focus-group discussions with some of the occupants – including women and children – and these findings were formalised in the meetings and were presented back to the occupation in the form of pamphlets and blog articles. The

attempt was to present the internal contradictions of the movement to the movement itself and to force the occupation to sharpen these contradictions. While the inquiry of *Citynotes* included different facets of the occupation including gender, class division, housing problems in Delhi, and the role of the activists and academia, this paper develops a different direction and is a reflection on the pedagogical nature of the movement. Thus, while the argument here derives from the co-inquiry, the responsibility of this presentation rests solely with me.

The paper traces the development of Shaheen Bagh protest from its inception and locates the emergence of critical pedagogy (CP) at the specificity of Shaheen Bagh moment. I argue here that locating CP at the specificities of struggles gives us possibilities to take back CP, to go beyond the academic discourses in which it is located in India now. An analysis of the Shaheen Bagh movement shows us that CP as a critique of the existing social relations emerged at the site of protest and in its emergence, it posed a universal class question, transcending the mere “identitarian” location from which it emerged.

As such the study aims to address two questions: First, what is the relevance of CP today and how can its essential task of critiquing capitalist social relations be renewed in the South Asian context and second, what does a study of Shaheen Bagh show us about limits of a movement and limits of CP as a practical critique? To answer these questions the paper begins with a brief account of CAA and struggles against it in India. It then focuses on the Shaheen Bagh protest site and uses the theory of praxis deployed by *Citynotes* that focused on the multitudinality of the movement and how a collective subjectivity that stood outside of any pre-given form or identity became the site for the emergence of critical pedagogy. The paper concludes by suggesting the limits of the movement as well as limits of CP as praxis when the coming together of multitudinous subjects can only be imagined in terms of coming

together of individuated subjects and the possibility to deploy CP such that the momentum of movements can be sustained.

### **CAA, NRC, and the Muslim question in India: A class analysis**

As has been outlined earlier, CAA-NRC appeared to target the Muslims in Indian subcontinent as a whole (Changoiwada, 2020) and while whether they affect only the Muslims in the geography is doubtful (Press Trust of India, 2019), what has been of greater concern to the Muslims in India is the trend of anti-Muslims rhetoric and practice in India over the last six years since BJP came to power in the Centre in 2014. There have been an array of mob-attacks against Muslims across India, especially in the name of cow protection, and the impunity that the perpetrators received from the state as well as tacit support of such acts have been well documented (*Violent Cow Protection in India: Vigilante Groups Attack Minorities*, 2019). Prior to the passing of CAA, the GoI had revoked the special status that the Constitution of India had provided for the state of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). Following this move J&K, India's only Muslim majority state, was stripped of its right to have its own constitution that governed the state since independence. The statehood was revoked and it was divided into two units to be directly administered by the Union government, and a stringent curfew was placed across the state to police popular anger against this move. This move had caused unease among the Indian Muslims and has been seen by the Hindutva forces to be the realization of a long-pending promise of the BJP government, to keep the Muslims majority Kashmir under the Hindu-Nationalist paradigm (Komireddi, 2019).

While Indian Muslims did not necessarily relate with the Muslims of Kashmir in terms of culture or history, following the various incidents in India – like the Love-Jihad campaign by Hindutva forces that aimed to target interfaith couples, the construction of a new Ram Temple in the demolished medieval era Babri Masjid Mosque, the criminalisation of religious conversion, the constant

rhetoric of GoI functionaries about rewriting the constitution to make it a Hindu nation, the abolition of triple *talaq* and the push for a uniform civil code across India – the Kashmir crisis caused deep mistrust between the Muslim community and the Indian state. The CAA-NRC was initiated in this backdrop when the trust of Muslims on Indian state was at its nadir. Hence the exercises only signalled one point; that the Indian state is determined to push Muslims out of legal protection in India and this was perceived to be in line with the BJP's ideological head the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) position on Muslims in India.

The Muslim question in India has been an important topic in India since partition of the subcontinent and independence of India and Pakistan in 1947. Though NRC exercise has been limited to the state of Assam, bordering Bangladesh, and has implications that go beyond the Muslims, CAA has been explicit in its targeting of Muslims as the Other. NRC exercise had its peculiar history in Assam and involves the ethnic nationalistic elements in Assam which had issues with Hindu as well as Muslim migrants from Bangladesh and other parts of India. BJP's own position about NRC has been fluctuating and the NRC exercise in Assam did not necessarily help the interest of the party (Bhattacharyya, 2019). The CAA because of its explicit rejection of Muslims for consideration in the new Amendments hence caught the attention of Muslims across India the most. In fact, it was the legal legitimacy of such an exercise that created more insecurity among the Muslims. The array of legislation, as discussed earlier, was from the state itself; at the same time there has been open lynching of Muslim men on the roads across India in the name of cow protection by vigilante groups, often with the overt support of the police and protection from the state. The disparate and heterogeneous Muslims across India and South Asia were being brought under the ambit of legality, and at the

same time the exception to the law was applied in the case of these lynching and in their quotidian regularity.

At the same time, the implementation of CAA and NRC in the present has implications that go beyond the Muslim question. It is tied to the regimentation of the surplus population in South Asia, rendered surplus and precarious following the newer regime of accumulation that capital has been entering over the last couple of decades. As *Citynotes* (2020) argues:

...it is also true that the NRC-CAA will also be used to discipline other workers who can be labelled as 'infiltrators' at any time and thereby can be thrown away into the detention camps. In this manner, it is the state's attempt at a certain kind of mobilization, and an othering that is based upon the duality of citizen and infiltrator, in order to segment and re-segment the working population.

Over the past two decades, there has been growing unrest against the neoliberal policies across India. There has been unrest across its industrial corridors, there has been massive agrarian crisis and large-scale mobilisations of farmers and agricultural workers from the lowest sections of the population. Universities across India have been in turmoil, the Indian economy has been reeling under crises exacerbated by disastrous policies like de-monetisation, and the middle classes which enjoyed an increase in the standard of their lives have been losing economic ground. The new regime of accumulation has been rendering millions of population surplus and precarious, and this precariousness also meant that the existing models of mediation of labourers by the state – in the form of trade unions for example – has been proving to be inefficient as far as the state was concerned. The surplus population – which is the entire population in this moment of capital – is multitudinous (Virno, 2004), and in their very constitution as antagonistic subjects against capital is a threat to the existing ordering of socio-technical division in the Indian sub-continent. As such this multitudinous antagonistic subjects – multitudinous because all sense of stable

identity or category or a spatio-temporal location in which it can be placed has lost meaning and antagonistic because as the living force it ‘screams’ (Holloway, 2014) against capitalistic exploitation – which has lost any sense of geographical place due to the increasing precariousness of their everyday existence is in constant flux and is in a continuous state of migration. Thus, in a sense the ‘spectre of migration’ (Hardt and Negri, 2001) has been haunting the Indian state and CAA-NRC needs to be read in this milieu where it is important for the state to bring this multitudinous subject back into the ambit of the legal system, either as a legitimate citizen or as an infiltrator. This facilitates in both cases, the counting the surplus population and bringing it under the law of measurement, mutual commensurability and value.

Thus, in the neoliberal era, the role of the nation state is to ‘control/regulate the working population at a given geo-political location, [such that a] larger share of global finance capital [can be attracted]’ (Citynotesinquiry, 2019). Thus, the abrogation of the statehood of J&K in 2019, and the ‘surgical strikes’ that the Indian army conducted in Pakistani territories bolstered the nationalist consensus within India and helped in turning the looming class war within the subcontinent into molecular war of identities – where the Muslim is the Other who gives meaning to the national consensus overall. CAA-NRC thus is an extension of this regulation mechanism, the regulation of the surplus population and addressing the emergence of a new political subject that has risen against the citizen subject of the nation-state (Citynotesinquiry, 2019).

### **Shaheen Bagh and the emergence of a new subject**

The occupation at Shaheen Bagh revealed the emergence of a new subject, a subject that emerged from the historical specificity of the Muslim question in Delhi, but in its emergence attempted to transcend the limits of its own historicity. This subject, following Badiou (2005), is tied to the Shaheen Bagh event and fidelity to this evental eruption is what gives it a form. This



emergence of the new subject, as has been posed by Postone (1993) and Ghosh (2016) is theorised as one which is against the category of ‘labor’ and the various segmentations through which this historical specific category of labor gets rendered visible to us. The category of the Muslim is such a segmentation of social division of labor that aims to capture the social doing of sections of the masses across the sub-continent into commensurable categories. Historically, the Muslims across India have been heterogeneous, had diverse cultural and religious practices and had different interpretations of Islam which make it difficult to conceptualise all these differences into a single homogeneous category (Alam, 2008). But a shared sense of victimhood, especially following Babri Masjid demolition, vigilante lynching and Islamophobia has given an identity to Muslims across the country.

### ***Shaheen Bagh and the timeline of events***

Shaheen Bagh as a locality with a sizeable Muslim majority is in fact a phenomenon of recent past. The locality saw an increase in Muslim settlement following the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 when larger groups of Muslims began to buy plots from the Hindu and Sikh residents of the locality (Farooqi, 2020). Farooqi also notes the aspiration of the members of the community to move out of Shaheen Bagh to better locations around where there is no water or sewage problem, electricity is steady, and lanes are cleaner. There are also a number of ‘low-fee’ private schools, and the members spend a significant amount of their income on their children’s schooling. The locality itself is divided along class lines and pockets of wealthy neighbourhoods and gated communities are spread around Shaheen Bagh. The lanes of Shaheen Bagh are narrow, overcrowded and often dirty with sewage water and waste dumping spilling into the lanes. Mostly the lanes are occupied by small shops that sell everything from groceries to automobile parts. It is a working-class neighbourhood and the labor force of Shaheen Bagh lend their brawn and brain

across various sectors of manufacturing and services throughout Delhi. Adjacent to Shaheen Bagh is *Jamia Milia Islamia University* which commands respect among the community and the families who send their children to Jamia for a better future. Jamia is also placed in such a social political situation in Delhi such that it caters to Muslim students across India.

While *Delhi University* and *Jawaharlal Nehru University* also exist in Delhi, Jamia's composition of students, faculty and a neighbourhood that is populated predominantly by Muslims, means that it is much safer for Muslim students, and they can openly express their religion if they wish to do so. During the protests against CAA-NRC, large mobilisations of students occurred across Delhi, and especially around *Jamia Milia*. Following protest rallies, police and the Central Reserve Police Force, a paramilitary unit of India, entered Jamia on the evening of December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019, unleashing terror on the students using the excuse of pursuing rioters. Students – including female students – were charged by police with *lathi* (a long bamboo stick), attacked with tear gas, and the campus became a war zone; albeit one side had the might of riot gear, and the other did not. The occupation of Shaheen Bagh began immediately following this attack on the 15<sup>th</sup> of December by a section of the local population along with a handful of students and intelligentsia who belonged to various universities in Delhi. While the spark was ignited by such state violence on university students, there was more to the occupation than meets the eye, for the occupants blocked the National Highway at Shaheen Bagh that connects New Delhi to Noida and is a key road that facilitates the movement of millions of people and transportation (for an account of the timeline of the protest, see Sharma, 2020).

As can be seen in the video clippings of the early periods of occupation, the organisers of the occupation could not be identified as the leaders of the movement (Siren, 2019). Rather, a leader or an organiser emerged to meet the functional necessity of a leadership hierarchy to maintain order, and to regulate

the masses towards reaching a consensus on the occupation, and this leadership position was arrived at by intense polemic against other political positions during the general assembly of the masses during the beginning of the occupation. But it is not to say that there were not organisers nor that it was a mere spontaneous uprising of the multitude; it was in fact the opposite. The collective lived experience of being a Muslim in Delhi could be mobilised by the organisers and the terms of the organisation was deriving from their shared Muslim-ness in Delhi. Thus, *Namaaz* (the traditional five-times-daily prayer) and other prayers were offered at the site of occupation. One of the main organisers, Sharjeel Imam, had repeatedly emphasised the Islamic character of the protest movement and why it was necessary for the protesting masses to embrace Muslim-ness and fight in terms of their shared lived experience. While there have been many protest movements across India since independence, led by Muslim leaders who asked followers to protest by emphasising on the identitarian character of Muslim-ness, what happened in Shaheen Bagh was markedly different. The emphasis of Muslim-ness by Sharjeel (Imam, 2020) and others (Amin and Mushtaq, 2019), while occupying a National Highway and stopping production – production of the city, its commodities, and the social relations of production – transcended this religious “identitarian” character precisely through their objective act of the *Mass Strike* embedded in the occupation.

While in the initial video clippings there appear to be only Muslim men, the character of the occupants of the highway began to change once Muslim women from the locality began to replace the men for the occupation. While *Citynotes* had begun its inquiry, the occupation was led solely by the women who used existing police barricades to block the road and had made a stage which existed as the *functional* organising centre of the blockade. The presence of women deterred the police as well as the right-wing mobs from attacking the

blockade and the upcoming elections to the Delhi state legislative assembly meant that the governments at the state and centre were not willing to alienate the Muslim voters by attacking the women.

During the initial phase of the occupation – from December 15<sup>th</sup> to about the first weeks of January– when Shaheen Bagh had an insurrectionary character and when the stage was a functional centre of the occupation, Shaheen Bagh had not only barricaded themselves from the state and the police but also had barricaded themselves from the mediational politics characterised by sit-in demonstrations that one was used to in Delhi. The character of Mass movements in and around Delhi and India was such that the Indian Parliament with its various levels of administrative apparatus was the site where protesting masses across India turned to if they wanted their voice to be ‘heard’ by the Central government. Thus, the farmers movement, trade union movements, various university struggles or student movements had their vector towards New Delhi and other popular sites of protest. It was Jantar Mantar and the road adjacent to it in Central Delhi that has been ‘allotted’ by the state to various protestors to protest. All those groups who had grievances against the state or had some demands that had to be raised with the state would come to Delhi and sit-in the designated space. Various political mediators in the form of political parties and trade unions and activists would then enter these sites as professional solidarity workers and would help the protesting groups to raise their demands in front of the state. Here the role and legitimacy of the state was never challenged; in fact, all the mediators – including those from the parliamentary Left – would, from the perspective of the state, act in such a way that the state, as the ultimate arbiter of the fate of the masses, was reinforced. Also, the protest sites were far removed from the sites of production such that they never caused much trouble to anyone, unless they caused serious public-relation value for the government or various parties involved.

Shaheen Bagh was different from these types of protests that one became used to in Delhi. But the occupation of the Highway, as in that sense occupation of the city-factory, is not a new strategy for the working class in Delhi. During the Maruti workers strike in Manesar plant a decade ago, the workers had engaged in a series of strikes and had occupied the factory floors, stopping production and at the same time, defied the mediation attempts of the trade unions who were acting on behalf of the management and the state (White, 2017). Since it was directly addressing production, the state had dealt with the strikes with heavy hand with significant violence and legal prosecution. Shaheen Bagh occupation was similarly placed at this strategical milieu. By blocking the highway, what the Muslims at Shaheen Bagh was objectively doing was an act of Mass strike; a strike aimed to cease the production of the city as a social factory (Citynotesinquiry, 2020b), that ensured their social reproduction as Muslim subjects.

Rosa Luxemburg (1906) had outlined how specific demands – or economic reasons – like a job loss or a demand for better working condition has the potential to concentrate into a political struggle that has the potential to unravel the political-economic foundations of the everyday lives. Similarly, various struggles that Muslims have been undertaking in India were concentrating at Shaheen Bagh to a political general struggle that had the force to subvert the social factory and lay bare the underlying social relations of productions that made the city-factory. But in rejecting the mediations of the existing forms of political apparatus, what Shaheen Bagh in its early days also signalled to those outside of the situation was its rejection of political mediation which brought them into the ambit of legality and measurement. Their emphasis on fighting the struggle ‘in-terms of the Muslim’ (Amin and Mushtaq, 2019; Imam, 2020) was also markedly different from the popular struggles where any particularities are levelled so that a universal abstract citizen subject is often

put forward as the key subject of struggle. The struggle in Shaheen Bagh was in fact very much against this violent abstract notion of citizenship that evacuates any particularities that the Muslim category has. The abstract citizens were all qualitatively equal, but it rendered the Muslim bodies a target of hate crimes and systematic state violence precisely through the quantitative difference that Muslims carried from the standard of a secular citizen.

### **Critical pedagogy during the Shaheen Bagh occupation**

It is in this ground that the paper locates the emergence of critical pedagogy (CP) at the site of the occupation. The argument while is deriving from the theory of a new subjectivity that emerged during the occupation is also a tactical argument, a polemic, to bring back the insurrectionary potential of CP and ground it in the contemporary social movements in South Asia. Critical pedagogy and its various versions have been used as a theoretical tool to investigate various practices in educational settings including curricula, school culture, oppressive practices, exclusion, and neoliberal reforms in education. In that sense as McLaren (2015) proposes, CP has been ‘concerned with the centrality of politics and power in our understanding of how schools work.’ Because of the central concern about the existing ordering of educational practice, CP’s aim in a sense was to reveal the hidden discourses within education that perpetuated oppressive and exploitative practices in education. Logically following this emphasis, the active side of CP – that which aimed at construction of a new order of emancipatory educational practice – emphasised classroom practices including curricular and pedagogical techniques that actively aimed to subvert the structures of oppression as well as make classrooms and teaching democratic. This broad principle of CP has been expressed in Indian school education discourses as well, especially following the massive increase in the enrolment of first-generation learners into school and higher educational settings. CP offers tools to examine physical as well as

epistemic exclusion of marginalised groups and their ways of being. CP and the rules of its application was in fact familiar to many in the academia and the political left in India. In the case of the former, CP has been traditionally imagined as a principal of pedagogy recommended within existing academic disciplines or discourses. In fact, many were familiar with the writings of Freire and had practiced some versions of it in the teaching projects and literacy campaigns in India. Critical pedagogy was meant to emancipate the students and make them critical thinkers, so that they can think for themselves and see through the structures of oppression from which they suffered. But this also made it possible for CP to be near-fatally disconnected from the long history of class struggle against exploitation and its organic connection with social and political movements across the world. Ford (2021) outlines a similar fate that CP had in the US academic institutions, and in India too this meant that CP can be domesticated and can be delivered to students as a course of “critical thinking.” In this way it had become in a sense a fixed package that had to be delivered through an existing formal organisation of educational practice; the educator here held the mediator’s role who guided the students to see through the systems of oppression. On the other hand, in the political left, it was the vanguard parties with their control over theory and organisation of workers’ collectivities that dictated critical educational practice. Any spontaneous uprising of the workers like picketing or strikes must thus be mediated and approved by party bureaucracy.

CP has been central in developing resistance to dominant educational discourses and epistemologies for grounding the politics against neoliberal re-ordering of education in India, yet what has been missing has been a class analysis of the entire system of education itself (Kumar, 2006). Lost is the necessary analysis of the social division of labour and missing is analysis of the role of education in regimenting the surplus population, including the role of

the degrees and diplomas. What remains is less about signifying qualifications for critical civic engagement and more about designating one's place in the chain of functional meritocratic social relations.

This is where Shaheen Bagh contributes to 'rethinking CP for insurrectionary politics' (Onhumanconditionblog, 2020). Here CP is wrested from the confines of the existing de-politicised discourse and is brought alive in the immediacy of the movement itself. Kumar (2021) while discussing Rosa Luxemburg's political praxis defines pedagogy as essentially 'reaching out' to the masses and thus locates political movements as the source of pedagogy, in a political sense. While this reaching out could in a sense be imagined as something one does to the outside of the situation, Luxemburg in fact also has something else in mind. She has been concerned about the force of the movement that could educate the masses in an instance that stands outside of the clock time of capitalist abstraction. Hence, she writes that a great mass of people can be educated during fights against the system, and only 'by the living political school ... in the continuous course of the revolution' (Luxemburg, 1906: 22) can political education that is required to overthrow the existing state of affairs be fulfilled.

Here pedagogy attains a different sense; Luxemburg also emphasises that any overthrow of a system is an external expression of the internal social and class development. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire's emphasis was precisely along this direction. Here the educator is not separate from the educated as such. Nor is the pedagogical process or content separate from the context in which it is practiced. While rejecting the 'banking model', he insisted that the task of the educator – or the leadership in our case – is not to deposit existing given categories into the people; rather the task is to force the people to critique the given categories through 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (Freire, 2005: 51), or praxis.



Shaheen Bagh stood outside of the existing logic of struggle and pedagogy by rejecting the banking model where categories were given. It also stood outside of the secular logic of struggles that have characterised many of the working class struggles in India where the tendency has been so far to level differences from within and present a united front against the government. This united front, history has shown us, unfortunately carried all the formal structures of power characteristic of the regime of accumulation and reproduced the existing relations of power and the socio-technical division of labor characterised by the mental-manual divide. Thus, the party leaders or the enlightened professors often preached the masses, the media covered these speeches and publication houses printed books and articles about the “knowledge” workers. The subjects of such struggles were often relegated to the manual labor category, and this subject was presented as a totality –often along a reductive imagination of the proletarian totality of Lukacs (2016)–which would fight the totality of capital. Indeed, this model objectively, merely reproduced existing relations of power.

The occupation at Shaheen Bagh politicised the masses who were occupying the highway much more than any political study classes or pamphlets could have achieved. In an instance the entire space was withdrawn from the time of capital; a new space-time, different from the homogeneous empty time of the everyday, was created at the site of occupation and this was the moment of a new sociality, of the emergence of a new subject and the emergence of CP as an example of actual praxis. Women and children came out their homes, which have too often been considered as one-dimensionally traditional and conservative, and occupied the highway. Community kitchens were set up and food was being prepared socially. It was being distributed equally to everyone who needed it. Exchange relations were broken when volunteers brought in the blankets and clothes needed to fight the chilling cold. Men stopped going to work and played a secondary supportive role to women. Children were being

educated about history, politics, and struggles; they were questioning the narrations in the official textbooks and families was seeing through the hidden curriculum in official schooling process. *Namaaz* was offered in the streets and communal policing of the site, to identify agents of the state as well as right-wing vigilante groups, was undertaken often by the children. There was no objectification of the female body, and no one asked why their women did not cook food in their respective families. The social relations that made the space Shaheen Bagh a neighbourhood colony in Delhi and the occupants Muslim were all challenged. In their occupation, they struck right at the heart of what a city is; a city is a social factory which produces and reproduces the hierarchized socio-technical division of labor. And to make sense of agency of the working class in such a city, it needs to be controlled by the workers who make it, and production should be socialized. This demanded that existing relations of production be challenged or the existing state of such a city be challenged through the Mass Strike. This was a movement towards a real state of emergency – as an event which was outside the categories of law, but not for the purpose of its recomposition. Production was stopped and internally social relations were beginning to be questioned. A moment of critical pedagogy in operation was visible at Shaheen Bagh. Thus ‘out of the existing conditions [in Shaheen Bagh] the future emerge [d], [and one could] glimpse alternative realities within the present [such that the masses knew immanently that] ...[w]ith the right alteration the whole thing can unravel’ (paraphrasing Ford, 2016: 2).

But this did not last long. The threat of violence from the outside – both the police as well as the right-wing groups – as well as the danger of destabilisation of internal hierarchies within the movement was beginning to show. The internal factor identified by *Citynotes* – those socio-economic factors internal to a situation – has been what has been more significant for this

paper and has revealed the greatest tension during the occupation. When Shaheen Bagh barricaded themselves from the state and stopped the reproduction of the city, they simultaneously created a space within the barricade that they had set up. Now that they had closed themselves out of mediation, internal contradictions began to emerge within the movement. Shaheen Bagh has been a deeply divided space from its beginning. There were various levels of hierarchies between the dwellers and many affluent Muslims refused to identify with the movement due to fear that they might be identified with the protesting Muslims (Farooqi, 2020). Also, the elections to Delhi Legislative Assembly were nearing and Shaheen Bagh was a perfect location for all the parties involved. For the BJP, it was symbolic of the threat of the Muslim violence as well Muslim takeover of the city. For the supporters of Shaheen Bagh, it was an opportunity to show off their commitment to the minorities and make sure that the minority vote bloc is secured during the election. To bring Shaheen Bagh back into abstraction and reign in its multitudinous character, actors across political spectrum used categories of the state to check the negative potential of the site to crack the regime itself. Thus, while the BJP accused the movement to be a site for terrorism and Islamic threat, the liberals and parliamentary Left played the vigilante role to enforce the secular logic of Indian Constitution onto the strike (Amin and Mushtaq, 2019).

Internally, what was happening within the occupied space was the emergence of the mediation of exchange relations. Freire had warned about the presence of ‘oppressor consciousness’ among the oppressed people where everything around it is turned into an object of domination: an unfortunate re-establishment of conditions favouring a “banking model.” This he had termed as *permanence* against *change*, and while revolutionary transformation is possible only if one affirms change and the dynamic character of the present,

reactionary tendencies arise once status quo is upheld (Freire, 2005: 84, emphasis in original) In the case of Shaheen Bagh, the stage which held together the movement was only a functional centre of the movement during the inception, yet it became *the* strategic centre of the movement in the subsequent days. Thus, who speaks, what is spoken of, and who hears what is being spoken became the organising principle of Shaheen Bagh.

The multitudinous nature of the movement, which did not have any static centre or a hierarchy that was outside of the situation, was now reduced into the abstraction of the stage such that there is a citizen-subject who always spoke to the state and media from the stage. It is not to deny the agency of the women and children who, despite all odds and challenges, continued to occupy the highway. But this subject is a markedly different subject to that one which emerged during the movement; now the speaking subject resembled more like the individuated abstract citizen subject and did not *emerge* from the occupation itself. Rather, political leaders, activists, academicians, and NGO leaders began to occupy the stage, speak for the occupation, and proclaim solidarity to the protesting ‘citizen’. Against the initial insistence of the movement to emphasise the Muslim-ness of the occupation, the slogans of secularism and liberal constitution occupied centre stage now. Shaheen Bagh became a tourist spot, and the occupation was increasingly under the threat of violence from both inside and outside such that the state agents began to patrol the site to ensure that no untoward incident happened there which could affect the Muslim vote bank in Delhi. This happened also because Shaheen Bagh failed to sharpen the internal contradictions within the occupied space (Citynotesinquiry, 2020b) and the emergence of a new commoning was ‘covered’ using existing categories of citizenship and secularism. Covering has been used by Badiou (2021) to point out the ‘attempt to neutralise the possible emergence of a new infinity by covering it with pre-existing significations.’

Thus, what emerged at Shaheen Bagh became something that already existed and the caesura it had created in the grammar of the city-factory was covered and unity of the citizens against a particular party and government was presented as the outcome. And so Muslim as a category for the state to exclude was left unchallenged. This, as *Citynotesinquiry* notes, was the limit of the subversive potential of Shaheen Bagh and the limit of the pedagogy as such. The class character of the movement and its original emphasis of Mass Strike could not be developed, and other spaces within Delhi could not be similarly occupied, such that the reproduction of the city as a social factory could be challenged at multiple sites. But even when this shift was happening with the formal appearance of the movement, towards representative politics and demand-based slogans, the class-content of the movement still held a militant character because the occupation did manage to encourage other locations in Delhi to occupy public spaces and disrupt the apparent rational functioning of the city. Thus, even when COVID19 pandemic hit the capital and the threat of violence was imminent, Shaheen Bagh managed to hold onto to the occupied site, albeit without the necessary internal vector of the movement to question social relations within the occupied space.

## **Conclusion**

The Shaheen Bagh occupation revealed both the potential of movements to educate the masses and show cracks in the given order of things, and at the same time expose the limits of social movements and CP in the contemporary times. More than what could be achieved through the struggle, either in terms of meeting the demand to repeal the Act and to end the violence against Muslims in India, what stands before us is the insurrectionary potential of the city spaces despite the looming threat of violence and seemingly impossible solidarity between the labouring class during post-Fordism. While this new potential erupted in terms of the concrete material conditions of the present South Asian

context, where precarity at all levels of socio-technical division of labor marks the human condition, in the moment of its eruption and in the objective act of its expression – *Chakka Jam* or Mass Strike – Shaheen Bagh posed the universal class question of the political economy of the city. This has important implication for educationalists as it shows us a glimpse into practising ‘communist pedagogy’ (Ford, 2016) and to wrest critical pedagogy from its existing de-politicised academic discourses in India. This paper was an attempt to show that the insurrectionary moments of social struggles is where we need to locate critical pedagogy and the task of critical pedagogues, is to show the class character of social movements and inquire into the limits of forms of struggles such that the fetish of the form can be overcome to imagine and then realize concrete utopias that we already demonstrate in our struggles.

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