

# **THE ROLE OF PERFORMANCE IN CONSTRUCTING MUSLIM CITIZENSHIP IN THE 2019–20 ANTI-CAA PROTESTS: NEW TRENDS IN INDIAN MUSLIM BELONGING TODAY**

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**Abstract:** Scholars of Indian religious traditions have described how Muslims belong to Indian society as a charismatic other, a sectarian minority, and a liminal community (Ahmad and Reifeld 2004; Gold 2013; Sila-Khan 2004; Robinson 1979). While these are important analyses, they do not adequately address recent developments in Muslim self-statement and identification that are determinedly Indian *and* Muslim, grounded in a rejection of the limited terms of their acceptance and inclusion. This article identifies a new trend in understanding Indian Muslim affiliation, one that is continually shaped by the long-standing question of Muslim belonging. I turn to data from contexts of public and private performances of Muslim identities that emerged throughout India, and around the world, in response to the official exclusion of Muslims from the premises of citizenship in the 2019 CAA (Citizenship Amendment Bill) legislation. From late 2019 to early 2020, Muslims and their allies in the anti-CAA movement publicly recited poetry, staged theatrical performances in the street, and organized a weeks-long women-led sit-in in Delhi to collectively reject the exclusionary premises of the new citizenship legislation and argue that being Muslim and Indian is no contradiction. How the question of Muslim affiliation is articulated and contested in genres of performance not only newly theorizes Muslim belonging in India today, but also reveals the important role of performance in constructing notions of religion, community, and nation.

**Keywords:** India, Muslim, CAA protests, performance, citizenship, Islamophobia

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## Introduction

Starting in the last half of December 2019, remarkable actions in support of Muslims occurred throughout India that produced a historic moment of protest. People from diverse communities joined Muslim students, many of them women, to reject the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (hereafter, CAA). Related to the recent implementation of the National Register of Citizens (hereafter, NRC), the CAA legislation excludes Muslims from a list of minority religious communities who had been granted legal paths to Indian citizenship. Those groups had been given preference because of the circumstances of religious persecution, and it was clear that not including Muslims in the legislation was an official act of exclusion. This legislation would disproportionately impact minority Muslim communities, including internally displaced Kashmiris, Ahmadiyyas, Afghans, Rohingyas, Pakistani Shias, and undocumented Muslims located at the India and Bangladesh borders. In public forums and online, street plays about state violence done to mainly Muslim university students were performed, and poetry was recited that expressed how being Muslim is complicated, sometimes messy, but unhesitatingly Indian. Working-class and older Muslim women took over sections of a public highway in southeast Delhi for nearly 100 days to protest the legislation. The protests were largely shut down by March 2020, impacted by the rapidly developing global COVID-19 pandemic and the actions of local police officials to end these uprisings.

Responses that formed the protest movement against the CAA legislation produced a new approach with Indian politics premised on upending the very anti-Muslim sentiment that produced this new citizenship regime. It built upon previous iterations of Muslim nationalist sentiment because it was developed by a diverse coalition of participants, Muslim and non-Muslim, who produced demonstrations of affinity with Muslims. This movement was driven by new articulations of citizenship that were performed and embodied in several modes of cultural expression. The various kinds of performances in the anti-CAA protests show how representation and embodiment as genres of expression are key methods for articulating notions of patriotism and citizenship.

In this article I draw on diverse examples of performative responses to the CAA legislation to argue that they illustrate a new trend in how Indian Muslims are understood in terms of their relationships to the nation and society. Participants in the protests inverted the Islamophobic premises of the legislation by performing and embodying an Islam that is unapologetically Indian, thus confronting persistent stereotypes in culture and scholarship that render being Muslim and Indian a contradiction. Non-Muslim solidarity with these actions challenged the premises of Hindu nationalism that insist on a national character that in religious terms is

narrowly Hindu. Women-led protests at many sites, especially at Shaheen Bagh, contradicted the gendered dimensions of Islamophobia that construct Muslim women as oppressed, without individual agency, and needing to be saved from “violent” Muslim men. The demands of Muslim women in the protests revealed the intersectional nature of their identities, and demonstrates how the anti-CAA movement became about issues beyond simply the assertion of Muslim belonging.

Material from performance offers new ways to theorize Muslim belonging as it has been debated in secular Indian historiography. In colonial and post-colonial contexts, scholars have described Muslims as uniquely separatist, as liminal figures that accommodate what majority Hindu society requires of them, and in certain cases as exceptional resources for middle-class Hindu culture. The performative politics of citizenship and religious community that characterize the 2019–20 anti-CAA movement provide a new conceptualization of Muslim belonging that resists and in fact rejects both their official exclusion and limited social acceptance. As they reclaimed public space through action and performance, Muslims challenged the official fear of their community and the related acceptance of those Muslims who are not deemed threatening to the state or majoritarian Hindu interests. For this special issue on “Hindutva and the Muslim Subject,” I argue that materials from performance are essential sites for Muslim minority representation and self-statement in a situation, both in India and around the world, where their voices are being more and more stifled. In a politically fraught moment when the state again sought to officially control Muslim affiliations, Muslims and their allies presented powerful modes of identification based on an adamant articulation of their belonging to Indian society and culture. These developments suggest the important, and often overlooked, role of performance and cultural representation in how constructions of religious and social belonging are made visible in society.

### **The Anti-CAA Protests and Theorizing Muslim Belonging in the Study of Indian Islam Using Performance**

The politics of Muslim exclusion that characterize the genesis of the CAA legislation and the performances of Muslim citizenship in the anti-CAA protests present new data for how Muslim identity and belonging are understood in the study of modern Indian Islam.<sup>1</sup> A brief review of the literature on this question will help demonstrate how previous conclusions about Muslim identities are not sufficient for understanding being Indian and Muslim in the current moment. Scholarship on communalism and Muslim identity in India grew significantly in the 1990s and early 2000s (Ahmad and Reifeld 2004; Gilmartin and Lawrence 2000; Jalal 2000; Ludden 1997). Many of these studies emerged as a response to the destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya in December 1992, which was a violent episode

within a larger context of growing anti-Muslim sentiment and exclusion in Indian politics and social life. Scholars of Indian Muslim identity have described how Muslims belong (and do not) to Indian society, locating their answers in diverse arguments about what this community represents: a charismatic other, a sectarian minority, or a liminal community. One position in this literature interprets historical data drawn primarily from north Indian Muslim communities as evidence that Muslims in general are sectarian. The thesis of inherent Muslim separatism is often based on elite Muslim understandings of tradition, and authors drawing on materials from the late colonial period such as Francis Robinson (1979) and Farzana Shaikh (1989) describe a distinctive character of Muslim precepts that come to inform a unique political philosophy that insists on separateness. Interpretations of Muslim identities as extremely religious informed the views of many colonial British administrators that Muslims were uniquely prone to violent action and focused on jihad (Morgenstein Fuerst 2017). The fact that some Muslim spokespersons make ideological claims that support the separatist argument further strengthens this view, despite the fact that most Muslims, historically and today, have not interpreted their religious affiliation as a political stance that could be in tension with their citizenship or patriotic expression.

Constructions of Indian history and society as exclusively associated with Hindu traditions serve to support this claim that precludes Muslim identification as Indian. Major scholars and cultural critics developed notions of Hinduism as the primary religious character of what would be independent India. The author Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838–94) developed ideas about the nationalism of an independent India whose religious identity was related to Hindu values and histories.<sup>2</sup> This was part of a larger trend of relating Hinduism to a future India articulated by several important contributors to late colonial Hindu intellectual traditions. Vasudha Dalmia discusses how Bhartendu Harishchandra (1850–85) created new arguments about Hindu tradition using idioms of progress and modernity that would later serve as a foundation for modern Indian cultural nationalism.<sup>3</sup> In particular, Dalmia examines the origins and deployment of the slogan “Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan” as a representation of the continuities between the religious community, Hindi as a majority language, and the idea of India as an independent nation-state (1997: 146–52). These conceptualizations from Hindu intellectuals show that the approach to representing Muslims as outside the realm of also being Indian is not just a trend in scholarship, but also in vernacular politics and literary production.

Another approach in scholarship constructs Indian Muslims as liminal figures and emphasizes the indeterminate nature of this minority community in a Hindu-majority society. Pressured to acclimate or adapt to what majoritarian attitudes think it is that Muslims should say or do in order to be considered part of Indian society, these arguments rely on concepts such as ambiguity and syncretism to

describe the state of Indian Islam and Muslim identities in Indian society (Ahmad 1981; Bellamy 2011; Gottschalk 2000; Hasan 1997). Often presented as a critique of the power of communal categories such as “Hindu” and “Muslim,” Indian Islam is represented as something that is in-between and includes participants from outside Muslim communities. As part of this trend, scholars have utilized the concept of liminality as a productive way to examine religious identity in South Asia. For example, Dominique Sila-Khan’s (2004) study of the boundaries of religious communities in late colonial and modern India uses liminality to describe the status of Nizari Ismaili Muslims who were compelled to move from a more ambiguous state to declare themselves a member of one defined devotional community. In contrast to the thesis of inherent Muslim separatism, this trend emphasizes that Muslim participation in Indian society requires identity negotiation and occasional dissimulation (*taqiyya*).

While these are important analyses of their religious identities and social relationships, theorizing Indian Muslim belonging in terms of separatism or liminality does not adequately explain new trends in identification that are emerging in the context of debates about religious community and national citizenship today. As part of the anti-CAA movement, the status of Indian Muslims was performed and constructed in diverse ways and using various methods of presentation. Muslims who articulated their Indian identities performed a mode of Muslim citizenship that emphasized its religiosity, voiced the violence and dehumanization done to their community, and foregrounded the voices of Muslim women. In doing so, these Indian Muslims demanded full acceptance, and not just tolerance, from the state and majority Hindu society.

These representations of Muslims in response to the question of whether or not they belong as Indians suggest the important, and often overlooked, role of performance in how conceptions of religious community and social belonging are known in society. Performance makes visible the unseen, the assumed, and the marginal in cultural and political spaces of public and private representation. In performance studies, the relationship between representation, embodiment, and contesting the qualities of social identity categories has been theorized by Judith Butler as processes of repeated signification. Butler describes the “performativity” of identities as aspects of social reality which are not inherent or given, but rather are continually created as an illusion “through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign.”<sup>4</sup> This theorization of the performed nature of identity shows how a category like the Indian Muslim is constructed and needs continuous signification through representation. Butler explains that this connotation occurs through the “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame.”<sup>5</sup> This “frame” of repeated significations consists of regulating expectations of what qualities, behaviors, and dispositions constitute the

category of the “Indian Muslim.” The normative structure which Butler describes as limiting the possibilities for signification is not universal, and subject to historical, geographical, linguistic, and individual contexts. In South Asian spheres of cultural production, the category of Muslim has been connoted differently, over time and in different contexts, in terms of how it maps onto (and does not) the category of Indian as it has been historically constructed. Performances are and have been an active participant in the construction of national histories, despite a general neglect of this data in the literature on the cultural politics of producing Indian nationalisms.<sup>6</sup> And this mode of representation serves as a key space from which to theorize Indian Muslim identification today. Genres of fictional and politicized performance allow for Muslims to represent themselves, and be represented by their allies, in ways that contest and interrupt key assumptions about how they belong to Indian society and as they have been seen in Indian society and in historiographical scholarship.

As they were written out of new paths to Indian citizenship in official legislation, Muslims put their bodies in public and private spaces and literally performed their national belonging. These events were key moments that presented the cultural and political embodiment of strong messages about religious community and national identity. From recitations of political poetry, to taking on Muslim styles of dress and names in public events, to taking over a major street in South Delhi, thinking through how each of these developments serves as a performance of Muslim-ness indicates how constructions of religious affiliation occur in spaces far from traditional centers of authority and in the realm of politics and popular culture. Their calls for complete recognition have been shaped by long-standing Islamophobia in late colonial and post-colonial Indian society, rising Hindu chauvinism in modern Indian politics, and a more recent explicit anti-Muslim agenda carried out at the highest levels of Indian governance.

### **Background to the Anti-CAA Protests: Cumulative Anti-Muslim Sentiment in Recent Indian History**

The exclusion of Muslims from new legal citizenship regimes including the CAA is the most recent manifestation of a continuing historical suspicion of Muslim loyalties and sentiments in relation to Indian society and culture. The concept of Islamophobia has been defined by scholars and policymakers in ways that emphasize the legal, historical, and social dimensions of anti-Muslim sentiment. As a form of Orientalism, anti-Muslim sentiment tends to represent Muslims in stereotypical ways that ultimately are an exaggeration or a distortion (Said 1978). To clearly encapsulate the multidimensional practices and consequences of Islamophobia, Jasmin Zine (2004) has proposed a definition that notes the

systemic power relationships it is reproduced within and the particular political interests that it supports. According to Zine, Islamophobia is best described as “a fear and hatred of Islam and Muslims (and those perceived as Muslims) that translate into individual actions and ideological and systemic forms of oppression that support the logic and rationale of specific power relations (2004: 113–14).” Zine’s definition makes clear that this phobia and hatred reinforces particular networks of authority and dominance.

Islamophobia has long been part of the politics and social structures of Indian history and culture. It can be traced back to the colonial period, and in the writings of colonial officials like W.W. Hunter. Writing about the Great Rebellion of 1857, Hunter represented Indian Muslims as inherently violent and preoccupied with a militant jihad against non-Muslims, which would become a specific feature of anti-Indian Muslim sentiment.<sup>7</sup> Persistent doubts about the full place of Muslims in Indian society have been reframed in response to changes in the political and cultural discourse. The question of Muslim belonging has been shaped by formative moments in colonial and independent India, for example the Khilafat movement in the early twentieth century, Partition starting in 1947, the 1986 passage of the Muslim Women’s (Protection of Rights in Divorce) Act, the 1992 destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, and the 2002 pogrom in Gujarat in which the BJP led state government targeted and massacred thousands of Muslims in response to the developments in Ayodhya.<sup>8</sup> The terrorist attacks in the United States in September 2001 (9/11) produced a global “War on Terror” that continues, more than twenty years after the initial event, to define Muslims narrowly as inherently involved with anti-state violence. Terrorist acts in Mumbai in 2008, claimed by a Pakistani Muslim extremist group, intensified suspicions about the separatist goals of some Muslims. Skepticism about the positive place of Muslims continues to shape official and non-official assumptions about how this community belongs to Indian society, despite the fact that Muslims have been, and continue to be, full Indian citizens.

The rise of Hindu nationalism in national politics starting in the late 1980s is a formative aspect of the Indian history of anti-Muslim sentiment. Alongside this new extremist politics, the questionable association of Muslims with jihad that originated in the colonial era developed in post-colonial iterations. Several leaders from the BJP were elected to national office, starting with Atal Vajpayee’s election to Prime Minister in 1996. The elections of BJP politician and former Chief Minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi to Prime Minister in 2014 and 2019 are a more recent example of this trend, wherein the Indian government’s implicit anti-Muslim bias moved to a more explicit anti-Muslim agenda. In this environment Hindu supremacists found official favor, and Islamophobic attitudes and programs newly had official sanction. As demonstrated by the marked increase in hate crimes and

targeted killings of Muslims, this shift also emboldened regular people to commit acts of violence against Muslims. These include the phenomenon of lynching Muslims on the accusation of eating beef, and several Islamophobic campaigns that accused Muslims of engaging in various forms of “jihad” – including “land jihad” (Muslims purchasing land in Hindu-majority areas for the purpose of domination) and “*thook* (spit) jihad” (Muslims spitting in public areas as a method of promoting their religion). One of the longer-lasting right-wing Hindu discourses regarding claims of a nefarious “jihad” is the “Love Jihad,” which seeks to make particular claims about Hindu and Muslim love relationships. According to the ideological assumptions of those who promote the “Love Jihad” campaign, Muslim men target single Hindu women and deceive them into marriage as a mechanism of conversion to Islam.<sup>9</sup> This then becomes a reason to investigate Hindu and Muslim relationships, and to question the sexuality of Muslims, particularly Muslim men.

The CAA legislation was developed within, and shaped by, this recent anti-Muslim political agenda. Several attempts to enforce the BJP’s new ideological terms of citizenship were conducted in Assam in 2018 and 2019 under the rubric of the NRC. Effectively, these citizenship tests resulted in millions of Muslims, some refugees and some indigenous Assamese, now being termed as illegal and without claim to a national identity (Deb 2021; Saikia 2021). After a BJP victory in the Lok Sabha elections in 2019, policymakers took steps to quickly develop and pass several pieces of Islamophobic legislation, including the Triple Talaq Bill and the repeal of Article 370 in Kashmir. Passed on December 11, 2019 by both the Lok and Rajya Sabha, the CAA provides official paths to citizenship for migrants belonging to six minority religious communities (Hindu, Jain, Sikh, Buddhist, Christian, and Parsi) who entered India prior to 2014. Political support for this legislation was premised on the argument that these minority communities are persecuted and therefore deserving of state protection.<sup>10</sup> The exclusion of Muslims from the list of protected religious minority communities was conspicuous. The passage of the CAA must be understood in conjunction with the NRC, which is an administrative effort to identify and subsequently expel illegal migrants and immigrants. Critics of the NRC pointed out how minority migrant communities are often not able to produce the official documentation related to ancestry that allows one to qualify as a citizen. These new regimes redefined citizenship in ways that officially excluded Muslims and in effect, rendered many of this religious community stateless within India.

As a result of these political changes, many Indian Muslims are more conscious than ever of their marginalized identities.<sup>11</sup> In his analysis of the protests, Ali Khan Mahmudabad (2020) states that the official governmental exclusion of Muslims has paradoxically produced a new space for Muslims to articulate an



explicitly community-oriented politics. This new politics was not simply articulated by Muslims, who were joined by non-Muslim allies in these political actions. Demonstrations in public and private spaces of how Muslims belong to Indian society emerged as statements about community that were unapologetically Muslim, were performed and embodied in diverse modes of cultural expression during the anti-CAA protests. These performances occurred in public spaces such as on the streets of Delhi and in cities and towns throughout India, in Christian churches in Kerala, within mixed Hindu and Muslim neighborhoods in Kanpur, and on social media sites like Twitter and Facebook. In the following sections, I identify three major trends in the protests that compromise this new approach to the politics of religion and Indian society. Specifically I discuss Muslim testimonies to citizenship, non-Muslim allies demonstrating solidarity through their performances of community, and how the protests reveal the multiple needs of Muslim women who face intersectional forms of Islamophobia.

### **Muslim Poetic Testimonies to Citizenship: Hussain Haidry's "Hindustani Musalmaan" ("Indian Muslim")**

Varieties of Muslim testimony about their place within India and Indian society that were expressed at public protests and on social media used the context of the CAA's exclusion of Muslims specifically to respond with the assertion that they are Indian and Muslim and see no contradiction between the two. These statements rejected the anti-Muslim premises of the CAA and articulated diverse ideas of India as Muslim. One example of a Muslim testimonial that was popular at the protests is the poem "Hindustani Musalmaan" ("Indian Muslim"), created and performed by Hussain Haidry, a Mumbai-based poet and screenwriter. This poem was first published in 2017 on the Facebook page of a Mumbai performing arts organization. At that time, it went viral on social media sites and was written about in several national newspapers. The poem became popular again in 2019 when it was performed by Haidry and others, including the actor Nasiruddin Shah, at anti-CAA protests in Mumbai and Delhi.

The poem highlights contradictions in how official Indian Islamophobia defines all Muslims in monolithic ways. As a method of pointing to these inconsistencies, the poem's first section uses questions as a rhetorical device to name the different ways of expressing an Indian Muslim life. These questions depict a Muslim searching for their place and wondering about their identity given the anti-Muslim discourse constructed by state authorities. The poem begins by asking, "Brother, what kind of Muslim am I?" In response, the speaker names aspects of a Muslim identity through more questions: "am I Shia or I'm Sunni?", "from the village or the city?", and "am I rebel or a mystic?" (Mukherjee and Mehrotra, 2020).

The speaker then repeats the main question, “Brother, what kind of Muslim am I?” and continues to respond by posing questions which identify different examples of expressing one’s Muslim self: “is my cap my identity, or the beard shaved off completely? Recite Qur’anic verse, I could, or hum the songs of Bollywood?”

“Hindustani Musalmaan” represents the practice of being an Indian Muslim that is religiously pluralist and intersectional. The voice of Haidry’s poem shifts from questioning to statements that illustrate the poet’s conception of being an Indian Muslim without contradiction or hesitation. The notion offered by the poem is a Muslim identity that reflects the diversity of the nation in terms of regional identity, caste, class, and religious community. An Indian Muslim according to the poem is Gujarati and Bengali; from high castes and lower; it is the doctor and the weaver. An Indian Muslim includes aspects of sacred texts and cultures often thought of as primarily part of Hindu traditions, illustrated when the speaker claims that “the holy Gita speaks in me; the Ganges washes sins in me.” The poem continues to illustrate an expansive conception of Indian Islam with the speaker claiming, “the Hindu temple door is mine, as are the mosque minarets mine; the Sikh Gurudwara hall is mine, the pews in churches also mine” (Mukherjee and Mehrotra, 2020).

In contrast to how the poem begins with a series of questions, it ends with a clear assertion of a Muslim identity that rejects Islamophobic contentions of an essential Muslim separatism. This section includes vivid and emotional imagery of the violence that Indian Muslims have endured in recent years: the 1992 violent destruction of the Babri Masjid, aggressive police incursions into Muslim schools, and the aftermath of communal riots: “I’m in Babri’s demolished dome; I’m in the blurred borders of home; in poverty of slum dwellings; the Madrasa’s shattered ceilings; the embers flaming a riot; I’m in the garment stained with blood” (Mukherjee and Mehrotra, 2020). The poem concludes with a simple assertion of a strong identity that is religious and patriotic: “Brother, as Muslim as I am, I’m that much also Indian.” This construction of being Muslim is as diverse as India itself and draws from diverse aspects of national society and culture to reverse skepticism of how Muslims belong. Haidry’s articulation of the Indian Muslim also is evidence of the central role that violence and dispossession have played in this community’s history and current existence. The loyalty and patriotism for India that the Muslim speaker of Haidry’s poem expresses exists, despite the dehumanizing conditions of many Muslims’ existence.

Haidry’s poem is an example of how Muslim testimonies to their Indian identities invert the assumptions of Indian Islamophobia, in particular the illogical arguments that Muslims are inherently anti-national, separatist, and foreign. The poem’s questions and responses about the qualities of being Muslim highlight diversity within this religious community, and in doing so combat the monolithic

depiction of Muslims and Islam that is part of Islamophobic approaches. If anti-Muslim sentiment represents Muslims as backward and unchanging, this poem provides a contrasting view of a plural and sometimes contradictory community. In interviews about “Hindustani Musalmaan,” Haidry says that the poem doesn’t offer anything new (Punwani 2017). It is correct that Muslims affirming their Indian identities is not necessarily new and these expressions are found in diverse genres of cultural expression, including politics, literature, and cinema.<sup>12</sup> The remarkable popularity of the poem, both during its initial publication in 2017 and in the anti-CAA 2019–20 protests, suggests that Muslims and non-Muslims have found new ways that the poem relates to their experiences. The protests were characterized by Muslim assertions of their belonging as shown by Haidry’s poem. Muslim rejection of their exclusion is an obvious starting point in the analysis of the protests. Yet another significant part of these responses was how non-Muslim allies joined in refusing the state’s new terms of citizenship.

### **Performances of Solidarity with Muslims at the Anti-CAA Protests: Constructing New Forms of Belonging and Community**

Ironically, the effort to exclude Muslims from the terms of citizenship through the CAA legislation prompted an opposite reaction of statements of affinity with Muslims. These actions resulted in Muslims and their allies publicly performing their identities as a method of asserting and reinforcing their national belonging. Representations of Muslims that occurred in public spaces during the protests, along with demonstrations of solidarity with Muslims that happened around the country, challenged definitions of religious affiliation and Indian society which officially and unofficially exclude Muslims. Therefore these events presented new conceptualizations of community and belonging in India today that insisted that not only do Muslims belong, but Hindus (and other non-Muslim communities) affirm and protect their rights in the public sphere. These actions are political because the officially sanctioned Islamophobia in Indian society and politics today has determined that being a Muslim, or supporting this community, is an anti-national act.

Islamophobic statements by national officials when the protests were first developing prompted performances of solidarity with Muslims. These assertions, by some of the highest government officials, made clear their ideological assumptions that the protests were being staged only by Muslims. For example, on December 16, 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated in public comments that one knows who the protesters are by their clothes (Sogarwal 2019). This was understood as a xenophobic statement against Indian Muslims as it referenced

aspects of a Muslim identity that can be expressed in clothing choices, such as a headscarf or small-knit skullcap (*topi*).

In response to the reference to Muslim clothing, male students protesting at Jamia Millia Islamia University took off their shirts despite the frigid winter temperatures (Sogarwal 2019). Many participants in the protests took Muslim names for a day. Nation-wide, 24-hour fasts to show support for Muslims were organized several times by different organizations. The use of fasting as a part of political demonstrations illustrates how the anti-CAA protests continue modes of non-violent resistance popularized in India and around the world by former political leaders like Mohandas K. Gandhi.

Actions in support of Muslims organized by many religious communities rejected the Indian state's exclusion of Muslims and emphasized their affirmative place within India's diverse religious character. These events occurred throughout India and show that refutations of the state's official Muslim exclusion were truly national. They also constructed conceptions of a national religious community that was pluralist, in contrast to the ways in which Hindu nationalists insist on Hinduism as India's only legitimate religion. On Christmas Eve of 2019, the youth choir of the Saint Thomas Marthoma Church in Kozhenchery, Kerala, dressed as Muslims during church services as a performance of unity with Indian Muslims (Rakesh 2019). Young men in the choir all wore white skullcaps, and women wore black hijabs and sang songs in the tune of a *Mappilappattu* ("Muslim song") – a genre of expression connected with the Muslim communities that have long existed in the Kerala region.<sup>13</sup> On February 7, 2020, in Delhi, protesters from nearly all the major religious traditions of India – Hindu, Islam, Sikh, and Christian – participated in a multifaith event that included aspects of prayer rituals from each religion (Rizvi 2020). A Hindu pandit lit a ceremonial fire, portions of the Bible were read by a nun, and a group of Sikhs sang selections from the Guru Granth Sahib. Slogans that express religious values unique to each tradition present were chanted by the crowd, including "*Jai Shri Ram*" ("Glory to Lord Rama"), "*Allahu Akbar*" (Allah is the Greatest"), and "*Jai Yeeshu*" ("Glory to Jesus").

A unique dimension to the CAA protests was the phenomenon of non-Muslims protecting Muslims as they expressed their identity through public religious rituals. Many of these interveners were part of Hindu communities. Hindus protecting Muslims in the context of official state Hindu nationalism inverts the idea of inherent conflict between India's largest religious communities, which is a premise of Islamophobic attitudes. Many solidarity actions throughout India were carried out in tandem with ritual Muslim prayers. On December 19, protesters demonstrating at the gates of Jamia Millia Islamia University held a communal prayer in the street. Onlookers formed a human ring of protection around the group as they performed the ritual (Jain 2019). This demonstration of affinity for Muslims

and protection of their religious obligations contrasted starkly with the events at that very site just days before, when Delhi Police forcibly entered the university, released tear gas, and violently assaulted protesting students.

Demonstrations of unity went beyond publicly performed multifaith and Muslim prayer. In the city of Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh, the wedding procession of a young Muslim couple was nearly canceled due to police violence against anti-CAA protesters several days before. According to a news report published in the *Times of India*, Hindus who learned of their Muslim neighbors' fears organized to serve as a protective barrier that escorted the couple and wedding celebrants from their homes to the wedding venue (Mishra 2019). The woman to be married, Zeenat, described the intervention of her Hindu neighbor Vimal Chapadiya as the work of an angel (*farishta*), while Vimal described his efforts as something necessary because they are neighbors and he couldn't stand to see Zeenat's heart broken if the wedding could not happen.

Solidarity actions performed with Muslims as part of the anti-CAA protests show how public performance and physical embodiment are methods of rejecting Islamophobia and constructing a community that is inclusive, not just of Muslims but of many religious communities. These developments illustrate the many ways these protests contradicted the ideological rhetoric of exclusivism. Muslims took steps to make their identities as both Indian and Muslim more visible, and non-Muslims acted in ways that embodied a definition of national community that protects and includes Muslims. The state's response to suppress the protests, in often violent ways, reveals the partisan threat posed by these actions in support of Muslims. The response to Muslim exclusion took other forms beyond Muslims and their supporters rejecting exclusivism, asserting belonging, and promoting pluralism. Events at a major protest site in southeast Delhi, Shaheen Bagh, were led by Muslim women who articulated specific demands related to their positionality as women and as a minority religious community. The responses of these women, along with how they were received, show how anti-Muslim sentiment is intersectional and impacts Muslims in different ways.

### **Muslim Women, Leadership, and Gendered Islamophobia at the Shaheen Bagh Protests**

Like Muslim women in general, Indian Muslim women are subject to myopic assumptions about their gender, sexuality, and agency that are disempowering and dehumanizing. If anti-Muslim attitudes dictate that Muslim women are oppressed by Muslim men, then the women's leadership in protests at Shaheen Bagh, a southeast Delhi neighborhood next to Jamia Millia Islamia University (JMI), controverts this ideological view. The working-class and older women who led

protests and occupied sections of a public highway inverted the gendered assumptions of Islamophobia and used the public platform they created to be the leading voices demanding equal rights for their religious community. These demands became about more than just rejecting the legislation's new construction of citizenship. In articulating their needs, Muslim women showed how their identities are intersectional and seek redress on several major fronts. They called for recognition of their fundamental humanity as Muslim women and criticized patriarchal attitudes and institutions such as misogyny and the problem of domestic violence.

Over the course of a few weeks, the Shaheen Bagh demonstrations grew into a movement of hundreds if not thousands of participants, directed and organized by Muslim women. On December 16, 2020, several women living in Shaheen Bagh who were outraged by the police violence against JMI students in the days before decided to take action. They took over a stretch of the highway, set up tents and tables, and began what would become a historic and continual sit-in protest against police violence and the CAA. Many took Narendra Modi's statement about knowing the identities of protesters by their clothes to be particularly denigrating to Muslim women leading protests happening at Shaheen Bagh because of its reference to wearing a hijab, a distinctive marker of Muslim identity. The protests went on for nearly one hundred days. On March 24, 2020, state and local forces cleared the site under the premise of a national lockdown related to the spread of the coronavirus.

Muslim women interviewed about their participation at Shaheen Bagh voiced the reasons for their agitation and described how the CAA was just the latest development in the recent history of the Indian government's moves to disenfranchise Muslims politically and culturally. A woman quoted as Gulabi (Bose 2019) connected the CAA to previous bureaucratic attempts to marginalize Muslims:

They first scrapped special status for Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370, then they declared that *mandir* (Hindu temple) will be made in place where the Babri Masjid existed and now they want us to leave our home. This is an attack on our religion. They don't want Muslims here.

Sakina, also a participant at Shaheen Bagh, rejected the Islamophobic idea that Indian Muslims are foreigners who should return to where they came from: "we have been here since before India was formed and we will remain here. India is our home" (Bose 2019).

The demonstrations at Shaheen Bagh became more than simply a sit-in protesting the exclusion of Muslims as Indian citizens. The Muslim women created a diverse ecosystem of care for those who joined in the activities (Reuters 2019). Chai was readily available and food was prepared daily, often donated by businesses in the

local neighborhood. Bedding and medicine were arranged and provided by outside supporters. Women took care of the children of others so that more could attend the daily actions. Patriotic songs and poetry were regularly recited by individual speakers and often by the entire crowd. The women invited specific community leaders and activists to speak on the CAA, the Indian Constitution, and human rights. In their analysis of these protests, Fahad Hashmi (2022: 14) notes that the actions of the women of Shaheen Bagh were new articulations and performances of citizenship that went beyond the legal connotations of this concept to include emotions, identity, and participatory dimensions of Muslim belonging to India. The demonstrations of the women of Shaheen Bagh, along with the other forms of protest in the streets and online, confirm their conceptualizations of Indian citizenship as something more than just a legal status. To be an Indian citizen for these protesters meant expressing your affinity with India in emotional terms, and embodying that commitment in literal ways.

Many of the women participating in the protest at Shaheen Bagh were acutely aware that how others understood their efforts involved myopic views about women in general and Muslim women specifically. They reacted to this gendered Islamophobia in words and in actions.<sup>14</sup> Responding to the question of how women became so involved with the demonstrations, Sakina explained that “Women have always been at the forefront when it comes to protecting their homes. Why should we step back now?” (Reuters 2019). Women’s leadership was not limited to Shaheen Bagh however, as many of the anti-CAA protests around India were led by women, many of them university students. Despite their inversion of anti-Muslim attitudes toward women, comments made by Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath at a pro-CAA rally reveal that the prominence of women struck a chord with Indian Islamophobes. Adityanath, a high-ranking politician and Hindu leader, said it was shameful that Muslim men had forced women and children into the streets to protest and concluded that these men didn’t possess the courage themselves to do so (Outlook Web Bureau 2020). This sentiment was consistent with other remarks Adityanath made about the protests, including the imperative to “feed them bullets, not biryani,” referencing a dish of spiced rice and meats invoked by extremists as a coded anti-Muslim stereotype (Zargar 2021). Yet women at Shaheen Bagh explained that their remarkable political action was only the beginning of a new trend of women, and especially Muslim women, being visible in public demonstrations. As a woman at the protest (Bhatia and Gajjala 2020: 6294) proclaimed:

We have united across social differences and we are building a new nation where women are at the center of politics in India today, literally, and metaphorically! If you have been here, you know that future revolutions will now wear burqas and bangles.

Shaheen Bagh and the historical precedents set by women in leadership roles, were not confined to its origins in southeast Delhi. A trend of mini-Shaheen Baghs developed in cities and towns throughout India, thus illustrating the power of this protest as it was replicated on a national scale.

The Shaheen Bagh protests illustrate how religious identity, gender, and Islamophobia intersected and prompted Muslim women to articulate concerns that went beyond the immediate demands of the CAA protests. Women at Shaheen Bagh, and other associated protest sites, agitated for more than just the acknowledgment of their claims to citizenship. They also demanded a recognition of their humanity. Women held signs with slogans calling attention to the problems of domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, stalking, and harassment. One such sign read “Freedom from domestic violence (*gheriloo hinsa se azaadi!*)” (Reuters 2019). They criticized police brutality against Muslim women and testified to how women they know have been sexually harassed during arrests and investigations (Bhatia and Gajjala 2020: 6297–8). As they insisted on equal access to citizenship rights, women called out the patriarchal institutions that oppress them and demanded change and equality. Thus the Shaheen Bagh protests became a site where identity politics, Islamophobia, and gender justice converged as multiple demands of the hundreds of participants.

A more gender-inclusive analysis of Indian Muslim participation in the anti-CAA protests shows how constructions of Muslim identities represented in protest actions reveal needs beyond the recognition of citizenship. Articulations of Indian Muslim identities in politics, culture, or intellectual discourse are often created by and defined by cis-gender male expressions. The construction of Indian Muslim as a category of belonging should consider the intersectionality of marginalized social identities when the figure of the Muslim is articulated and contested in politics and cultural discourse. When women testified and expressed their needs for social justice as Indian Muslims, they spoke not just of recognizing their fundamental Indian selves but also about their marginality as women in a patriarchal system. The agitations of Muslims and their allies within the anti-CAA protest movement presented new forms of Muslim identification and revealed requirements that went above and beyond the call for political recognition as Muslims. Responses to these uncompromising assertions of being both Indian and Muslim also revealed the limits of recognition and tolerance even within so-called “progressive” spaces of Indian society.

### **“Good” Indian Muslims and Being “Too Muslim” for One’s Comfort: Confronting the Limits of Acceptance of Muslim Identification**

The performances of Muslim selves that characterize the anti-CAA movement contend with versions of Muslim ‘others’ that have experienced acceptance, if



somewhat limited, in Indian society. The formal and informal embrace of certain “good” Indian Muslims reveals that particular kinds of Muslims are worthy of toleration at the least and deserving of fascination at the most.<sup>15</sup> The role of Hindu dominance in contemporary politics and many aspects of culture is a determining factor in how Muslims are seen and understood in Indian society today. Daniel Gold points to the role of the Hindu gaze as well as socio-economic class in his analysis of how Muslim film stars and Sufi *qawwali* figures have become the kinds of Indian Muslims that attract the attention of middle-class Hindus (2013: 39–58). Importantly, Gold argues that the basis of this exotic appeal is that it ultimately is not a threat to the Hindu supremacist order because these Muslims do not challenge middle-class Hindu cultural or social power. These are the conditions of a limited acceptance of Muslims by the majority of Indian society. The inclusion and recognition of certain kinds of “good” and charismatic Muslims like those that Gold identifies is an example of how Indian Islamophobia works to reinforce existing Hindu hegemony and the status quo.

In contrast, Muslim protest actions and performances of citizenship in the anti-CAA movement rejected these terms of social acceptance. Hussain Haidry’s poetic articulation of the “Hindustani Musalmaan” gave voice to the exceptionally violent experiences of Muslims who nevertheless declared their Indian selfhoods. Articulating these formative pasts defies the stereotypical “good” Indian Muslim who refrains from mentioning this history which ultimately serves existing structures of power and authority. Muslims and their allies occupied public spaces to perform religious community and protect religious rituals, in defiance of the many ways they are excluded and regulated in those same spaces. In her opinion column for the *Indian Express* in early January 2020, Lucknow-based entrepreneur and writer Irena Akbar (2020) responded to Narendra Modi’s comments about knowing who the protesters are because of their clothes by turning its Islamophobia into a rallying point. Saying that she in fact would like to be “recognized by my clothes,” Akbar concludes her essay with a strong assertion of her Muslim identity: “The state wants to target me for being Muslim? I shall be “too Muslim” for its comfort.” Akbar’s statement presents a Muslim perspective that, empowered by the context of the anti-CAA protests, is no longer content with conforming or adapting to what the Indian state or Hindu-majority society may expect of their community.

Akbar’s assertion of being “too Muslim” for another’s comfort went beyond how the Indian state might receive these strong religious and national sentiments. Some Muslim statements about their identification provoked a backlash, even within communities that purported to be supporters of this marginalized community. Within the protests, usage of the descriptor “Allah,” the phrase “*Allahu Akbar*” (Arabic: Allah is great) or the Muslim invocation “*La ilaha illallah*” (Arabic: there is no God but Allah), and some forms of visibly Muslim dress were

determined by some in self-identifying “progressive” cultural and political circles to be divisive, communal provocations, or otherwise excessive. Mudasir Amin and Samreen Mushtaq describe this rejection of visibly Muslim attachments as a version of “secular Islamophobia” (Amin and Mushtaq 2019) that presents a different kind of obstacle to full and complete Muslim inclusion in Indian society. One that is perhaps more ominous as it promotes Muslim belonging and participation in theory but places limits on the nature of Muslim presentation and expression.

Asking a Muslim to not be “too Muslim” in their expression of their personhood is an example of a thinly veiled anti-Muslim attitude. Hindu chauvinism tends to be more forthcoming and transparent about its program of anti-Muslim sentiment, while the kinds of exclusion within this trend in secular Islamophobia construct a version of the “good” Muslim on terms that are not always obvious in theory.

## Conclusion

In this article I have identified moments in the performance and embodiment of Indian Muslim selves, and actions of solidarity with this community, that illustrate a new trend in Indian Muslim identification that is fully Indian and fully Muslim without hesitancy nor contradiction. In response to the government’s exclusion of Muslims from paths to citizenship for religious minority communities, protests that newly affirmed the place of this community within Indian history and society occurred throughout India and around the world. Muslims and their allies performed their nationalism for a new era, and in the process revealed the diversity of the community and how anti-Muslim sentiment is intersectional. This has important consequences for how Muslims are understood as Indians today, more than twenty years after the 9/11 attacks in the US and following the 2008 attacks in Mumbai. What emerged within the anti-CAA movement was an uncompromising assertion of Indian Muslim identification. This indicates new responses to Indian Islamophobia that do not attempt to explain away or apologize for being Muslim. Instead, these performances rejected the very premises that question their existence and belonging as Indians. They serve as powerful statements within the broader context of the growing institutionalization of Hindu chauvinism seen in the post-2014 Modi era of national governance. The Muslim “subject” which is the focus of this special issue demands to be heard through performed poetics, in street protests, and as part of a highly visible mass takeover of public space. Yet it must be noted that these loud Muslim voices were met with fierce violence and repression from the local police. Their posters and slogans of protest were erased from public spaces, and many of their leaders continue to be imprisoned. They clearly threatened the confidence of some in the Hindutva establishment.

Performance makes visible that which is often unseen or assumed in social and cultural discourse. It is a method that Muslims, but of course not only Muslims, employ in order to contest the terms that judge them as distant, separate, and an anxiety for national belonging in global contexts. Although the claims about identification they express in representational contexts are often overlooked, Muslims talking back to history and the present in performative situations are important rejoinders to narrow assumptions of identity, community, and the nation. Scholarship on contemporary religious life would be enhanced by more investigations of the representation of religion and belonging that occur in performative contexts, and often in the realm of popular culture. Not only do these depictions offer new ways of thinking through social life, history, and religious sentiment, but they are often essential spaces of self-statement for marginalized communities.

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## Notes

- 1 For a review of broader trends in the study of South Asian Islam from approaches in Indian historiography and religious studies, see Purohit and Tareen (2020).
- 2 See Chatterjee (1986).
- 3 See Dalmia (1997).
- 4 See Butler (1990a): 270–82.
- 5 See Butler (1990b): 33.
- 6 See Goswami (2004) and Roy (2007). Jisha Menon's *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition* (2013), a study of the role of mimesis in performances of Indian nationalism, is an exception.
- 7 For more on this history see Morgenstein Fuerst (2017).
- 8 See Shani (2010) for more on how diverse political and cultural conceptions of citizenship influenced how Indian Muslims responded to debates about belonging from the end of colonial rule to the present. Pandey (1999) examines these debates in the particular context of political debates at the time of India's independence and Partition.
- 9 See Strohl (2019) for a broader discussion of this ideological movement.
- 10 For more on how this legislation remade the terms of Indian citizenship, see Jayal (2022).
- 11 For an example in response to the CAA bill, see Khan (2019).
- 12 See Jalal (2000) for examples of Muslim nationalism in politics, poetry, and literature. For more on the representations of Muslims in Indian cinema, see Bhaskar and Allen (2022).

- 13 Sebastian R. Prange's *Monsoon Islam* (2018) details the formative histories of Arabian maritime trade networks in what is today the state of Kerala that mark the arrival of the earliest Muslims to the subcontinent.
- 14 The ways in which Islamophobia is gendered is a growing subject in the field of Islamic studies globally and in American Islamic studies particularly. See Juliane Hammer's (2013) discussion of the scholarship on this topic in scholarship on American Islam in her "Center Stage: Gendered Islamophobia and Muslim Women."
- 15 See Mahmoud Mamdani (2004) for discussion of the emergence of a problematic "good" and "bad" Muslim binary that has become more trenchant in a post-9/11 discourse of the War on Terror.

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