
Hum Dekhenge (We Shall See)

Shifa Zoya

Abstract

In 2019, protests erupted across India after the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was introduced just before parliamentary elections took place. The act grants expedited Indian citizenship to “illegal” and undocumented migrants belonging to six religious minorities (Hindus, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and Christians) who escaped to India from religious persecution in Muslim-majority Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan before December 31, 2014, even without valid visas or other required paperwork. However, the Act excludes Muslims from availing this benefit, resulting in backlash for the Islamophobic policy. It was introduced along with the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which is a list of people who entered India before March 24, 1971, a day before Bangladesh became an independent country. While the register claims to enable the identification and deportation of “illegal” immigrants, it can only identify, apart from Muslims, those without the required documents, an overwhelming majority of whom are women, the poor, marginalised and Indigenous communities, orphans or illiterate people. The CAA and NRC represent two of the many discriminatory laws and policies that have been used to target Muslims in India in a push for a Hindu nation. In what follows, I reflect on my living with and through these policies as an Indian citizen and work through the question of what it means to be a Muslim in India, especially in the current atmosphere of Hindu nationalism and the erosion of the secular fabric of the country.

Keywords

nationalism, discrimination, anti-minority

I used to say my name with confidence when I was in my teens. Painfully shy as a child, I avoided talking in general in middle school. My mother told me I barely made a sound, even when I cried as an infant. Which brings me to the present.

Most people don't get my name right on the first try. *Shilpa, Sheeba, Shippa*. They don't taste the Arabic that flows through the curves of my name. In South India, where I grew up, people struggle to pronounce the /f/ sound. I didn't mind. Not until they asked me if I was a foreigner. Then I minded. I still do. At the Meenakshi Amman temple in Madurai, my mother, aunt, and I had to fight with the security guards to convince them that we were not foreigners by speaking in Hindi. They even demanded to see our passports, which we indignantly refused to show. It was only my uncle yelling from the other side of the metal detector that saved us. *My wife, my wife!*

Once, a family friend took me to see the gardens outside the Honourable Supreme Court of India in Delhi, where he is a lawyer. One of his colleagues was walking by just at that moment and came over to us. *Are you French?* I was too stunned to respond, so our family friend replied on my behalf. *Arre nahi, yeh desi kudi hai!* (Oh no, she is an Indian girl!).

Other people have asked me if I am French too. It always makes me laugh.

Then what are you?

The ever-present follow-up question, when I deny the above allegations. I always answer softly these days.

Whenever people ask me what my native is, I always tell them I am from Bangalore and that my parents are from Mumbai. In a sense, this is true, although I can't speak fluent Kannada. Every year, my mother would bundle my sister and me up in the Udyan Express train to Mumbai. My father would come to see us off, pressing against the window and pretending to push the train out of the station when it sounded its whistle. He would then run alongside the train, slowly at first and then faster until the train pulled out of the station. My sister and I would press our cheeks against the cold metal, waving excitedly until we

couldn't see him anymore. By dinner time, my sister would have befriended half the bogey, jumping from upper berth to upper berth and coming back with a new friend every half an hour, while I would sit reading by the window.

In 2017, I remember reading about a young boy who was stabbed to death on a train right after Eid shopping, as a fight broke out over seats. People called him a "beef-eater." I didn't know Eid could be so heartbreaking.

My undergraduate Sociology classes were heavy and intense, more often than not. I was always looking for empty benches at the back where I could sit and watch food videos without being disturbed or spotted by the professor. I preferred sitting alone, in my Instagram haze, removed from reality. The classes had more than 80 students enrolled in them, and I was easily lost. In my second year, I decided to participate in a two-day Sociology conference at a faraway location. All I heard was an overnight stay with my friends, but I still had to write a paper to present. Having personally known someone who almost got lynched due to fake WhatsApp forwards about organ traffickers, I felt that was a good starting point for my conference paper. That is, until I discovered a world of WhatsApp-related lynchings in the name of the cow. I presented my paper on a morning heavy with fear, wearing a red *kurta*. I titled it *The Violent App*.

When I was six years old, my father took me to the quiet streets behind our house to teach me how to cycle. Taking off my training wheels, he steadied the back of my cycle while I rode until suddenly, he wasn't. After some time, I noticed and turned back in fear to look for his warm, reassuring hands, but promptly fell off. My father made me so independent that 20 years later, when I sat on my motorcycle, I realised I could go anywhere in that very instant. But I didn't want to go anywhere else. Not until 2019.

A Kashmiri friend asked me – *Why didn't you speak up for us all this time? Why now?* I had no answer. *I was too young?* She was born into

conflict. *I didn't know?* Everyone knew about the “Kashmir issue.” *I didn't know what it meant to be Muslim?*

Then, seriously, why now?

The protests came like a hammer to my conscience. It hurt. I hurt. But why? Especially when I felt like a fake, like I didn't deserve the tag of my community for having lived in blissful peace all these years. The only time I felt Muslim was on Eid when I got Eidi money. I had never claimed my identity outside of filling out forms. I was a hypocrite. So, what was it that brought me out onto the streets when I was twenty-one, after always feeling like I never belonged, a half child of two cities, two cultures, and two languages?

I was angry. The onus of being secular was being placed on Muslims, even though they were the ones primarily being singled out.

The anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) movement in India began ahead of the parliamentary elections in 2019. “*Hum kaagaz nahi dikhayenge!*” (We will not show our papers/documents!) became a popular slogan during this time. The CAA was widely condemned and criticised because of its discriminatory policy, which only excludes “illegal” and undocumented Muslim immigrants from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh from expedited Indian citizenship. It was introduced along with the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which is a list of people who entered India before Bangladesh became an independent country on March 24, 1971. The NRC enables the identification and deportation of “illegal” immigrants, but actually affects those without proper documentation. Protests erupted all over the country as the CAA and NRC together were seen as Islamophobic and anti-minority policies that granted expedited Indian citizenship to “illegal” and undocumented migrants belonging to six religious minorities, except Muslims. This went against the fundamental rights granted by the Constitution of India, where religion was never a basis for granting citizenship in the history of the country since it gained Independence in 1947.

The song that became a symbol of the protests

was *Hum Dekhenge* (We Shall See). It was written in 1986 by Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz in protest against the oppressive regime of Pakistani dictator Zia-ul-Haq. To this day, I am in awe of the story of Pakistani singer Iqbal Bano's famous performance of the song, in protest against the ban on Faiz's poetry. Bano performed in a black *sari* to symbolize her resistance, as *saris* were considered Indian attire. I now realize that I have more freedom to protest as a non-citizen in another country than I do as a Muslim in India. This identity of mine did not haunt me then as it does now. I have had to relearn how to navigate interactions with people and friends back home.

So, I sat down one evening and wrote – *Aap mujhse itni nafrat kyun karte ho?* (Why do you hate me so much?)

This country's best-kept secret.

Let us go then, you and I,
To the *maidan*, one Azad, one Kranti.
Lined with policewomen and men,
With menacing rifles
Propped lazily against closed shop shutters.
Guiding the crowd.
They calmly watched you walk home,
Green poster in hand
Held up in the crowds that chanted,
“*Hum kaagaz nahi dikhayenge!*”
“*Inquilab zindabad!*” and
“*Azadi, azadi!*”
Just a few hours before.
You looked at my poster and smiled sadly.
“*Aap mujhse itni nafrat kyun karte ho?*”
I read your lips whisper.
A TV reporter stuck her mic in my face,
You held my hand as I spoke broken words
That made no sense, in my fear.
Someone has just finished singing “*Hum Dekhenge*”
When you tug my arm.
The crowds of thousands of troubled minds
Almost drown out your voice.
Let us go home then,
You and I.

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Author Biography

Shifa Zoya is currently doing her MA in Social Anthropology at York University, Toronto, Canada. She is from Bangalore, India, where she completed an MA in English Literature. Having previously worked for an NGO that works on labour rights and migration in Rajasthan, India, she is passionate about bringing about social change and creating meaningful impact. When she is not working, worrying about the state of the world or trying out new cuisines, you will find her reading in sunlit windows and drinking hot chocolate or South Indian coffee. Or sailing out in the sea.