

## 7 Women Activists Imaged through Social Media Publics

### The “Feisty Dadis of Shaheen Bagh” as Political Subjects<sup>1</sup>

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In 2020, the magazine *Time* featured a woman from Shaheen Bagh, Delhi—Bilkis—“an 82-year-old who would sit at a protest site from 8 a.m. to midnight” as one of “the 100 most influential people of 2020” (Ayyub, 2020, para 1). Her images contributed significantly to the popularizing of the “*dadis* of Shaheen Bagh” [grandmothers of Shaheen Bagh]. Shaheen Bagh is a mostly Muslim working-class neighborhood in South Delhi that became known internationally during the 2019–2020 protests against the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Registry of Citizens (NRC) in India.

In this chapter, we consider how older Indian Muslim “subaltern” women came to signify nonviolent, caring protestors in social-media-based communicative publics. To this end, we have examined Twitter and Instagram archives from December 2019 to March 2020. We focus particularly on how affective sympathies for the older women activists were produced through imagery and text via social media. The visual imagery of the *dadis* at the protest site in Delhi came to symbolize care at home (*ghar*). Their sit-in protest embodies their focus on the family. In what follows, we contrast *gharelu* (of the house) with *bahir* (outside the house). We also argue that Bilkis’ peaceful sit-in imagery affectively resonates that of Kasturba Gandhi, thus invoking the Gandhian women who came out (*bahir*) to safeguard their home against the colonizers during India’s freedom movement. Our interest in unpacking these strategies is to highlight emerging practices in using social media to produce affective flows. This chapter should not be confused with reports or academic research about “what actually happened,” and it does not claim to be about the on-site functioning of the activists, even though the interviews conducted do provide evidence of some on-site events. The activists on-site ultimately have put their bodies on the line, and we acknowledge and respect their labor and struggle.

In the following, we briefly explain the political context and then describe our methods. The chapter is then divided into three sections: The first section

lays the theoretical foundations for the discussion and comparative visual analysis. This is detailed in the second section in order to show how the images of the *dadis* of Shaheen Bagh resonate with images of the wife of the Indian freedom fighter M. K. Gandhi. In the last section, we examine how pro-Modi Twitter users define an inspiring woman and then examine how the *dadis* of Shaheen Bagh were represented as inspiring women. Finally, we wrap up our overall argument about the importance of the production of affective intensities in the conclusion.

### **The Political Context**

The CAA and NRC are policies passed by the Indian government in December 2019. The CAA–NRC triggered protests in India, abroad, and on social media platforms. Salam (2020) describes how Indian citizenship laws have been amended over the years. In general, anyone born in India is automatically given citizenship. But due to allegedly illegal migration from Bangladesh into Assam and other northeastern states of India, citizenship laws were modified. In order to stop the recognition of any illegal migrants as citizens of India, the new laws stated that both parents should be Indian. This led to the creation of the National Register of Indian Citizens (NRIC) that was later developed into the NRC to identify illegal citizens. When doing this, the government proposed preparing a National Population Register (NPR) that would help identify people who are not actual citizens from a list of all citizens in the country. Because anyone could come forward and help the government identify unlawful citizens, this would risk communal targeting of people. Anyone unable to produce the required citizenship documents for the NRC would be considered a refugee. Many Indians, however, felt it would be difficult to get the required documents to prove their citizenship. Poor Muslims, for instance, might find themselves in detention centers or be denied citizenship based on religion. Thus, the policy was seen as going against the ethos of the Indian Constitution that guarantees equality and nondiscrimination to people on the basis of religion.

### **Methods**

Because we were using computational tools to collect comparatively large datasets, which are part of “big social data” in digital publics, we relied on the availability of Twitter developer access that allowed us to scrape thousands of tweets via Netlytic and Gephi. Thus, following the work of scholars such as Papacharissi (2015), Bruns and Burgess (2015), and Jackson et al. (2020), we examined networked and visualized Twitter data. We collected data from three key hashtags: #womenofshaheenbagh, #sheinspiresus, and #shaheenbaghprotests. One of the time periods we focused on covered responses to an International Women’s Day announcement made on Twitter in March 2020 by the Indian Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi. He

announced that he would hand over his Twitter handle to seven inspiring women on this day. Later in fall 2022, we downloaded historical data with these hashtags as well. Key methods guiding our work are interdisciplinary. Following the precedent set by scholars such as Jackson et al. (2020) we started by transferring “online counterpublics into networked data” in order to “understand their dynamic and interdependent properties while also narrowing an overwhelming volume of data to a manageable size” (p. 27). This was followed by a close reading of images and texts.

In 2020, we did not yet have academic researcher developer access at Twitter. Therefore, we used the Twitter streamer plug-in available in the open-source software Gephi to scrape the data. We scraped each of the Twitter hashtags for about an hour each day in the month of March 2020. At that time, Twitter data were also collected via Netlytic. On Netlytic, we set the system to collect tweets around each of the hashtags mentioned for 62 days each. Our findings revealed a cross-referencing of the hashtags #shaheenbaghprotests, #dadisofshaheenbagh, #womenofshaheenbagh, and #shaheenbaghdadis.

Overall, we were able to conduct a content and a network analysis. In order to get a full-scale reading of what was happening, we needed to look not only at who was saying something and to whom, but also at what they were saying and how they were connecting with the larger conversation. This allowed us to do both a close reading and a distant reading of the data. In this chapter, we focus on some of the images from the larger datasets and privilege the close readings of select visual and textual data. Nonetheless, the visualizations and network analysis tools gave us an understanding of the fluid and relational nature of affective flows that actually or potentially compelled action on the part of various actors.

For example, network analysis was able to show us who was talking to whom and how communication and ideas spread across the internet and the world. We were able to trace the “nodes” (the people involved) and the “edges” (how they connect to each other). For example, by following #womenofshaheenbagh, we were able to follow the edges back to South Asian Students against Fascism-UK, a UK group dedicated to getting the hashtag trending. Once we discovered the SASAF-UK group, Gephi allowed us to filter and cluster the nodes to see how they connected to other nodes, and to see who the significant voices were among this group. Our work here revealed that the digital space was its own sociocultural environment with its own particular nuances and power dynamics. Several transnational groups that we found did not have a physical grounding with the Shaheen Bagh protestors, but they did have a digital connection that brought attention to the women on the ground.

D’Ignazio and Klein (2020) argue that the context is an important part of data, and that it helps us to understand “how the power and privilege that contributed to their making may be obscuring the truth” (p. 153). Merely studying the hashtags and the network does not tell the larger story. Therefore,

we also carried out over 30 unstructured interviews with transnational and local activists as well as with social media influencers who did not identify as activists. Interviews were conducted intermittently from December 2019 to September 2021. Some of the interviews were conducted in person by members of our research team; others were conducted online and lasted for a minimum of half an hour and a maximum of an hour and a half.

Examining multiple forms of data and immersing ourselves in the digital protest space required not only multiple readings of data but also a commitment to self-reflexivity within the research process as feminist scholars (Leurs, 2017). While we engaged with data analytic tools to track this transnational, digital protest, we emphasize our theoretical commitment to feminist approaches to data that privilege partiality, subjectivity, and the situated, embodied quality of knowledge (Haraway, 1988). More recently, feminist scholars have reaffirmed these principles in the age of big data (D'Ignazio, 2015; Klein, 2014; Leurs, 2017; Rettberg, 2020).

The next section discusses women as political subjects in India in order to set the stage for drawing a comparison between the 1930s Indian freedom struggle and the strategy of highlighting older subaltern women. We start with the role of Indian women as political subjects within the public and private sphere.

### Women in India as Political Subjects: Nuancing the Public and the Private

In order to unpack the *affective attuning* (Papacharissi, 2015) of this digital public visibility, we first need to lay out the larger context for the (im)possibility of women as political subjects in contemporary Indian publics. In this section, we review these issues starting with how the *ghar–bahir* binary shapes political access.

The *ghar–bahir* binary is the Indian form of distinguishing between the private and the public. This dichotomy is drawn from Tagore's work (1916/1985). His novel *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*) narrates the struggle of an upper-caste female protagonist who dares to step out of her husband's home (*ghar*) to partake in India's freedom movement outside of the home (*bahir*). The Indian nationalist movement also drew from this binary to demarcate the struggles between self-rule of India and colonial rule of India with *swadesh* (of one's own country) as *ghar* and the British colonizers as those from *bahir*. The binary, however, has its root in patriarchal assumptions, and it reasserts the private as a space implicitly for those considered upper-caste and middle- to upper-class women. Being outside of the home—in public—was considered unsafe for these women. Ironically, even the Indian women's movement implicitly adopted this binary by focusing only on activism in public—conducted outside (*bahir*) of the domestic (*ghar*) and often led by dominant caste-privileged women, henceforth referred to as “*Savarna* castes” (Deo, 2016; Gajjala, 2019).

As Deo (2016) points out, Indian women are constructed as political subjects through their relationship to the state, their social class and caste, and their relationship with their families and their religious community. Their ability to exercise political agency becomes possible or constrained through the history of the Indian women's movements, the history of state legislation, and the definition of secularism and religious freedom in India. Women from historically oppressed locations—such as those from Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi locations and from working-class rural and urban poor locations—have had different challenges in accessing political publics in their struggle for justice. Women from minority (non-Hindu) religions in India, in turn, have had their own unique challenges.

For instance, the role of women in the Indian nationalist movement was considered to be the maintenance of the so-called Indian culture in the home-family-community setting. "Indian culture" here is defined through Savarna caste and Hindu lenses. This placement of women's role in the nationalist movement also helped the male-centric nationalist movement to engage with the "women's question" by allowing women access to education while still defining their political participation as the work they do in the home. The concepts of private-public, home and the world, *ghar-bahir* (Bhattacharjee, 1992; Chatterjee, 1989) were mobilized while reinforcing the woman's place as within the home. Yet as some feminist scholars note, this manner of resolving the "women's problem" was limited to the dominant caste and mostly middle-class society (Paik, 2014; Rege, 2006). The *ghar-bahir* framework was taken up differently depending on the social class and caste location of the women concerned. Upon looking at efforts by social reformers and nationalist leaders from Dalit and Bahujan backgrounds, for instance, we see that the postcolonial feminist reliance on the simplistic articulation of how women's role in nation building was resolved allowed for a tunnel vision that reproduces spatial private-public binaries of liberal feminism (as we see in Chatterjee, 1989).

Savarna-caste Hindu women are placed in a hierarchy in which they are the keepers of national culture at home. This serves to limit women's agency for political participation to the home culture alone. They then become complicit in the marginalization of those who do not conform to the heteronormative Hindu ideals of womanhood and manhood.

Scholars such as Rege (2006) and Paik (2014) have critiqued the Indian freedom movements' (mostly male-centric) reformist articulation of *ghar-bahir* as being based on dominant-caste Indian women's experience. As Paik (2014) notes:

Only very recently ... have scholars begun to provide a corrective, and [have] produced books devoted to the understanding of the internal dynamics of gender inequalities within Dalit communities in different regions of India. I have argued elsewhere that centering attention on the twice Dalit—"Dalit women"—allows for the most inclusive and productive

politics, and developing new feminist frameworks and critiques of power structures.

(p. 75)

Further, as Deo's (2016) research reveals, the ideal Hindu woman very easily becomes an activist for the Hindutva cause which is a radical hardline version of Hinduism taken up as a political stance that sees India as a "Hindu nation." To be an activist on behalf of such a Hindu idea does not require a questioning or rejection of the patriarchal structure of the home space. Since carrying forward the Hindu way is to protect "home culture." Even as she leaves the physical confines of her house to do the work of social reform on behalf of the ideal Hindu nation, she is continuing her work to preserve the *ghar*. Thus, even their participation in Hindu-oriented community work as "activists" is seen as "an extension of their domestic piety" (Deo, 2016, p. 32). As Ali (2001) observes, it is indeed

the particular manner in which the public sphere has evolved in India under colonial rule and during the national movement and hence the very nature that it has acquired has made it susceptible to the recent advance of Hindutva.

(p. 2419)

The abilities afforded by mobile gadgets and social media tools further extend opportunities for such a Hindu keeper of culture to build affective networks of transnational connectivity through WhatsApp groups and other forms of digital family spaces (Gajjala & Verma, 2018). This activism can and is done with the body placed in the home.

### **Muslim Women and Their Feminist Consciousness through Digital Communication**

The analysis above leaves unanswered the questions regarding how Muslim women have been impacted by the Indian nationalist movements. For instance, how have Muslim women in India mobilized as activists? Were Muslim women expected to perform their Indianness in the home space? What constitutes "Indianness" for women of minority religions? These questions are important if we are to foreground the ways in which digital affective publics were deployed strategically to highlight the political agency of the older women of the Muslim community living in the community of Shaheen Bagh in Delhi.

During the late 1970s and right into the mid-1980s, a case centering a Muslim woman in relation to alimony and Muslim religious law (Shariat) took center stage. This was the "Shah Bano case" (Ali, 2001). Shah Bano had filed a criminal suit against her ex-husband for not providing alimony. The Indian courts ruled that she should be given alimony—however, there

was furor around the judgment and claims were made that it went against Muslim personal laws. The Indian constitutional idea of secularism as revolving around religious freedom in personal and religious community contexts was used as an argument against the ruling. It is said that in a bid to garner Muslim community votes, the Indian Parliament then passed the Muslim Women Act in order to restrict payment of alimony according to interpretations of Islamic Law. According to Ali (2001), this was a result of how the nationalist movement created “an autonomous private sphere.” He further writes that,

in fact, the Shah Bano controversy was to actually impart an unparalleled momentum to the emerging politics of Hindutva as the former was effectively used by the latter to reinforce the idea that the Indian state was appeasing Muslims.

(p. 2422)

While the Shah Bano case cast a heavy burden on Muslim feminists, the history of feminist consciousness raising and activism by Muslim women activists in certain regions of India leads to another sort of nuancing of the binary of *ghar* and *bahir*. For instance, when we look at instances of Muslim women’s activism in relation to family disputes and education, we see ways in which they attempt to change community practices by focusing on the social rather than on the religious practices. For instance, by learning Arabic and reading primary religious texts, they were able to point out that some oppressive patriarchal practices were not innately Muslim, but were actually social in nature. Therefore, they were able to be committed to community development while also fighting for women’s rights on certain issues. Such Muslim feminist groups argued for a notion of “ethical self” as “important to both men and women in order to act on behalf of the [marginalized] community” (Suneetha, 2012, p. 63). Such an ethical self is not gender specific. It is predicated on a focus on building an equitable community (home) space while emphasizing the need for both men and women to be educated. This approach to reform around women’s issues, rather than leading to religious conservatism, led to the secularization of viewpoints. In the next section, we examine how these different views on women’s empowerment are implicitly built into social-media-based affective engagements.

### **Affective Publics and Twitter Archives**

Papacharissi (2015) refers to *Twitter publics* as “soft structures of engagement” that are formed through “newer modalities of civic engagement” (p. 115). In our continued observing of these publics, we also found that these were fragmented and moment/movement-driven, yet they reside in searchable archives. For instance, in our collection of tweets around #womenofshaheenbagh, we found that it did not appear on Twitter before

December 29, 2019, although the women had been protesting on site from December 15, 2019. We collected a total of 23,966 tweets around the hashtag from December 2019 to October 2022. This shows how the movement took some time to become visible on social media. Once visible on social media networks, the online part of the movement formed visible archives through invisible infrastructures that shape the practices of network linking. Hashtags themselves are only the surface of machine-to-machine “talk.” As far back as the mid-1990s, Derrida and Prenowitz (1995) described the technological infrastructure’s role in shaping the archive. They noted that:

the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event. This is also our political experience of the ... media.

(p. 17)

In the case of the technical structure of Twitter and Instagram and how it shapes the visibility of archives, Losh (2019) observes that

in addition to providing metadata that allows computers to sort through online conversations more efficiently, hashtags with slogans are speech acts that use language to attempt to bring a new order into existence.

(p. 63)

The interfacing between individual and text occurs via mobile gadgets, with the body itself occupying no particular located space, whereas the infrastructure of the social media archive simultaneously predetermines and allows placement of the utterance in public space. Even as it bursts forth with a sense of immediacy, invoking urgent responses, the tweet first hits the public space as an utterance. Then, it rests, waiting to be reanimated again by some Twitter user who sees its significance and retweets or replies to it. The Twitter archive is both alive in the present and serves as evidence of a speech act providing a “receipt” (Brock, 2020, p. 19) of what was uttered. This particular fluid affordance of social media immediacy and archives has led to the practice of “showing receipts.” These receipts, as Brock (2020) notes, have been developed particularly through a “postpresent discursive digital practice that situates past transgressive behavior ... in the now (usually via social media) to be ‘read’ as evidence in the moment” (pp. 219–220). These are practices that yet again highlight the public–private fluidity and the interweaving as well as the hidden-in-plain-sight existences of the personal and the public in social media space. Such practices contribute to the “how” of strategic social media use by protest movements, and they have become the norm, particularly in Twitter publics. However, they also contribute to unpredictable outcomes across time, because different kinds of affective engagements with Twitter posts nudge the algorithmic infrastructures in different directions.

The fluid and interweaving nature of Twitter publics connects well with Lünenborg’s (2019) understanding of affect. According to her, *affect* has

a dynamic, processual, and fluid capacity arising in the relational interaction between actors and artifacts in any kind of social practice, and embedded in a variety of temporal and spatial contexts.

(p. 322)

As such, affect is determined to be adaptable and constantly shifting in the relation between actors and artifacts within social practice and other contexts of time and (digital–physical) space. New technologies change how we approach and understand communication within the public sphere and how it allows for (human) agency (Lünenborg, 2019). Thus, because affect is relational, affective publics are performative and processual. These “publics” consist of different actors, networks, and societal groups that are not constrained to specific “spheres” or modes of organization such as media (Lünenborg, 2019). To better understand the performativity of publics and find its formulaic patterns, researchers should investigate the doing of publics. Increased technological awareness within political participation introduces networked publics as parts of sites for protesters to participate through both digital and physical spaces. This leads to the formation of ad hoc publics (predigital social networks).

In order to examine the affective resonances and sense of connectivity and placement in the community produced through various mediated practices in the context of the Shaheen Bagh movement, we first examined selected snapshots emerging from the larger Twitter datasets. Following the data analysis, we also examined specific Twitter texts that were heavily retweeted.

### Staging the “Women of Shaheen Bagh”

Our entry point into the anti-CAA–NRC activism and the Shaheen Bagh protests was filtered through the viral images (some of which form part of our textual analysis) of anti-CAA–NRC protestors—the Women of Shaheen Bagh—a group of Muslim Indian women protesting the passage of the CAA–NRC by staging a peaceful sit-in on a major roadway in the predominately Muslim neighborhood of Shaheen Bagh in South Delhi (Bhowmick, 2020, January 15; Bhowmick, 2020, February 4; Hameed, 2019; Khan, 2020).

Overall in this chapter, we extend our previously argued position that contemporary Indian feminist protests are frequently defined by the interrelation of digital and physical activism (Khan, 2020,). Dey (2016) has also argued that Indian feminist activism today is increasingly being defined more broadly and by its global, digital dimension, despite the persistence of a digital divide, drawing particular attention to the way in which student movements in India, the United States, and the United Kingdom have mobilized to protest and show solidarity.

Our analysis revealed a concentrated effort among anti-CAA–NRC Twitter users to emphasize a narrative of political protest defined by strategic representations of made-to-feel-at-home-ness and an ethic of care. Past research has identified where “subaltern images” are deployed among Indian digital feminist movements as a means of spreading a sense of affect and community (Gajjala, 2017). These images of older women and subaltern subjects were being deployed (partly spontaneously and partly in a planned manner) as a strategy by social media users aligned with the movement. This became clear to us through the visualizations we produced using data analytics software.

Transnational digital activists played a role in amplifying the narratives emerging from the local sites of activism in India. As Sorce and Dumitrica (2021) have observed in their study examining the Fridays for Future’s (FFF) digital protest communication on Facebook, there is an awareness on the part of current youth activists “of the necessity to act in a ‘vertical’ manner that goes beyond national, geopolitical milieus and towards a transnational activist sensibility.”

In our conversation with one of the participants, we learned how the sit-in protest of Shaheen Bagh was initially started by about 50 women who knew each other and shared social media networks. Regarding the protest strategy at Shaheen Bagh, an interviewee mentioned that there was a feeling that a lot of the local activists had become invisible. Thus, transnational visibility seems to have led to what Tarrow (2005) refers to as “scale shift” of the movement. This, in turn, led “domestic-based activists” to “form a spectrum of ‘rooted cosmopolitans’” who were made visible through their engagement in “transnational practices” (p. 35).

Interestingly, one of our interviewees also said that the protest sites in Shaheen Bagh offline were also fractured spaces because of what became visible. She said that some people—partaking in the protest—were visible because of their presence on the site and their “accessibility” to social media. For instance, some celebrities came to the protest site to express solidarity, and the crowds rushed to surround them.

When we asked her about the international media visibility of dadis and about *Time*’s story on Bilkis, she noted that this story highlights Indian culture—a strategy adopted by the activist-journalist Ayyub (2020) who wrote the article. She equates Indian culture with that of care, love, and respect instead of rage. She said that one could counter rage, but it is harder to counter a peaceful protest. This was clearly a strategy invoking a Gandhian nonviolent resistance in an effort to reassert the community’s identity as Indian. Groups such as United against Hate<sup>2</sup> came forth to push for the “compassion” and “peaceful” nature of the protest and Bilkis—an elderly woman—became the face of the movement.

In the following section, we perform a close and comparative reading of two images followed by an examination of associated messages from both sides of the CAA–NRC conflict in order to show how the affective resonances

that contributed to the older women of Shaheen Bagh being nonviolent saviors of the constitution emerged through social media.

*The Nonviolent Nationalist Freedom Fighter (Woman)*

Ahmed (2004) has emphasized that feminist close reading “works against, rather than through, a text’s own construction of itself ... re-thinking of how [the text] works, of how and why it works as it does, for whom” (p. 17). In what follows, we perform a feminist close reading of two iconic images of women protesting to assert their claims on their home space through non-violent sitting in place.

The first image we discuss is a studio portrait shot of Kasturba, Gandhi’s wife, in 1940, seated on a woven mat delicately holding a thread from a box *charkha* (traditional spinning wheel).<sup>3</sup> A symbol of the nationalist movement, Kasturba represents Indian womanly grace and tradition as she sits cross-legged and engages in the act of creating thread. The *charkha* at which Kasturba is pictured is actually a spinning apparatus that cannot be used to produce the large quantities of handspun yarn needed for the production of handloom cloth. It is in fact an innovation of the more traditional *charkhas* used in handloom production and is designed to be compact, and mobile so that the middle class majority participants of the Swadeshi movement might be able to incorporate the spinning of yarn into their daily routine as a form of symbolic resistance to the colonial mass production of yarn and textiles that were seen to be displacing the textile laborers in India. Thus, the briefcase *charkha* pictured in the image serves as an “abstracted symbol, separated from the larger production of cloth, and linked to different kinds of activity” (Brown 2010, p. 4). Excerpted from cottage industry, Kasturba engages in a political act, modernized by the new wheel. Her smile is reassuring and confident, while her actions provide viewers with the compelling contradiction of performing the political act of spinning thread for clothes while also wearing traditional cloth.

Spinning as a symbol has strong connotations with gendered practices in the global south region (Brown, 2010). First, the very act of spinning is associated with home and domestic labor for women. Kasturba’s spinning is symbolic as a political act during the Swadeshi<sup>4</sup> movement in India. As Brown (2010) notes, for the nationalist movement in India, the act of spinning embodies the national identity of being patriotic. Second, spinning enabled participation in the Swadeshi movement for everyone, especially women, who became activists through the gendered domesticated act of spinning from within protected spaces without having to be out on the streets. Third, the imagery of a smiling and spinning Kasturba resonated that of a mother’s welcoming approach. Also, Kasturba being the center of the image signifies the central role played by women during the anticolonial movement. The act of spinning symbolized anticolonial production through which India’s economy (*bahir*) was being rejuvenated by women through their domestic

skills (within the *ghar*). The image thus embodies the relationship between the Indian nation and women being made independent of colonizers by the good Indian mother, who is building *swadesh (ghar)* through her reproductive domestic labor and outcasting the colonizers (*bahir*).

Figure 7.1 is an artistic interpretation of one of the grandmothers of Shaheen Bagh. This image circulated on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. The background of the image is colored in orange, white, and green striped colors with the symbol of the 24-spoke wheel represent the national flag of India. The black lettering (we shall not move) is a rallying cry found in the feminist movement of Shaheen Bagh. In the foreground, the older woman is depicted wearing undyed cloth with a headwrap. She is holding a rosary, and the object below where she is resting one of her legs suggesting a charkha is actually a mat. The image is suggestive, in that the woman is staring directly at the audience, invoking a sense of consciousness and silently beseeching her people to act, thereby paralleling Kasturba's image. Both women are representatives of their places in society as the holders of tradition and gender role expectations while becoming a political symbol themselves.



Figure 7.1 Artistic rendering of Bilkis Dadi that went viral on social media. ↵

Source: <https://twitter.com/DadiBilkis/status/1337381533166960641/photo/1>

*Discourse of Domesticity*

Now we turn to the dataset gathered with a focus on tweets that conformed to the original intention of the dataset #sheinspiresus—designed to reinforce the discourse of domesticity and appropriate public behavior of women who seek to be considered “inspiring.” This dataset was scraped in March 2020 after we heard that PM Modi would be handing over his Twitter handle to inspiring women on International Women’s Day. These inspiring women would, in turn, tweet about other inspiring women using the hashtag #sheinspiresus. Upon hearing of this, social media supporters of the anti-CAA protests decided to sabotage this hashtag by connecting it with and highlighting #womenofshaheenbagh so as to make it trend. In one very visible tweet that used both these hashtags to connect them, there was a call to the protesters in Hindi that points to the moment when the Shaheen Bagh movement sympathizers not only caught onto a high traffic hashtag but also actively called out for the appropriation of the #sheinspiresus hashtag:

Prime Minister Narendra Modi Ji has said (asked) that do you know some woman who is as inspiring as this? Who inspires you? If yes, then you write about it using this hashtag #SheInspiresUs. Yes, we are inspired by those thousands of women—mothers and sisters—who are protesting at the site of Shaheen Bagh against CAA. You also learn from them. #WomenofShaheenBagh.

(translated by authors)

*Imagery*

Gregg and Seigworth (2010) have stated that

affect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon. Affect is an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation as well as the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities.

(p. 1)

Extending this definition of affect, Ahmed (2010) explains that we always enter into a space that is affectively laden—she speaks of rooms, but we might also extend it to speaking of social media networks. Thus, “how we arrive ... what impressions we receive” shapes our affective encounter as much as what is already “there.” She writes that:

We may walk into the room and “feel the atmosphere;” but what we may feel depends on the angle of our arrival. Or we might say that the atmosphere is already angled; it is always felt from a specific point.

(p. 37)

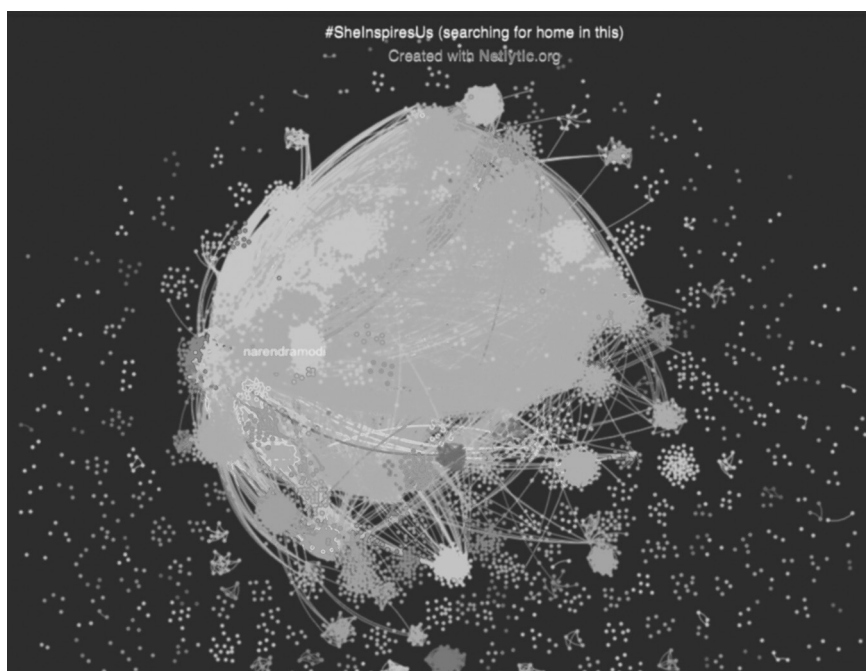


Figure 7.2 Network of tweets #sheinspiresus visualized via Netlytic.org. ↵

Table 7.1 Statistical description of the #sheinspiresus dataset scraped via Netlytic ↵

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Dataset Stats	
Dataset Name	#SheInspiresUs
Dataset Last Updated	2020-05-04 23:53:23
Dataset Source	Twitter
Total Messages	93,507
Unique Posters	45,180

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What does it mean to “walk into the room” of masses of online tweets organized around particular hashtags? In the case of the Indian Twitter sphere for International Women’s Day, the atmosphere was certainly “already angled” by the massive traffic around PM Modi’s Twitter handle. This is shown by the details of the dataset and how the network characteristics privileged affective impressions from the majority of posters. Figure 7.2 shows how the network structure of tweets is revealed when visualized. This figure delivers the network of all posts including #SheInspiresUs and shows how strongly the network is centered around the key instigating account of PM Modi.

While Table 7.1 gives us a description of the statistical data that is visualized in Figure 7.2, Figure 7.2 shows the visualized network of all posts

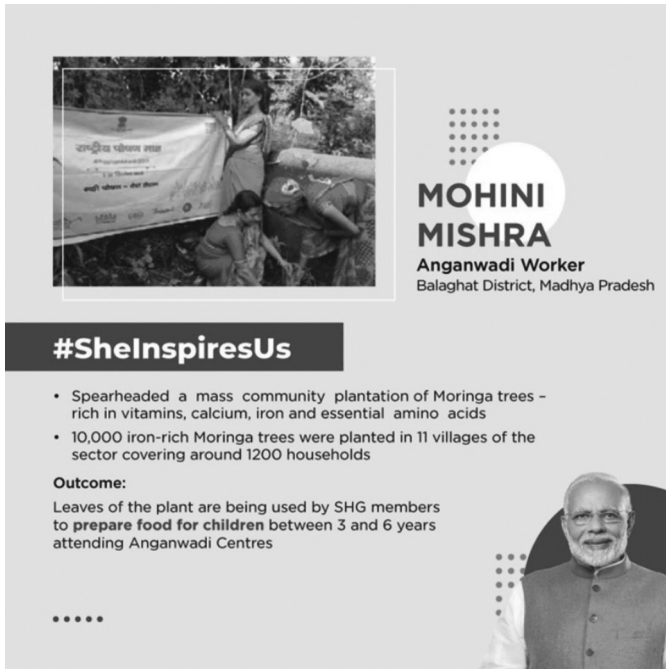


Figure 7.3 Sample profile of #sheinspiresus. ↵

around the hashtag #sheinspiresus. Figure 7.3 is a sample image from posts that are in support of the PM’s idea of an inspiring woman and tweeted using #sheinspiresus. Following this pro-PM’s vision example, we describe one example of appropriation of the hashtag #sheinspiresus that was coupled with the hashtag #womenofshaheenbagh and was thus embedded in the visualized network from Figure 7.2 while also shifting the algorithm toward praise of the women of Shaheen Bagh (see Figure 7.4).

In Table 7.1 we listed the number of unique Twitter posters (45,180) who were responsible for the 93,507 messages (which include original tweets and several retweets of these few original tweets) that can be found in the data we scraped on Netlytic for 62 days (March 4, 2020–May 4, 2020). In Figure 7.2, the visualized version of this data, we see that the “narendra modi” Twitter handle is a central node from and to which a majority of the tweets with the #sheinspiresus connect. What looks like a massive splash of shades [teal (blue-green)] on the image is actually a mass of nodes representing the Tweets that connect with PM Modi’s Twitter handle. Handles such as SASAF-UK which were attempting to highlight the women of Shaheen Bagh, on the other hand, actually formed a very small cluster in the visualization.

It was the one tweet from a user called “curious beaver” which tagged the Shaheen Bagh official handle (Shaheenbaghoff1) and used both the hashtags (#womenofshaheenbagh and #sheinspiresus) that connected the larger pro-Modi mass to the cluster that SASAF-UK was a part of (represented by a small cluster of [red] nodes on the image).

Figure 7.3 is representative of the kinds of posts that came from the PM Modi Twitter handle that highlights the ideal women considered inspiring by the pro-Hindu sexist ideology that sees the place of the woman as within the home. The tweets shared from the pro-Modi handles with the #sheinspiresus orient us affectively toward appreciation of such an ideal woman. Inspiring work by such ideal women is described in two to three bullet points in images tweeted and tagged with the hashtag #sheinspiresus. The ‘outcome’ section in each of these images describes what positive changes are brought about by those inspiring women mentioned. We see thus that domesticity is privileged by phrases such as “prepare food for children,” “regular supplement of food,” and “severely malnourished status to the normal category,” emphasizing the ethic of care practiced by these women. Even though such profiles show working women—an *anganwadi* worker (rural child care worker), and lady supervisors—they emphasize the role of women within the home. The ideal role for her is as a caregiver. Also embedded in such images are claims that these women have been activists for change by enhancing heteronormative and Indian cultural family values. Phrases such as “spearheaded a mass community,” or “worked along with local communities,” or “pursued the family” connote that clearly.

### *Women of Shaheen Bagh as Saviors of the Constitution*

In Figure 7.4, largely circulated on Instagram during the anti-CAA protests, we can see various anti-CAA protestors from the Shaheen Bagh community, with two women students from Jamia Millia University being labeled as “Saviors of Constitution.” One of them holds the placard “Inquilab Zindabad,” which means “long live the revolution.” This is an old protest cry, and can be seen as associated with the Indian independence movement when viewed along with the placement of the other people in the image.

In this image, we see three men and five women. The two older women with their heads covered are placed most significantly in a larger frame. There is no doubt that these women symbolized the *dadis* of Shaheen Bagh, because the wrinkles on their skin make them appear old. However, their facial expressions are calm and welcoming. This highlights the nonviolent tone of the image, invoking an ethic of care—at home. The image is curated carefully to keep out any impression of confrontation or rage. Even the person holding the microphone and holding a speech is made to appear to be supervised and watched over by the caring older women.

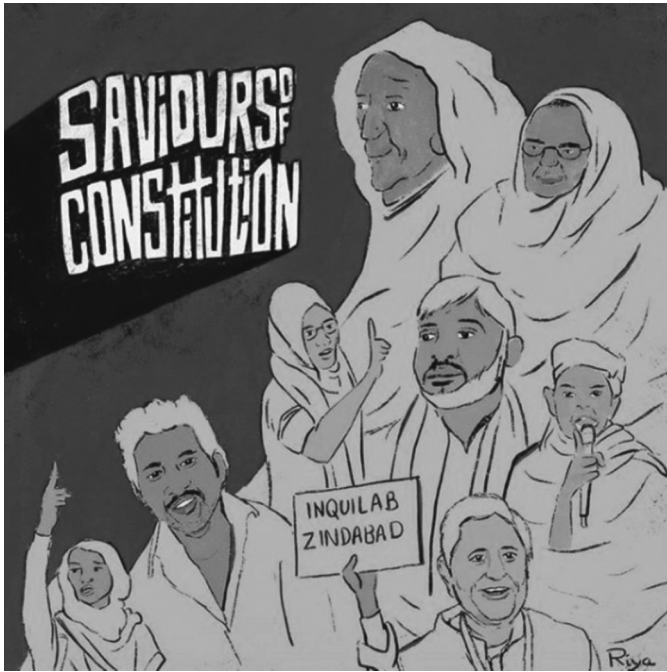


Figure 7.4 Women of Shaheen Bagh as saviors of the constitution. ↵

To contextualize the image, we need to understand its background. The anti-CAA protest in Delhi became internationally visible during an event at which students of Jamia Millia Islamia University were brutally assaulted by the police (Salam, 2020). These students had been protesting from inside the university which was located close to Shaheen Bagh. This image also includes two of the female students whose photographs—with them pointing fingers at the police—went viral. But the positioning for these finger-pointing students in this particular image seems less belligerent than the stand-alone images of the same students. Such an image conveys that the protest movement is about nonviolently fighting for their rights, their citizenship. Even the use of saffron and orange color in the background might suggest another signaling that their protest is not antinational as the dominant party supporters had claimed. The saffron and orange is also visible in the Indian national flag and symbolizes patriotism. It would seem that the goal is to remind the larger public of the values embedded in the Indian Constitution that grew out of the Indian nationalist movement of the 1930s and 1940s. As mentioned before, the Indian Constitution gives citizenship without any discrimination based on religion. The current government's party color is saffron and introduced the CAA in Parliament with the intention of denying citizenship based on

religion, thus singling out Muslims and making them face the wrath of detention centers (Salam, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

Examining social movements through what emerged via Twitter publics raises the question of whether we reach for a context that is far removed from the offline protest site and the embodied negotiations and struggles of the activists and community members on site. Academic researchers doing research through digital data—particularly academics writing from the Global North about Global South contexts—are often accused of either co-opting a very local struggle for their political/ideological viewpoints or of appropriating the activists' labor for one's own fame, glory, and professional advancement. All these accusations may sometimes be true. Our team of writers grappled with their consciences—we were also taken to task by some of our interviewees. Yet we feel that what we wrote here has value and needs to be shared. The interventions that our research makes are both a methodological one and one that asserts the materiality of transnational and online engagement with different local struggles even as we waded through the contradictions.

Our research methods emphasize a need to retool—co-opt—computational data analytics tools and to contextually understand the material practices of how humans use as they work within pre-given algorithmic architectures in platformed digital environments. As we worked through the masses of collected data, we developed hands-on tactics to work through pre-defined/designed computational tools. These computational tools emphasize quantitative metrics that do not necessarily work to describe and analyze the social relationships evident within the data. So while it seems like something magical is happening as we press buttons and apply these metrics or visualize layouts, the resulting visualizations made no sense to us without the qualitative in-depth interviews, news reports, and onsite activist engagement of different co-authors. On the other hand, a purely textual, qualitative approach would not have sufficed to bring out the nuances of how the visibility for the subaltern older woman was produced in transnational media space.

In a 2015 publication entitled “Easy Data, Hard Data: The Politics and Pragmatics of Twitter Research after the Computational Turn,” Burgess and Bruns (2015) note how Twitter data can be seen as “low-hanging fruit.” We would agree that is so under certain conditions of naivette with regard to what constitutes data, what constitutes participation, and what constitutes digital activism. When Twitter data is read through a naïve qualitative textual glance or through the quantitative metrics afforded by the computational tools and with the researcher making claims of being a participant in the activist site because of some retweeting to enhance the hashtag visibility, it is not just a case of appropriation of the offline activist space and labor—what is crucially missed is what is happening within the digital material infrastructure.

Our chapter here implicitly challenges several assumptions at the same time as it asks the question of how visibility for particular groups of activists can happen through transnational digital publics.

Thus, we see how the offline presence of *dadis* of Shaheen Bagh—as political subjects—is amplified. The protest strategies amplified as those of the *dadis* were not aggressive but stern and nonviolent, affectively invoking the Gandhian freedom struggle of India’s nationalist movement. As Chopra and Sanyal (2022) note, in the Gandhian movement, the identity of women who participated in the freedom movement was constructed as the mothering image, the one who cares for her familial kinship, embodying the private duties of *ghar* and coming out in the *bahir* space of resistance to support their sons, brothers, and husbands.

In our comparative visual analysis, Kasturba was seated, spinning the charkha as a symbolic gesture of domesticity (*ghar*) for women. In 2019, Bilkis evoked a similar posture, however, spinning the anti-CAA movement, seated on a mat on the streets of Delhi (*bahir*), exceptionally normalizing women’s role of rising up against the pro-Hindutva government, just as Kasturba did with regard to the Swadeshi movement. Brown (2010) notes how during India’s freedom movement, the act of “spinning” enabled people’s participation in the Swadeshi movement, especially for those who could not compromise on their mundane activities to be a part of the movement. They spun from their homes and registered their participation. Just as the spinning imagery during the Swadeshi movement unified the whole village, similarly Bilkis’s spinning of the anti-CAA movement enabled individuals—particularly women and domestic workers—to join the protest cause. It is interesting to note that the similarity of both events lies in the fact that women were at the center of the narrative—Kasturba then, Bilkis now. Hence, just as every woman contributed to the Swadeshi movement by doing her task, similarly women across the country, going beyond religion, caste, and class, came together at the protest site, joining their voices against the CAA–NRC bill. Just like carrying out mundane *gharelu* (domestic) responsibilities is important to women, similarly, coming to the protest site everyday became significant. This was both an extension of *ghar* and taking charge of things *bahir* for the sake of *ghar*.

The Muslim women steered the Shaheen Bagh movement in an effort to protect their children and grandchildren by embodying the narrative of care for their family or *ghar*. These Muslim women came out in the *bahir* on December 15, 2019, when their sons and grandsons were brutally assaulted by police in a peaceful anti-CAA–NRC protest inside the campus of Jamia Milia Islamia University. That incident resonated with people, because it reminded them of the British (*bahir*) atrocities on Indians (*ghar*). The affective sense of a national fight against colonizers (*bahir*) reverberated this time in the form of challenging the pro-Hindutva politics of bifurcating the country (*ghar*) based on religious citizenship. The country symbolized *ghar* for these women who wanted to protect the future of their children from religious

fanaticism as caring mothers and grandmothers, doing their *gharelu* responsibility of care.

The fortitude of these Muslim women at the protest site, which became an extension of *ghar* for them, holding photographs of Indian freedom fighters such as Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Bhagat Singh and singing the national anthem, affectively evoked not only the secularism enshrined in the Indian Constitution but also the Gandhian women exhibiting “feminization of resistance” and “political motherhood” (Chopra & Sanyal, 2022, p. 6). This opened up the movement, calling for everyone to join the *dadis* of Shaheen Bagh who exhibited such compassion and courage. Their nonviolent stance resonated with India’s freedom movement and made an affective connection with the masses. The bodily strength of these old women, braving the harsh winter of Delhi and not willing to move from the protest site, evoked a sense of masculinity that embodies the *bahir*; but the way the *dadis* exhibited pleasing smiles and welcoming attitude to everyone evoked the feminine warmth of *ghar*. Their singing of patriotic songs, quiet demeanor, and smiles with which they opened their *ghar* (the protest sites) to people across sectors (*bahir*) with warmth and acceptance of diversity made these gendered domestic acts into a political one, giving momentum to the movement.

We looked at three datasets scraped from Twitter using Netlytic software and proceeded to make sense of them by linking them with the interviews we had conducted not only with activists and witnesses on site in Delhi but also with transnational digital activists from the South Asian diaspora. We were able to see that the significant visibility produced through social media activity was a result of an on-site activist strategy to use social media while also connecting with transnational activists and sympathetic media personnel—both local and global. Therefore, the global visibility of the women of Shaheen Bagh was produced through the combined strategies of local activism, social media outreach, transnational/diasporic digital activism, and a variety of media organizations.

In the case of Shaheen Bagh, the community members on site led the charge not only on the ground but also through their own Twitter and Instagram accounts—@shaheenbaghoff1. But it was in the affective deployment of content—images, videos, text—and the strategic populating of particular hashtags by a larger network of digital participants and activist coalitions local and diasporic that generated affective intensities. These, in turn, produced global publics. These affective publics relied on strategies to emphasize an ethic of care, but also focused and reoriented the transnational gaze on the seemingly benign bodies of older women rather than on the rage of the younger feminists and of the men of the community.

Following work by other scholars, we examined how Global South activists utilize online tools to generate affective intensities and create affective networks as tactics for intervention while influencing and affectively inviting social media actors bearing global and local visibility into these networks. As researchers looking at data accessed and viewed

through computational tools and data analytics software, we also engage in the activist space as researchers. But the way we approach these data is different from the flat epistemic readings that the data analysis tools themselves tend to orient us toward. By moving to offline interviews and in-depth reading of texts and placing the Twitter datasets in spatiotemporal contexts—as cultural studies and feminist methodologies expect us to—we also draw on our own affective engagement with the activist spaces, even though we are researchers and not activists. Thus, our approach “allow(s) ... for something other, singular, quick and ineffable to irrupt the space of analysis” (MacLure, 2013, p. 16).

## Notes

- 1 This chapter was part of a larger team project. The work we draw on here was carried out from fall 2019 to summer 2022. Other members of the team who contributed in various ways but who are not active authors of this chapter include Emily Edwards, Sarah Ford, Kiran Bhatia, Dyuti Jha, Oladoyin Olubukola Abiona, Olayombo Tejumade Raji-Oyelade, Ololade Margaret Faniyi, Sujatha Subramanian, and Riddhima Sharma. We also thank the anonymous interviewees for their valuable insights.
- 2 United Against Hate is “a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization of common people—urban and rural, spiritual and secular—seeking equal protection for all, united against hate, bigotry and racism” (see [www.united-against-hate.org/](http://www.united-against-hate.org/)).
- 3 The image is located online at [www.alamy.com/kasturba-gandhi-spinning-mahatma-gandhi-wife-india-asia-1940-old-vintage-1900s-picture-image271971943.html](http://www.alamy.com/kasturba-gandhi-spinning-mahatma-gandhi-wife-india-asia-1940-old-vintage-1900s-picture-image271971943.html)
- 4 Produced by self; produced in home country; also a metaphor for home (*ghar*).

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