How Campuses Mediate a Nationwide Upsurge against India's Communalization. An Account from Jamia Millia Islamia and Shaheen Bagh in New Delhi

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1   We return to the notion of generational communities introduced in this special issue in light of the ongoing[1] pan-Indian protests spearheaded by students against the Indian government's initiative to define accession to citizenship on religious lines.[2] Applicable to individuals who entered India prior to 2014; the recent Act of Parliament permits the authorities to grant citizenship to "persecuted minorities" from three neighboring countries while making Muslim migrants ostensibly ineligible. The citizenship reform and its strong anti-Muslim overtones are being implemented within the political context of the recent reelection of a Hindu nationalist government at the Centre. The act follows a series of the Hindu Right government's decisions against Indian Muslims: criminalization of Muslim men practicing Triple Talaq, the abolition of the special status of the only Muslim-dominated state in the country, and the handing over of land for the construction of a Ram temple in place of a mosque destroyed by Hindu militants in 1992 (Chatterji, Hansen and Jaffrelot 2019; Singh 2020). Importantly, the citizenship reform purposely precedes the intended implementation of a measure that would make it mandatory for every Indian citizen to provide evidence of his or her nationality; those failing to show proper ancestral documentation being at risk of citizenship revocation. Already implemented in the state of Assam where the construction of detention camps is underway (Siddique 2020), the Act almost officially aims at stripping hundreds of thousands of Muslim migrants from Bangladesh of their rights (Editorial Board, *Economic and Political Weekly* 2019). Overall, the contested Citizen Amendment Act should be understood as a "safety net" for those non-Muslim Indians who will fail to prove their citizenship in a likely future, while in contrast exposing the weaker

sectors of Indian Muslims to the risks of administrative persecution and/or being rendered stateless(Ali 2019; Kesavan 2019). As of 31 December 2019, and in the wake of the nationwide upsurge against the government's reforms, the national assessment of Indian citizenship is being postponed to more "favorable" times. As of 18 January 2020, in protests in the majority party led state of Uttar Pradesh, 23 Muslim died, most of them from police bullets (Jafri 2020), as those who are supposed to secure order apparently took the opportunity to ransack and loot Muslim properties in various cities.

2   Since December 2019; a new wave of the wide scale student-led opposition movement has been observed,[3] in particular in the aftermath of the violent police storming of two Muslim-dominated, state-funded universities: Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) in Uttar Pradesh and Jamia Milia Islamia (JMI) in New Delhi (Ahmed 2019; Dubey 2019). In the midst of the agitation and the government's attempts to suppress the protest movement, we are investigating the relevance of select campuses as privileged sites for heading such colossal mobilization, which aim at safeguarding minority rights and challenge anti-Muslim policies. We use here primary ethnographic material collected between 17 and 31 December 2019 in New Delhi's two protest hotspots: Jamia Milia Islamia's gate number seven and the majority-Muslim neighborhood of Shaheen Bagh.

3   We posit that key students and recent graduates in a handful of university campuses were the first to translate the nationwide concern about the government's reforms against Indian Muslims into collective action because they had been exposed to organized political socialization earlier; they had consolidated networked nodal points attracting more spontaneous forms of political participation beyond campus; and they were already rallying around metonymic figures of non-partisan youth representing the future, the constitution, non-violence and the homeland. To understand the nature and the scale of the protests, it is necessary to move away from the idea of spontaneous —and deterritorialized—upsurges of atomized individuals and to take into account the ability of campuses to shelter early political initiators, centralize networks of aggrieved populations and convey powerful images of a nation in the making.

4   For instance, most protest coordinators of the interim Jamia Coordination Committee (JCC), which was formed after the episodes of police violence on December 13th, have a prior history of activism: 73 out of their 83 members are affiliated to a political student group (Aatikah, 29 December).[4] The eight student organizations[5] that make up the JCC belong to the leftist or Islamic political families; they receive strong support from a handful of campus-specific student groups and from the self-advocated "centrist" student wing of the Aam Aadmi Party, an opposition party governing the city-state (Mahir, 27 December). In the absence of a students' union in the university, the Committee/JCC plays a central role as the main body coordinating and launching the protest calls in New Delhi (often anonymously).

5   Upon hearing that the media portrayed her as a first-time protester, Nabeela, a prominent figure of the Jamia protests got visibly irritated. She directed me to one of her Facebook comments, which read: "Were they [the media] blind to us protesting against curfew timings, sexual violence, #MeToo cases? Do they only notice protests driven by men? Women students are actually well trained in mobilizing through practice" (25 December).[6] Among the respondents, numerous stories of micro exposure to politics in Jamia also surface. Ghaazi, a JMI graduate now in journalism declares: "The first movement [in 2015] which initiated and succeeded to unite the students was

the cantine ka issue. […] I was a student, standing at the gate, facing the proctor, 6 to 12 rupees, I can't pay. That ignorance [of the university Vice Chancellor] made us strong" (31 December). Activists recounted that the shift from campus-based issues to national issues in Jamia student politics was slow, and remembered experiencing failure to mobilize Jamia students after the suicide of Dalit student Rohith Vemula (see introduction) in 2016 (Chalani, 30 December; Ghaazi, 31 December). A former president of a student organization in JMI remembered that:

> Since the Batla House encounter in 2008 [where alleged terrorists in Jamia Nagar neighborhood were arrested and killed], our student wing got stronger and stronger in Jamia. Organization is a continuity, in daily meetings, in branch meetings, organization meetings, community meetings, if you continue that, it is a painstaking process, that helped them [students] to come out as a threat to the regime, the more you organize, the more it's like…[conversation interrupted].

Even though the JMI student union has been banned since 2006, the campus cannot be considered as ideologically "barren." As Kapur aptly states, "[r]ooted in the political history of India, Jamia's own campus had its brushes with warring ideologies" (Kapur 2019). Three landmark moments of campus politization seem to have prepared the ground for the active participation of these JMI students who are now highly engaged in the December protests. These took place after an anti-Muslim raid by India's internal intelligence agency in a student residence in 2016, following an alleged case of sexual harassment by a faculty member in 2019, and as a result of the inclusion of Israeli embassy representatives in an academic event on campus in 2019 (Saadiq, 26 December). As a JCC member acknowledged,

> There is always a need of initiators […] students should have to talk on issues. It was always their [initiatives], but not in terms of masses, mass[es] are not doing this. All organizations do this work of awareness, doing that together in fact. Mob lynching or any other issue, we organise a programme in central canteen, any park, any lawn. Individual calls. Circulate on WhatsApp" (Aarthi, 29 December).

This indicates, in line with our understanding of campuses as generational communities, that previous occurrences of political participation have oriented the political reading of the Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) by Jamia students, contributing to turn their political awareness into organized resistance.

6   Activists, political cadres and non-affiliated individuals who prepared the ground for the early protests in AMU and JMI mid-December were almost always students exposed to an incipient political culture, under the aegis of small but active seasoned political groups—by which initial calls against the Act were made. As police violence escalated (Ahmed 2019; Dubey 2019), the scale of the protests increased exponentially, attracting considerable indignation from various sections of civil society. Let us consider how campuses channeled grievances and served as nodal points in rallying and fostering the demonstrations. Reacting to police brutalities, student activists, especially from Muslim communities, were instrumental in mobilizing the Muslim-dominated neighborhood around Jamia campus. A JMI student activist acknowledged that "people [JMI activists] are going to localities with pamphlets. Then we give a call, mostly attended by local people. We need to convey the message to the common masses. It is our duty to convey the message" (Ikshitha, 23 December). In turn, new networks of solidarity were

developed between students and residents of Jamia Nagar, many of whom have relatives who study or studied in JMI. Aarthi reflected on these newly formed bonds:

> We haven't seen the community people coming out for any protest...this is the only protest where the Jamia community people actually join the students. They have been very helpful [Jamia residents], when they [JMI university administration] asked us to vacate the hostel [student accommodation], they actually offered their home. They offered food. They were very helpful. Many of my friends' parents called me to say, you can stay at our place" (29 December).

Similar bonds were created in Shaheen Bagh neighborhood in the vicinity of JMI, where local Muslim women and men occupied half of the highway connecting the capital to its main satellite city, Noida. One of the main organizers, a doctoral student in Jawaharlal Nehru University who had campaigned with both Left and Islamic student organizations for years, recounted how he convinced the first Muslim women to sit on the asphalt of the highway amidst the fear of repression, and underlined that he had been thinking about this act of defiance for a while: "Road bandh is a purana [old] idea, since childhood we have been planning to shut India down [giggles]" (Ishaq, 23 December). So, the JMI campus was the first to emerge as a durable focal protest point for socially receptive neighborhoods.

7   Furthermore, the maintenance of political mobilization underscores the ability of activist constituencies to access steady funding streams. A member of the student wing of Delhi government's ruling party admitted that "[JMI] alumni are the backbone of the protest. [...] Everyday 10 000 to 12 000 rupees is spent on the protest." Thus, the generational community of JMI students successfully connects with older batches of graduates in order to ensure effective resource mobilization and the centralization of the donations to the JCC.

8   The student collective and its ad-hoc counterparts across India appear to consolidate three other forms of political networks. First, organizations such as JCC offer platforms for professional (and often older) young leaders such as Chandrashekhar Azad (Dalit leader from Uttar Pradesh) or Kanhaiya Kumar (Leftist leader from Bihar) to appear at protest sites, bringing further national recognition to the movement. Second, the internal task specialization of the JCC enables effective communication,[7] especially on social media, drawing in "elite students" who had never attended a public protest before and thereby maximizing their participation. At venues such as Jantar Mantar (the designated official location for demonstrations in New Delhi), many students carrying innovative banners reflecting their incongruous presence on the protest ground could be spotted. A series of English-medium protest placards starting with "It's so bad even..." reveals the need of students from cosmopolitan backgrounds to mention in humorous fashion their usual reluctance to take part in collective action. Here are few examples: "It is sooo bad, even South Delhi [affluent area of Delhi] is here!!!"; "It's sooo bad even Amity [a depoliticized private university] is here"; "It's so bad, even the introverts [in caps] are here"; "It's so bad [I am] here with my ex"; "It's so bad even the privileged [in red] are here"; "It's so bad even parents are here" (December 19). Lastly, as the participation of more affluent students tends to be short-lived, ongoing political mobilization of students partly relies on the strengthening of political networks across central public universities—involving in particular non-elite sections of the students. We suggest that this process consolidates a broader national network of coordinated

political bridges among generational units. Between such universities political ties sustained by branches of various student organizations exist; they are further consolidated by institutionalized political socialization within each of these campuses. Manshoor, a leftist member of JCC provided glimpses of those political links:

> Jamia [JMI], Delhi University, JNU [Jawaharlal Nehru University], Ambedkar [University], Aligarh [Muslim University], BHU [Banaras Hindu University], Jadavpur University, Hyderabad Central University, Pondicherry University, Garhwal University… most central universities, like Allahabad [University]… central universities' [students] come from marginal backgrounds, popular backgrounds, and most of them have a student union, they are already political campuses, it makes it easy to coordinate with such organizations. Private universities like Amity they don't protest. They pay 5 lakhs or 10 lakhs for their graduation. That's the difference. They don't give such interest in the politics. BHU is like Jamia, as there also there is no student union. BHU is in UP, they don't want any dissenting voice to emerge. They arrested eight comrades, all non-Hindus. […]AISA [c.f. note 2] took out an initiative, to launch an all India coordination committee, around 80 organizations from 60-70 campuses have committed. There was a press conference at the press club of India two or three days before on this. All over India [on December 24th]. The idea is to coordinate.

Further ethnographic research is required to unveil how mobilizational idioms struck a chord among non-campus constituents, achieving "resonance" with Muslim populations, so-called liberals and a variety of political opponents to the current government. However, two converging sets of possible explanations can already be formulated. First, students used future-oriented metaphors of the nation in order to challenge the populist-cum-nationalist discourse of the ruling party. A JCC member fiercely stated: "It is very important. You don't attack on the students, [if so] you attack on the future of the country. You attack on the future economy of the country. All depends on the students" (Rahman, December 30). By successfully claiming the incarnation of an India in the making, student protesters and "non-hostile" media effectively portrayed police brutalities as assaults on the future of the country. Demonstrating tactical maturity, various student groups also excelled in obliterating markers of political divides, replacing them with positive and inclusive idioms articulated around the values of the Indian constitution. Rahman went on declaring: "Constitution is liberty, equality, fraternity. This is not a protest of Muslims, it is a protest of constitution" (December 30).

9   The protestors at JMI gate number seven—the epicenter of student protests in New Delhi—eluded partisan statements about Indian secularism and instead preferred to stress catchy patriotic tenets (e.g. placards reading "#I am a *Desh Bhakt* [a worshiper of the country]"), gender representativeness and advocacy of Gandhian non-violence. They propagate posters and online hashtags saturated with constitutional symbols (#CAA Against Constitution, #Jamia For Constitution, #Save Constitution), sing the national anthem and read India's constitutional preamble in public. The scant use of secular language is not only an indication of its lack of popular appeal, it compensates for the fact that the JCC also tries to minimize the use of Muslim-specific slogans, in particular those articulated by Islamic student organizations. A student activist of the student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami Hind admitted that he strategically refrained from chanting *Insha Allah* and *Allahu Akbar*:

> I go to others and tell them not to raise those slogans [to Muslim carders of *Students of Jamia* (SOJ) in particular]. I go to them on behalf of the forum, you should be responsible. Out of campus, for SIO cadres [Jamaat student wing], then such slogans are available. People say it is a communal slogan. Our constitution permits them, to live according to religion. But for our people only.

Hence, statements specific to Islam uttered by a few Islamic organizations became more discreet as protests gained national prominence. As a result, Labiba, one of the four social media poster-girls of the JMI mobilization withdrew from Facebook a divisive post a few days after posting it: "At this point we are clear; we don't hold any burden of chanting secular slogans and may not fit your secular vocabulary. Our engagement and approach altogether is different from you and is the fundamental difference. So, please don't dictate us" (December 13). This Left-Islamic "unholy" alliance is not unprecedented as campus alliances like those in the University of Hyderabad demonstrate, yet the ability of the nexus to reach pan-Indian prominence is unprecedented.

10   As the student-driven mobilization will necessarily routinize, experience fragmentation and decrease in scale, campus spaces, in particular in central public universities, will most likely continue to thrive as bases for generational communities politicized against a set of contested values—in this case Hindu majoritarianism. The relative shift of such political communities away from a focus on only campus-specific material demands is likely to perdure, enabling key campuses to function as abeyance structures for future mobilization. Turning cohabitation, common experiences and biographical availabilities of students into active political capital, public universities represent metaphors of a prefigurative Indian nation, constitute hubs for protest networks, and circulate political idioms from one student cohort to another through the socializing effect of small groups of ideological campus activists. Contrary to the apprehensions of regional and national parties over the loss of vote shares when opposing the presumed communal sentiment of a consolidated Hindu block, less frightening educational spaces and the anti-establishment activism they shelter constitute ideological and physical battlegrounds[8] where challenges to "Saffron India" will continue to emerge.

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NOTES

1. As of December 31st, 2019.
2. Fieldwork was conducted by the first author in the vicinity of two protest sites in New Delhi, namely the gate 7 of the university Jamia Milia Islamia and the Shaheen Bagh neighbourhood. This constitutes an early appraisal of the December and January protests; it confirms the relevance of student politics in understanding the socio-political jolts of contemporary India and South Asia at large.
3. In India, students occasionally spearhead opposition movements, as it was the case for the Bihar movement in 1974 (Jaffrelot 1999:255–77; Shah 1977) and during the Anti-Mandal protests in 1990 (Datta 2016). Both mobilizations targeted the then-Congress government and displayed early signs of the strengthening grip of the Hindu nationalist political agenda among Indian youth. With the coming of age of the anti-Emergency generation, student protestors turned political (Karnad 2018).
4. Respondents' names have been anonymized.
5. Following is a non-exhaustive list of student organizations active in JMI campus. On the left side of the political spectrum can be found AISA (All India Students' Association, the student wing of CPI(ML), the Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist Liberation), DISSC (Dayar i Shauq Students Charter Jamia, JMI-based student group) and SFI (Students' Federation of India, the student wing of the Communist Party of India Marxist). Islamic student outfits are: SIO (Students Islamic Organisation of India, the students' wing of Jamaat-e-Islami Hind), MSF (Muslim Students Federation, the student group of the Indian Union Muslim League), Fraternity Movement (the student branch of Welfare Party, also affiliated to Jamaat-e-Islami Hind), CFI (Campus Front of India, affiliated to the banned Popular Front of India) and SoJ (Students of Jamia, a JMI-centric collective). CYSS (Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Samiti, the student wing of Aam Aadmi Party) as well as JSF (Jamia Students' Forum, a JMI-specific cross-organizational platform) is also active in the university. Groups such as Pinjra Tod (independent feminist student organization) and United Against Hate (collective comprising activists from several student organizations) participate only sporadically to JMI student politics.
6. The comment is a repost of a newspaper interview of another JMI female activist, Salma. Several national and international media reports reflect on the invisibility of Muslim women as

political actors in India and highlight exceptionally active women's participation in the present-day anti-government protests (Yadav 2020; Raman 2020; Dixit 2019; Kapur 2020)

7. JMI student activist Reza stressed on this aspect: "They [Jamia Coordination Committee] are working very systematically, we have media committee, program committee, graphic committee, ground committee, mike committee, traffic and control committee: there are different groups who are assigned different work" (26 December).

8. The violent attack from masked pro-government youth in another university in Delhi (Jawaharlal Nehru University), as well as the gun-shooting episodes near Jamia in February 2020 give renewed opportunities for those who want to polarize and target anti-government student activism. In a context of extreme communal tension—who has by the end of February 2020 evolved into murderous anti-Muslim pogroms in New Delhi (Gayer 2020)—the collective actions of generational communities might assume a significant role in reshaping the political trajectory of contemporary India.

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AUTHORS

JEAN-THOMAS MARTELLI

Centre de Sciences Humaines (CSH), Politics and Society Division, New Delhi

KRISTINA GARALYTĖ

Assistant Professor, Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies at Vilnius University