Gendered Citizenship in India

Participation and Protest as Acts of Care in the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act/National Register of Citizens movement

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I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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Source: Wikimedia commons

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Abstract

Gendered Citizenship in India: Participation and Protest as Acts of Care in the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act/National Register of Citizens movement

Kusumika Ghosh

What is our understanding of a 'women's movement'? Is it a movement for women by everyone/ a movement by everyone for women/ a movement for women by women/ or all of the above? The existing hetero-patriarchal, nation-state model creates a socio-political imaginary where "women's issues" are feminised; and "national issues" that are matters of greater inclusivity, diversity, and generality are masculinised. This reinstates the framing of citizenship, religious freedom and resource politics as affairs of greater concern, hence masculine; while sexual/domestic violence and reproductive rights are considered specific, and therefore feminine. My research uses the women-led anti-Citizenship Amendment Act/National Register of Citizens (anti-CAA/NRC) movement in India to challenge this imaginary. It is structured around a triangular theoretical framework comprising Citizenship, Political Participation, and Social Movements, held together by a Politics of Care. Using in-depth interviews with protestors from the Northeast Indian city of Guwahati and the national capital city of Delhi, it posits that the liberal definition of citizenship fails to capture the lived reality in postcolonial democracies. Instead of treating care as a discrete theme, I approach it as the connective tissue – an epistemic and affective force that links how citizenship is lived, how participation is enacted, and how resistance is sustained. Across both field sites – Delhi and Guwahati – this model allows for a comparative reading of feminist dissent that foregrounds the everyday labour and solidarities that constitute political life from the margins. This thesis, therefore, utilises a historically discrete moment in contentious politics to contribute to the discourse on gendered citizenship in South Asia.

1. Introduction: Gender, Citizenship, and Social Movements in India

> *...citizenship and gender are the most decisive factors accounting for extreme inequalities between individuals in rich and poor countries in the twenty-first century (Boatcă and Roth, 2015, 191).*

This thesis emerges from a moment of intense political mobilisation across India, marked by the women-led nationwide protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in 2019-20. It is grounded in two key protest sites: Guwahati in Assam, where anxieties over indigeneity and migration have long shaped local politics; and Delhi, the seat of centralised state power and national resistance. These geographically distinct locations offer critical vantage points from which to interrogate how citizenship is enacted and reimagined as an act of care in a contemporary social movement.

Citizenship is not a static or singular construct. In fact, its contentious nature is held sacred in the study and practice of politics. The usual genealogy of studying citizenship moves from Aristotle to T.H. Marshall, but this research begins with those who disrupt such lineages. Margaret Somers (1993, 2020) calls it a moral and social relationship rooted in the public sphere, shaped by histories of exclusion and the erosion of social rights under market-driven regimes. For Somers, the right to have rights (Arendt, 1973) is not guaranteed by legal status alone, but by sustained political and social inclusion – something women and other marginalised groups are routinely denied. Manuela Boatcă and Julia Roth (2015) pushes this further, exposing how colonial histories and patriarchal statecraft continue to determine who is granted mobility, belonging, and recognition. Citizenship, they argue, operates as a form of inherited privilege. This thesis begins with a simple question: where do women feature in this discourse?

In the canonical texts, Aristotle regarded women as citizens, but in permanent need of being ruled by men, in public and private. Kant, in his Enlightened Rationalist thoughts on the matter, ascribed the status of passive citizenship to women. He rendered them unsuitable to ascend to active citizenship – routes to which he kept available to the servants and workers, but completely blocked for women. Marshall's theorisation acknowledged the need for civil, political and social rights to guarantee "full citizenship", but bypassed the underlying gendered conditions of those rights. The path from there to Mohanty (1984), Jayal (1999), Lister (2003), and Yuval-Davis (2011)'s fierce critiques

has been a long-winded one – and is being furthered by contemporary scholars. This research builds on their critical feminist theorisation to argue that citizenship is a gendered and situated practice, shaped by intersecting histories of migration, colonialism, and postcolonial state making.

Postcolonial state making, as experienced in many South Asian and African countries, was achieved through social movements. India, the geographical focus of this research, transitioned into a "Sovereign, Socialist, Secular, Democratic Republic"[1] following its movement for independence from British and European colonialism. It has a history of public resistance to the government since the colonial era, and the right to dissent is enshrined in the Fundamental Rights in the Constitution of India in Articles 19(1)(a) and 19(1)(b). The culture of contentious politics[2] is considered key in a pluralist democracy, and the Constitutional guarantee of Fundamental Rights to "all persons, citizens of foreigners" upholds it in India. Bajpai (2022) says the Indian Constitution champions versions of religion-blind and multicultural citizenships – however flawed (p.28).

However, Alf Gunvald Nilsen, who has written extensively on the relationship between social movements, state formation, and development and democracy in India, diverges from the Marxist thinking that political orders founded on the modern democratic conception of citizenship would automatically propel "real, practical emancipation". Instead, Nielsen argues that citizenship has to be understood as simultaneously enabling and constraining popular social movements (Nilsen 2016). This idea is radical in its association of modern democratic citizenship with popular social movements in postcolonial societies, and is especially applicable to my research on the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)/National Register of Citizens (NRC) movement in India.

Vincent Bevins, a journalist and author of 'If we Burn: The Mass Protest Decade and the Missing Revolution' (2023) has called the decade from 2010 to 2020 the 'mass protest decade'. As the alleged decade of mass protests was coming to its end, in 2019, millions contested the new citizenship legislations (NRC and CAA) in India. However, the reason this movement became 'iconic' (Roy, 2021) was its sustained and visible female participation. The Wire, a leading independent news agency of India, remarked - "the

[1] According to the Preamble of the Constitution of India.

[2] Coined by Charles Tilly in a series of works he began in the 1970s, the concept encompasses social movements but extends to a wider range of conflictual phenomena, including strike waves, civil wars, revolutions, and insurgencies.

independent nation has never seen such a sustained political agitation led by young women – vociferously, unfailingly and determinedly" (Lahiri, 2020). The anti-CAA/NRC movement, therefore, provides a new lens through which to interrogate India's political imaginary, which has traditionally and contemporarily been shaped by 'masculine' norms such as sovereignty, control, and aggression (see Kinnvall 2019, Ansari and Chambers 2022). In spite of that, the movement has not been labelled a 'women's movement', unlike the #MeToo[3] or anti-dowry protests, even while accounting for its 'iconic' composition and leadership.

It leads one to inquire about the ontology of a "women's movement" – what kind of issues are encompassed in it, and how that shapes our political imaginary. Using that as a point of departure, this research focuses on the movement of resistance to the CAA and NRC (2019) in India, through the lens of gender to examine *gender as the analytic* through which citizenship is done and reimagined. The focal point of my research is neither of these legislations, but to inquire how women engaged with the two as 'activist citizens' - expanding from Kant's 'active citizenship' to Isin and Nielsen's 'Acts of Citizenship (AC)' framework[4] (2008). Before turning to the discussion of women's acts of citizenship within the anti-CAA/NRC movement, the following section provides a brief overview of the two legislations in question, in order to establish the contextual terrain of this research.

1.1. The NRC and the CAA - a continuum

Bajpai (2022) has argued that it is an exclusionary[5] variety of citizenship that contextualises the continuum of the NRC-CAA (p. 34). When siloed, the NRC is meant specifically for the Northeast[6] Indian state of Assam, and has been demanded by political and pressure groups in the state since the heavy population influx triggered by the

[3] "In October 2017, Raya Sarkar, a 24-year-old law student from India, posted a crowdsourced list on Facebook of male Indian academics who allegedly harassed women. This led to the start of the #MeToo movement in India, where universities became key spaces of discussion, debate and activism" (Dey, 2021).

[4] The AC framework introduces a distinction between 'active' citizens – those who reproduce the state's normative expectations – and 'activist' citizens, who challenge these norms and script new possibilities for political engagement.

[5] This framing of the CAA and NRC is central to this research. Throughout the thesis, this 'exclusionary' aspect of the two legislations in question will be approached from various standpoints.

[6] Throughout the thesis, I use 'Northeast India' and 'the Northeast' interchangeably to refer to the 8 states of India's Northeast - Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Tripura and Sikkim.

Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. It is a list of people who can prove they came to the state of Assam by 24 March 1971, a day before neighbouring Bangladesh became an independent country (BBC News, 2024).

Fig 1.1: Map of the 7 Northeastern states of India, with Assam highlighted in red

Source: Wikimedia commons

From its inception, the determination of citizenship of the Indian nation-state has depended on documentation of identity – recorded on paper and in the process of digitisation only of late. The NRC requires an individual to furnish two kinds of documents to be enlisted in it: "legacy documents" to prove their ancestors lived in India before 1971, and "linkage documents" to prove they were related to this ancestor (Saha, 2021). Among marginalised populations in India, the condition of being 'document poor' – that is, lacking the requisite official documentation to substantiate legal citizenship – has generated profound anxiety (Choudhury Lahiri, 2021). This concern is especially acute among older individuals who came of age when documentation was not routinely issued or required. These structural challenges are compounded by entrenched gender inequalities, which render women especially susceptible to documentary precarity. Within patriarchal familial arrangements, women have historically lacked both access to and control over personal documentation that would trace their legal identity across the life course. Even where documents such as birth certificates might have existed, these were seldom preserved, owing to prevailing assumptions that women – conceived

primarily as domestic subjects rather than public actors – had little need for such proof. Furthermore, in many conservative households, marital renaming practices disrupt the continuity of women's documented identities, often resulting in multiple, non-aligned records (Choudhury Lahiri, 2021).

The CAA (2019), on the other hand, revises the Indian Citizenship Act, which had previously barred undocumented migrants from acquiring Indian citizenship. Under the original law, individuals entering the country without valid travel documents or overstaying their visas were classified as illegal immigrants, subject to detention or deportation. The CAA introduces significant changes by reducing the residency requirement for citizenship by naturalisation – from eleven to six years – for individuals belonging to six specified religious minorities: Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians, provided they originate from Pakistan, Afghanistan, or Bangladesh (BBC, 2024). Bajpai (2022) critiques it saying:

> The law allows for "any Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, or Christian migrant from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, or Pakistan who arrived in India on or prior to December 31, 2014 [to] not be treated as an 'illegal migrant'. However, with no proof of persecution required, and persecuted Muslim communities in Afghanistan and Pakistan such as Shi'a and Ahmadi Muslims excluded, the category of "illegal migrant" is essentially for Muslims alone. The fears for pluralism here are not only that the CAA institutionalises discrimination against Muslims in citizenship law undermining secular citizenship established by the Indian Constitution, but also that alongside a putative national list of all Indian citizens (NRC), the CAA can pave the way for "statelessness, deportation, or prolonged detention" of Muslims, a material concern as the experience of the NRC in the state of Assam suggests (p.35).

This effectively creates a religious exception to the standard naturalisation process, which traditionally required longer residency or government service. While the timeline of the NRC precedes that of the CAA by decades, both came to be enacted in the same year. Roy (2022) locates the 'promise' of the CAA. Calling it a 'curious piece of work', Roy (p. 731-32) critiques the assertion that the CAA 2019 recognised the right of specified religious communities to return 'home', in the fulfilment of a moral claim to obtain the legal protection of citizenship, whose denial would perpetuate a historical wrong.

The rhetoric of persecution and protection has been invoked in the discourse around CAA, but has found no mention in the text of the Amendment. As Bajpai says, it is only in BJP rhetoric where the CAA is pluralist as it extends protection to victims of religious

persecution in neighbouring states. Scholars and political analysts claimed that the CAA linked with the NRC can potentially transform India into a majoritarian polity, marginalising its 200 million Muslims (Regan et al., 2019 cited in Sengupta, 2021).

Keeping with the NRC, the CAA makes no mention of gendered exclusions, but its impact is far from neutral[7]. The two legislations of reconstituting the citizenry in India fail to demonstrate this awareness. As Mathew (2019) said, "there is no gender balance or justice in the process of identifying the so-called 'foreigners.' It put the already disadvantaged women through a completely arbitrary process".

1.2. The Project

This multi-layered exclusion forms the background of the anti-CAA/NRC movement, and the larger context of this research. I deliberately use the term 'CAA/NRC' to signal a crucial divergence in how the movement was framed across my *two field sites* – the national capital city of Delhi, and Assam's capital city, Guwahati[8]. In Delhi, I refer to the mobilisation as 'anti-CAA/NRC' because the protests there – reflecting a pan-Indian sentiment – resisted both the CAA and the NRC. In contrast, in Guwahati and across much of Northeast India, the agitation was predominantly directed against the CAA, with far less opposition to the NRC. This distinction is rooted in the specific implications of the CAA for the region: it facilitates the expedited naturalisation of non-Muslim communities excluded from the NRC, thereby shielding many Bengali Hindu migrants in Assam from the risk of deportation or detention (BBC News, 2024). For many in Guwahati and the wider Assamese populace, this was seen as a betrayal of the NRC's original intent – to preserve access to land and resources for so-called indigenous communities[9]. The CAA, then, was perceived not merely as a communal law but as a demographic and cultural threat to the region's identity and autonomy.

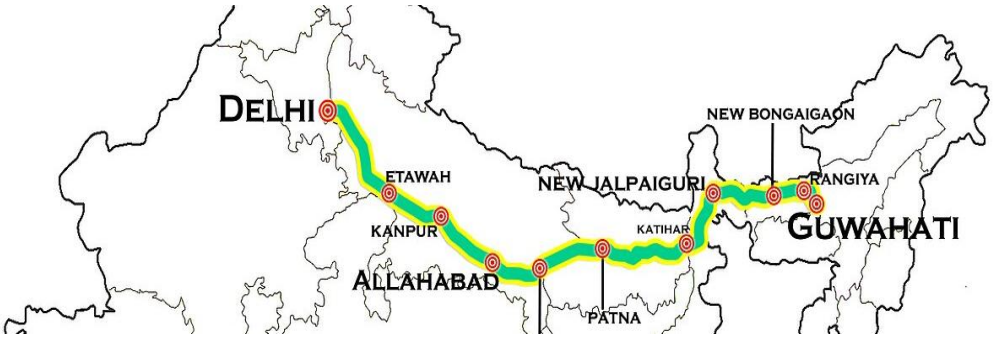
[7] The paper-concerns of the NRC double up when a woman in Assam, with all the vulnerabilities stated above, is Muslim and thus excluded from the scope of CAA. If she found herself disenfranchised from the NRC, she could not rely on the CAA to expedite her on her path to obtaining Indian citizenship.

[8] Administratively, Assam's capital city is noted as Dispur, an area within the city of Guwahati because of a shift in governance after the state of Meghalaya was carved from Assam in 1972.

[9] Although no community in India has the official status of indigeneity, the Central and state governments grant constitutional and political concessions to certain tribal communities in the Northeast, recognising their claim. But in the Northeast, the question of who is indigenous remains contentious (Srikanth, 2014, p.41).

While the protests unfolded across the country, I selected the cities of Guwahati and Delhi as field sites for this research due to their distinct political significance and interrelationship.

Fig. 1.2: An Indian Railways map showing the route connecting Guwahati and Delhi; Source: Wikimedia Commons



The railway route that connects the two cities facilitates migration into the national capital city. McDuie-Ra (2012) has argued that employment opportunities in the neo-liberal spaces of the global city of Delhi have fuelled a rapid increase in migration from the Northeast. But, outside these spaces of economic inclusion, these migrants continue to live as 'exceptional citizens' and experience racism, discrimination and violence (p. 1625). The insider/outsider discourse surrounding people from Northeast India has long circulated in Delhi, often surfacing most visibly in instances of egregious rights violations. The reason, as McDuie-Ra argues, can be located in the fact that,

> While India contains diverse regions and peoples and a coherent national society is not always identifiable, there is a distance between the north-east and the rest of India that is qualitatively different from that between other regions and peoples in India. There is a strong belief in both the Indian 'mainland' and in the north-east that the different states, autonomous units and peoples grouped together as 'the north-east' will never be able to be part of India in the same ways as other diverse groups of peoples have been accommodated (p. 1628).

The transposition of the anti-CAA agitation from Guwahati to Delhi marked a fundamental transformation in the movement's character, reflecting the same insider/outsider conundrum. In the Northeast, opposition to the CAA was rooted in

anxieties over demographic erosion – a fear of being rendered minorities in their own land. However, as the protests took shape in Delhi, their focus shifted dramatically: from regional concerns over indigeneity to a broader critique of faith-based citizenship (Jayal, 2019) under the current political regime. Northeastern organisers who had previously spearheaded anti-CAA demonstrations were now labelled "xenophobic" for resisting the extension of Indian citizenship to migrants in Assam (Ahmed and Pathak, 2020).

In summary, the field sites were chosen as the places where: i) the protests first began (Guwahati), and ii) where they commanded the most public attention and spread to the rest of the country from (Delhi). The invisible thread of transformation of the movement's agenda also connects the two cities. It was initially characterised by socioeconomic concerns of immigration into indigenous[10] lands in the Northeast, and subsequently became known nationally and globally as 'a rediscovery of India's republic'[11] (Ranganathan 2019). While this transformation made the agenda of the anti CAA/NRC movement more expansive, it simultaneously relegated the Northeast's cry for protecting the 'identity, culture, language and resources of the indigenous people'[12] (PTI 2020) in favour of a 'secular' agenda. The sites chosen are thus representative of the interaction of indigenous politics[3] with religious politics[13].

Although I use the terms 'protests' and 'social movement' interchangeably, Charles Tilly and others (2019) have a different approach, and consider protests different from social movements. At the most basic level, their social movements are all about social interaction. They are not just a group of people who have gathered to protest something; but in fact, are interacting with one another in a set of specific ways. According to this definition, social movements seek to launch a challenge against those who presently hold power in society, the biggest institution being the state. Tilly (1992) has referred to the modern state as the "National State", corresponding to Benedict Anderson's famous conceptualisation of the "imagined community" (1991). An imagined community is kept together by an invisible thread forging the feeling of belonging among people who will possibly never encounter each other. The thread, with the help of a national media,

[10] Assam has multiple 'tribal' communities, which is India's equivalent of 'indigenous' communities. The major ones are Bodo, Mising, Karbi, Rabha, Sonowal, Kachari, Garo, and Dimasa; and they are entitled to rights under the Scheduled Tribe status.

[11] The New York times published the cited article with this title on December 27, 2019

[12] The language of postcolonialism assumes importance here, debates around interests of indigenous peoples clashing with the larger discourse of development provide insights into Assam's politics.

[13] India is a secular democracy, where 'secularism' applies for the state's non-interference and non-discrimination on religious grounds.

solidifies into loyalty to one's nation or "nationalism". This feeling, however integral to the making of the modern state, does not replace the tangible proof of documents required to become a member. The documentation of belonging to a state sets the background for this research, and contextualises the anti-CAA/NRC movement.

This research, therefore, situates itself within this contested terrain, exploring the gendered contours of the movement by asking: why do significant sections of the Northeastern population support the NRC while opposing the CAA? Why did 'mainland' Indians resist both the NRC and the CAA? And where, within these overlapping sites of resistance, do women emerge as political subjects, actors, and dissenters?

Seemingly inconspicuous moments in research often offer great insights, as with my search for literature on the active citizenship of women through social movements. In 2022, when both the academics and practice of feminism had crossed far beyond the simple binary of men/women – it was surprisingly difficult to locate academic research on women in social movements that were not uniquely about 'women's issues'. Factor the geopolitical criterion of the Global Majority countries[14] into the search, and the libraries give one even lesser to work with. The European library shelves I had been rummaging through to find the material on this had very sparse, if any, literature on South Asian women in political activism, especially concerning issues of citizenship. To the dismay of academic rigour, the substantial engagement with social movements in non-English speaking parts of the world remains restricted in the confines of "international languages". On the other hand, in erstwhile colonies of Britain, especially in South Asia, research on social movements seldom finds global recognition.

There has been an emphasis on such critical perspectives from the Global Majority with the rise in postcolonial scholarship. The study of social movements has taken a significant step away from trying to adjust non-Western phenomena within very Western frameworks, even though much remains to be done. However, in any analysis of women's role in social movements, especially in postcolonial societies, there remains a major challenge that Ray and Kortweg (1999) point out aptly. They claim that while there is a trend toward the increased visibility of women's activism and the circumstances under

[14] As Oppong and Dombroski say, "this foundational terminology represents a move away from descriptors, such as 'developing world' and 'Third World', which imply rich so-called developed countries are the norm to which all nations should aspire. By contrast, the terminology of Majority and Minority worlds reminds us that wealthy groups and nations remain a minority in global terms, and should be taken seriously in global politics, economics, and culture."

which women in the Global Majority countries (which they call the third world) organise, there is a central dilemma in the literature – that of particularism versus universalism. In other words, they say, there are still too many individual case studies that heighten the perception of uniqueness and non-replicability on the one hand. On the other hand, too many studies that tend to assume that all women want the same thing; without enough dialogue between the two. There is an urgent need to guard against this tendency, and study women's participation in protest politics on a spectrum, without excessive individuation or homogenisation. To establish that spectrum in exploring how women *do* and *experience* citizenship, this research asks two primary questions:

First, how do the anti-CAA/NRC protests reveal and challenge the gendered political imaginary in India, particularly through women's leadership and participation?

This focuses on the ontology of a "women's movement", and explores the scope to reframe the anti-CAA/NRC movement as one. By analysing the rift between the 'masculine' and 'feminine' in its political imaginary, this research contributes to a gendering of citizenship in India.

Second, how do women in the anti-CAA/NRC movement reconfigure the relationship between citizenship, participation, and social movements in India through their participation?

Here, the analysis draws upon the masculinist underpinnings of citizenship, conceived through logics of documentation, surveillance, and exclusion. In contrast, women's participation in the movement foregrounded forms of political engagement that responded to Isin and Nielsen's construction of 'activist citizens'. Through examining the 'acts' of citizenship, this connects the otherwise divergent protest agenda in Delhi and Guwahati.

To do this, I adopted an instrumental case study design, multiple qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, including in-depth interviews, observations, and thematic analysis; and inquired about the data from a critical and intersectional feminist standpoint. This inquiry has leveraged the epistemic privilege of women protesters to assert that gender is not a peripheral concern but a central analytic lens through which to understand power, identity, and resistance in contemporary India. It does not adopt caste as a central analytic, not because it is unimportant, but because the specific sites and actors studied mobilised around religion, gender, and region, rather than caste as an organising frame. While caste remains structurally embedded in Indian social and political life, and undoubtedly shapes how citizenship is experienced and contested, it did not emerge

explicitly in the narratives or organising strategies of the movements I observed. That said, the absence of caste in the analytic frame reflects a methodological decision tied to the empirical field, not a denial of its salience[15].

1.3. Contribution

While this research foregrounds the epistemic and political labour of women in the anti-CAA/NRC movement, particularly that of marginalised women, it also attends to the internal contradictions and exclusions within these mobilisations. Protest spaces, while subversive, are not inherently egalitarian. The narratives that celebrate care, solidarity, and feminist leadership must also be interrogated for the hierarchies they might reproduce. Regionalised exclusions - as will be interrogated in this thesis, and the relative marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ voices within both field sites, compel a more layered reading of resistance. By refusing a flattening celebratory tone, this thesis situates care not as a uniformly liberatory ethic, but as a force that can, at times, reinscribe normative expectations – particularly of femininity and maternalism. The aim, therefore, is to critically explore how care operates within feminist dissent: both as a tool of solidarity and as a site of tension. It is through embracing these ambivalences that this research hopes to sharpen its analytical lens and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gendered citizenship and collective action.

1.4. Thesis organisation

To that end, it is organised in a way that reflects its epistemic stance - with chapters 2, 3 and 4 laying the contextual, analytical and theoretical framework, chapter 5 providing the methodological tools and approaches to transition into the empirical findings discussed in chapters 6, 7 and 8. The concluding chapter 9 summarises the findings, analyses and limitations of this research. Threaded together, the thesis reads here onwards in the following way:

Chapter 2 sets the contextual background for the empirical research. It engages with the NRC, CAA, and their construction, tracing their legal, historical, and socio-political

[15] This is a limitation, and there remains scope for extending this research to engage more directly with caste-based exclusions and solidarities - particularly through Dalit feminist and anti-caste perspectives that challenge the boundaries of dominant feminist discourse.

trajectories. First, it focuses on Assam, unpacking the long shadow of Partition and migration politics that laid the groundwork for the NRC. It analyses how citizenship in Assam has always been a contested terrain, shaped by anxieties around identity and belonging, and draws upon literature that dismantles the purported legal neutrality of the NRC to expose its embedded biases. Next, it turns to the CAA, interrogating its selective inclusion criteria and the reconfiguration of citizenship along religious lines. Regional specificities of resistance are also explored, highlighting how opposition to the CAA manifested differently across India in the two field sites. Finally, it expands the discussion of the primary field sites in context of the movement, and its divergent, localised agenda.

Using this contextual layout, Chapter 3 interrogates gender, nationalism, and the paradoxical roles women occupy within nationalist imaginaries, and shifts the focus to women's political agency within and through social movements. Beginning with the specificities of Assamese nationalism and its historical entwinement with gendered exclusions, it expands to explore the colonial legacy that shaped both feminist and nationalist discourses in South Asia. Expanding further, it situates the thesis in a global discussion on the simultaneous instrumentalisation and marginalisation of women within nationalist movements - paying close attention to how colonialism produced gendered subjectivities that persist in postcolonial nation-building endeavours. This chapter provides the conceptual framework for engaging with the research questions of this thesis. Finally, it synthesises these debates to articulate a theoretical framework for understanding gendered citizenship.

Based on this conceptual scaffolding, Chapter 4 constructs the core theoretical framework. It offers a triangulated model of gendered citizenship that foregrounds care, solidarity, and intersectional resistance as political acts that are foundational to citizenship. Then, it reflects on the conceptual and material "infrastructure" required to study social movements through this lens, asserting the epistemic centrality of feminist movement sites in reimagining political agency. Feminist Standpoint Theory is introduced as the epistemological anchor of the research, and reflexive thematic analysis is proposed as a method for operationalising it. Finally, it emphasises the importance of infrapolitical resistance and affective solidarities in creating alternative forms of belonging.

In Chapter 5, this framework is extended through a clear layout of the research design (which adopts an instrumental case study approach) and the rationale for methodological

choices. It details how data was organised, analysed, and interpreted using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). It also includes critical reflections on research positionality, the ethics of engagement (including pseudonymisation of all interviews), and the imperative to avoid extractive or 'parachute' research. Following this sequence, the research design emerges organically from the conceptual architecture of the thesis, rather than being retrofitted to it. Placing it as the fifth chapter is an intentional choice that operationalises the central feminist standpoint commitment of the thesis: that knowledge is situated, and that theory and method must be in dialogue with evolving context rather than imposed from above. This methodological discussion is fully informed by the theoretical, historical, and political foundations established in preceding chapters and offers a substantive engagement with the empirical data.

Chapter 6 offers the first of three empirical analyses, focusing on Delhi as a key site of resistance during the anti-CAA/NRC movement. Focussing on the mobilisation of Muslim women, it explores how protests in Delhi emerged as a powerful feminist intervention that redefined both the form and meaning of political participation. It situates the field within the broader urban, communal, and securitised context of the city, showing how public space itself became a contested terrain. It analyses how the occupation of public space became a form of care and prefigurative politics, and establishes Shaheen Bagh as a site of feminist transgression into domains historically framed as masculinised. Finally, it examines the motivations behind women's participation and the methods they employed, from individual concerns to collective displays of resistance, underscoring how their political agency was relational and affective - a trope that is established in chapter 4.

The discussion on women's agency shifts its focus to Guwahati in Chapter 7, where the anti-CAA protests, unlike in Delhi, were driven not by the defence of secular citizenship, but by the fear of demographic erasure and cultural displacement. Women in Guwahati navigated a precarious terrain – participating as protectors of culture and community, yet simultaneously challenging patriarchal imaginaries that nationalism carries (leaning into Chapter 3's discussion on feminism and nationalism). It focuses on their experience of being caught between Assamese nationalist narratives and the threat of state incarceration. It explores the intensification of militarisation and surveillance in the region, examining how fear and suppression structured the affective and spatial conditions of protest, and curtailed possibilities for sustained mobilisation. Finally, it

situates the motivations and methods of women demonstrating their political agency in this fraught context, and examines feminist solidarities emerging out of precarities.

By opening the empirical section with Delhi, the thesis maps the emergence of feminist dissent at the national centre before tracing how its political repertoires and imaginaries were taken up, reinterpreted, and localised in the context of Assam. This ordering allows for a more coherent analytical arc, tracing the movement in terms of feminist politics rather than simply its timeline. More importantly, it allows the research to trace the terms of visibility and invisibility that women have to navigate in social movements.

Chapter 8 is the culminating empirical analysis of the thesis, drawing together insights from Delhi and Assam to locate women's acts in the anti-CAA/NRC movement within the triangular framework of gendered citizenship developed in Chapter 4. It situates the data on lived experiences of protest within the broader theoretical architecture of the thesis, revealing the diverse logics of participation. It also outlines the comparative frames through which the two field sites are analysed, revealing how distinct histories and state-society relations generate different protest cultures. It interrogates the spatial and organisational dynamics of mobilisation, focusing on safety, space, and the uneven role of civil society organisations. Finally, it introduces a striking and unprompted theme that emerged in the data: motherhood. Not solicited in interview questions, but invoked by participants, motherhood is discussed as an incidental yet potent motivator, anchoring women's moral claims to protest and their vision of political futures.

Finally, a concise conclusion articulated in Chapter 9 situates the thesis within broader scholarly and political debates, arguing for the necessity of a decolonial approach to agency rooted in the politics of care to theorising citizenship from the margins. It highlights that the central contribution of this thesis lies in the development of gendered citizenship as a theoretical framework through which to analyse and problematise social movements - and reconstitute the definition of women's movements. It closes by acknowledging what remained outside the scope of this thesis and outlines future directions for research and praxis.

2. Mapping Citizenship: Histories of the NRC, CAA, and Sites of Protest

"Citizenship and belonging are neither same nor given, particularly for minorities in South Asia."

(Gogoi and Sen, 2024, p. 4829)

The introductory chapter opened with the argument that citizenship is not a static or singular construct, and that its tensions crystallise acutely in the debates surrounding the NRC and the CAA. This chapter situates the question of who belongs, and on what terms, within the broader theoretical frameworks of citizenship and resistance. It brings the intersections of gender, nationalism, and activism to life in the specific contexts of Guwahati and Delhi. The NRC and CAA, it argues, are not neutral bureaucratic exercises, but implicated in larger projects of state control, exclusion, and identity-making. Both emerged within longer histories of contested citizenship, migration, and state formation. In Assam, these processes revived older fault lines, where concerns about demographic invasion dominate public discourse. In Delhi, the protests against these policies have been reframed as an assertion of secular, feminist citizenship.

Drawing from the two field sites, this chapter connects how the NRC and CAA generate disparate yet overlapping anxieties. Guwahati represents a region steeped in the politics of ethno-linguistic identity, where citizenship is intertwined with local histories of migration and displacement. Delhi, as the nation's capital, serves as a contrasting space where citizenship was imagined through feminist and pluralist resistance during the movement. In both regions, women's participation in the protests against these policies reveals the gendered contours of citizenship and the resistance to exclusionary state practices. The aim of this chapter is threefold: to unravel the socio-political genealogies of the NRC and CAA, to trace their gendered and regional impacts, and to anchor these debates in the lived realities of Assam and Delhi. It is in this uneasy convergence of policy, place, and protest that the contours of a gendered, intersectional citizenship can take form.

2.1. The National Register of Citizens in Assam, 2019

The NRC in Assam represents one of the most contentious exercises in the history of Indian citizenship. Introduced in 1951 and updated in 2019, it embodies the intersection of legal frameworks, ethno-nationalist anxieties, and the precarious realities of those on the margins of citizenship. Its evolution reveals the amalgamation of historical, legal, and socio-political forces that continue to shape Assam's identity and its tense relationship with migration. The NRC has been a highly debated and controversial policy, reflecting the complex dynamics of citizenship, identity, and migration in the region.

2.1.1 Historical Context: Partition and the Legacy of Migration

The roots of the NRC lie in Assam's changing colonial and postcolonial trajectory, shaped by overlapping regimes of migration, extraction, and state formation. Designated a 'frontier region' by the British colonial regime, Assam was subjected to a series of administrative experiments that reconfigured its demographic and political landscape. Annexed following the First Anglo-Burmese War, it was incorporated into the Bengal Presidency in 1826 and later carved out as a separate non-regulation province in 1874. The brief merger with Eastern Bengal (1905-1912) only deepened anxieties about being politically and culturally subsumed. Colonial migration policies favoured Bengali clerical and agricultural migration, fostering competition and demographic shifts that sparked early identity politics. These anxieties resurfaced during the negotiations for independence, when the 1946 Cabinet Mission Plan proposed grouping Assam with Muslim-majority Bengal – a move that met fierce resistance from Assamese leaders and led to the anti-grouping movement of 1946.

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 further intensified these tensions. The influx of refugees and migrants from East Bengal, especially Bengali Muslims, generated deep-seated fears of demographic displacement and resource competition. Scholars like Sanjib Baruah and Sanjay Barbora have shown how these historical ruptures and migrations crystallised tensions about belonging, identity, and political futures in postcolonial Assam – anxieties that continue to animate debates over citizenship and exclusion.. As Barbora (2006) said,

> Since the inception of the Indian republic in the mid-20th century, the north-eastern region has been beset by armed insurrections and

> political violence directed, in equal measure, against settlers, against different ethnic groups and the authorities. After several decades of conflict, 2004-05 saw both hopes of a breakthrough in many of the protracted armed-struggles, as well as escalation of conflict between different ethnic groups in the region. This paradoxical situation is often attributed to the region's underdevelopment and its peripheral position within the Indian geographical entity (p. 3805).

These anxieties were formalised in the 1951 NRC, compiled to document citizens and identify "illegal immigrants." However, as Gogoi and Sen (2024) have argued, “citizenship and belonging are neither the same nor given” in South Asia’s postcolonial landscape.

Assamese nationalism, critiqued for its exclusionary tendencies, relies heavily on the construction of cultural and linguistic purity. Baruah (1999) has argued that the anxieties were informed by colonial histories of migration and land alienation, which created a “hierarchical relationship between insiders and outsiders” in Assam (see also Rahman, 2020; Jha & Chakrabarty, 2023). Bengali communities had historically held administrative and cultural prominence during the colonial period, stoking the Assamese elite’s fears of cultural erosion and resource scarcity. It tied directly to perceptions of the Bengali population as economically and socially influential "outsiders" (Sharma 2021). This anxiety found expression in the state’s anti-immigrant politics, framed by the Assamese elite as a necessary step to safeguard regional identity. The imposition of Assamese as the official language of Assam in 1960 heightened tensions with Bengali-speaking populations, cementing their status as outsiders (Sharma, 2021, p.5). The resulting linguistic divide underscored broader anxieties over resource competition and cultural dominance, epitomised in the Assam Movement (also known as the Axom Andolan) of 1979-1985.

The demand for an updated NRC reflects this same sentiment, with the figure of the "Bangladeshi" migrant becoming the archetypal "other" in Assamese political consciousness. Critical scholars (see Bhagabati, 2019) have analysed this nationalist project, describing its relationship with the "motherland" as one marked by a symbolic guardianship, where immigrants, particularly Bengali Muslims, are framed as existential threats to Assamese identity. The NRC process, allege the critics cited above, marginalises these communities while reinforcing patriarchal notions of guardianship tied to masculinised protectors of the Assamese nation. The 2019 update of the NRC, as

Baruah argues, has established a new category of persons - the "foreigner" - who are perceived as a threat to Assamese society and culture.

Sharma (2023) also highlights how these tensions were reinforced by the state's inconsistent and exclusionary policies on migration. The failure to establish a comprehensive framework for addressing migration has led to ad hoc measures such as the NRC, which, rather than resolving these tensions, perpetuates the cyclical marginalisation of Bengali-speaking populations. This oscillation between bureaucratic exercises like the NRC and politically charged rhetoric around "illegal immigrants" has entrenched a narrative where the Bengali "other" is repeatedly scapegoated as a threat to Assamese cultural survival. Moreover, the legal and bureaucratic mechanisms underpinning these policies, including the ambiguous criteria for determining citizenship, have created what Sharma describes as a "citizenship impasse," where procedural opacity and political motivations converge to exclude vulnerable groups disproportionately (p.7).

Culminating decades of political mobilisation – from 1951 to 2013 – the 2019 revision of the NRC in Assam was a politically charged exercise (Jayal, 2019). Far from being a neutral bureaucratic exercise, the NRC intensified existing inter-community antagonisms. Gogoi and Sen (2024) argue that it is a legal expression of Assamese nationalism's desire to detect, delete, and deport the Bangladeshi 'other,' perpetuating liminality and disenfranchisement (p. 4831). As per official data, the NRC excluded around 1.9 million people, leaving their citizenship status in limbo[16]. These exclusions have been criticised for their arbitrary and opaque nature, with concerns raised over the impact on women and marginalised communities (Rahman, 2020).

In this context, the gendered and regional dimensions of the NRC emerge as central to understanding its disparate impacts. Women, especially those from marginalised communities, have been disproportionately affected due to their historical and systemic exclusion from property and documentation systems.

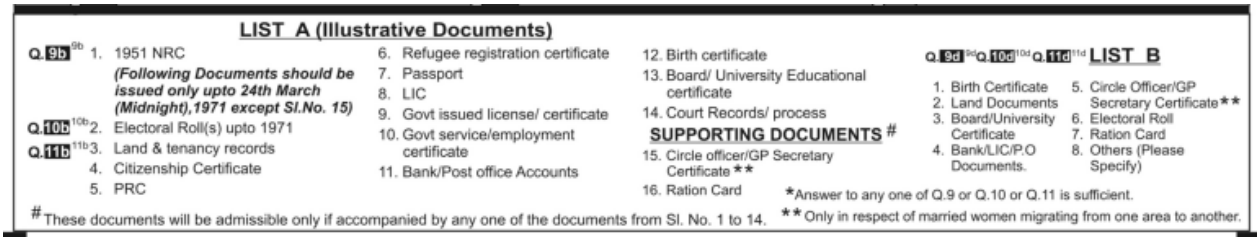
[16] On August 31, 2019, the Office of the State Coordinator for NRC, Assam, published the final list, including 3,11,21,004 individuals and excluding 19,06,657 out of 3,30,27,661 applicants. The process involved 68,37,660 applications, over 52,000 officials, and a draft list on July 30, 2018, with 2,89,83,677 eligible persons, followed by 36,26,630 claims and 1,87,633 objections. The final list was made available at NRC Seva Kendras and local government offices (Office of the State Coordinator, NRC, Assam. 2019. Press Brief, 31 August 2019. Accessed November 28, 2024).

2.1.2 The Gendered Dimensions of Citizenship and the NRC

Many women in Assam lacked property or land records; married women, in particular, faced difficulties in proving parental lineage. Amnesty International (2019) reported that "the burden of proof placed on marginalised individuals is insurmountable," effectively excluding many from legal recognition.

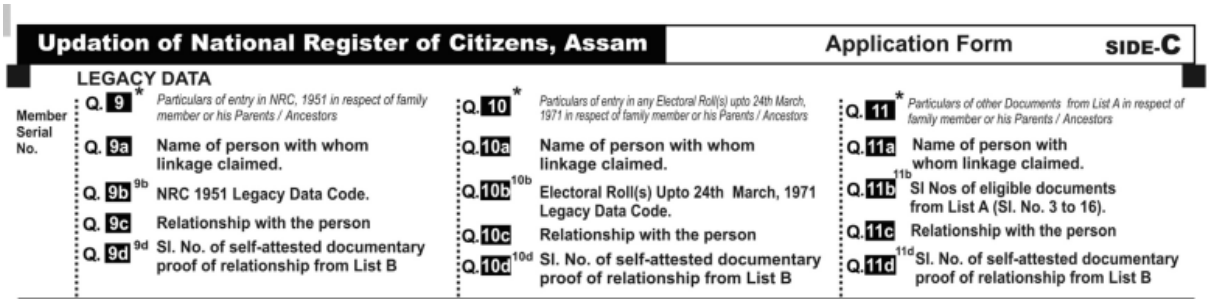
The first documentary requirement to enroll in the NRC is the possession of "any one of the documents of List A issued before midnight of 24th March, 1971 where name of self or ancestor appears (to prove residence in Assam up to midnight of 24th March, 1971)" (Government of Assam[17]). Two other documents, keeping in mind the married women who migrated after marriage, were added to the list. However, as the official website reads, "these two documents shall be accepted only if accompanied by any one of the documents listed above".

Fig. 2.1. List of documents needed for NRC 2019; sourced from the official application form by author



Should someone fail to produce any of the documents in List A, they would have to establish their connection to an ancestor who would have possessed one. This connection, in turn, has to be established with another list of documents, known as 'legacy data' in NRC parlance.

Fig. 2.2. List of documents needed to establish ancestral legacy in case of failure to produce a List A document; sourced from the official application form by author



[17] The government website containing the full list of required documents can be accessed at https://www.nrcassam.nic.in/admin-documents.html.

The dismissal of documents like panchayat certificates[18] made the process further inaccessible to women. Although the Supreme Court acknowledged these certificates as valid evidence of lineage, local officials frequently disregarded them, reinforcing structural biases. Bengali-speaking Muslim women, residing in the 'char' areas[19] in particular, found themselves at the intersection of multiple marginalisations – as women, as linguistic and religious minorities, and as perceived "outsiders" (Patgiri and Patgiri, 2023). The "outsider" narrative perpetuates cycles of marginalisation, where women are rendered vulnerable not only to state mechanisms like the NRC but also to community-level discrimination and domestic exploitation (Doshi 2020). Gogoi and Sen (2024) have noted that "the precarity of recognition is most experienced by women both on account of gendered property laws in India and the fact that ownership of temporary char land is in itself a difficult process" (p. 4839).

They often occupied precarious socio-economic positions, with many engaged in informal or domestic labour, further limiting their access to official documentation. Punathil's use of the concept of "precarious citizenship" (2022) in this context accurately describes how women face these acute, and multifaceted difficulties in the NRC process.

This concept captures the arbitrariness, messiness and fragility of situations where state-driven interventions place a group in an ambiguous position, and it allows us to talk about the continuums between otherwise understood binaries such as citizenship/non-citizenship and insider/outsider, as this complex experience involves being insider and outsider, citizen and non-citizen at the same time Further, precarious citizenship is a result of constant criminalisation of migrants by state and non-state actors which leads to discrimination and extreme forms of violence. (p.57).

As Patgiri and Patgiri (2023) observe, the pervasive stigma against Bengali-speaking Muslims not only frames them as demographic threats but also devalues their labour, casting them as invisible contributors to Assam's socio-economic fabric. This invisibilisation compounds the patriarchal norms that tie women's identities to male

[18] A certificate of residency issued by a gram panchayat (the foundational level of local self-governance in India) is not considered a document of citizenship and is "meaningless" unless supported by some other valid record for enrolling in the NRC.

[19] Char-chaporis (riverein sand bars) "represent a complex socio-economic and environmental landscape characterized by persistent challenges such as poverty, low literacy rates, inadequate healthcare, and vulnerability to floods and erosion. These riverine islands, formed by the Brahmaputra River, have historically been a focal point of migration, significantly altering the region's demographics and socio-political dynamics" (Deka and Kalita, 2024).

relatives, making it even harder for a woman from this community to establish independent claims to citizenship.

Thus, gendered implications of the NRC were further compounded by the regional and linguistic divides in Assam. The process was plagued by administrative inconsistencies and a lack of transparency. Multiple errors in the draft list, exclusion of Indian citizens, all highlighted the flaws in the bureaucratic machinery. With its stringent documentation requirements and inadequate consideration of intersectional marginalisations, the NRC update process amplified vulnerabilities (see the Development and Justice Initiative Report, 2019). It disproportionately affected those already burdened by poverty, displacement, and limited access to education and healthcare (Patgiri and Patgiri 2023, p. 25).

2.1.3 The Myth of Legal Neutrality

Although the NRC was presented as an objective bureaucratic process, it operated within a legal and political framework that privileges majoritarian interests. Gogoi and Sen (2024) describe this as the "mythology of law," wherein legal processes mask their embedded social codes of violence (p. 4829). Far from being a neutral exercise, the NRC has been critiqued as a reflection of a system where the language of constitutionality and rule of law is instrumentalised to legitimise exclusionary practices. Rajkhowa (2020) has observed that this new regime of citizenship draws heavily on colonial-era policies, blending territorial autonomy with an exclusionary notion of ethnic homogeneity.

Its legal foundation is rooted in the Assam Accord of 1985, which sought to detect, delete, and deport "illegal migrants"[20] who entered the state after March 24, 1971 (Jayal 2019; Sharma 2023). However, as Rajkhowa (2020) argues, the Assam Accord also introduced a "hierarchised model of citizenship" (Roy, 2010) where universal citizenship claims were subordinated to regional anxieties over indigeneity and migration. This shift crucially marked a departure from frameworks aimed at providing special protections for indigenous communities, to one that sought to exclude certain groups, particularly Bengali-speaking Muslims, from equal citizenship. The absence of a comprehensive

[20] Under Indian law, an "illegal migrant" is a foreigner who has entered into India (i) without a valid passport or other travel documents and such other document or authority as may be prescribed by or under any law in that behalf; or (ii) with a valid passport or other travel documents and such other document or authority as may be prescribed by or under any law in that behalf but remains therein beyond the permitted period of time (The Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2003 (India), 2003, s 2(b).)

refugee policy in India further complicates this process. By conflating refugees, migrants, and stateless persons under the category of "foreigners," the legal system obscures the diverse realities of those excluded from citizenship. This conflation, as Gogoi and Sen (2024) argue, perpetuates “a structurally maladjusted sense of belonging,” leaving individuals to navigate a labyrinthine bureaucracy that systematically excludes them (p. 4832). The bureaucratic rationality of the NRC requires extensive documentation and ancestral proof. In turn, the lack of such documentation places an insurmountable burden on those at the margins, reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

Rajkhowa (2020) also highlights the role of the judiciary in legitimising this exclusionary logic. Supreme Court rulings in 2005 and 2014, which described undocumented migration as a form of “external aggression,” have normalised the weaponisation of legal frameworks like the Foreigners Tribunal. These tribunals, as Sharma (2023) points out, operate with procedural opacity and often disregard the principles of natural justice, disproportionately targeting economically and socially marginalised groups. This creates what Sharma calls a “citizenship impasse,” where those excluded are systematically denied access to justice, undermining the very notion of democracy.

Further, Rajkhowa notes that the NRC initiative has reoriented the relationship between the judiciary, bureaucracy, and the state. Questions of citizenship, once rooted in the political imagination of the postcolonial nation-state, are now reduced to technical exercises of documentation and verification. This shift, he argues, not only depoliticises citizenship but also enables the state to exercise arbitrary power under the guise of bureaucratic neutrality. By framing the issue of migration as a legal problem rather than a socio-political one, it thus runs the risk of perpetuating cycles of marginalisation, targeting vulnerable communities under the guise of maintaining constitutional order. As he cautions, this approach not only fails to resolve long-standing ethnic tensions but also risks entrenching new forms of violence and inequality within the framework of citizenship itself.

2.1.4 Resistance to the NRC in Assam

The exclusionary framework of the NRC has been met with significant resistance, both within Assam and across India. In Assam, it was characterised by the region’s unique socio-political context, where historical tensions over migration intersect with the politics of indigeneity and exclusion. Unlike the national protests against NRC and CAA, which

primarily focused on their anti-Muslim implications, Assam's opposition has been tied to the state's long-standing debates over ethnic identity and indigenous rights. This historical framing has shaped both the support for and resistance to the NRC, reflecting the entrenched tensions between regional identity and broader questions of national belonging.

In Guwahati, the state's administrative and urban hub, these tensions manifested in the everyday struggles of marginalised communities, particularly Bengali Muslims and women (and especially Bengali Muslim women), who must navigate systemic barriers in accessing documentation, housing, and public services. Miya poets[21], many of whom are based in Guwahati, have critiqued the NRC's erasure of identities through their writings, asserting their right to belong within the Assamese polity. Behera (2025) argues that the "very act of writing Miya poems lends to the poiesis of a new Miya subjectivity as it becomes a mode of resistance through counter-storytelling". This has emerged as a powerful cultural resistance to the NRC's erasure of identities for Bengali Muslims, since…

> It has, and continues to play a pivotal role in the protest of the social, cultural and political framing of the Miya subject as 'illegal immigrants' and 'infiltrators' in contemporary Assam. In writing these poems as part of their 'everyday practices' the Miya poets challenge these narratives associated with their community's socio-historical presence. Miya poetry becomes a mode of resistance against the cultural assimilation of the Miya Muslims within the larger 'Assamese' ethnic identity, which systematically erases the community's history of oppression. (Behera, 2025, p.1)

Gaining popularity with Dr. Hafiz Ahmed's 2016 poem "Write Down I Am a Miyah," this genre uses personal and collective narratives to question belonging. As Yasmeen (2019) notes, Miya poetry not only addresses the historical marginalisation of Bengali Muslims in Assam but also critiques the majoritarian assumptions underpinning the NRC by reappropriating the derogatory term "Miya" with pride. These poems highlight the everyday struggles of Bengali Muslims, particularly those living in Assam's char areas, whose identities are tied to precarious geographies and contested citizenship.

[21] 'Miya/Miyan/Miyah' is a "slur that has been historically used to identify a community" - the Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam, and "was adorned and poetically used to negotiate the threats and onslaught of state-mandated citizenship practices" (Azad and Chakraborty, 2022)

The use of dialect and imagery in Miya poetry emphasises its role as a tool of resistance - leveraging the same politics of language that is used to exclude and marginalise this community. Poems like Shalim M. Hussain's "Ei Biplob TVte Dehabo Na" (This Revolution Will Not Be Televised) challenge mainstream narratives by juxtaposing the community's lived realities against the trivialities of popular culture. Hussain critiques how systemic exclusions and historical trauma like the Nellie massacre[22] remain unacknowledged in mainstream media and literature. Similarly, Kazi Neel's "Hei Desh Aamaar, Ami Hei Desher Na" (That Land is Mine, I Am Not of That Land) juxtaposes claims of belonging with the rejection faced by the community, capturing the profound alienation wrought by policies like the NRC (Yasmeen, 2019). Its "role in enriching and strengthening the fabric of resistance cultures across Assam" (Azad, et al., 2022) has been noted by scholars, but the authors have also critiqued its gender disparity.

> An estimated 40 to 50 poets have been part of the Miya Poetry Movement since 2016, and the number has been increasing. It is important to mention that the representation of women in the Miya Poetry Movement is very limited. This could be because of the high prevalence of patriarchal practices due to which women's access to education and the political sphere remains limited. (p.6)

However, framing the NRC solely as an exclusionary exercise risks oversimplifying the heterogeneity of Assamese society. While anxieties over migration are central to this demand, they coexist with broader resistance to the erasure of regional identities under colonial and national regimes (Ahmed & Pathak 2020; Misra 2020). Simplistic deductions of the NRC as an act of collective chauvinism risk overlooking the historical and structural contexts that underpin both its contested implementation and enduring appeal (it had started long before 2019, after all). For proponents of the NRC, the register was viewed as a measure to safeguard Assamese identity amidst ongoing demographic pressures. This perspective holds particular weight in a region historically treated as a *resource frontier*, where state policies have prioritised resource extraction over equitable development (Karlsson, 2022). Assamese intellectuals contend that the NRC offers a mechanism to stabilise the region by addressing fears of being politically and economically marginalised (Ahmed & Bhattacharya 2020; Siddique 2020).

[22] This intensely violent riot was studied intensively for the first time by Kimura (2003), who described it as an "incident that saw the Tiwas, an ethnic group based on the Assam plains, attack the Bengali Muslims, who were immigrants, with about 1,600 people being killed" in a village called Nellie on 18 February 1983.

That said, these perspectives do not mitigate the exclusionary consequences of the NRC in practice. As discussed, the Register has disproportionately impacted women, Bengali-speaking Muslims, and other marginalised communities, entrenching cycles of disenfranchisement. Nonetheless, situating the NRC within its historical and structural context allows for a more nuanced understanding of its complex legacy in Assam.

As the next section will explore, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) has further complicated these debates, reframing the politics of exclusion at a national scale and provoking resistance that spans regional and ideological divides.

2.2. The Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), enacted by the Indian Parliament in December 2019 has emerged as one of the most polarising pieces of legislation in contemporary Indian politics. Framed as a corrective to historical injustices faced by religious minorities in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, the Act marks a fundamental departure from India's secular framework for determining citizenship. Its selective inclusion of non-Muslim communities – Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians – has sparked nationwide debates over its constitutionality, ethicality, and its alignment with the pluralist ethos of the Indian Constitution (Bajpai, 2022). This Act, the critics say, underscores the state's role in reconfiguring a "fundamental shift away from jus soli"[23] citizenship in tandem with the NRC (Punathil, 2022, p. 60).

Since its Independence, Indian citizenship laws have largely adhered to a secular framework, making the CAA's privileging of religious identity constitutionally controversial. Bajpai (2022) has framed the pluralism historically found in India in six categories[24], and argued that CAA inches India towards a dangerous variant - that of Hindu majoritarian pluralism. At the heart of the debate on CAA (2019) is this perceived reconfiguration of Indian citizenship along religious lines, a shift that many view as

[23] Jus soli and jus sanguinis are legal principles determining citizenship. Jus soli, or "right of soil," means citizenship is granted to individuals born within a country's territory. Jus sanguinis, or "right of blood," means citizenship is granted based on the nationality of one or both parents.

[24] The six historical variants of pluralism found in the country, according to Bajpai, are: segmented pluralism, multi-confessional pluralism, Hindu pluralism, religion-blind citizenship, inclusionary differentiated citizenship, and multicultural citizenship.

antithetical to the basic structure of Indian constitutionalism. The Act's exclusion of Muslim migrants, whom it effectively renders ineligible for expedited naturalisation, has been widely criticised as a blatant instance of religious discrimination.

2.2.1. The Legal Provisions and Selective Scope of the CAA

At its core, the CAA (2019) amends the Citizenship Act of 1955, to grant expedited naturalisation to members of the six specified religious groups from the three neighbouring countries, provided they entered India on or before 31 December 2014. As Section 2 of the Act states:

"Provided that any person belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi or Christian community from Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan, who entered into India on or before the 31st day of December, 2014... shall not be treated as an illegal migrant for the purposes of this Act."

Prior to the CAA (2019), Indian citizenship was granted through naturalisation based on residency for 11 of the preceding 14 years[25]. By reducing this requirement to six years for specific communities, the Act not only expedites citizenship for these groups but also explicitly excludes Muslims, the largest minority in India (BBC News, 2019). The Act's timing amplified its controversial reception. Coming on the heels of the updated NRC in Assam, which excluded 1.9 million people in its final list, the CAA is perceived as a safety net for non-Muslims excluded from the NRC. This leaves Muslims, as well as other marginalised groups unable to produce adequate documentation, vulnerable to statelessness (BBC News, 2019). This nexus of NRC-CAA worsened anxieties among India's document-poor population.

By embedding religion into the framework of citizenship, the CAA (2019) marks a significant shift from India's constitutional commitment to pluralism, raising urgent questions about the state's role in reconfiguring national identity. Its provisions challenge the secular principles enshrined in the Indian Constitution, particularly its guarantees of equality under Article 14 and protection against religious discrimination. While the government defends the Act as a humanitarian measure, critics argue that its selective

[25] "While the 1955 Citizenship Act prohibited all undocumented migrants from acquiring Indian citizenship, the 2019 amendment fast-tracks the citizenship pathways for some and provides them legislative protection from deportation and imprisonment with the exception of those living in the tribal areas of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura and the areas under the 'Inner line' special permit zones" (Amnesty International, 2024).

application of humanitarianism exposes a communal agenda. For instance, the exclusion of neighbouring countries like Myanmar, where the Rohingyas face systemic persecution, and Sri Lanka, home to displaced Tamil refugees, raises questions about the Act's true intentions. Scholars have pointed out that the Act effectively privileges Hindus and other non-Muslim communities, aligning with a broader Hindu nationalist agenda to redefine citizenship in religious terms (Jaffrelot 2021).

Building on this critique, Sanjib Baruah frames the Act as a continuation of India's failure to disentangle its post-Partition identity from communal fault lines. By focusing on granting refuge to Hindus, the CAA positions India as a "Hindu homeland," undermining the secular fabric envisioned by the framers of the Constitution (Baruah 2019). Jaffrelot (2021) similarly contends that the Act contributes to the ethnicisation of Indian democracy, where explicit exclusions of Muslims embed religion into the framework of citizenship and deepen communal divides. Critics have further highlighted parallels between the Act and the two-nation theory that partitioned India and Pakistan along religious lines – a theory explicitly rejected by India's founding leaders. The CAA, they argue, represents a regressive step, embedding religious identity into the framework of citizenship and exacerbating existing societal divisions (see Jayal 2019; Baruah 2019)

2.2.2. Resistance and Regional Variations

Against this backdrop, the CAA triggered widespread protests across the country, with significant regional variations in the nature of opposition. In Assam and other northeastern states, resistance stemmed largely from anxieties over the preservation of ethnic identities rather than religious divisions. Many Assamese argued that the CAA violated the Assam Accord of 1985 by facilitating the settlement of Bengali Hindu migrants, who were perceived as a demographic threat to the region's cultural and linguistic integrity. As an activist from the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) remarked during an interview, "Assamese opposition to outsiders is not communal; it is about protecting our land and culture" (Mittal and Ranjan, 2023, p.471). The Assamese, and by implication the Northeastern narrative, thus underscores the enduring tensions between localised assertions of indigeneity and the federal state's imposition of homogenising citizenship policies.

In mainland India, by contrast, the opposition to the CAA coalesced around its communal implications and its challenge to the constitutional principle of secularism. The iconic sit-

in at Shaheen Bagh, led predominantly by Muslim women, symbolised this resistance. Protesters articulated a vision of inclusive citizenship rooted in constitutional values, countering the exclusionary framework introduced by the CAA. This movement sought to reclaim the "idea of India" as a secular and pluralistic nation, positioning itself as a direct challenge to the agenda advanced by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). These regional variations in resistance highlight the intersecting dimensions of the CAA's impact. While Assam's protests foregrounded ethnic and linguistic survival, mainland movements critiqued the communalisation of citizenship. When combined, both agendas of protest reflect a broader unease with the state's redefinition of national identity, uniting diverse constituencies in defence of constitutional ideals. My empirical data builds on these observations, as will be shown in the following chapters, where I explore how these regional dynamics unfolded in two key sites: Guwahati and Delhi, and how women's activism emerged as a bridge between the diverging agendas.

The anti-CAA/NRC movement was notable for its feminist leadership and participation, marking a departure from traditional gender roles in public protests. From Shaheen Bagh to smaller towns, women across religious and class lines emerged as the vanguard of dissent. In Delhi, Muslim women framed their opposition as a defence of their dignity and citizenship, challenging stereotypes of submissiveness. In Assam, women from marginalised communities linked their resistance to broader struggles for land and identity. For many, the CAA was not just a religious issue but a threat to their socio-economic stability. This dual framing – as women and as citizens – underscored the intersectionality of their activism. Leveraging their standpoint and an intersectional feminist lens, my empirical data goes to show how the movement disrupted conventional narratives of resistance, demonstrating how women's agency could redefine political imaginaries of the masculine and feminine in India.

This shifting landscape of resistance thus set the stage for examining how the NRC and CAA operated within specific contexts. The following section delves into the lived realities of citizenship in Assam and Delhi, exploring how these debates are shaped by local histories, identities, and solidarities.

2.3. Field Sites: Citizenship and Resistance in Assam and Delhi

The CAA and NRC have acted as flashpoints, transforming the terrains of citizenship, identity, and belonging in contemporary India. While the legislations and their repercussions have had a nationwide impact, their manifestations in Assam and Delhi provide distinct insights into how these processes unfold within specific regional and socio-political contexts. Delhi, as the capital city and a hub of national resistance, saw a diverse, secular, and feminist-led opposition to the perceived communal undertones of the CAA. Meanwhile, Assam, a state shaped by its colonial past and postcolonial struggles with migration and indigeneity, experienced the NRC-CAA nexus as a continuation of historical tensions surrounding identity. These field sites not only demonstrate the layered impacts of citizenship laws, but also offer critical reflections on regional identity, intersectional resistance, and the role of the state - setting the backdrop for my choice of field sites for the empirics of this research.

2.3.1. Assam: 'Documentary Doublethink' and the Fear of the 'foreigner'

The previous section has already discussed that in Assam, resistance to the CAA was rooted in concerns over ethnic identity rather than religion. Assamese nationalists argued that the Act's provisions, which granted citizenship to non-Muslim refugees, violated the Assam Accord by legitimising the presence of "illegal migrants" beyond the cut-off date of 1971. It has to be reiterated that the Accord, a product of the Assam Movement (1979 - 1985), established March 24, 1971, as the cut-off date for identifying undocumented migrants, *regardless of religion*. By offering expedited citizenship to non-Muslim migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan who entered India before December 31, 2014, the CAA was seen as a direct violation of this agreement. This tension between regional and national priorities has been a defining feature of Assamese resistance, reflecting the complexities of navigating regional concerns in a postcolonial state.

The British colonial government's preference for Bengali-speaking elites for administrative roles and the subsequent influx of Bengali-speaking Muslim peasants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries laid the groundwork for enduring ethnic tensions

(Choudhury 2022). These migrations were perceived by indigenous Assamese communities as a threat to their cultural and linguistic identity, an anxiety that intensified post-Partition with the creation of East Pakistan. The 1971 Indo-Pak war and the subsequent formation of Bangladesh further complicated Assam's demographic landscape. The state became a primary destination for refugees fleeing the violence, exacerbating fears of being overrun by "outsiders" - leading to the Accord.

However, as Gogoi and Sen (2024) have noted, this did little to assuage concerns, as the "Bangladeshi migrant" remained a central figure in Assamese political consciousness. The NRC was initially framed as a solution to resolve this long-standing "immigrant question", promising to establish a definitive list of Indian citizens. However, its implementation has been fraught with controversy and discrimination. The 2019 list, as mentioned above, excluded 1.9 million individuals, many of whom belonged to economically and socially marginalised groups, particularly among Bengali-speaking Muslims. The process of proving citizenship through documentation disproportionately impacted women, as has been discussed above (see Choudhury Lahiri, 2021).

For many in Assam, the CAA signified the erosion of hard-won protections for the region's cultural and linguistic identity. As Baruah (1999) has observed, the Assamese ethno-nationalist movement has historically centred on the protection of local resources, land, and identity against perceived demographic changes driven by migration. The fear that the CAA would open the floodgates to Hindu Bengali migrants from Bangladesh intensified these anxieties, as it effectively rendered the NRC, a painstaking process of identifying undocumented migrants, irrelevant. Critically, the NRC's emphasis on documentary evidence reflects a bureaucratic turn in citizenship determination that prioritises legalistic definitions over lived realities. This is what Gogoi and Sen (2024) identify as the "documentary doublethink" that underscores the inherent contradictions in a process that claims to resolve citizenship disputes while perpetuating systemic exclusions.

Women in Assam have played a crucial role in nuancing the resistance to CAA (2019). Framing their resistance as both a defence of Assamese identity, and a critique of patriarchal structures within nationalist politics, they problematised any univocal demand for the NRC within the anti-CAA discourse. The intersection of gender, ethnicity, and class in these protests (that will be explored in the following chapters) testified to the layered nature of citizenship struggles in the region (Saha, 2021).

Thus, resistance to the CAA in Assam was grounded in the region's enduring anxieties over migration and the preservation of indigeneity. Unlike other parts of India, where opposition to the CAA centred on its religiously discriminatory provisions, Assam's protests were driven by fears that the Act would violate the Assam Accord of 1985. As Sharma (2021) observes, these protests were framed as a defence of "indigenous sovereignty," with demonstrators seeking to protect the state's cultural and demographic integrity (Sharma 2021, p. 9).

2.3.2. Delhi: Secularism and Feminist Mobilisation

While Assam's resistance to the CAA reflected the region's anxieties with migration and the defence of indigeneity, Delhi's protests offered a contrasting narrative rooted in secularism, constitutionalism, and feminist mobilisation. As the national capital, Delhi occupies a paradoxical position in India's socio-political fabric, functioning as both a seat of power and a contested space where the promises and contradictions of citizenship are laid bare. This dual identity was exemplified in its central role in the anti-CAA/NRC protests, which transformed the city into a battleground for articulating alternative visions of belonging and resistance. As the empirical discussion will reveal in the following chapters, Delhi's urban spaces became arenas for reclaiming citizenship as a relational and inclusive practice, challenging the exclusionary logic of the CAA-NRC framework.

Delhi's historical and geographic position as a hub of political power makes it a focal point for resistance. Subaltern Studies, particularly the work of Ranajit Guha, emphasises the duality of power and resistance, highlighting the ways in which subaltern groups have historically engaged with and contested elite spaces of authority (Guha, 1988). Similarly, Delhi's urban terrain mirrors this dynamic, as it represents both the epicentre of state power and a space where marginalised groups challenge hegemonic narratives of citizenship and belonging (Guha, 1988). This dynamic was evident in the anti-CAA protests, where public spaces like Shaheen Bagh were reclaimed as symbols of inclusive dissent. As Rochona Majumdar observes, "the revolutionary potential of urban protests lies in their ability to disrupt the normalised rhythms of elite control and reassert the political agency of marginalised groups" (Majumdar, 2015, p. 53). In Delhi, this disruption was both spatial and symbolic, with protesters reimagining streets, parks, and metro stations as arenas of solidarity and resistance.

The anti-CAA protests, epitomised by the iconic Shaheen Bagh sit-ins, marked a significant departure from traditional frameworks of political resistance in India. Unlike Assam's protests, which were driven by anxieties over ethnic identity, Delhi's mobilisation foregrounded the constitutional principles of secularism and equality. These protests also had an explicitly feminist ethos, challenging the masculinised framework of citizenship as a purely legal and administrative category. Muslim women, whose voices had historically been marginalised in national political discourse, emerged as the vanguard of this resistance. Their leadership disrupted entrenched hierarchies of gender, religion, and class, reframing citizenship as a lived and relational practice rather than a narrow legal construct.

A notable feature of the Delhi protests was their grounding in the traditions of urban and campus feminism, which have long resisted patriarchal norms and authoritarian governance. Feminist collectives like Pinjra Tod (Break the Cages) played a critical role in mobilising support, drawing on their experiences of challenging gendered restrictions in university spaces. These collectives brought an intersectional framework to the protests, highlighting how caste, class, gender, and religion intersect in the experience of exclusion. This inclusivity was reflected in the diverse composition of the protestors, which included Dalits, Adivasis, and LGBTQ+ individuals, each contributing their lived experiences of marginalisation to the broader movement. As feminist scholars have argued, questions of belonging are inseparable from the structures of oppression that shape access to rights and resources (Omvedt, 1993; Spivak, 1988).

The leadership of women students in these movements reflects the broader emergence of campus feminism as a stronghold of democratic dissent in contemporary India. As Basu (2023) notes, "the bodies of women themselves became central sites of resistance against the repressions and violence of a masculinist, authoritarian, Hindutva state" (Basu, p. 223). This feminist intervention not only contested the exclusionary premises of the CAA, but also reimagined citizenship as an embodied and inclusive practice. The Delhi protests exemplified this use of the body - the power of performative resistance to challenge state narratives. From public readings of the Constitution to poetry recitations and art installations, acts of cultural expression transformed protest sites into vibrant spaces of dialogue and creativity. The symbolic recitation of the Preamble to the Indian Constitution became a defining feature of the movement, asserting the protesters'

commitment to secularism and pluralism in direct opposition to the alleged communal undertones of the CAA.

Through these acts, the Delhi protests reclaimed public spaces as arenas of inclusion and solidarity, challenging the exclusionary logic of citizenship embedded in the CAA-NRC framework. The feminist ethos of the movement disrupted traditional power structures, offering an alternative vision of resistance that foregrounded care, intersectionality, and relationality. As the following chapters will explore, this ethos of inclusive dissent serves as a powerful counterpoint to the narratives of exclusion and marginalisation that underpin contemporary debates on citizenship in India.

2.3.3. Interconnections and Divergences

The movement in Assam and Delhi reveal both overlapping stakes and divergent priorities in the resistance to the NRC-CAA framework. While Assam's protests centred on anxieties about migration and the preservation of regional identity, Delhi's mobilisation foregrounded constitutional secularism and feminist critiques of exclusionary state practices. These differences, therefore, reflect how regional histories and socio-political contexts shape distinct narratives of resistance, even as they confront the same policies.

In Assam, resistance was closely tied to the region's long-standing preoccupation with indigeneity. Protests led by organisations such as the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) emphasised the threat posed by the CAA to the Assam Accord of 1985, which had sought to establish a cut-off date for determining citizenship irrespective of religion. For protesters in Assam, the CAA represented a betrayal of this agreement, exacerbating fears of demographic and cultural erosion. This focus on Assamese nationalism and indigeneity shaped both the rhetoric and the geography of resistance, with urban centres like Guwahati acting as focal points, even as the concerns resonated across rural areas.

Delhi's protests, by contrast, presented a decentralised and intersectional challenge to the communal undertones of the NRC and CAA. Grounded in secular and feminist principles, the mobilisation was led by grassroots collectives, feminist organisations, and student groups, with Muslim women at Shaheen Bagh at the forefront. Their leadership symbolised a significant shift in the imagination of resistance, foregrounding

relationality, care, and solidarity over exclusionary frameworks of identity. Unlike Assam's resistance, which reflected the regional stakes of migration, Delhi's protests rejected the communal, gendered and exclusionary premises of citizenship itself.

The spatial and organisational dynamics of the two movements further underscore these differences. Assam's protests drew on a history of ethno-nationalist mobilisation, framed around indigeneity and regional autonomy. In Delhi, the protests emerged as a challenge to the homogenising narratives of citizenship advanced by the state, articulating a pluralistic vision of belonging rooted in constitutional ideals of justice and equality.

While Assam's resistance focused on defending regional identity, Delhi's mobilisation emphasised the broader constitutional and ethical implications of exclusionary citizenship. These protests, despite their differences, offer complementary critiques of the Indian state's attempts to redefine citizenship. By centring the voices of marginalised communities, they expose the broader stakes of the NRC-CAA framework, challenging the state's vision of a homogenised, national, and allegedly 'Hindu' identity. The anti-CAA/NRC movement, thus, serves as a microcosm of India's broader struggles with pluralism.

2.4. Centring marginalised voices in doing Fieldwork

Investigating how women *did* citizenship in this microcosm of India's pluralist debate, this research contends that the protests that I studied in Guwahati and Delhi that shaped the anti-CAA/NRC movement can be conceptualised as *women's protests*; because women's protests, as Murdie and Peksen (2015) say, encompass the events and social causes not specific to women, but where they are the key actors of mobilisation. Here, I lean on Alvesson et al. (2022) to use what they call problematisation (a concept chapter 5 has substantially engaged with). The authors offer several entry points for constructing a reflexive research design, and I specifically take up their notion of *phenomenon-ism* to ask:

> What is the phenomenon to be studied? Often this is seen as more or less a given – for example, stress, motivation, gender roles, racism, online platforms, decision-making, innovation, bullying, and female leadership. But the phenomenon is typically much more open for 'reflexive (re)construction' than typically imagined. It is not obvious what stress, motivation, female leadership, and so on really are.

> Common-sense labels or terms used by people in the field or in the literature may not be the only or best way of conceptualizing and understanding a complex phenomenon such as racism. Reflexivity here involves a need to re-consider how we think of the phenomena that we are familiar with and study. Finding new angles is what researchers should do, and systematic reflexivity is a tool for achieving this (p.11).

The phenomenon I am studying is female participation in a social movement, using it to reframe the movement itself. It is a key contribution of this thesis: to center women not only as participants but as political actors who redefined public space, moral authority, and constitutional discourse. It argues that in the anti-CAA/NRC movement's context, women were not merely participants but the symbolic and strategic anchors of dissent. It positions such mobilisation not as incidental, but as central to understanding the movement's form, texture, and impact.

Crucially, this conceptualisation *problematises* what is commonly known as women's protests and challenges dominant narratives that frame women's activism through the lens of either victimhood or auxiliary support. Instead, I use it to trace how women across language groups, region, class, and religious identities mobilised with purpose and agency - often through creative, care-based, and everyday repertoires of protest that can be classified as Scott's 'hidden scripts'[26]. In doing so, they disrupted normative assumptions about who gets to protest, and how. The anti-CAA/NRC movement thus serves as a critical site where 'gendered citizenship' – the theoretical framework I establish in Chapter 4 – was not only defended but reimagined from below. By framing it as a women's protest, I foreground the feminist political stakes of the movement, and align with broader scholarship that recognises women's participation in mass mobilisation as both affective and strategic[27]. For optimising time, resources and navigating hindrances to access, I limited my inquiry to the street protests that erupted in Guwahati on December 10, and continued until December 19, 2019[28]. In Delhi, I focused on the events sparked off by the protests at the Jamia Millia Islamia University on December 13, and the 101 days of sustained demonstrations at Shaheen Bagh.

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[26] See the chapter 4 and the discussion on James C Scott's infrapolitics.

[27] A great resource for this scholarship can be found in Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez and George's "Women's Mobilisation and Gender Norm Change: Annotated Bibliography"

[28] There was a call to mobilise under the banner of women in black, which saw a lukewarm response, but set the stage for the Padatik (translates loosely to 'footsoldier') march in February 2020. The second one was massive and had a significant number of female informal sector workers.

This movement calls for critical enquiry in its unprecedented character of transforming from a 'Northeast Indian problem' to one of national importance. In the Indian political imagination, the Northeastern states constitute a 'periphery' (Baruah, 2020) vis-a-vis the 'core' of Delhi, and the issues of the region are often relegated to a subservient position in the national narrative. An example of this worldwide phenomenon of sidelining the regional issues in favour of 'central' or 'national' issues is the annual floods in Assam. The state of Assam gets devastated by floods every year, and incurs massive loss of life and resources. Despite being an annual occurrence, it is usually relegated to a corner of national newspapers[29]. The lack of national attention to Assam floods can be attributed to limited and superficial media coverage, regional bias in news prioritisation, and the absence of in-depth reporting on the socio-political and environmental aspects of the floods. Local media has been more effective in highlighting these issues, but their reach is limited compared to national media outlets - a grievance frequently mentioned in the interviews I did in Guwahati. A sense of disenchantment and relegation characterised the discussion on India's policymaking in its Northeast – especially articulated by the women I was interviewing on their experience with the process of enlisting in the NRC.

This peripheral status is further substantiated by intense militarisation of the region. AFSPA, which stands for the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, is a controversial legislation in India that grants special powers and immunity to the armed forces deployed in "disturbed areas." The impunity granted to the armed forces in areas under AFSPA finds cruel expression in massacres like that of unarmed civilians in Oting village of Nagaland's Mon district on December 4, 2021[30]. This act prevails in 8 districts and 1 sub-division[31] of Assam, and is much worse in its neighbouring states of Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. It is thus justified, and even necessary, to consider Northeast Indian socio-political and socio-economic concerns through a lens that takes into account its experiences of immigration, militarisation, resource extraction and continuous relegation in India's body-politic.

[29] See Sumeda, 2022.

[30] The Centre denied sanction to prosecute 30 Army men who were allegedly involved in the December 2021 killing of 13 civilians in a botched ambush at Oting in Nagaland's Mon district (PTI, "Oting Killing.")

[31] The districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Charaideo, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Karbi Anglong, Dima Hasao, and Lakhimpur sub-division of Cachar are under AFSPA in 2023. On 22.05.2023, Assam's Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma promised complete withdrawal of the Act from the state by the end of 2023. AFSPA has been operational in Northeast India since 1958.

By studying the role of women in a mass movement of such an enormous scale[32] along with its multi-layered composition, this chapter takes the opportunity to point at the double jeopardy of women's assertion of interests in the political expression of a 'minority'[33] region and religion – a theme further highlighted in chapter 3. It also centres the Northeast as a key site for rethinking citizenship, where the convergence of race, religion, gender, and region exposes the limits of nationalist and feminist universalisms alike.

[32] Protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) occurred in at least 94 districts across 14 States. Close to 48% of protests recorded at least one violent incident or police action such as detention/lathi charge or both. Deaths of at least 31 people were related to the violence that ensued during the protests (Singaravelu, "Data | How Many People Died during Anti-CAA Protests?").

[33] Northeast Indian states hold the minority status in all indices of political representation; and the Muslims are the 'largest minority religious group' in India, 14.2% of the country's population.

3. Contextualising Gendered Citizenship through feminism, nationalism and political agency

This chapter explores the intersections of feminism, nationalism, women's activism, and citizenship, building the thesis' argument for the recognition of gendered citizenship as a critical analytical framework in postcolonial societies like India. Moving beyond the reductive trope of 'equality,' it underscores the need to reimagine postcolonial citizenship through the lens of 'affect'– a concept attuned to structural inequalities and the lived experiences of marginalised groups. This focus is foundational to the research, as the chapter situates women's activism within postcolonial states and interrogates the gendered processes through which the 'nation' and its contours are constructed and contested around the world.

By critically engaging with the literature, it traces the historical roles women have played in social movements, and examines how their citizenship is shaped at the margins of the nation-state; exploring how intersectional feminist scholars have debated the understanding of citizenship. Finally, this chapter contributes to the growing body of literature on women as political beings in postcolonial societies. It foregrounds the contribution of this research to feminist scholarship on gendered citizenship by using the anti-CAA/NRC movement as a case study of unprecedented scope - one that highlights the intersections of religion, region, gender, and class in determining *who* is a citizen, and how they *do* citizenship.

Additionally, the chapter reviews the body of scholarship on feminism's many interactions with nationalist/decolonial movements across the Global South, framing the category of 'women protestors' as a site of inquiry. This framing nuances the ways in which women 'experience' and 'perform' citizenship, especially in postcolonial contexts where notions of belonging, identity, and resistance are fraught with historical and socio-political tensions. Drawing on Ray and Kortweg's (1999) insights, I emphasise the need to study women's participation in protest politics on a continuum - eschewing both the excessive individuation that erases collective agency and the homogenisation that obscures intersectional differences.

Drawing on feminist standpoint theory and insights from postcolonial feminism, the chapter foregrounds my analysis of how women's political participation in the anti-CAA/NRC movement redefines citizenship and belonging within an increasingly

authoritarian political landscape. To that end, this chapter is divided into two main sections - on Feminism and Nationalism, and Women as Political Beings in Social Movements.

3.1. Feminism and Nationalism

The relationship between feminism and nationalism in postcolonial contexts reveals a layered and oft-contested dynamic. As Mohanty critiques in Under Western Eyes (1984), the tensions between feminist and nationalist goals emerge from their divergent priorities, approaches, and intersections with power. Nationalist movements, while aiming to dismantle colonial domination, often reinscribe patriarchal norms and exclude women's specific concerns. Feminism, in turn, seeks to challenge these exclusions but risks universalising women's experiences, particularly in postcolonial contexts where oppressions are shaped by intersecting hierarchies of gender, class, caste, and colonial histories.

Gendered narratives of liberation struggles often instrumentalise women as symbolic figures - depicting them as 'mothers,' 'workers,' or moral custodians of the nation - while systematically erasing their autonomy and silencing their lived experiences. Anne McClintock sums this up as 'mother politics' - where women are expected to serve the nation by reproducing and transmitting cultural values but are denied the agency to shape the national project themselves (McClintock, 1991). Mohanty's analysis complements this critique of stripping women of agency - even in feminist discourses, ones that fail to account for intersectionality. Her critique is targeted at Western feminist scholarship that ends up replicating colonialist frameworks, reducing "Third World women" to a singular, homogenised category defined by victimhood and dependency (Mohanty 1984, 333-334).

McClintock's "mother politics" is vindicated by Sedzro (2023), who uses the South African anti-colonial struggle to contend that nationalist movements during the struggle frequently employed it to incorporate women into the nationalist project. Women were cast as the mothers and reproducers of the nation, entrusted with the dual responsibilities of nurturing future citizens and preserving cultural traditions. Tapping into the ingrained patriarchal norms that idealised women's roles as caregivers, and portraying their contributions as essential but secondary to those of men, this instrumentalisation reduced women's *political being*. By confining women to the reproductive sphere, says Sedzro,

these movements reinforced traditional gender roles and precluded women from claiming full citizenship or participating in political decision-making.

3.1.1. Feminism and Assamese Nationalism

In the context of Assamese nationalism (discussed in chapter 2), similar patterns emerge. Women have been celebrated as cultural icons and preservers of Assamese heritage, language, and identity – even in militant organisations like the ULFA[34] , where women were visibly involved in the rebellion. ULFA often tied women's roles to their capacity as mothers and caregivers of the 'Assamese nation' (Pathak, 2021), even in its otherwise revolutionary ideology. An idealised image of 'womanhood' was meticulously crafted through a nationalist project that glorified tradition, positioning women as embodiments of 'chastity', 'docility', 'self-sacrifice', and 'unconditional love'. Central to this construction, says Pathak, was the image of the mother, symbolically linked to the nation as *matribhumi* (motherland) and to language as *matribhaxa* (mother tongue). Women in ULFA were given the responsibility to reproduce, as a way of furthering their 'revolutionary cause'. The article uses several interview excerpts like the one below to critique the patriarchal constructs operating even within revolutionary movements.

> Marriage was considered as the ground to reproduce the next generation of revolutionaries. The institution of marriage was termed as 'revolutionary marriage' by a former ULFA member (Interview with RS in September 2015). The conjugal union in marriage transcends the boundary of the personal and became political in the wake of a 'revolutionary marriage'. The family, which came up out of this 'revolutionary marriage', was supposed to have a complete obligation towards the organisation. 'Who will carry on our revolutionary cause if we will not reproduce the next generation?' said one of the former members of the ULFA (Interview with RS, September 2015) (Pathak, 2021, p. 227).

Pathak's interviews using the oral history method reveal the difficult balancing act women faced in reconciling their roles as mothers and activists within the ULFA. While

[34] The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), founded in 1979, is a separatist militant organisation in Assam, India, advocating for an independent Assamese nation. Emerging in response to perceived neglect and exploitation by the Indian state, ULFA sought to protect Assamese identity, culture, and resources, particularly against demographic changes caused by migration. Initially operating as a grassroots movement, it adopted armed struggle to pursue its goals, including guerrilla warfare and attacks on state infrastructure.

the organisation was relatively accommodating to mothers compared to other armed groups, women still encountered significant challenges in raising children in the harsh conditions of the camps while also participating in the struggle. After becoming mothers, they were reimagined primarily as nurturing caregivers, a stark contrast to their previous roles as warriors engaged in military activities. While they were not explicitly required to abandon war and militancy, they were ideologically excluded from these domains. This reinforced the prevailing notion that "motherhood and war" are inherently incompatible or extraordinary within the context of war and militancy narratives (pp. 279).

Thus, through her article, Pathak challenges the conventional portrayal of mothers as pacifists in conflict zones, exposing the complex lives of women activists in ULFA who participated in the cause as revolutionaries, but were confronted with entrenched patriarchal structures in the process. Kikon (2005) critiques this prevalent tendency to reduce women's identities to that of mothers and their characterisation as peacemakers. She contends that while this delineation opens a specific avenue for women's political engagement in the Northeast, their contributions are consistently interpreted through a 'social lens' rather than being acknowledged as explicitly political, thereby erasing their political agency. Kikon's contention substantiates Mohanty's problematisation of 'women' as a universal, analytical category, which complicates the discussion on nationalism and feminism through a general lens of oppressor versus oppressed.

> …the discursively consensual homogeneity of "women" as a group is mistaken for the historically specific material reality of groups of women. This results in an assumption of women as an always-already constituted group, one which has been labelled "powerless," "exploited," "sexually harassed," etc., by feminist scientific, economic, legal and sociological discourses. (Notice that this is quite similar to sexist discourse labelling women weak, emotional, having maths anxiety, etc.) The focus is not on uncovering the material and ideological specificities that constitute a particular group of women as "powerless" in a particular context. It is rather on finding a variety of cases of "powerless" groups of women to prove the general point that women as a group are powerless (Mohanty, 1984, p. 338).

The objection to understanding 'women' as a universal group, especially 'third world women' (Mohanty, 1984) is a crucial argument that intersectional feminist scholars have been making (Beal, 1969; Crenshaw, 1989). This scholarship builds on, and further nuances what Spivak (1988) argued - that the subaltern, particularly Third World women, are denied their agency and rendered fundamentally voiceless and unable to represent

themselves within dominant White discourses. It crucially adds to the discourse on Third World Women's agency by diversifying the category of Third World Women in itself - a concept that this research utilises in its construction of the 'woman protester' as a site of inquiry to distinguish feminism as a political *practice*. As Wagner (2021) says,

> Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's analytical framework of intersectionality arguably saved feminism from becoming a movement in which, to quote bell hooks, "females of all ages [act] as though concern for or rage at male domination or gender equality [is] all that [is] needed to make one a 'feminist'… [erasing] the notion that one [has] to learn about feminism and make an informed choice about embracing feminist politics to become a feminist advocate" (Wagner, 2021).

Pathak's work (2021) strengthens this problematisation. It does not merely observe the diversity of women's experiences as ULFA activists; it interrogates the patriarchal structures within nationalist movements that homogenise and instrumentalise women's contributions. By foregrounding the reproductive responsibilities imposed on women active in the ULFA, her analysis exposes the ways in which nationalist ideologies often co-opt women's agency under the veneer of participation.

Building on this foundation, Bhagabati (2021) psychoanalytically critiques this brand of Assamese nationalism's infantilised relationship with the "motherland" - comparing the nationalist project to a child's dependence on the mother. The motherland, says Bhagabati, is imagined as a "pure, vulnerable entity" that must be defended against external threats, with immigrants cast as the primary aggressors. This infantilisation sustains a protective, patriarchal nationalism that depends on the nationalist subject assuming the role of defender of the 'feminine', the 'mother'.

These same patriarchal structures are evident in the intertwined concepts of "motherland," "masculinity," and the "son of the soil," which are central to understanding the foundations and "aggressive manifestations" of Assamese nationalism; particularly in its extreme form, "Oti Axamiyagiri" - a term used by Sarmah and Nath (2022) to critique the hypermasculinist construction of the same. The "son of the soil" is inherently masculine, embodying the militarised protector of the motherland. This militarised masculinity, a hallmark of "Oti Axamiyagiri," glorifies strength, aggression, and the willingness to resort to violence to safeguard the purity of Assamese identity. Men are positioned as defenders of cultural and territorial integrity, reinforcing a dynamic where the motherland

is cast as a vulnerable woman in need of protection. This imaginary perpetuates patriarchal notions of guardianship, where men's roles are defined by their capacity to protect, while women are relegated to symbolic or passive roles. The feminine figure of the motherland becomes a site of projection for nationalist anxieties, as its purity and safety are tied to the actions of its "sons".

The rhetoric surrounding this defence draws heavily on the politics of aesthetics (Sarmah and Nath, 2022), including visual markers like language and attire, to signify the "foreignness" of Bangladeshi immigrants. The multicoloured lungi[35], beards, and skullcaps of working-class Miya Muslims become symbols of threat, further reinforcing the nationalist imagination of cultural invasion. Together, they delineate a dichotomy of ingroups and outgroups, where the "true" Assamese are heroised, and outsiders are portrayed as threats to the cultural, territorial, and emotional integrity of the region. As Sarmah and Nath (2022) argue, these constructions sideline critiques of patriarchy within the movement itself, allowing nationalist aspirations to reproduce the same structures of marginalisation that they ostensibly seek to resist.

While these narratives position women as central to the nationalist imagination, they confine their participation within narrowly defined roles that emphasise moral and cultural reproduction rather than political leadership or structural transformation.

3.1.2. Feminism, Nationalism *and* Colonialism

The narrative of Assamese nationalism, however, cannot be disentangled from the broader hegemonies of colonial and mainland Indian governance. Fanon (1963) has argued that traditional European theories of nationalism, which view the nation as a natural and inevitable entity based on shared culture and history, fail to account for the complexities of the colonial context. He contends that in colonised societies, the nation is not a pre-existing reality but rather a product of colonial power dynamics - as in the case of Assam. British colonial policies, manifested in cases like the inclusion of Sylhet[36] in

[35] A garment similar to a sarong, wrapped around the waist and extending to the ankles, worn in various countries in South Asia. It is out of the most popularly worn garments by men in Bangladesh.

[36] Sylhet, historically significant for its shifting administrative affiliations, was incorporated into the Assam Province in 1874 to facilitate commercial development. Following the Partition of Bengal in 1905, it became part of the Chief Commissioner's Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. After a referendum in 1947, Sylhet was integrated into East Pakistan, marking a critical transition in its geopolitical identity. It is presently a part of Bangladesh.

Assam, reinforced the perception of Assam as an appendage of Bengal rather than a distinct region. This imposition of colonial geography shaped Assamese identity by framing it in opposition to Bengali domination, rather than allowing it to emerge on its own terms (Sengupta, 2016). Economic anxieties further fuelled the nationalist impulse. The colonial state's encouragement of Bengali migration to meet administrative and labour demands created significant competition, particularly over land and government jobs. For the Assamese middle class, this heightened fear of economic displacement deepened resentment toward Bengali immigrants, intensifying demands for cultural and linguistic protection (Guha, 1977).

Post-independence policies perpetuated this marginalisation, as Assam remained economically and culturally peripheral to the Indian nation-state. The Indian government's continued treatment of Assam as a resource frontier, prioritising extraction over regional development, echoed colonial patterns of neglect. These policies disregarded Assamese linguistic and cultural aspirations, compounding the alienation that had already been ingrained through decades of colonial governance (Baruah, 2001). The Indian state's response to the ULFA insurgency, marked by military operations and the period of "Secret Killings" (Deka, 2024), further intensified the militarisation of Assamese masculinity (Sarmah and Nath, 2022). The violence inflicted upon civilians, including allegations of torture, rape, and extrajudicial killings, created a climate of fear and reinforced the narrative of a threatened Assamese identity (Talukdar, Borpujari, and Deka 2009). Places like Kakopathar, known for their resistance to state violence and association with the ULFA, became symbols of Assamese resilience and sacrifice, contributing to the development of a hardened and 'defensive form of masculinity' (see Wilcox, 2015).

The otherwise fragmented and hierarchical relationship between Assam's decolonial aspirations and the hegemonic governance of postcolonial India is tied together by the patriarchal appropriation of women's labour, bodies, and identities within nationalist struggles. This selective inclusion highlights how nationalist and state-building projects rely on women's participation without dismantling the entrenched patriarchal frameworks that shaped *both* colonial and postcolonial governance. Women's marginalisation during and after these movements, therefore, was not incidental, but a structural feature of the patriarchal logic underpinning nationalist projects. It foregrounds Vasavithasan (2004)'s caution against viewing nationalism as a panacea for all societal ills. She highlights

Fanon's concept of the "pitfalls of national consciousness," arguing that the achievement of independence doesnot necessarily translate into genuine liberation for all citizens, especially women. Fanon (1963) advocates for a contingent view of nationalism, recognising its potential as a mobilising force for liberation, but also acknowledging its limitations and the dangers of replicating colonial hierarchies. Women have been elevated as symbols of the nation, cast as 'mothers,' 'workers,' and supportive figures in both India's liberation struggle against the British and Assam's liberation struggle against India; yet their agency has been continually constrained and their interests simultaneously sidelined. As McClintock notes,

> All nationalisms, moreover, are gendered. "When you own a big chunk of the bloody Third World, the babies just come with the scenery," as the Chrissie Hynde song goes. In the chronicles of male nationalism, women, too, are all too often figured as mere scenic backdrops to the big-brass business of masculine armies and uprisings. Theorists of nationalism (Fanon notably excepted) have seldom felt moved to explore how nationalisms are at every minute implicated in gender power. No nationalism in the world has granted women and men the same privileged access to the resources of the nation-state. So far, all nationalisms are dependent on powerful constructions of gender difference (McClintock, 1993, p.61).

While women's participation has been celebrated rhetorically in anti-colonial, nationalist struggles of liberation, the same participation has been instrumentalised to serve agendas that left entrenched gender hierarchies unchallenged. Theresa O'Keefe's exploration of republican feminism in Northern Ireland (2018) is a radical critique of this instrumentalisation, located in the Irish context. Her analysis situates republican feminism within the historical, political, and social contexts of Northern Ireland, where the intersections of gender, national identity, and state violence shaped women's activism in profound ways. O'Keefe emphasises that 'republican feminists' navigated complex positionalities, often challenging their marginalisation within both the republican movement, where their contributions were minimised, and the broader women's movement, which tended to sideline issues like state violence and female prisoners' rights.

Tracing its roots to figures like Constance Markievicz (see Salis, 2018), who linked Irish nationalism to women's liberation during the 1916 Easter Rising, O'Keefe argues that 'republican feminism' developed as both a continuation and a rupture with earlier nationalist traditions. She understands Republican feminism as a distinct form of feminist

activism arising from the lived experiences of women within the Irish republican movement. Most importantly, republican feminism recognised the intertwined nature of women's oppression and the struggle for national liberation. While the Troubles (see McKittrick et al. 1999) catalysed many women's entry into republican activism, it was the direct experience of gendered state violence - the brutality of the British state, manifested in practices like strip-searching and sexual harassment of female prisoners - that served as a catalyst for its development in Northern Ireland. It underscored the necessity of linking feminist goals with anti-imperialist resistance (O'Keefe, 2018, p. 171).

The concept of republican feminism is radical in its recognition of the dual oppression faced by women, as women *and* as Irish people, which led republican feminists to view British colonialism and patriarchy as intertwined systems requiring simultaneous dismantling. Practices such as strip-searching were not merely punitive; they embodied the colonial state's attempt to assert control through deeply gendered humiliation. This analysis recognises what Rashed (2021) calls 'double colonialism' encountered by Moroccan women or Ambedkar critiqued as the double jeopardy faced by Dalit women in India (see Pardeshi, 2022; Singh, 2020).

3.1.3. The double jeopardy

This thesis emphasises this *double jeopardy* faced by women seeking to assert their interests within the political expressions of 'minority' regions and religions - a dynamic vividly illustrated by Goswami (2022), who argues that the militarisation of Northeast India fostered a hypermasculinised culture that relegated women to the margins, both symbolically and literally. Women became tools of oppression and resistance - subjected to state-sanctioned violence, such as rape, which symbolised the humiliation of the insurgent community, while also being valourised as martyrs to uphold nationalist honour within the insurgent community (Goswami, 2022). The recognition of this double jeopardy thus challenges the patriarchal foundations of nationalism and calls for a reimagining of liberation that is not only anti-colonial but also anti-patriarchal.

The trajectory of women's movements in India cannot be fully understood without foregrounding the interplay of caste, class, religion, and regional identity in shaping women's experiences of oppression and resistance. Dalit and Adivasi women's activism, for instance, not only disrupts the dominance of upper-caste voices within feminist

movements but also brings to light issues such as caste-based sexual violence, land rights, and labour exploitation. As Rege (1998) argues, Dalit women have "talked differently," articulating a feminist standpoint that critiques the exclusions of upper-caste feminism in India while simultaneously resisting patriarchal oppression within their own communities. Rege's emphasis on historicising Dalit women's struggles situates them within the Satyashodhak and Ambedkarite movements, challenging the Brahmanical and colonial patriarchy that shaped India's socio-political fabric. She argues for the critical re-inscription of Dalit women's voices into the historiography of Indian feminism, highlighting their participation in anti-caste struggles and the ways in which caste and gender hierarchies are inextricably linked. Crucially, she connects how practices like endogamy and the sexual regulation of women were pivotal to maintaining caste boundaries, illustrating that "women are the gateways to the caste system" (Rege, 1998, WS41). This perspective aligns with the theoretical grounding of this thesis, which employs a feminist standpoint to examine how gender intersects with region and religion in social movements that are about 'masculinised issues' in nationalist political imaginaries.

Muslim women's activism, particularly as seen during the anti-CAA protests, exemplifies how religious identity magnifies gendered vulnerabilities. Chopra (2021) notes that women at Shaheen Bagh transformed public spaces into sites of solidarity and care, creating a narrative of resistance that blended personal identities with collective demands for justice. This exclusion underscores a systemic intersection of legal, social, and patriarchal structures, rendering Muslim women precarious in the face of exclusionary citizenship laws. Bora (2010), writing on women in Northeast India, critiques universalist feminist frameworks for failing to account for the racialised and ethnicised dimensions of women's marginalisation, particularly in regions like Assam, where questions of migration and indigeneity are juxtaposed uncomfortably.

Spivak's concept of the "subaltern as a political subject" then becomes particularly instructive here, even as it faces critiques such as Neil Lazarus's argument that Spivak focuses more on how the disenfranchised are represented within colonialist discourses than on their native agency (Lazarus, 1999). It brings the focus back on how women, from positions of structural disadvantage, assert agency by challenging dominant discourses of nationalism and citizenship.

3.2. Women as Political Beings in Social Movements

'Sisterhood is powerful.' 'Sisterhood' can also be misleading unless contextualised. (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1983)

"Sisterhood is powerful," but as Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1983) caution, it can also be misleading if not rooted in the specific and intersecting identities that shape women's experiences. This complexity is reflected in the literature on women's activism, which demonstrates how women are mobilised not only as women but also through identities as mothers, workers, peasants, and citizens–categories that, as the previous section underscores, often blur the boundaries of what constitutes "women's interests." Perhaps the most influential writer on the question of interests was Maxine Molyneux (1985), who dismissed the concept of "women's interests," claiming that women as a group have many interests, in line with Mohanty's critique of a homogenous analytical category called 'women' (1984).

Molyneux did, however, specify that women have "gender interests," which can be 'practical' or 'strategic'. Practical gender interests, rooted in women's material realities within the sexual division of labour, reflect struggles centered on survival and sustaining their socially assigned roles as wives and mothers. These interests, grounded in the immediate and lived experiences of women, are not inherently transformative but are instead inductively derived from the urgent demands of daily life under patriarchal systems. Such struggles, while vital, often work within existing gendered hierarchies rather than subverting them (Molyneux, 1985). 'Motherism' - theorised by Nigerian thinker Catherine Obianuju Acholonu (1995) is an important example of Molyneux's "practical gender interests", that make no explicit demands for gender equality. Acholonu situates motherhood as a central pillar of Afrocentric social thought, emphasising the critical importance of nurturing and survival-based priorities - ending wars and ensuring the well-being of children. These urgent needs of survival and subsistence, however, do not necessarily challenge the existing gender order, tend to leave the patriarchal foundations of gendered oppression untouched, implicitly reinforcing the status quo.

Strategic gender interests, on the other hand, represent the feminist praxis of interrogating and dismantling the structures that enforce women's subjugation. These interests, deductively developed, aim to fundamentally reconfigure the conditions under which women live, challenging patriarchal norms, and advocating for liberation beyond

survival. Crucially, strategic interests often build on practical struggles, but they do not stop at the immediate–they demand structural transformation and gender equality as a matter of justice, not accommodation. My thesis will go on to demonstrate how women protestors in the anti-CAA/NRC movement initially mobilised around their 'practical gender interests', but soon catalysed demands for structural changes that Molyneux would classify under 'strategic gender interests'.

However, as Nira Yuval-Davis warns (see Grünell and Saharso, 1999), framing these interests through identity politics often risks homogenising diverse experiences, overlooking the complexities and differences within social categories.

> In identity politics people present their personal stories as if they represent those of everyone in that social category; that is very one-dimensional and homogenising. It is important to retain notions of difference without equating deconstruction of categories with depoliticization (Nira Yuval Davis in an interview with bell hooks, cited in Grünell and Saharso).

Yuval-Davis's critique of identity politics, which warns against conflating perspectives unique to individuals with universal representations of social categories, emphasises the necessity of recognising difference and challenging homogenisation within the analytical framing of 'women'. Understanding 'interests' through identity politics can dangerously homogenise diverse and intersecting experiences, flattening the complexities within social categories. Rege (1998) also weighs in here. Central to her analysis is her critique of the category of "difference" as often employed by feminist theorists. Rege contends that this concept, while significant in recognising marginalised voices, risks being reduced to a framework of identity politics that isolates Dalit[37] women's struggles as peripheral rather than integral to the broader feminist agenda (Rege, 1998, WS40). This analysis is particularly important in the context of Northeast India, where, as Papori Bora argues,

> Universalist approaches take categories like 'Indian citizen', 'woman' and 'tribal' as a given and do not allow for an engagement with how these categories are mutually constituted (Bora 2010, p.64).

[37] Dalits are a group of people in India who are considered to be among the lowest in the caste system and are also known as the "untouchables". Subjected to brutal marginalisation, Dalit feminist activism has emerged as a fierce critique to Brahmanical patriarchy - or upper-caste patriarchy in India.

Bora's critique is particularly pertinent in her analysis of the 2004 Manipur protests[38], where women's activism challenged not only gendered violence but also the broader structures of exclusion inherent in Indian nationalism and citizenship. Applying a universal "women's rights as human rights" framework in this context risks overlooking the intersectional dimensions of identity. The violence experienced by Northeastern women, including in the case of Thangjam Manorama - whose rape and custodial killing sparked the protest - is not solely about gender, says Bora. This violence is also shaped by their racialised and ethnicised marginalisation, stemming from the region's specific political and historical context. The act of protesting naked, therefore, carried profound symbolic weight. The women's bodies became powerful instruments of resistance, directly challenging the said marginalisation. By using their nakedness to shame the military, the women subverted patriarchal and nationalist narratives that position women as symbols of honour and purity. Bora interprets this act as reclaiming their agency and redefining the meaning of citizenship, not as a legal status bestowed by the state, but as a claim to dignity, recognition, and equality (Bora, 2010).

The evolution of women's movements in the Northeast thus emerges at the confluence of national feminist discourses *and* region-specific realities (see Bora 2010; Kakoti 2021). Women's activism in India has traversed distinct phases, beginning with 19th-century reformist efforts led predominantly by male elites. These early initiatives, focused on widow remarriage, child marriage, and women's education, were shaped by caste and class privilege, addressing gender inequality primarily within upper-caste Hindu frameworks (Sarkar, 1991). While these movements opened avenues for women's participation in public life, they largely reinforced existing hierarchies of power.

The nationalist struggle marked a transformative period in women's political participation, where women from diverse backgrounds engaged in anti-colonial resistance, challenging both British imperialism and patriarchal restrictions within their communities. However, as Sarkar notes, "the nationalist agenda often subsumed feminist concerns under the broader goal of liberation from colonial rule," (Sarkar, 1991, p. 68) as in other cases of nationalist struggles discussed in this chapter. This trend continued into

[38] sparked by the rape and custodial murder of Thangjam Manorama Devi of by the Indian paramilitary unit of Assam Rifles. In an explosive act of protest, women tore off their clothes in front of the Assam Rifles Headquarters, Imphal, chanting 'Indian Army, Rape us' (see Sen, 2024)

the post-Independence period, as state-led developmental agendas sidelined gender equality in favour of economic growth and national unity.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed the emergence of autonomous women's movements that critiqued both patriarchal norms and state inaction on gender issues. Protests against dowry-related violence, workplace harassment, and custodial rape (e.g., the Mathura case) became defining moments in this phase. As Gandhi and Shah (1990) observe, these movements represented "a significant shift in feminist praxis, as they foregrounded women's autonomy and prioritised collective action over state-centred reforms" (p. 145).

While the ideological frameworks of the Indian women's movement in the 1970s inspired and informed regional activism, feminist mobilisation in the Northeast has had to contend with its own pressing concerns: the systemic exploitation of tribal women, the pervasive normalisation of gendered violence (Iralu 2017), and the heightened vulnerabilities created by prolonged insurgencies and state militarisation (Haobijam and Singh 2022). As Bora suggests, understanding these protests demands a 'postcolonial feminist analytics' (p. 355) that interrogates how categories like "Indian citizen," "woman," and "tribal" are produced and reproduced through power relations - justifying my use of an intersectional feminist lens in analysing the anti-CAA/NRC movement.

3.2.1. Women as Political Beings *within* Social Movements

The complexities of feminist mobilisation in the Northeast also highlight the fragmented solidarities within broader political and social movements. While movements like the Manipur protests reflect women's agency as political subjects navigating intersecting oppressions, they also expose the fractured nature of solidarity within broader struggles. The rhetoric of national survival often overshadows the need to address systemic gender inequalities, sidelining feminist agendas in the name of collective unity (see Jayawardena 1986; Enloe 1989; Chinchilla 1997). One of the most significant consequences of "Mother Politics" in South Africa, says Sedzro (2023), was its role in silencing women's demands for gender equality. Nationalist movements often dismissed feminist claims as divisive or secondary to the overarching goal of national liberation - demonstrated by O'Keefe (2018) in her work, where republican feminists had to actively reject reductive gender norms symbolised by "Mother Ireland"; asserting instead their right to full political participation and leadership. In all three cases, of South Africa, Northern Ireland

and Northeast India, women have often been urged to prioritise the collective struggle and postpone their demands for equality until after independence, a promise that was rarely fulfilled.

Critics of nationalism, such as Yuval-Davis, have long highlighted how feminist demands for structural transformation - such as greater representation in leadership roles or the integration of gendered perspectives in policy-making - are often sidelined in favour of broader nationalist priorities. As Grünell and Saharso (1999) argue based on their interview with bell hooks and Yuval-Davis,

> If the history of emancipation movements teaches us anything, it is that there are no `natural' alliances between members of different movements. Separatist movements within movements, especially women organising along feminist issues, have been the cause of much unease. Black women organising separately did not meet with much sympathy from either the black movement or the white women's movement. It was precisely this lack of interest in their experiences from both the black movement and white women's movement that led black women to organise separately (Grünell and Saharso, 1999)

Their observation gains traction in the context of Assamese nationalism, where the prioritisation of a unified identity has often come at the expense of addressing internal hierarchies and oppressions, particularly those related to gender. Just as the African National Congress sidelined gender inequality by framing it as a secondary concern to be addressed after liberation (Sedzro, McClintock), Assamese nationalism has often subsumed women's rights under the larger goal of preserving Assamese identity and resisting perceived threats from external forces, such as migration and cultural homogenisation (Bhagabati; Sarmah and Nath). This dynamic becomes even more pronounced when examining the intersection of caste, class, and ethnicity within Assamese nationalism, where women and gender diverse people from marginalised communities, including tribal and Dalit groups, face layered oppressions that are often ignored within the broader nationalist discourse. The prioritisation of an overarching Assamese identity frequently obscures the specific ways in which women from these communities experience exploitation and marginalisation. For instance, tribal women's activism, often rooted in struggles for land, resources, and cultural autonomy, is rarely acknowledged as part of the Assamese nationalist project (Siddique and Ramachandran, 2024). Instead, their issues are often framed as peripheral to the "mainstream" concerns

of Assamese identity, reflecting the exclusionary tendencies of many nationalist movements.

Confronting these limitations, several women in Assam have actively resisted their marginalisation, in their everyday individual lives, and also as organised collectives (Saikia, 2023). The literature on their resistance tends to particularly focus on movements opposing state violence - like protests against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) (Nath, 2021). Most famously, activist Irom Sharmila Chanu began her sixteen year long hunger strike demanding the repeal of AFSPA following the Malom massacre, where 10 civilians were killed by the Assam Rifles sparking significant outrage, leading to widespread protests across Manipur and Assam (Subramanian, 2022). More recently, in December 2021, a shooting in Oting, Nagaland that claimed civilian lives prompted the Northeast Students' Organisation (NESO) and the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) to stage protests across the northeastern region, demanding the repeal of AFSPA and denouncing it as a tool of state-sponsored violence and oppression against civilians (Nath, 2021).

In these movements, women have challenged the broader frameworks of state power that perpetuate their oppression, resisting the 'racialised and ethnicised marginalisation' Bora (2010) points at. However, issues of gender justice within a militarised context has not received much attention, unless met with exceptionally brutal sexual violence like in the case of Thangjam Manorama's rape and murder.

Even in the early feminist movements in Assam, spearheaded by firebrand figures like Chandraprabha Saikiani, Kamalabari Satyabrata, and Renuka Devi Barkataki, a complex interplay between gendered resistance and the broader nationalist agenda was evident (Deka 2013). Saikiani's efforts to expose everyday forms of discrimination against women and her advocacy for egalitarian rights across caste and creed revealed a nascent feminist consciousness; although it was shaped and, at times, limited by the imperatives of the nationalist movement, which frequently subordinated women's struggles to its broader goals.

Expanding upon these analyses of gendered sociopolitical oppression in colonial contexts, Kikon (2016) broadens the scope of this discourse in her ethnographic research in Nagaland[39]. She highlights how the Indian state plays a pivotal role in fostering a

[39] another Northeastern state adjoining Assam

culture of sexual violence and impunity in areas under the AFSPA. Her interviews with survivors demonstrates the systemic failure to hold both state and non-state perpetrators accountable, leaving survivors caught between the pressures of advocacy groups encouraging them to speak out and the pervasive social stigma surrounding sexual violence. Kikon's most important contribution in this discourse is her emphasis on the fact that sexual violence in militarised settings extends *beyond* the public domain of armed conflict to infiltrate private spheres, including the home, family, and community, underscoring the pervasive reach of militarisation and patriarchal violence. The 'double jeopardy' discussed above surfaces again - how do women exercise their agency in resisting patriarchal oppression beyond the public domain and into the private sphere in such contexts?

Kikon's analysis of the entrenched entanglement of militarisation and patriarchal violence urges a reimagining of the boundaries within which resistance is conceptualised and performed. When violence penetrates public and private spaces, it not only deepens the structures of oppression but also redefines the landscapes where agency and resistance can emerge. This necessitates an intersectional feminist lens to critically examine how women – positioned at the nexus of overlapping systems of domination – navigate, contest, and disrupt patriarchal and militarised power, not only in visible, public arenas but also within the often-overlooked intimate and localised spheres of their lives.

In her article "Women and Resistance in the Conflict-Affected Bodoland Territorial Council Region of Assam", Saikia (2023) examines how women from the Bodo, Bengali-speaking Muslim, and Adivasi communities in the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) region of Assam demonstrate resistance against dominant forces in their families, society, and the state. Saikia's analysis draws on in-depth interviews with women affected by ethnic conflicts in the region, noting the many forms of resistance these women employ in the face of patriarchal structures and social marginalisation. Bodo women, for instance, engaged in overt resistance through their involvement in protests, political participation, and social initiatives. Bengali-speaking Muslim women, facing greater restrictions, practiced everyday forms of resistance like pursuing education and employment or using silence and social distancing as strategies to navigate their marginalised position.

Through her findings, Saikia contends that women are not merely passive subjects within nationalist frameworks but active agents of resistance, employing both overt and subtle strategies to challenge their relegation to symbolic or subordinate roles. Their efforts

reveal a persistent struggle to assert autonomy and agency in contexts that seek to co-opt their identities for nationalist and patriarchal agendas. Cynthia Enloe (2014) contends that women's acts of defiance, even when they do not lead to immediate systemic change, expose the mechanisms of power that sustain the gendered status quo and reveal the anxieties of those who benefit from structural inequalities. Enloe's conceptualisation reframes women's resistance not as isolated or symbolic gestures but as profoundly political acts with far-reaching implications, even when practised in seemingly apolitical acts of survival that Saikia discusses.

3.2.2. Women *mobilising* as Political Beings in Social Movements

Saikia's findings, in dialogue with Enloe's incisive framework, reject any notion of women's resistance as passive or merely symbolic. Instead, they foreground resistance as a deeply political act that confronts and disrupts the structural inequalities sustaining patriarchal sociopolitics. Women's defiance - whether through overt acts or everyday strategies - asserts their agency in contexts where their identities are systematically instrumentalised or subordinated, evident in global historical contexts of women's participation in social movements.

In the Central American Republic of Nicaragua, the tremendous extent of women's participation in the struggle against the dictator Anastasio Somoza (that led to his overthrow in 1979) has been regarded by many authors as an obvious enough response to the widespread repression and brutality of the regime on the one hand, and the appeal of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN)'s vision and strategy on the other (see González-Rivera 2011[40]; Cupples 2006[41]). As Molyneux (1985) noted:

> Women's participation in the Nicaraguan revolution was probably greater than in any other recent revolution with the exception of Vietnam. Women made up approximately 30 percent of the FSLN's combat forces, and at its peak in 1979, the women's organization of the FSLN, the Association of Women Confronting the National Problem, or AMPRONAC, had over 8,000 members.' Many more women who were not involved in organized politics provided vital logistical and backup support to the revolutionary forces, and still others gave their support silently by refusing to denounce their revolutionary neighbors, or by hiding a fleeing combatant (p.227).

[40] González-Rivera, Victoria. 2011. Before the Revolution: Women's Rights and Right-Wing Politics in Nicaragua, 1821–1979. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press.
[41] Cupples, Julie. 2006. "Between Maternalism and Feminism: Women in Nicaragua's Counter-Revolutionary Forces." Bulletin of Latin American Research 25 (1): 83–103. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0261-3050.2006.00151.x.

However, the specific ways in which women became *political beings* has not been subjected to rigorous analysis, partly because it seems obvious, and partly because women's extensive revolutionary activism is often seen as the effect of the universalising character of the opposition to the dictatorial regime (Molyneux, 1985; Ramirez-Horton 1982). Their participation, says Molyneux, was certainly part of the wider process of popular mobilisation, but it was entered into from a distinctive social position to men, one crucially shaped by the sexual division of labour (Molyneux 1985). Moreover, for different classes and groups of women, the meaning of political participation also differed, whether in the case of students, young middle-class women, or the women in the 'barrios' - a colloquial term for poor neighbourhoods. The multiplicity in is a crucial point of departure for analysing the participation of women in the anti-CAA/NRC movement that this thesis engages in.

Arguing for recognition of this intersectional agency and diversity of the analytical category of the 'woman protestor', Aili Mari Tripp (2001) examines the factors contributing to the increased visibility of African women as independent political actors since the 1990s. She argues that while women's groups played a crucial role in the political reform processes of the era, their contributions have often been overlooked in studies of democratisation. Much like student organisations, labour unions, and human rights groups, women's organisations actively resisted corrupt and repressive regimes through public demonstrations and militant actions. Tripp contends that no single factor explains these new trends. Instead, African women's political mobilisation, she says, must be understood as the result of intersecting structural and contextual dynamics.

This research builds on this recognition that women's activism cannot be homogenised; instead, it emerges as a dynamic and intersectional phenomenon that reflects the nuanced realities of their lives. In Nicaragua, as Molyneux (1985) observed, women's roles ranged from direct combatants in the Sandinista forces to logistical supporters and silent enablers of the revolution. Their participation was informed by their distinct social positions, shaped by the sexual division of labour and the intersecting dynamics of class and geography. Similarly, in the Shaheen Bagh protests against the CAA/NRC in India, women from varied backgrounds, including Muslim grandmothers, young students, and working-class homemakers, came together in protest. As Chopra (2021) observed, their efforts blended traditional roles with radical actions. They turned public spaces into

arenas for care and solidarity, where “resistance became both personal and collective,” rooted in their identities as mothers, caregivers, and political actors. Their participation challenged the perception of protests as the domain of the young or the politically experienced. Instead, it revealed how ordinary women, often taking on activism for the first time, could reshape public discourse and reclaim agency in the face of repression (Chopra 2021). This reclamation of agency not only disrupted traditional notions of who participates in what political movements, but also brought to the forefront questions about the gendered dimensions of citizenship.

3.3. Towards a theory of Gendered Citizenship

This chapter has argued for rethinking citizenship as a gendered and intersectional concept, challenging its traditional framing as a neutral, legal category. Instead, it situates citizenship as a political process, shaped by the lived realities of marginalised groups, particularly women. Drawing on feminist and postcolonial theories, it has highlighted how women’s activism redefines citizenship, not as a static entitlement but as a dynamic site of negotiation, resistance, and belonging. As Chopra (2021) notes, the ethos of care at Shaheen Bagh was radical; women organized childcare, offered legal aid, shared food, and created spaces for debate and dialogue. These actions subverted patriarchal norms by blending traditionally "domestic" roles with public political engagement, demonstrating how care itself can serve as a form of resistance, rooted in the interconnectedness of community and belonging. It also critiques how nationalist discourses instrumentalise women’s contributions, even as they marginalise their agency. These critiques echo the exclusions that the anti-CAA/NRC protesters resisted, as Muslim women challenged not only the state’s exclusionary policies but also the patriarchal and communal discourses that sought to legitimise their participation, as my following chapters will go on to demonstrate. Women’s activism, in this context, rejected exclusionary state practices while reimagining citizenship as a relational and participatory process. As Tripp (2001) argues, such acts of mobilisation are not incidental; they reflect the intersecting dynamics of gender, region, and class that shape political agency in postcolonial societies.

Thus, this chapter has laid the groundwork for understanding gendered citizenship as a critical analytical framework, emphasising how women’s activism redefines and contests exclusionary practices in postcolonial contexts. It has advanced the argument that

citizenship, particularly in postcolonial contexts like India, must be re-theorised as a gendered, intersectional, and affective practice. By tracing feminist critiques of nationalism, the instrumentalisation of women in liberation struggles, and the layered exclusions experienced by women from marginalised communities, it has shown that women's political agency cannot be collapsed into universalised categories or subordinated to nationalist imperatives. Drawing on theorisations of practical and strategic gender interests, standpoint theory, and intersectionality, the chapter has built a case for understanding women as political beings whose activism reconfigures dominant imaginaries of the citizen, the nation, and the public sphere. It is on this foundation of foregrounding care, solidarity, and resistance as political acts, that the critical theoretical framework of *gendered citizenship* emerges in the next chapter.

4. Caring as a Political Act: A theory of Gendered Citizenship rooted in Solidarity

This chapter develops the theoretical scaffolding for the thesis by reimagining citizenship as a lived, gendered, and relational practice grounded in a politics of care. Moving away from the institutional language of rights and duties, it offers an alternative framework that emerges from the everyday 'acts of citizenship' of women resisting the CAA/NRC in Delhi and Guwahati. Care, here, is not ancillary to political life; it is its organising logic. Drawing on Joan Tronto's work, the chapter frames care as a political act, and proposes a triangular framework linking citizenship, participation, and social movements, not as discrete categories, but as interwoven modes of inhabiting and contesting power. In this formulation, citizenship becomes less a legal status than a performance of political belonging.

4.1. A Theory of Gendered Citizenship

Gendered citizenship as a concept has been approached by several scholars from a variety of angles, addressing the ways in which gender influences the experience and exercise of citizenship (Sarvasy, 1997). It acknowledges that gender is a fundamental dimension shaping the meaning and experience of citizenship, and is perhaps best understood as a theoretical framework or an analytical approach rather than a single, unified theory. Drawing upon the existing knowledge, gendered citizenship appears to be a contested terrain shaped by intersecting power relations (Yuval-Davis, 1997), specific historical and cultural contexts (Abu-Ras et al., 2022), the forces of neoliberalism and colonialism (Robins, Cornwall and Von Lieres, 2008), and the ongoing struggles for social justice and decolonisation (Mohanty, 2013). It is not a static or uniform status accorded to one, but a dynamic and differentiated experience contingent on one's location within these complex power structures. As Chari (2009) said,

> In order to assess the gendered understanding of citizenship, it is necessary to move beyond an earlier liberal and political science understanding of the formal relation between the individual and the state. Citizenship should be seen to be a more total relationship inflected by identity, social positioning, cultural assumptions, institutional practises and a sense of belonging (p.47).

My objective in this thesis is to contribute to that discourse by presenting gendered citizenship as an equally critical, but perhaps a more aspirational model that approaches it from the bottom-up, built on the *politics of care.* This is a proposition emerging from both my critical reading of existing literature and the empirical insights generated from an analysis of my interviews.

If the aim is to build a theoretical framework that would look at citizenship as a lived reality of women through their everyday practices (as it is in this chapter), then the discussion has to shift from the institutionalised language of rights and duties. Therefore, this chapter attempts to frame the thesis on women in the anti-CAA/NRC movement within theories of intersectionality, feminist solidarity and agency; to infer how these inform the dynamics of citizenship, political participation and social movements. The idea is to build a triangular framework that connects the lived experiences of the three through a politics of care. In it, citizenship, participation and movements are theorised as lived experiences on and from the margins of society, and are connected by a common denominator – care. When analysed in this way, citizenship is not merely a status conferred by the state. It leans closer to the communitarian school in its focus on the collective, but differs from it in its emphasis on being performed through practices of solidarity, care, and resistance and not on identity.

This triangular model is structured around three interconnected axes – citizenship, political participation, and social movements – held together by a politics of care. It is grounded in empirical data from the anti-CAA/NRC protests, and responds directly to the gendered exclusions I observed in the field.

First, it reconceptualises citizenship as a lived and relational practice, not a neutral legal status. In both Delhi and Guwahati, documentation regimes disproportionately penalised women – because of early marriage, name changes, or the erasure of matrilineal records. Resistance to this, like the refusal to "show papers," was an embodied and collective act of care. Here, it critiques liberal citizenship theory for its reliance on formal equality, which masks the structural violence of documentation-based inclusion.

Second, it defines political participation as affective and collective labour, shaped by risk and interdependence. In my field sites, women participated not by stepping forward individually but by negotiating visibility, sheltering others, or engaging in less conspicuous ways. This challenges dominant accounts that equate participation with formal engagement or public leadership, erasing the emotional labour of resistance.

Third, it reads social movements as ethical infrastructures, sustained through feminised care work – childcare, storytelling, making the public space safer for women – not just through confrontation. Protest here is not only oppositional, but prefigurative. It critiques idealised portrayals of protest that assume inherent egalitarianism, overlooking how hierarchies persist even within spaces of dissent.

Holding this triangle together is a politics of care – not as sentimentality, but as a relational, sometimes ambivalent force through which marginalised women make political claims.

Theorised this way, gendered citizenship focuses on the interconnected facets of the *doing.* This builds on Isin and Nielsen's AC framework, as mentioned in Chapter 1. If we have to critique the clinical, paper-dominated approach to establishing one's citizenship in India, we have to explore how one performs and experiences citizenship not only in relation to the state, but also other individuals and communities around them. Instead of centring the legal subject, AC shifts analytical focus to the performative dimension of citizenship – foregrounding the *acts* through which individuals assert themselves as political subjects entitled to rights, irrespective of their formal recognition by the state (Isin & Nielsen 2008, p.3). This methodological shift is particularly relevant in studying the anti-CAA/NRC movement, says Sengupta (2021). Rather than conforming to liberal or republican paradigms that view citizenship through the lens of legality, duty, and state allegiance, the AC approach interprets citizenship as a series of transgressive, *everyday* performances that can be ethical, cultural, social, religious, or sexual in nature.

In this framework of gendered citizenship, I draw upon Joan Tronto's theorisation of the politics of care and Isin and Nielsen's AC framework; and blend it with James C. Scott's *infrapolitics* (1990) in extending Tronto's (1996) question: 'How would our thinking about political life change were we to use care as a political concept?' Scott argues that paying close attention to political acts that are disguised or offstage helps us to discern a realm of possible dissent, including the social and normative basis of practical forms of resistance, as well as the values that might, if conditions permit, sustain more visible forms of rebellion. He advances the term "infrapolitics" to center what he calls the "unobtrusive realm of political struggle (Thylstrup et al., 2024). While his original framework of infrapolitics has been critiqued for not fully considering intersectional factors, especially that of gender, it does broaden the understanding of what constitutes

"the political" (Furniss 2024) - supporting feminism's ever relevant assertion that the 'personal is political'. Phipps (2016) does a brilliant job articulating this:

> This institutionalisation of the politics of the personal prompted challenges from those relegated to the margins, particularly the black feminists to whom so much was owed. The concept of intersectionality and explorations of how Western feminisms had been co-opted by colonial discourses and projects exposed the false universalism of 'women's experience', and the construction of the feminist 'knower' in the image of privilege. In response, it was argued that those on the perimeters of feminism had access to special forms of insight: the exploration of the structural and discursive spaces occupied by black women/scholars as 'outsiders within' uncovered hidden forms of creativity and distinctive and important standpoints on self, family and society. Ideas of epistemic injustice and questions about who can know and speak continue to be central to feminist theory and activism (Phipps, 2016, p.316).

If Scott's theorisation of infrapolitics refers to the subtle and often invisible forms of resistance that operate beneath the surface of 'formal', public politics, can 'care', or caring, be counted in it? Chari (2009) and Davidoff (2003) say the gendering of citizenship lies in the creation of public-private divide, wherein male domination and female subordination are structured by the strict separation of hierarchical spheres with male belonging to the public and female to the private. This forms the basis of my conceptualisation of women in the anti-CAA/NRC movement, who consistently blurred this line - blending their personal with the political. This argument is put forward and developed throughout the thesis. Feminist theorists have expanded it further to include acts of everyday resistance that challenge dominant power structures; and I specifically leverage Vachani and Pullen's emphasis on affective solidarity as a central organising feature in feminist resistance (2018) to understand infrapolitics as a pillar of the politics of care.

Through this framework, this chapter attempts a critique of citizenship as a neutral or universal category. It challenges liberal notions of equality, which often fail to address the structural barriers faced by marginalised groups, and advocates for equity as a more justice-oriented framework, laying the brickwork for 'gendered citizenship'. The anti-CAA/NRC movement, with its emphasis on *care* and *solidarity*, offers a vision of citizenship that moves beyond formal legal rights to engage with the lived realities of exclusion and belonging. By centering women's agency, the movement disrupts the

patriarchal and communal hierarchies embedded in both state policies and nationalist discourses, opening up new possibilities for relational and participatory forms of citizenship.

4.2. The Infrastructure of studying a Movement within the framework of Gendered Citizenship

Studying a social movement in South Asia, that cut across the juggernaut that identity politics is in the subcontinent, raised an unanticipated question – do we need to examine the markers of such movements beyond the usual 'identity', 'interest', etcetera? Is there another way to understand what mobilises and sustains movements?

Central to this reconfiguration of citizenship is the role of affect – not as private emotion, but as a relational and political force that shapes how protest is mobilised, how solidarities are formed, and how exclusions are lived. Following Ahmed (2004) and Berlant (2011), I understand affect as that which circulates between bodies, anchoring political life not only in discourse but in feeling, gesture, and atmosphere. In the context of the anti-CAA/NRC movement, affective practices – from collective grief and fatigue to everyday acts of care and inspiration – served as forms of political infrastructure. These affective relations sustained resistance in the absence of formal leadership or institutional support, and allowed women, particularly from marginalised backgrounds, to reconfigure belonging through shared vulnerability, risk and solidarity. Affect, then, is not secondary to political action but constitutive of it – especially in contexts where institutional recognition is persistently deferred.

The first two decades of the 21st century, before the COVID-19 pandemic had restricted the act of physically gathering, had witnessed the resurgence of mass movements across the globe. Millions turned to collective action - 'most notably in Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa, Hong Kong and across India as confidence in mainstream politics faltered' (Ismail, 2019). Quoting Ismail,

> Following moments of open class warfare in the late 1960s and early 1970s, battles against the political and economic order became fragmented, trade unions were attacked, the legacy of the anti-colonial struggles was eroded and the history of the period was recast by the establishment to undermine its potency. In the post-Cold War era, a new phase

> of protest finally began to overcome these defeats (Ismail 2019).

This global trend speaks of the significance of movements as powerful sites of political articulation and negotiation. In postcolonial societies like India, this is a resurging phenomenon. These movements hold particular importance - as much as in the way they unfold as their objectives - highlighting the fraught processes through which citizenship and belonging are constructed, challenged, and reimagined. Approaching movements through the lens of women's participation, then, opens new avenues for interrogating how systemic exclusions, from electoral politics to social representation, are resisted and redefined. While I alluded to employing Scott's 'infrapolitics' in the previous section, this is where it becomes most relevant. As he describes it himself,

> The term infrapolitics, however, seems an appropriate shorthand to convey the idea that we are dealing with an unobtrusive realm of political struggle. For a social science attuned to the relatively open politics of liberal democracies and to loud, headline-grabbing protests, demonstrations, and rebellions, the circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups is, like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum (Scott, 1990, p. 183).

My borrowing from Scott's infrapolitics is partial, in my agreement with his statement that subordinate groups create a secret discourse that represents a critique of power spoken behind the backs of the dominant. At the same time, the powerful also develop a private dialogue about practices and goals of their rule that cannot be openly avowed. In the academic (Biswas, 2023; Hasan and Jha, 2024) and journalistic literature (Salam, 2023) on the women in the anti CAA/NRC movement, it indeed appears as one of what he calls 'loud, headline-grabbing protests, demonstrations, and rebellions'. However, when one examines women *doing* citizenship in this movement using the politics of care as a lens, it reveals a more nuanced discourse. The confrontation with gender roles within the movement, the solidarity built using gender as a rallying point, and the unspoken covenants on creating nuclei of safety when women gathered for the protests can very much be identified as the 'hidden script' of the anti-CAA/NRC movement. As Massoumi and Morgan (2024) discuss,

> Scott argues for the need to look elsewhere to fully understand power relations, towards what he calls the hidden transcript. He defines this as 'discourse that takes place

> "offstage"', which is 'the privileged site for nonhegemonic, contrapuntal, dissident, subversive discourse'. 'The hidden transcript', he states, 'is thus derivative in the sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript'. The hidden transcripts of relatively powerless social groups – slaves, children, serfs, peasants, prisoners, untouchables – preoccupy Scott's analyses and allow him to critique cruder theories of ideology or hegemonic incorporation, since they reveal how subordinate groups do not automatically share the beliefs and values of superordinate groups, even when it may publicly appear that they do. Scott intended to show that such groups were neither victims of false consciousness nor that they necessarily consented to domination. Revealing such hidden transcripts showed how subordinate groups developed their own nascent forms of oppositional consciousness, often generating formal or informal institutions (spaces, norms, established patterns of behaviour) in which such hidden transcripts could be shared (p. 1343).

Central to the definition of the hidden script applied to the anti-CAA/NRC movement is the role of intersectionality, which provides a critical framework for understanding how overlapping oppressions shaped the participation and experiences of women in it. Drawing on Black Feminism's challenge to hegemonic feminist theorising that assumes the homogeneity of women (Collins, 2022; Wagner, 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2006), Crenshaw's coinage of 'intersectionality' (1989) is pivotal to understanding how exclusions in the anti-CAA/NRC movement operated across multiple dimensions. Muslim women in Delhi, for instance, faced not only communal polarisation but also patriarchal norms that sought to silence their voices. Similarly, in Assam, Bengali Muslim women experienced compounded vulnerabilities at the intersection of regional fissures and religio-linguistic discrimination. Intersectionality allows one to identify these layers of exclusion not as isolated phenomena but as interconnected systems that shape resistance and agency, forming the hidden script. Using intersectionality as a theory, as well as a conceptual framework, allows for critiquing exclusion but also provides a framework for understanding resistance. Marginalised groups – people of colour, indigenous peoples, oppressed castes and classes, minority religious groups, womxn and gender diverse people often draw on their intersecting identities as sources of strength and solidarity, creating spaces for collective action that challenge dominant systems of power.

4.3. Intersectionality and Citizenship

Crenshaw's seminal work on intersectionality emerged from a critique of the inadequacy of single-axis frameworks, particularly in feminist and anti-racist discourses, to capture the distinct experiences of Black women in the United States. By centering the interactions of race and gender, the theory of intersectionality states that systems of oppression do not operate independently, but in fact converge to produce unique forms of marginalisation. Crenshaw's work challenges the assumption that oppression can be universally theorised, calling instead for an approach that is attentive to the multiplicity of identities and contexts. While acknowledging the truth in this, a social movement like the anti-CAA/NRC can be used to inquire into how intersectional solidarities develop in resistance to these systems.

Intersectionality has since expanded to encompass a broader range of identities and oppressions, finding resonance in postcolonial contexts where colonial histories, caste hierarchies, and regional politics intersect with global systems of power - like that of neoliberalism. Mohanty, for instance, has consistently engaged with the expansion of intersectional analysis from Black Feminism into transnational contexts. I have referred to her work extensively in the previous chapter to problematise the category of 'women', but her more recent emphasis on the importance of situating intersectionality within the specific socio-political conditions of the Global South (2013) is crucial. She argues for the need to understand how neoliberal and colonial forces intersect with various dimensions of social identity to shape gendered citizenship and to build solidarities based on a recognition of these complex power dynamics.

Citizenship, often imagined as a universal and neutral framework, is profoundly shaped by intersectional exclusions. There are several traditions within citizenship studies, and they warrant a discussion here. Liberal Citizenship emphasises individual rights and private interests, where citizenship is primarily defined by the legal rights granted by the nation-state to its citizens. It assumes individuals have equal status, rights, and duties, ideally making social divisions like gender, ethnicity, class, or caste irrelevant to one's citizenship status (Roche, 1987). Thinkers in this tradition have focused on outlining the rights and duties citizens can expect, often without deeply considering the impact of social inequalities. Kymlicka and Norman (1994) argue that the dominant view of citizenship

in political theory is often implicitly defined almost entirely by the possession of rights, which they see as leading to a passive citizen focused on entitlements rather than public participation. What Kymlicka and Norman propose instead, is broadly known differentiated citizenship.

This theory arises from the recognition that many groups experience exclusion from the 'common culture' despite having formal citizenship rights and suggests the need to develop a theory that acknowledges cultural exclusion and the distinctive needs of marginalised groups. Proponents like Young (1993) suggest policies like special representation rights, self-government rights for national minorities, and multicultural rights. Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) argues that a study of women's citizenship should consider their affiliation to dominant or subordinate groups, their ethnicity, origin, and urban or rural residence, as well as global and transnational positionings. She challenges the gender-blind and west-centric character of many citizenship theories, and instead focuses on issues of membership, group rights, social difference, and the gendered construction of the public/private and active/passive binaries. In the Indian context, differentiated citizenship has the potential to highlight how factors like city, region, language, economic disparities, and social inequalities lead to citizens experiencing rights differently. However, critics worry that emphasising group differences might hinder the development of a broader sense of fraternity (Chari, 2009), which remains a concern in very diverse postcolonial societies like India.

T.H. Marshall's (1950; 1975; 1981) work remains highly influential in this context almost a century later. He defines citizenship as a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community, encompassing civil, political, and social rights and obligations. Political rights, in his conceptualisation, is almost naturally followed by civil rights. More importantly, he argues for ‘social citizenship’ - a model that says citizenship involves ensuring everyone is treated as a full and equal member of society through an increasing number of rights. It links citizenship to membership in a community rather than solely the state, which allows for analysing it as a multi-tiered construct across various collectivities. Feminist and critical scholars (Lister, 1997) often use Marshall's framework as a reference point for contemporary analysis, recognising it allows for examining citizenship both as a failed promise of equality and a normative vision for equality. However, his work has been criticised for its gender blindness and failure to account for the differential experiences of women, prompting critics to reveal how gendered norms

are embedded within citizenship regimes. This tendency is most evident in the oft positioning of women as dependents or cultural symbols rather than autonomous political agents. Yuval-Davis' expansion of this concept where she shifts the emphasis on the need to analyse citizenship as a multi-tiered construct, applying to *various* collectives beyond the state, especially in an era of ethnicisation and globalisation, paves the way to the model of gendered citizenship I am arguing for.

Civic republicanism, somewhat similarly, centres on the ideas of the common good, public spirit, political participation, and civic virtue (Roy, 2005). It views citizenship as both a status and a means of active involvement in shaping and promoting the common good, emphasising participation in civic life (Sandel, 1982). Critics of republicanism point out that it does not adequately address how the "community" is constructed and who gets to actively participate, and that it can have an abstract approach to politics while demanding duties from citizens.

For instance, when gendered exclusions intersect with religion, caste, or regional identity, as in the case of the CAA and NRC, they create compounded vulnerabilities within and between such "communities". In Assam, for example, the NRC disproportionately affects Bengali Muslim women, who face multiple layers of exclusion due to their religio-linguistic identity, patriarchal norms, and socio-economic marginalisation. Many of these women lack access to formal documentation required to prove citizenship, a result of systemic barriers to property ownership and inheritance. Here, Crenshaw's intersectionality provides a lens to understand how these exclusions are not merely additive but intersecting, producing unique forms of disenfranchisement. Similarly, the CAA's privileging of non-Muslim refugees underscores how religion intersects with other markers of identity to structure access to citizenship. While the policy ostensibly offers protection to marginalised groups, it reinforces communal polarisation by excluding Muslim communities. Intersectionality reveals how this exclusion disproportionately impacts Muslim women, who navigate the dual burdens of systemic Islamophobia and patriarchal discrimination. By centering these experiences, intersectionality challenges the notion of citizenship as a static or equitable construct, reframing it as a site of contested and relational power. Intersectionality, therefore, has rightly become a foundational framework for understanding how overlapping systems of oppression shape lived experiences and political actions. Moving beyond single-axis

analyses of oppression, it foregrounds the interactions of race, gender, class, religion, and other identities to reveal how marginalised groups navigate systemic inequalities.

4.3.1. The Role of Solidarity

The relationship between intersectionality and solidarity is critical for understanding how collective action emerges in diverse and pluralistic contexts. While intersectionality emphasises difference, solidarity seeks to navigate these differences to build collective power. Considering the two working together makes a tremendous impact, because the concept of solidarity in feminism has often faced criticism for its reliance on essentialist notions of womanhood. Especially in its early formulations, feminist solidarity emphasised shared experiences of oppression, framing women as a universal category united by their marginalisation (hooks 1984). However, postcolonial and intersectional feminists have challenged this universalism, highlighting the diverse and often contradictory realities of women's lives. Mohanty (2003) critiques the erasure of difference in early feminist frameworks, arguing that solidarity must account for the specific historical, cultural, and economic contexts shaping women's experiences. On the other hand, modern day neoliberalism poses significant challenges to feminist solidarity by promoting individualism and commodifying feminist ideals. As Wickström et al. (2021) argue, neoliberal feminism often co-opts feminist language to advance corporate interests, fragmenting collective action and depoliticising resistance. This appropriation reinforces structural inequalities.

Smolovic-Jones et al. (2021) bring intersectionality and solidarity together to conceptualise what they have called "agonistic solidarity," where conflict and contestation become productive forces for building alliances across diverse identities. In their words,

> Conceptually, feminist solidarity and sisterhood have lost some potency in recent decades, as the development of poststructuralist theory and lessons gleaned from practical experience have legitimately questioned whether 'women' can be 'essentialised' as a homogeneous category. An emphasis on difference over unity started to become a lived reality when women worldwide realized that 'our herstories are too numerous and too varied' to be taken as 'shared'. This study draws on ethnographic data from a major women's protest and proposes a democratic form of embodied agonistic solidarity. Our main contribution lies in offering a

> framework to analyse how women work together, drawing on difference as a resource offering 'agonistic' energy and vitality. Embodied agonistic solidarity is a practice that cultivates collective agency through difference and conflict (Smolovic-Jones et al., 2021, p. 919).

In the anti-CAA/NRC movement, solidarity was not based on erasing differences but on embracing them. The protests in Delhi, for example, were supported by activists from varied caste, class, gender, and religious backgrounds, creating a coalition that reflected the intersectional nature of their struggle. These alliances demonstrated how intersectionality and solidarity can work in tandem, fostering collective resistance that is attentive to difference while united by shared goals. The problematisation of identity politics as a source of feminist politics, the decentering of the subject (through queer theory, for example) and the politics of experience (Phipps, 2016) have also been at the forefront of questioning what feminist solidarity could be in the context of increasing individualisation, privatisation and corporatisation of public life (Mohanty, 2003; Vachhani and Pullen, 2018). Affective solidarity, as theorised by Vachhani and Pullen (2018), plays a critical role in feminist resistance. Affective solidarity foregrounds the emotional and relational dimensions of collective action. Drawing on Butler's (2011) theory of embodiment and vulnerability, feminist solidarity is understood here not merely as an intellectual or political commitment but an affective practice grounded in care, empathy, and mutual support. As Vachhani and Pullen (2018) argue, solidarity emerges through shared experiences of injustice, generating a collective affective energy that fuels resistance. They drew this out of their 'Everyday Sexism Project' to evoke affective solidarity as:

> [For Clare Hemmings (2012) affective solidarity is] the 'question of affect – misery, rage, passion, pleasure – that gives feminism its life'….a conceptualisation of how infrapolitical feminist resistance emerges at grassroots level and between individuals in the form of affective solidarity, which become necessary in challenging neoliberal threats to women's opportunity and equality. Our contribution conceptualises affective solidarity as central to this feminist resistance against sexism and involves two modes of feminist organising: the politics of experience and empathy. By addressing the ethical and political demands of solidarity we can build resurgent, politically vibrant feminist organizing and resistance that mobilizes feminist consciousness and builds momentum for change (Vacchani and Pullen, 2018, p.26).

Solidarity, when theorised this way, is not merely a strategic alliance but an affective and ethical commitment to collective struggle. This form is evident in movements that centre care, empathy, and relationality as tools of resistance. When seen through this lens, the mobilisation for the anti-CAA/NRC movement can be located within the framework of gendered citizenship that I discussed in the opening of this chapter. Mohanty (2003) highlights how alliances that centre intersectionality can disrupt the hierarchies embedded within both movements and states. Agonism recognises that conflict and disagreement are inevitable in pluralistic societies but views these tensions as opportunities for democratic engagement and transformation. In feminist solidarity, conflict becomes a means of negotiating difference and building alliances across diverse identities and experiences (Smolovic-Jones et al. 2021).

By foregrounding the experiences of the most marginalised, intersectional solidarity not only resists dominant systems of power but also reimagines collective action as transformative and justice-oriented. This shift from essentialism to intersectionality, thus, has had profound implications for feminist solidarity. Rather than seeking a homogenised unity, contemporary approaches like Smolovic-Jones et al. (2021) view conflict and contestation as generative rather than divisive, and embrace difference as a resource for collective action. The anti-CAA/NRC movement provides a compelling illustration of agonistic solidarity. Women from varied backgrounds - in Delhi, in Assam - came together to resist state policies that threatened their rights and identities. Despite their differences, these women forged alliances through shared struggles, demonstrating how conflict can be a source of strength and solidarity.

Intersectionality, therefore, together with feminist solidarity (especially the affective kind theorised by Vacchani and Pullen and the embodied agnostic kind theorised by Smolovic-Jones et al), serves as a critical framework for analysing the anti-CAA/NRC movement, offering tools to understand both exclusion and resistance. By centring the experiences of marginalised groups, it reveals how intersecting systems of oppression shape not only the exclusions embedded in policies like the CAA and NRC but also the strategies of resistance that challenge these exclusions. Hemmings (2012) further elaborates on how affective solidarity mobilises emotions like anger, frustration, and hope to drive feminist resistance. In the context of the anti-CAA/NRC movement, these ‘affects’ were instrumental in building alliances across diverse communities. By recognising the

tensions inherent in solidarity, the anti-CAA/NRC movement challenges this neoliberal framework by foregrounding collective care and community-based resistance. Women's participation in the movement highlights how solidarity can counter neoliberal individualism, creating spaces for collective agency and social transformation. These acts of solidarity disrupt neoliberal narratives of self-sufficiency, asserting the value of interconnectedness and mutual support.

In the empirical chapters to follow, this framework will guide the analysis of how women in Delhi and Assam navigate and resist intersecting oppressions. It will also highlight the relational dimensions of their resistance, exploring how intersectionality informs their practices of care, solidarity, and collective action. By operationalising intersectionality in this way, the analysis will move beyond single-axis frameworks to provide a nuanced understanding of how marginalised groups contest and reimagine the boundaries of citizenship and belonging.

4.3.2. The Role of Care

The previous chapter has repeatedly brought up care and caregiving in relation to women. The term 'care' carries substantial theoretical baggage across feminist ethics, health policy, and affect studies, among others. This conceptual elasticity, while important, also runs the risk of diluting its political valence. To mitigate that risk, the theorisation of 'care' is anchored here in feminist political theory - especially in Joan Tronto's work. Tronto insists that care is a political resource – one that has been historically feminised, devalued, and relegated to the private sphere. The women in the anti-CAA/NRC movement inverted this structure by placing care at the heart of political life, not as a peripheral ethic but as a strategy of resistance and re-worlding. Then, care, which is often dismissed as a private or apolitical act, becomes a radical practice when mobilised in the public sphere. Its political practices - whether seen in community kitchens, public libraries or protests for social justice - challenge neoliberal individualism, reimagining solidarity as a collective and inclusive endeavour.

Fisher and Tronto define care as: "a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web" (Fisher and Tronto 1991, p.40). Fisher and

Tronto position care as a species activity – a fundamentally human, universal act – while insisting on its context-specific enactments. This flexibility aligns with the plural practices of feminist protest I examined in Guwahati and Delhi, where care was not simply a moral imperative but a strategic resource and a form of knowledge that challenged the masculinised, securitised logics of the state and emerged as a crucial component of doing citizenship.

The focus on care in the context of citizenship, participation and social movement borrows on this understanding of it as a practice in which morality and politics are fundamentally intertwined. Feminist theories emphasise that citizenship must be understood as relational, grounded in practices of care and solidarity (Lynch, 2013; Fraser, 2008; Held, 2006). Furthering this argument, the ethics and politics of care, as theorised by Sevenhuijsen (2003) and Harcourt (2023), draw upon the relational underpinnings of solidarity. This framing is central to my theorisation of gendered citizenship as an act of care in protest spaces, for care, therefore, is not confined to the domestic sphere or feminised labour, but operates as a mode of political agency, a method of resistance, and a connective thread between citizenship and participation.

When incorporated in discussions on citizenship, as elaborated in the previous pages, can the politics of care be informed by several theoretical traditions, each offering distinct perspectives on its meaning and implications. The established traditions - civic republicanism, liberalism, Marxism, feminism, and cultural pluralism - shape understandings of citizenship by interrogating the relationship between individuals, the state, and society. Civic republicanism emphasises the common good, civic virtue, and active political participation, framing citizenship as a collective responsibility while also inviting critiques regarding the exclusionary nature of "community" and the obligations it imposes.

Liberalism, in contrast, centres on individual rights, freedoms and legal equality, yet often overlooks structural inequalities that constrain citizens' agency (Kapur, 2018; Zerilli, 2015). From a Marxist perspective, citizenship rights are seen as superficial, failing to challenge the capitalist structures that underpin social and economic disparities. Meanwhile, cultural pluralism foregrounds the politics of difference, arguing that a universal model of citizenship erases the experiences of historically marginalised groups and advocating instead for differentiated citizenship (Kymlicka and Norman) that recognises diverse identities and socio-economic realities. Citizenship, conventionally

defined as a legal relationship between the individual and the state, is more accurately understood as an active and relational construct. It is shaped by ongoing negotiations between individuals, communities, and institutions, reflecting intersections of power, identity, and exclusion. Feminist and postcolonial critiques of citizenship highlight how it is far from neutral or universally accessible. Instead, citizenship operates as a mechanism for maintaining hierarchies, often serving as an instrument of control and differentiation.

Feminist critiques highlight how citizenship has historically been shaped by patriarchal traditions, questioning the public/private divide and the gendered struggles for inclusion. Walby's (2020) concept of 'gender regimes' reveals how economic, political, and social structures interact to shape experiences of inclusion and exclusion, explaining how public and private spheres perpetuate systemic inequalities by drawing the divide. She states that while public gender regimes may ostensibly expand rights through participation in labour markets or electoral systems, they are counterbalanced by private regimes that confine women to familial and domestic roles. When seen together, these regimes reveal how gendered exclusions are institutionalised, shaping the experiences of citizenship in ways that privilege men and reinforce patriarchal norms. By situating citizenship within these broader systems - intersecting the public and the private, a relational approach moves beyond static or individualistic definitions to capture its dynamic, and in this case, participatory nature. Relational citizenship also critiques neoliberal frameworks that commodify social reproduction and prioritise self-sufficiency over collective well-being. Again, Harcourt's (2023) work on the ethics of care assumes importance here in its highlight on how practices of mutual aid and solidarity offer alternative models of citizenship, rooted in interconnectedness and justice.

In the anti-CAA/NRC movement, these practices were central to the reimagining of citizenship as a shared and inclusive endeavour. Women's leadership foregrounded the relational aspects of belonging, demonstrating how care and solidarity can serve as foundations for resistance. The relational dimension of citizenship is further evident in how care and solidarity were central to the anti-CAA/NRC movement. Wickström et al. (2021) critique the neoliberal framing of citizenship, which prioritises individualism and commodifies rights, sidelining collective practices of belonging. This is in line with the discussion on affective solidarity in the previous section.

Movements like this have the potential to challenge this paradigm by foregrounding interconnectedness and mutual support as foundational to citizenship. Women's participation in these protests demonstrated how care - often dismissed as a private or apolitical act - becomes a radical practice of resistance when mobilised in the public sphere. As Ibkar (2023) wrote, "in giving care a principal role in the protest, both as a representative human practice and as a form of political expression, Shaheen Bagh effects a radical reimagination of non-violent protest organisation and performance".

Postcolonial theorists highlight another crucial dimension when discussing citizenship in a country like India. They argue that the exclusions within citizenship regimes in such countries cannot be separated from the broader hierarchies established during colonial rule (Mongia, 2018). The administrative and legal frameworks inherited from colonial states were designed to classify and regulate populations (Mamdani, 2012), embedding hierarchies of race, religion - and in India's case, caste and 'tribes' too. However, postcolonial discourses on citizenship have also received fierce criticism from feminist theorists, who have pointed to its hyperfocus on dismissing liberalism, leading to reinforcement of the existing public-private divide (Mohanty, 1984).

Postcolonialism focuses on the entanglement of modern, liberal discourses with subtle forms of Western ethnocentricism. While its purpose is not to dismiss the commitment to liberal autonomy, this standpoint helps to draw attention to particular difficulties lying at the root of the assumptions of this tradition. One preliminary concern is that the ideal subject of civil society presupposed by Western discourses privileges a 'self-constituting' autonomous citizen, while sexual or cultural difference is presented, implicitly or explicitly, in opposition to this ideal. This premise marginalises the conditions of freedom residing in one's own culture, and instead takes autonomy to be a constituted property of abstract or decontexualised personhood. Furthermore, liberal recognition is problematic from a postcolonial perspective because it often presumes a stable world of public meanings and symbols. It relies on a settled public-private distinction which frequently fails to engage with Third World women's struggles for emancipation (Mookherjee, 2005).

If the focus is then shifted from an absolute opposition of any particular tradition to the construction of one that bases itself on experiencing the political through care and solidarity, my proposed theoretical framework of gendered citizenship becomes more viable. Feminist theorists have long since critiqued the tendency to frame marginalised

women as passive victims, arguing instead for a focus on their strategies of resistance and survival. Resistance, in this framework, is not limited to overt acts of defiance but includes everyday practices that subvert power relations.

The relational and intersectional dimensions of citizenship, as highlighted in the sections above, also reflect on its performative nature. These performative aspects are particularly visible in acts of protest and collective mobilisation, shifting the focus from formal definitions to the lived experiences of individuals and communities as they navigate inclusion and exclusion. Performance in this context is best theorised drawing on Judith Butler's (1993) theory of performativity. Through the lens of Butler's performativity, citizenship can be understood as something enacted rather than simply possessed; and constituted through repeated *acts* of belonging and engagement, as well as through resistance to exclusionary practices. In the anti-CAA/NRC movement, women's protests exemplified this performativity. By occupying public spaces and asserting their voices, they redefined citizenship as an active and participatory process, challenging its restrictive and exclusionary parameters with their agency.

4.3.3. Agency and Care

Agency is often framed as the capacity to act independently, but feminist theorisation challenges this liberal conception by foregrounding the relational and collective dimensions of action. As Mookherjee (2005) highlights in the excerpt above, feminist agency complicates simplistic liberal/postcolonial divides in understanding the experience, as well as performance, of gender. In contexts of systemic marginalisation, such as those faced by women under exclusionary state policies, agency becomes a site of negotiation and resistance. Drawing on feminist critiques and theorisations of resistance, there needs to be an interrogating of the intersections of agency with affect, solidarity, and infrapolitics.

Traditional frameworks often depict agency as synonymous with autonomy, rooted in the liberal ideal of the self-sufficient individual, prompting Feminist critiques to argue that such frameworks overlook the relational and contextual dimensions of agency. Madhok (2018) highlights that agency is embedded in networks of care, obligation, and mutual interdependence, especially in contexts of political abandonment and states of exception . This relational approach shifts the focus from individual will to the collective capacities and solidarities that enable action. Relational agency is particularly evident in grassroots

feminist organising, and Madhok's paper on the Meira Paibis (or women who carry the torch, loosely translated from Meiteilon) of Manipur, a neighbouring state of Assam in Northeast India harps on that. As she notes, the Meira Paibi protest where the elder women viciously protested the Indian Army raping and murdering a Meitei woman with impunity, exemplify how collective action emerges from shared grievances and relational ties (p.119). These women, she says, mobilised against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) not only by asserting their rights but by reframing resistance as a communal act of care and justice. Their protests underscore how agency is constituted through collective practices, challenging the state's monopoly on defining legality and legitimacy .

Agency is not only relational, but also performative. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of performativity (as in explaining the performance of citizenship in the previous page) feminist theorists argue that agency is enacted through repeated actions that challenge and subvert dominant norms. Resistance, in this view, becomes an embodied practice that creates new political subjectivities and possibilities. Vachhani and Pullen (2018) explore how acts of feminist resistance, taking their Everyday Sexism Project as one, generate affective solidarities, and in turn, a performative agency, that disrupt entrenched systems of sexism. These acts are not merely reactions to oppression but are productive, generating new ways of being and relating in the world.

This performative nature of agency is evident in the anti-CAA/NRC movement, where women's leadership redefined public spaces as arenas of political engagement. Erica Chenoweth also raises the point that social movements which centre women's voices and leadership attract more women supporters - which means that on a fundamental level, they have a broader base of support and more people on the ground (Haug, 2020). At Shaheen Bagh, Muslim women enacted agency by transforming their marginalised identity into a site of resistance (Chopra, 2022). Their performative acts challenged not only the state's exclusionary policies but also patriarchal norms that sought to silence them. By occupying public spaces and engaging in collective care practices, these women demonstrated how agency is relational, embodied, and transformative.

4.4. Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist standpoint theory further expands this understanding of gendered citizenship by emphasising how marginalised groups, through their lived experiences, possess unique epistemic insights into systems of power. Women's leadership in the movement exemplifies this, as they critiqued not only the policies of the state but also the patriarchal and communal narratives that sought to confine their roles. Muslim women in Shaheen Bagh redefined public spaces by using them as arenas of care, solidarity, and collective resistance, while indigenous women in Assam foregrounded the intersections of regional identity and gender in their critiques of the NRC. These acts of resistance provide a lens to interrogate the broader structures of nationalism and citizenship, revealing how exclusionary policies are embedded in historical and systemic inequities.

Nationalism, as a political and cultural project, is another key axis through which the anti-CAA/NRC movement can be understood. Feminist critiques of nationalism highlight how women are often positioned as symbols of cultural purity and tradition, relegated to reproductive or symbolic roles while being excluded from political agency. In Assam, the rhetoric of protecting the "motherland" has historically relied on masculinised imaginaries of defence and sovereignty, casting women in roles that uphold patriarchal norms. The movement, however, challenged these narratives by centring women's voices; even if somewhat, and sometimes, unintentionally.

Ontologically, I, as the researcher, did not assume an outsider approach, but engage with the topic with an insider, participative approach - offering descriptions and explanations for how me and research participants were involved in mutual relationships of knowledge creation (Whitehead and McNiff 2006, 22-23). The interviews and informal chats over coffee with people who chose to participate shaped the main contribution of this research. Epistemologically, it adopts the stance that knowledge is created mutually and through interactions – using these interactions as a process of testing and critiquing what is known, to further improve it. Knowledge, therefore, is co-created from the feminist standpoint of epistemic privilege. Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) has a strong normative commitment to challenging and changing power relations. It seeks to go beyond analysis and description by advocating for the participation of marginalised groups in knowledge construction and decision-making processes - aiming to dismantle patriarchal and other oppressive structures in knowledge production. Like other scholars of FST, I contend that

knowledge is produced structurally and relationally; in this case, within the structure of the contemporary Indian body-politic and its relation to the participants of the mass movement.

Epistemic privilege has its fair share of critics within feminist research for “idealising” marginal subjects (Bar On 1993), for making a fetish of otherness (Lal 1996), for mystifying the harms of oppression (Narayan 2004), for suggesting that marginality necessarily yields knowledge (see Go 2016; Pels 2004; Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002; Yuval-Davis 2012). However, while acknowledging the validity of these concerns, I contend that while no social position is free of drawbacks, some provide better theoretical tools (Harding 1997) to work on social movements. My position here is a nod to the concept of ‘Epistemic Justice’, as described by Cox and others, entailing a challenge to the supposed objectivity of (mostly colonially produced) existing knowledge; an acknowledgement of alternative forms of the same; and most importantly, making space for the coexistence of both. FST advocates for "strong objectivity," which suggests that the perspectives of marginalised and oppressed individuals can lead to more objective accounts of the world (Carbera et al, 2020). This approach challenges traditional notions of objectivity by acknowledging that all knowledge is socially situated and that the perspectives of those at the bottom of social hierarchies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of social reality. Hence, I have approached the anti-CAA/NRC movement leveraging on women’s epistemic privilege. My work borrows the philosophy underlying the works of Dorothy Smith (1990), Liz Stanley (1990) and Sandra Harding (1991) where they contend that women occupy a specific location in society that allows them (and therefore, us) a ‘privileged’ access to social phenomena.

The anti-CAA/NRC movement acquires an entirely new meaning when approached from women’s standpoint, factoring in the intersectionalities – as discussed above – within the analytical category of ‘women’. As Sweet (2020) asserts, “using intersectionality as a starting point guards against the homogenising tendencies of “women’s standpoint” by continuously decentring the privileged position and insisting on the “multiple” structuration of all standpoints”. When examined from the standpoint of women, the movement reveals layers of complex identities shaped not only by gender but by class, religion, linguistic and regional differences. By utilising an intersectional approach, my research moves beyond the generalisation of "women's standpoint," recognising the varying experiences, vulnerabilities, and agency among different groups of women

involved. As Sweet argues, starting from an intersectional perspective indeed prevents the oversimplification of 'women's standpoint' by consistently shifting focus away from privileged positions and emphasising the diverse, layered nature of all viewpoints - as I witnessed in the process of collecting my data. This decentring is crucial for understanding how Muslim women, for instance, experience the anti-CAA/NRC movement differently from Hindu upper caste women in Delhi, or Assamese speaking Hindu upper-caste women in Guwahati, given their unique vulnerabilities to state surveillance and marginalisation. The concept of reflexivity further enriches this analysis, reminding me to account for my own positionalities when interpreting these standpoints.

This layered approach to understanding women's experiences within the anti-CAA/NRC movement, informed by intersectionality and reflexivity, underscores the necessity of a research design that can capture the multiplicity of standpoints within a single movement. This renders the instrumental case study method particularly suited to my objectives, as it enables an examination of broader theoretical questions through specific, context-rich cases.

4.5. Towards a methodology of Gendered Citizenship

> …critical perspectives "from the Global South" combines two dimensions: a radical criticism of the dominant (colonial, modern and capitalist) epistemic perspective, including the claims of universality of the Eurocentric emancipation theories, and a focus on alternative perspectives and practices from/in the Global South. A third component of this renewal of the critical perspective should not be missed: an invitation to an open, intercultural dialogue that takes into account the positionalities of the actors and that draws on the plurality of alternatives, cosmovisions and emancipatory practices (Cox, Nilsen and Pleyers 2017, p.3).

Throughout the chapter, I have discussed how feminist theories bring attention to the gendered foundations of citizenship. Historically, women's access to citizenship has been mediated through patriarchal structures, positioning them as dependents rather than autonomous political agents. In postcolonial contexts, the exclusions within citizenship regimes are further compounded by the legacies of colonial governance. These intersecting oppressions expose how citizenship is constructed as a site where gender, religion, and class converge to determine belonging. In this context, the anti-CAA/NRC

movement's resistance was not merely a reaction to exclusionary state policies but an active process of reclaiming citizenship and belonging. State policies, while framed as administrative measures, revealed structural inequities in their design and impact; disproportionately triggering marginalised women, religious minorities, and those in economically precarious conditions, exacerbating existing exclusions. The movement, in turn, utilised infrapolitics through its emphasis on nonviolent resistance, symbolic actions, and the reclamation of masculinised public spaces. It disrupted the state's narratives of legality and order, and created spaces for alternative imaginaries of citizenship and belonging. By centering marginalised womens' leadership and agency, the movement created a transformative space where belonging was reclaimed, and citizenship was redefined as a relational and participatory practice.

Therefore, this thesis uses the theoretical framework of gendered citizenship that encompasses the historical and ongoing exclusion and marginalisation of women, the impact of intersecting social identities and power structures, the significance of the public-private divide, and the need for context-specific and intersectional analyses to achieve more equitable and inclusive forms of citizenship. Women participants, particularly those from marginalised communities, used their positionality, a standpoint that I leverage, to challenge both state violence and patriarchal constraints. These acts of resistance underscore how agency operates at the intersections of gender, class, and religion, creating spaces for collective action and political reimagination.

In sum, the model of gendered citizenship developed here resists liberal and statist framings by centring a politics of care, everyday resistance, and feminist solidarity. Through the lens of infrapolitics, care emerges not as a private virtue but as a radical act. It sustains participation, disrupts state authority, and reclaims public space. This framework will guide the analysis of the anti-CAA/NRC movement in the chapters that follow, where the empirical narratives of protestors in Guwahati and Delhi reveal how citizenship was reimagined from the ground up. From this theoretical framework, emerges the methodological design of this research presented in the next chapter.

5. The How, Where, Who and Why: Research Design and the Operationalising the Feminist Standpoint

To operationalise this theoretical framework of gendered citizenship, this study adopts an instrumental case study design, multiple qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, and inquires the data from a critical and intersectional feminist standpoint. The decision to locate the methodology chapter at this stage of the thesis is also epistemologically aligned with its feminist standpoint. Rather than positioning methodology as a neutral or procedural step, this chapter approaches research design as an extension of the theoretical and political frameworks already laid out. It reflects the central standpoint commitment of the project – that knowledge is situated and relational, not abstract or universal. It also ensures that the methodology of this research is aligned with the framework theorised in Chapter 4. To that end, this chapter lays down the methodological pillars and analytical framework of my empirical data, organised in the three following sections on Research Design, Data, and the Results.

5.1. The Research Design

> …good qualitative research design often relies less on the virtues of scientific rationality and more on how the researcher reflexively and creatively deals with a number of important background factors that are not easy to take into consideration when privileging rigor and formal procedures. These factors include researchers' paradigmatic base, theoretical perspectives, ideological inclinations, social and political conventions, complexities of language, and the zeitgeist. While neither rejecting the ideal of rigor nor claiming that rigor and creativity are incompatible, we suggest that an overzealous emphasis on formal procedures tends to lead attention away from, and even conceal, important factors that limit the potential for generating new and novel theoretical and practical insights (Alvesson, Sandberg and Einola, 2022, pp. 23-24)

As the authors quoted above go on to say, qualitative research design is fluid, iterative, and fundamentally non-linear. This is highlighted throughout my research; rather than following a fixed blueprint, it too unfolds through a continuous interplay of key components. Maxwell (2012) describes this as a "do-it-yourself" process, where researchers tack back and forth between elements like purpose, theory, research questions, methods, and validity. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) liken it to an improvised dance, responsive to the rhythms of data. Martin (1982) goes further, invoking a 'garbage

can' model, where design components swirl without clear sequence or hierarchy. While building my research design, I kept going back to their remark on a 'reflexive research design':

A reflexive research design requires that a researcher: (1) identifies and works with some key issues in a fairly ambitious and focused way; (2) makes serious efforts to be accountable for reflexivity and shows how it makes a difference; (3) works against narrowness, balancing some focus with a capacity not to be locked into his or her pre-understandings; (4) points at constructions and re-constructions, also demonstrating awareness of problems with these; and (5) pre-plans and targets for heightened reflexive attention and a strong commitment to do explicit, focused, and ambitious reflexive work. Ideally, the outcome of following these guidelines in designing research is less prepackaging, ordering, and reproducing of the conventional thinking in an area and more of something novel and interesting, bearing imprints of reflexivity making a difference, and not just being another box-ticking exercise (ibid, p. 31).

Reflexivity is the key foundation of my methodology here. The first steps to building a reflexive research design are identified by the authors as (i) formulating the research questions, and (ii) establishing a research plan. Following this, I started with the first - formulating my research questions. Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) identify two main strategies for developing research questions. The first - *gap-spotting* - follows a familiar path: researchers review existing literature to identify what's missing, then propose to fill that gap. If the gap is significant (Barney, 2020), it might shift understandings, but more often, this strategy simply reinforces existing knowledge - useful, but hardly transformative. The second approach - *problematisation* - is more disruptive and intellectually generative. Rather than accepting the literature's assumptions, it asks: what underlying premises is this work built on, and what happens if we unsettle them? This opens up space for entirely new questions and more original, potentially radical, ways of thinking. Problematisation demands more than methodological rigour - it requires reflexivity, critical sensitivity, and engagement with both the research context and the theoretical landscape. It is following this strategy that my research questions were designed, and they asked:

First, how do the anti-CAA/NRC protests reveal and challenge the gendered political imaginary in India, particularly through women's leadership and participation?

Second, how do women in the anti-CAA/NRC movement reconfigure the relationship between citizenship, participation, and social movements in India through their participation?

5.1.1. Instrumental Case Study

While the anti-CAA/NRC Movement in itself is rich enough for an intrinsic case study, my objective in this research has been to contribute to theory – specifically, theories concerning the lived experiences of citizenship, feminism, and social movements in postcolonial contexts. To this end, I have employed an instrumental case study method, where the anti-CAA/NRC movement in Delhi and the anti-CAA movement in Guwahati serve as cases to examine how women experience and perform citizenship at different intersections along the margins of the 'nation'. An instrumental case study is designed to utilise a particular case as a means of gaining a deeper understanding of broader phenomena, issues, or theories (Ridder, 2017). The case itself holds secondary importance; the primary aim lies in the insights it yields regarding the overarching research question or concept under investigation. In my study, this question centres on the meanings and enactments of citizenship through a gendered lens within contentious political contexts.

This approach facilitates in-depth, multi-dimensional exploration of complex issues within their real-life environments. By focusing on Delhi and Guwahati as two field sites, I can critically engage with the distinct socio-political climates shaping each site, thereby uncovering varied narratives of citizenship. In Delhi, where the anti-CAA/NRC protests have seen significant participation from Muslim women, the case study sheds light on how women confront and challenge religious discrimination within the state's citizenship frameworks. Meanwhile, in Guwahati, where ethnic and linguistic concerns intertwine with the citizenship question, the instrumental case study reveals different layers of exclusion that influence women's activism.

Through instrumental case study design, I position these movements not merely as isolated events but as windows into broader theoretical concerns – questions about who qualifies as a citizen and what roles gender and marginality play in this qualification. This method enables an investigation that transcends the case's immediate context, allowing me to view these sites as illustrative of larger social patterns, interrogating the multiple, intersecting layers of identity and power embedded within citizenship. By approaching

the anti-CAA/NRC movement in these two locations as two distinct cases, I am able to examine the acts that constitute women *doing* citizenship from multiple standpoints, and within varied sociopolitical landscapes.

In doing so, I employed the instrumental case study method to deepen the discourse on citizenship, situating women's narratives within the processes of nation-making and, ultimately, conceptualising citizenship as a lived and contested practice.

Following this approach, I selected a sample of interviewees centred on intersectionality, including both women and men active in the movement, as well as those who, though not directly involved, closely observed it. This inclusive sampling captured a wider range of perspectives on women's political activism in contemporary India, offering insights that may guide future feminist research and activism.

5.1.2. Methodology and Methods

This research uses an intersectional approach to Feminist Standpoint Theory (referred to as FST hereon) to arrive at its findings. The previous chapter elaborates on the theory, but a reiteration is important in terms of methodology because this research aligns with the three principal claims of FST: (1) that knowledge is socially situated. (2) that marginalised groups (women, in this case) are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized. (3) that research, particularly ones focused on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalised.

The process of achieving knowledge begins when standpoints begin to emerge (Crasnow, 2009; Harding, 2009; Intemann 2010). Patricia Hill Collins (1997) argues that a standpoint should never be confused with a "point of view." Rather, a standpoint is a "site of inquiry" and a "relational achievement" (Naples 2003, p. 84; Sweet 2020). Excluded knowledge has more emancipatory potential because marginalised subjects are disinvested from the ideologies of the powerful: this is epistemic privilege. My research, therefore, leverages the epistemic privilege of women on various margins of the Indian state, as mentioned above.

Knowledge has been co-created here using interviews with women (and a few men) who are on the geopolitical margins of the Indian state, leaning into their 'epistemic privilege'.

My sample population includes men because the standpoint here is feminist, not female (Hartsock, 1983). Further, there is not one standpoint from which better theories are generated; rather, standpoint theory posits an iterative process that aggregates partial perspectives (Stoetzler and Yuval- Davis 2002, p. 315; Yuval-Davis 2011). This also speaks to the relativist concern in feminist scholarship about standpoint theory's tendency to "essentialise the experience of marginalised groups, and subsume them into one homogenous voice to achieve the goal of 'emancipatory' research" (Tandon and Rathi, 2019).

The intersectionalities within my sample population are intended to work for this very thesis – for instance, an Assamese Muslim female activist and a Bengali Hindu female research scholar who I interviewed (separately) gave very different accounts of their motivations and experiences with the same demonstration. Collins (2000) and others (Bar On 1993; Longino 1990; Sprague 2001) have insisted that standpoints are not individual and static but community-based and processual. Collins' concept of standpoint is a collective, politically achieved perspective arising from shared marginalised social positions, which provides unique and valuable knowledge that can challenge dominant paradigms and work towards social transformation. This is distinct from a traditional "point of view" which is typically seen as an individual, subjective perspective not necessarily tied to social position or collective struggle.

FST thus offers a lens through which individual experiences within movements are understood as part of a broader community-based and processual form of resistance. To capture the complexities of intersectional feminist standpoints, I employed a combination of research methods.

For methods, I chose a combination of semi structured, in-depth interviews and RTA to gain a composite understanding of how motivations, tactics of mobilisation and methods of participation among women in the movement changed across the two cities. Motivations as a unit of analysis helped me develop more generalisable insights on the socioeconomic and political determinants of women's mass mobilisation (Murdie and Peksen 2015, 181); tactics of mobilisation built the foundation for adding to the existing toolkits on facilitating women's involvement in politics; and methods of participation carved the space for archiving the experience of women protesting in the world's most populous democracy – currently situated in an declining climate of pluralism.

5.1.3. Interviews and Interactions

> The dilemma for the feminist scholar, always, is to find ways of working within some disciplinary tradition while aiming at an intellectual revolution that will transform that tradition (Stacey and Thorne 1985). In order to transform (political) sociology - to write women and their diverse experiences into the discipline - we need to move toward new methods for writing about women's lives and activities without leaving sociology altogether. But the routine procedures of the discipline pull us insistently toward conventional understandings that distort women's experiences (Smith 1987, 1989). Feminist methodology should provide strategies for managing this central contradiction- strategies that will help us with the "balancing act" demanded of any scholar who attempts innovative research within a scholarly tradition (Devault 1990, p.96).

Marjorie DeVault wrote the paragraph above to provide feminist strategies for interviewing and analysis. Her article calls for systematising researchers' own experiences as women to (a) construct categories, (b) ‘listening’ to what remains unarticulated in interviews, and (c) conversation analysis; all of which I have built upon in this research. Feminist approaches to in-depth interviewing seek to uncover the "subjugated knowledge" embedded in the diverse realities of women’s lives, bringing visibility to their lived experiences, exposing concealed power dynamics, and advancing social justice for marginalised communities. Central principles include attentiveness to power imbalances between researcher and participant, fostering non-hierarchical relationships, engaging in reflexivity about the researcher’s positionality and biases, and maintaining accountability to participants and to the pursuit of social change. Semi-structured interviews, with a blend of guiding questions and flexibility to pursue emerging topics, support a participant-centred approach. The overarching goals of using in-depth interviews, therefore, are to empower participants, amplify silenced voices, reduce power hierarchies, and generate knowledge that contributes to transformative social change.

5.1.3(a) Sampling

My total sample size consists of 22 in-depth interviews. I did a total of 13 interviews as part of my fieldwork in Guwahati. Of these, 3 were male respondents; a research scholar, an employee of a non-profit working for the marginalised and an employee of an international organisation on development. The remaining 10 were women, occupying different positions within the movement. To work on the research objective of investigating women's experience with the politics of protest in contemporary India, I approached popularly known mobilizers, who then pointed me to the women they met in the course of the movement.

I wanted to diversify my sample to work around the limitations of its size – and therefore chose my participants based on social class, religion, educational qualification, occupation and their linguistic identity. The linguistic identity holds specific importance for Assam, as Sanjib Baruah explains in a recent piece:

> With Assamese being pitted against Bengali for the first part of the 20th century, for key segments of Assamese civil society, official language status for Assamese became an object of desire in the latter half of the century. This particular aspect of language politics followed the logic of path-dependency. The campaign seeking official language status for Assamese gained momentum in the immediate post-Independence years; vernacularising came to be seen as a necessary part of decolonization (Baruah, 2021, n.p).

However, in the territory that currently constitutes Assam, there are native speakers of a number of languages other than Assamese or Bengali. Consider just a few indigenous languages: Bodo, Dimasa, Karbi, and Mising. In recent years significant resources – in time, money and intellectual energy – have had to be spent in an effort to come up with an official definition of the phrase 'Assamese people'. This has become necessary because clause 6 of the Assam Accord of 1985 promised "constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people." But the key phrase 'Assamese people' has so far eluded a definition that the current political dispensation finds acceptable. The contention around constructing the analytical category of 'Assamese people', as Baruah mentions, underlines the motivations, tactics of mobilisation and methods of participation in the protests that I studied in Guwahati.

In Delhi, I did 9 interviews - of which 7 were women and 2 were men. While designing my sample, I had targeted 15 interviews from each field site, but there were several obstacles in accessibility. Many individuals who had previously agreed to participate later withdrew their consent, often citing concerns about personal safety amidst the rising Islamophobia in Delhi's everyday life. This pervasive atmosphere of fear and hostility affected participants' willingness to engage in research on a topic as politically charged as the anti-CAA/NRC movement. Growing surveillance and the stigmatisation of Muslim identities within public spaces contributed to an environment in which participants, especially those from marginalised communities, felt increasingly vulnerable, uncertain of the implications that sharing their experiences might carry.

These dynamics not only reduced the number of interviews I was able to conduct but also underscored the fraught reality of conducting research within a socio-political climate characterised by discrimination and distrust.

5.1.3.(b) Interview Structure

The interviews were semi-structured, and lasted about an hour each. The interviewees were contacted via phone calls and messages, and I scheduled the interviews to their convenience. I met with the respondents in cafes, offices, informal workspaces and homes – wherever they felt most comfortable to speak[42]. I relied on an interview guide to keep the conversation on track, and was accompanied by my key contact person to most of the interviews to establish trust and facilitate communication. The interviews in Guwahati were in English, Assamese and Hindi; and often involved all three languages with occasional Sylheti[43] words scattered in. In Delhi, they were in Hindi and English, with phrases of Urdu scattered in.

[42] Initially, I had planned to supplement the semi-structured individual interviews with focus group discussions. However, during the pilot stage of fieldwork, they quickly proved impossible given the nature of this research. The participants were unwilling to talk about the movement in the presence of people they did not know very well. Even within well established networks, there was visible discomfort among the participants and there was more silence than conversation. This showed the unfeasibility of this method for my research, and reasserted the importance of doing individual interviews while researching contentious topics. It also emphasised the relevance of the first round of my fieldwork to establish trust and get data.

[43] Sylheti Bengali, often simply called Sylheti, is a language or dialect spoken predominantly by people from the Sylhet region in northeastern Bangladesh, as well as by Sylheti-speaking communities in Assam (India), the UK, and other parts of the diaspora. Though closely related to Bengali (Bangla), Sylheti has distinct linguistic characteristics, including unique phonetic, grammatical, and vocabulary features, which sometimes make it mutually unintelligible to speakers of standard Bengali.

5.2. Data

In keeping with the ethical considerations, I prevented interviewees from saying their names or any revealing/identifying trait on tape. I recorded the interviews using my phone and uploaded the recordings to an encrypted cloud storage facility as soon as I had a good internet connection; deleting those from my phone's storage after. I did not use their original names in the notes I made during interviews. The signed consent forms were scanned and uploaded on the same cloud storage – along with the rest of the interview data, including recordings, transcriptions and contact details.

5.2.1. Organising Data, Thematic Analysis, and Reflexivity

In analysing the data collected, I employed Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), a method Braun and Clarke (2008) define as "a method for systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set." They argue that by focusing on meaning across a dataset, RTA enables researchers to discern and interpret "collective or shared meanings and experiences." The methodology's core principles of reflexivity and subjectivity play a central role in my research, allowing for a layered, interpretive approach that appreciates the nuances of social movement narratives and citizenship.

Throughout the research, I engaged critically with my standpoint, shaped by my position as a Bengali woman from the Indian mainland, recognising how this positionality might influence my understanding of Assamese resistance. As an outsider with ties to a community implicated in Assam's migration discourses, I was acutely aware that dominant narratives framing the anti-CAA movement as xenophobic could shape my interpretations of participants' perspectives. Acknowledging this risk, I employed reflexive journaling as an intentional feminist practice to interrogate moments where my interpretations may have been shaped by internalised biases or hegemonic framings that construct Assamese resistance as exclusionary. This process required continuous engagement with my assumptions and perceptions, allowing me to foreground participants' accounts on their own terms. By prioritising active, intersectional listening, I sought to honour the nuanced motivations articulated by participants–motivations that

often centred on cultural self-determination and regional autonomy, challenging simplistic or pathologising readings of the movement. This allowed me to approach Assamese voices with respect and complexity, foregrounding their agency while recognising the power dynamics and potential biases embedded in my positionality as a researcher.

In Delhi, I approached my role with heightened reflexivity, recognising my position as a privileged, upper-caste Hindu woman in a movement largely shaped by those who occupy marginalised social locations. My caste and religious background afforded me certain privileges within the socio-political landscape of Delhi, privileges that could distance me from the lived realities of many anti-CAA protesters, particularly those from Muslim and lower-caste communities. I was conscious that these privileges, intertwined with my identity, might lead to unconscious biases or limited understandings, particularly given the Hindu nationalist undercurrents influencing pro-CAA sentiments in the city. Reflexive journaling and critical self-examination throughout my research, interrogating moments where my interpretations could be influenced by my social position or internalised norms that could obscure or distort the participants' experiences and narratives, formed regular elements of my everyday routine on the field.

5.2.1(a) Core Principles of Reflexive Thematic Analysis

I chose RTA over other tools of analysis precisely because of its emphasis on the two critical aspects listed below.

Reflexivity: RTA is characterised by a researcher's active, critical reflection on how their positionality influences data construction and interpretation. Devine (2021) underscores the importance of researchers acknowledging their own assumptions, values, and experiences that may shape their understanding of the data. Reflexivity thus entails a constant evaluation of my own preconceptions and biases, facilitating a more self-aware, rigorous interpretation of the data. This approach is critical in examining movements like the anti-CAA/NRC protests, where the dynamics of power and marginalisation are complex and intertwined with personal and collective histories. Reflexivity allows me to be mindful of how my own identity and stance might affect my reading of participants' experiences, ensuring a conscientious engagement with the material.

Subjectivity: RTA diverges from methods that attempt to neutralise researcher influence. Instead, it recognises subjectivity as a valuable analytical tool. Subjectivity is not viewed as a limitation but rather as an essential component that shapes the analysis. The researcher's perspective becomes integral to the interpretive process, guiding how themes are constructed and insights developed. This is especially significant in studying social movements, as subjective insights can illuminate the lived, often deeply personal experiences of marginalised groups.

As Biagini (2017) noted in her PhD thesis, RTA's flexibility – stemming from its lack of rigid epistemological foundations, necessitates grounding in the researcher's own ontological and epistemological positioning. Biagini's work is a point of reference for my research because of its nature; in which she engages with the political activism of women in the context of a social movement. Throughout this chapter and across my thesis, I have engaged with this concern of positioning by critically reflecting on my positionality, and how it interacted with the participants' perspectives. Building on DeVault's (1990) strategies, I incorporated my experiences as a researcher to (a) construct relevant categories, (b) actively 'listen' to what remains unarticulated in interviews, and (c) apply conversation analysis to reveal underlying meanings.

These strategies contribute to a more rigorous, nuanced interpretation, ensuring that my analysis captures not only the explicit narratives but also the implicit silences within the data.

5.2.1(b) Reflexivity in Practice: Fieldwork in Guwahati

My identity as a Bengali woman from Kolkata influenced my interactions with participants in Guwahati, where responses to my presence were varied. There I was not an outsider researching a field, but someone implicated in its histories. As a Bengali-speaking woman whose familial and linguistic inheritance has been shaped by the very logics of displacement I critique, my identity shaped access, but also ethical discomfort, especially when navigating the ethno-nationalist logics that underpinned parts of the anti-CAA discourse.

I tried to respond to this through a feminist ethics of accountability: making visible the contradictions within solidarities, without delegitimising them. My intention was not to smooth over discomforts, but to show that feminist praxis often emerges within and not despite such tensions. Many participants perceived me as "a researcher from the mainland

affiliated with a European university," which prompted me to consciously address and dismantle the power hierarchies that surfaced in our interactions. It was critical for me to remain reflexive, acknowledging that my positionality carried specific assumptions and biases that could affect both the data collection process and my analysis.

However, this positionality also led to some scepticism about my ability to fully understand and accurately represent the struggles and experiences of the people in Assam. I sensed apprehension regarding my capacity to genuinely grasp their complex relationship with the state. Acknowledging and addressing these perceptions was essential, as it deepened my understanding of participants' mistrust toward outsiders – especially outside the activist 'circles' and enhanced my sensitivity in interpreting their narratives. Incorporating these reflexive insights into my analysis allowed for a more nuanced approach that respects the participants' perspectives and the historical and political contexts of the anti-CAA/NRC movement.

5.2.1(c) Broader Implications: Guarding Against 'Parachute Research'

Addressing these dynamics is crucial to counter the risks of what has been criticised as 'parachute research' – a term commonly used to describe researchers who briefly enter a region, gather data from predictable sources, and make superficial judgments. This critique is particularly resonant in the northeastern regions of India, where, as Ngaihte (2018) observes in a review of Chinai's book, there is a common grievance about "reporters who parachute in, meet with predictable sources, and pass ill-considered judgments." Although my work is academic rather than journalistic, the same concerns apply to researchers who may fail to engage deeply with local contexts and perspectives.

Standpoint theory and RTA offer effective tools for countering these risks. By grounding my analysis in reflexivity and the conscious use of thematic analysis, I remain attentive to the power dynamics embedded in my research. The emphasis on reflexivity ensures that I am constantly aware of my positionality and its impact on the research process. Standpoint theory, with its focus on valuing marginalised perspectives, reinforces my commitment to honouring the voices of those at the periphery of the 'nation' as they interpret and resist state policies. This approach allowed me to resist the tendencies of

'parachuting in' and instead fostered a collaborative, respectful relationship with my data and the individuals it represents.

5.2.2. Analysing the Data

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), as developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, served as the foundation of my qualitative approach throughout the data analysis phase. RTA was particularly suited to my research objectives due to its emphasis on reflexivity, allowing for a nuanced and interpretive analysis of complex social phenomena. This method enabled me to maintain an iterative approach, returning to the data multiple times with fresh perspectives, thus enriching my understanding at each stage.

5.2.2(a) The 6-Step Framework

Braun and Clarke's well-regarded 6-step framework for conducting thematic analysis provided the structural foundation of my analysis. The steps include:

1. **Familiarisation with Data**: Engaging deeply with the dataset by reading and re-reading the material to ensure thorough familiarity with the content.
2. **Generating Initial Codes**: Systematically coding all relevant and interesting features across the entire dataset.
3. **Searching for Themes**: Grouping codes into potential themes that address the research questions.
4. **Reviewing Themes**: Evaluating themes to confirm their alignment with both the coded extracts and the dataset as a whole.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes**: Refining and naming themes to encapsulate their essence.
6. **Producing the Report**: Finalising the analysis and writing up the results.

While these steps provided a guide, the iterative nature of RTA meant that I frequently revisited earlier steps as new knowledge emerged. Motherhood, for instance, was not a theme that I had set out to explore while designing the interview schedule. It however emerged as a powerful mobiliser for women in the anti CAA/NRC movement, in both the field sites. Insights from Della Porta's *Methodological Practices in Social Movement*

Research[44] further strengthened the reflexivity and analytical depth of this process. It emphasises the importance of flexibility and responsiveness to emerging themes in qualitative research on social movements, which aligns with the example given about motherhood emerging as an unexpected but significant theme in the anti CAA/NRC movement.

5.2.2(b) Key Stages of Reflexive Thematic Analysis

i. Familiarising Myself with the Data

The familiarisation phase required a sustained, immersive engagement with my data. This stage involved reading through interview transcripts, listening to audio recordings, and reviewing my field notes and observations repeatedly. Through this process, I developed an intimate understanding of my data, gaining insights into recurring themes and subtleties within participants' narratives. Importantly, I referred back to specific notes from interviews that were not recorded, allowing me to integrate observational and contextual details into my analysis. These reflections and initial ideas began to form a scaffold for the themes that would later be constructed.

ii. Generating Initial Codes

During the coding phase, I systematically worked through the entire dataset, identifying and labelling relevant features that related to my research questions. Coding in RTA is not a passive exercise but an active and reflexive engagement with the data. Rather than merely summarising content, I was interpreting and questioning each segment of data, drawing on my understanding of social movement theory, gender, and citizenship. This process required revisiting and revising codes as new perspectives unfolded, making it both an intensive and evolving task.

44 Della Porta, Donatella, ed. 2014. Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

iii. Constructing Themes

Once initial codes were established, I began searching for broader patterns and significant meanings within the data. At this stage, I was grouping related codes into larger themes, focusing on areas that shed light on the complex relationships between gender, activism, and citizenship in the anti-CAA/NRC movement. These themes were not simply "emerging" from the data but were being actively constructed through my interpretive engagement with the material. This phase involved collating relevant data extracts under each candidate theme, which I then examined for consistency and coherence.

iv. Reviewing Potential Themes

In the theme review phase, I evaluated the candidate themes in relation to both the coded extracts and the overall dataset. This critical step often led to refining themes, which involved splitting, combining, or even discarding themes that did not fully encapsulate the insights I sought to convey. I constantly questioned whether each theme contributed to my broader research questions and theoretical framework, a process that encouraged a rigorous assessment of my analytical choices.

v. Defining and Naming Themes

With the finalised themes, I undertook a detailed analysis of each, defining their scope and focus. This phase required clarifying the 'story' that each theme conveyed and ensuring that it aligned with my interpretive goals. The naming of each theme was equally significant; I aimed to create labels that were both descriptive and reflective of each theme's analytical depth. This stage represented a convergence of all prior efforts, as the themes took on distinct identities and began to articulate the nuanced experiences of citizenship within the movement.

vi. Writing My Findings

The final phase involved drafting an analytic narrative that integrated my themes with data extracts, positioning my analysis within the broader scholarship on citizenship, feminism, and social movements. Here, I connected my themes with existing research, allowing my findings to actively contribute to theoretical discourse. This phase not only synthesised my findings but also underscored the significance of a reflexive, feminist lens in understanding citizenship as a contested, lived experience.

5.2.2(c) Guiding Principles of doing Reflexive Thematic Analysis

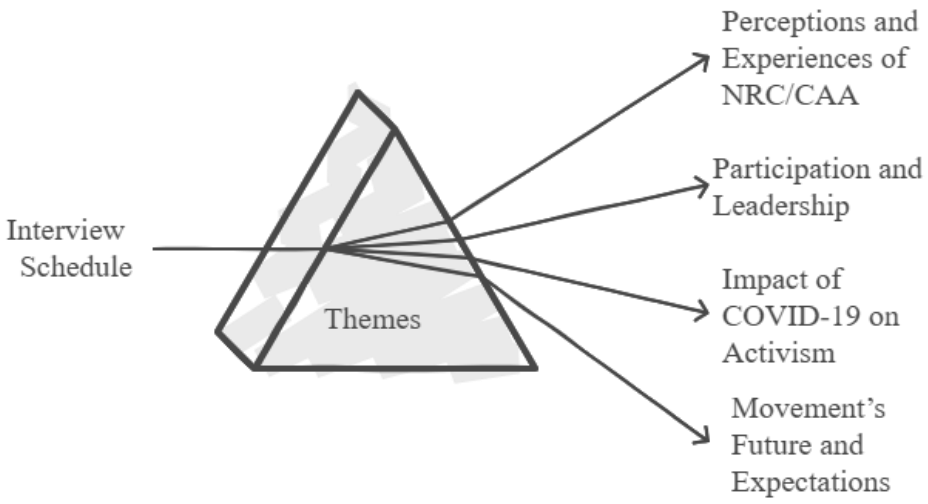
Guided by Braun and Clarke's principles, my analytical approach was iterative and recursive, embracing a non-linear process that allowed revisiting earlier stages to refine insights and maintain a fluid, responsive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Reflexivity was integral throughout, as I consistently examined how my positionality might shape my interpretations (Finlay, 2002; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Rather than passively "emerging" from the data, themes were actively constructed through engagement, reflection, and theoretical insight (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). I focused on identifying patterns of meaning that went beyond surface-level interpretations, aiming to uncover latent meanings within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Boyatzis, 1998). This depth of analysis aligns with feminist standpoint epistemology, which foregrounds the significance of women's lived experiences in knowledge production (Harding, 2004; Collins, 1997). Moreover, intersectionality theory informed my approach, recognising that gender intersects with other social identities to shape nuanced experiences of citizenship and activism (Crenshaw, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

This reflexive and interpretive method enabled me to situate women's voices within the broader discourse on citizenship and political activism in India, acknowledging both the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and participants and the inherently political nature of research on women's movements (England, 1994; Oakley, 2016; Naples, 2003; Mohanty, 2003). By adopting this reflexive thematic analysis, I sought to produce a rich, nuanced understanding of women's experiences in the context of citizenship and activism, contributing to empirical knowledge and theoretical discussions within feminist political sociology (McCall, 2005; Lister, 2007).

5.3. The Results

I began by thematically organising my interview schedule. I had questions that I asked across both the field sites, and a select number that were specific to the particular field. This was to account for the differences in the context and experiences of the cities of Guwahati and Delhi, despite being governed within the same federal framework. Thematically organised, the questions in the interview schedule could be organised into 4 main themes:

Fig 5.1: Thematic organisation of the interview schedule

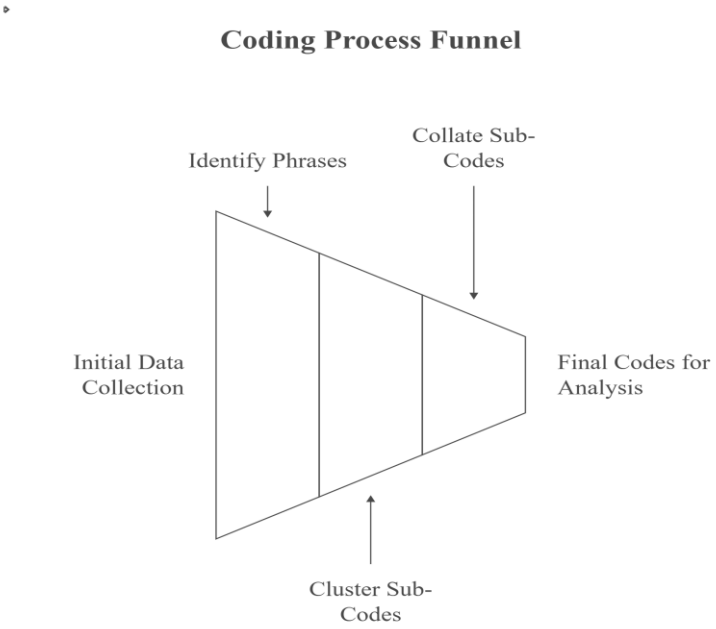


For analysis, I categorised the 4 themes under 2 broad categories - 'Movement' and 'Context'. This helped me distinguish between the codes I needed while analysing the mechanisms and experiences from the anti-CAA/NRC movement in Guwahati and Delhi, from the codes that contextualised those mechanisms and experiences. I then proceeded to code my data. I was using NVivo and occasionally MS Excel to cross-check for any potential errors. Coding was a 2-step process - where I first coded the interviews from Guwahati, then those from Delhi.

The emerging codes were different from each field site, but still fitting in the 4 thematic categories of the interview schedule. It was exceptionally helpful at this stage to look at the sites individually, and wait to explore the similarities and differences in the analysis

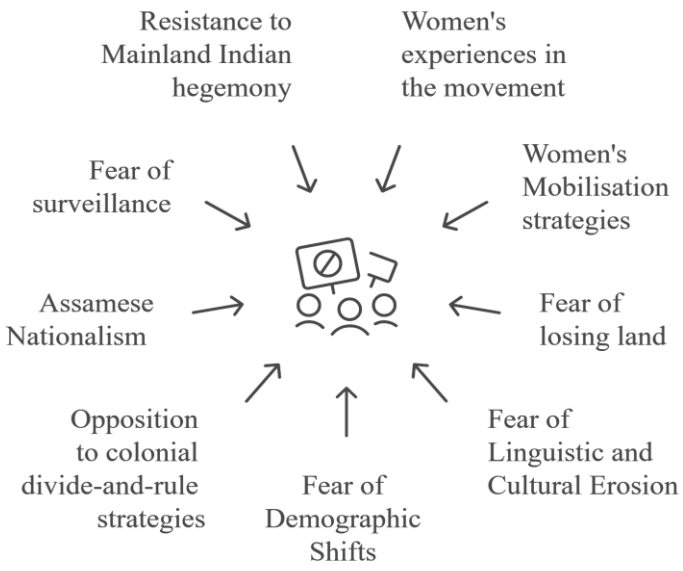
stage. In both cases, I arrived at the final codes through a funnelling process – firstly by identifying phrases, words and paragraphs that could be clustered together under a sub-code, and then by collating those sub-codes under the 9 I have presented for each of the field sites in the figures below. The sub-codes have played an important role in framing the empirical chapters that follow.

Fig 5.2: Coding Process Funnel



Using this funnel, the coding process remained accountable to the raw data. It helped me extract excerpts that I wanted to include as quotations in the empirical chapters, but also to create the divergent frames of analysing the two field sites. Briefly, the codes that emerged from my interviews in Guwahati were:

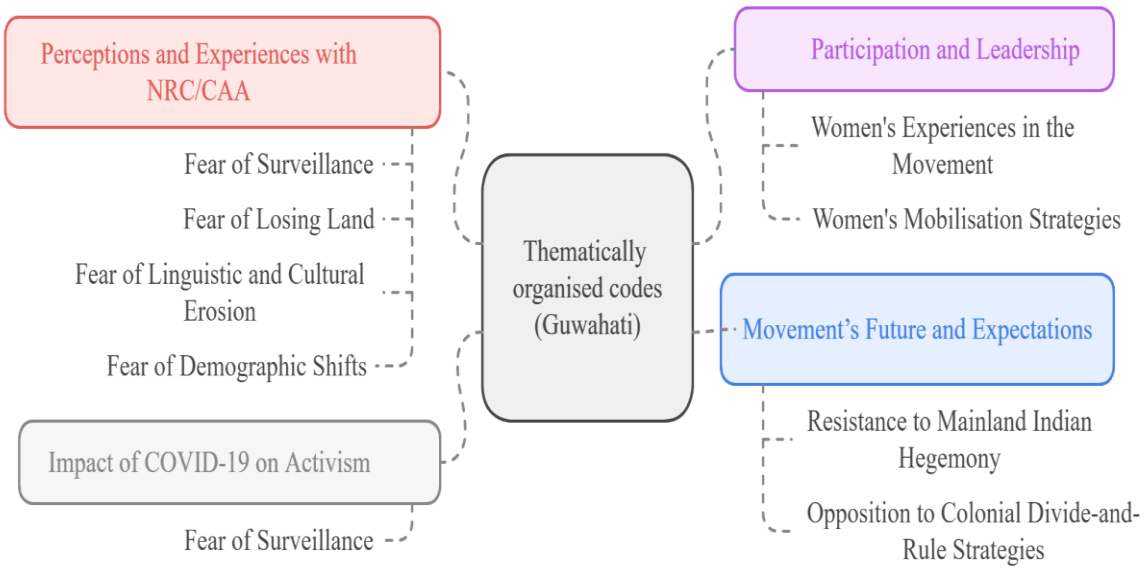
Fig 5.3: Codes emerging from Guwahati interview data



These codes reveal how activists perceived the CAA not merely as an isolated policy, but as part of a larger historical pattern of marginalisation, where Assam's unique identity and interests appeared subsumed by the hegemonic tendencies of the Indian state.

Organised under the four themes of the interview schedule, they were:

Fig. 5.4: Thematically organised codes for Guwahati



One of the central themes that surfaced from my analysis of the Guwahati interviews was a profound resistance to what participants saw as mainland Indian hegemony. The participants spoke of a longstanding regional grievance within Assam, where the policies of the central government were interpreted as an extension of colonial-style exploitation that benefited external interests at Assam's expense.

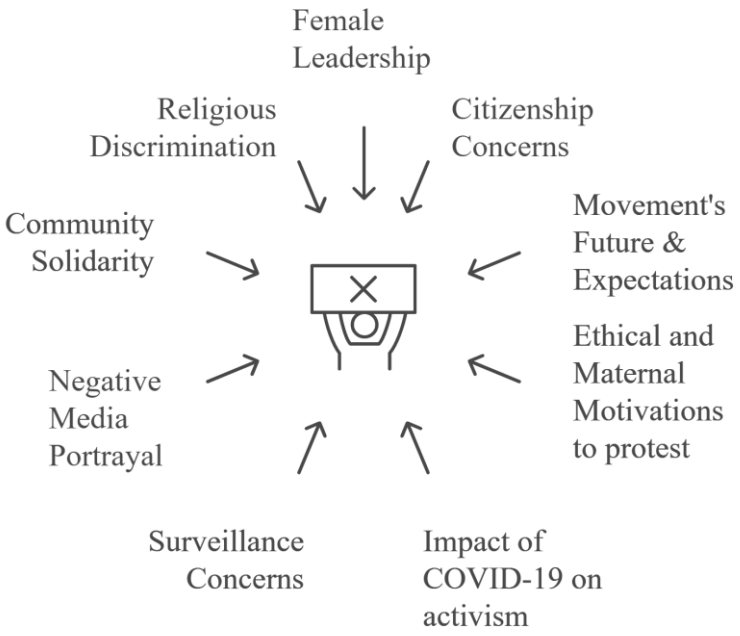
Many interviewees framed Assam's relationship with the central government as one marked by colonial dynamics, rooted in historical memories of resource extraction and cultural suppression. In this narrative, the CAA emerged as yet another policy that reinforced the central government's indifference to Assam's distinct cultural fabric and local needs. This sentiment extended into feelings of betrayal, where the Act symbolised a disregard for the indigenous Assamese population, favouring immigrant groups and thereby exacerbating the sense of exclusion and abandonment felt by many in the state.

Land and livelihood also emerged as vital issues within the movement, with women particularly vocal about the potential threats to Assam's agricultural and cultural heritage. Many interviewees framed their involvement as a defensive act to protect the land and resources upon which their communities depended. For many Assamese women, the land symbolised not only a means of subsistence but a critical part of their identity, deeply tied to their cultural heritage. This intrinsic connection to the land motivated their participation in the movement, as they saw their activism as necessary to defend Assam's agricultural resources against policies they perceived as existentially threatening.

Similarly, I coded the interviews I did in Delhi, letting myself be guided by the interview data and my field notes - and used the codes to inform the themes. In this case too, I could collate the codes into the 4 thematic areas of the interview schedule. However, the codes emerging out of the interviews in Delhi were noticeably different from those in Guwahati. This was a direct result of fundamental differences in the nature of the anti-CAA movement in Guwahati, and the anti-CAA/NRC movement in Delhi. This is where the use of Feminist Standpoint Theory becomes particularly relevant, for its ability to maintain the nuances while situating an otherwise vastly differentiated movement agenda on the spectrum of feminist resistance. Women were remarkably present and involved in the movement on both the sites, and this was highlighted throughout my data.

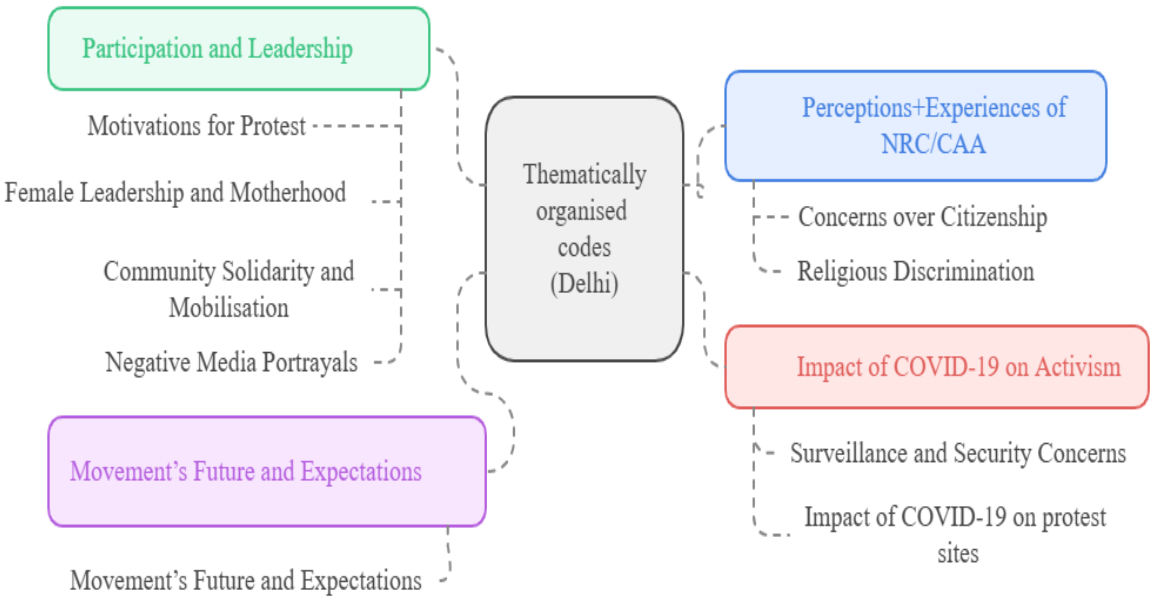
In Delhi, the codes that emerged were:

Fig. 5.5: Codes emerging from Delhi interview data



After identifying the codes, I matched them with the four themes to organise them, which were:

Fig. 5.6: Thematically organised codes for Delhi



Female leadership emerged as a significant theme in the Delhi interviews, as participants reflected on the inspiration they drew from iconic figures, particularly the female elders who led protests at Shaheen Bagh. The "Shaheen Bagh dadis" became powerful symbols of resilience and resistance, providing both motivation and a model of female empowerment within the movement. Their influence inspired other women to assume leadership roles and to create spaces within the protests where women could feel safe, included, and visible. The presence of these women-led spaces emphasised the movement's inclusivity and helped foster a supportive environment where gender dynamics were acknowledged and respected. This theme underscored how the movement enabled female participation and leadership in ways that challenged traditional gender norms, creating an intersectional, inclusive space for women to express their dissent and shape the protest narrative.

The movement was also shaped by personal motivations grounded in ethical and moral convictions. Many protesters, according to my interviews, were driven by a strong sense of justice and fairness, feeling compelled to act in response to what they perceived as an injustice to fellow citizens and marginalised communities. For these participants, the protests represented an assertion of fundamental values – equality, justice, and inclusivity – that they felt were being compromised by the government's policies. The desire to protect a diverse and inclusive Indian identity was a recurring sentiment, with protesters voicing a commitment to an India that embraces all religious and cultural identities. This personal connection to broader ethical values motivated individuals to stand in solidarity with those most directly impacted by the policies, even when they themselves may not have been immediately affected.

The advantages of using RTA for my analysis appeared in its four most lauded aspects:

Firstly, in its application to diverse data sources. I was applying reflexive thematic analysis across various qualitative data types in the anti-CAA/NRC movement, including interview transcripts, protest slogans and chants, and images from protests. Secondly, in identifying key themes. Through thematic analysis, I was identifying recurring themes and patterns that revealed how the participants were framing issues, constructing collective identities, and articulating grievances and demands. This process was essential in uncovering the underlying ideologies and meaning-making processes within the particular events of protest that I studied. Thirdly, in exploring narratives – in this case, narratives of the anti-CAA/NRC movement. By identifying themes within movement

texts and conversations, I was analysing the narratives and stories constructed by the participants to make sense of their struggles and to mobilise support. Finally, the most crucial was its applicability to the process of comparing across the protests in the two field sites. I was using RTA to systematically compare themes across the two field sites (Guwahati and Delhi), which helped reveal both similarities and differences in movement ideologies and strategies.

Finally, to ensure robustness of the research, I adhered to two rules of RTA, namely, *negative case analysis*, where I was actively searching for data that contradicted or did not fit within my established themes. This approach was refining and strengthening my thematic framework, ensuring it was both comprehensive and robust. I was also carrying out *saturation checks***,** and ensuring that each theme had sufficient weightage to support it, checking for thematic saturation. If any themes lacked sufficient backing, I was considering whether to discard or merge them to maintain coherence and validity in the analysis.

Thus, this chapter has articulated the feminist, intersectional, and reflexive framework that underpins this research. By situating it within the contours of FST, I have adopted a critical, participatory approach to knowledge production that values the perspectives of marginalised groups, recognising these as essential to understanding citizenship, resistance, and identity within postcolonial India. This approach acknowledges that, the participants' positionalities within complex matrices of gender, ethnicity, and regional identity yield critical insights that challenge dominant narratives, and highlight the structural inequalities shaping their experiences.

Throughout this thesis, my engagement with the data is informed by my own situated identity as a researcher both within and outside these communities. I have addressed the intricate power dynamics involved in co-constructing knowledge with participants whose lived experiences diverge from my own. This reflexivity has been vital in navigating the complex layers of privilege, marginality, and interpretive authority inherent in this research. With that established, the following chapters turn to my empirical findings.

6. Centre Stage: Feminist Resistance and the Reimagining of Citizenship in Delhi

"…a cultural imaginary has been allowed to sediment wherein "women's issues" are feminised and "national issues" that lay claim to greater inclusivity, diversity, and generality, are masculinised." - Basu, 2023

With reflexivity as the cornerstone of my fieldwork, I designed it in two phases – a pilot phase to make contacts and establish trust followed by in-depth interviews, conversations and observations that form the bulk of my data. This chapter is a nod to McClintock (1996) and O'Keefe (2018)'s challenge to the dichotomy of 'masculine and feminine' in the social imaginary (as I have elaborated in Chapter 3) using Basu's India-specific critique (2023).

Social imaginary, as Charles Taylor describes in his book Modern Social Imaginaries (2004), is the way people conceive of their social existence – how they interact with others, the nature of their relationships, the expectations they generally have, and the deeper normative ideas and images that support these expectations. This imaginary forms the "common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (Taylor 2004, p.23). I use it interchangeably with 'political imaginary', as the structures through which people imagine their place in society are inseparable from *how* power and legitimacy are constructed. Put simply, this term is employed here to describe the normative structures through which belonging, authority, and legitimacy are imagined.

As Basu suggests in the opening quote, the political imaginary in India continues to privilege masculine forms of political agency; leading to the assumption that citizenship, and subsequently the contentions around citizenship are matters of the masculine, and thereby to be led by men. She says:

> Feminist uprisings have secured, to an extent, a hard-won acceptance for women's leadership on matters that are earmarked as "women's issues"...in that very process, a political imaginary has emerged that draws a fallacious boundary around the constitution of "women issues" as distinct or worse, as a subcategory, of "national issues"; Within the cordon of "women's issues", women may spread their wings of leadership and no further, while "national issues" remain within the command of men (p. 226).

I challenge that here by demonstrating the methods used, motivations for, and experiences of the two groups spearheading the anti CAA/NRC movement in Delhi – the female students at the campuses of Jamia Millia Islamia university (JMI) and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), and the women at the Shaheen Bagh encampment. That 'women's movements' are not only the ones concerned with the regulation or violation of the female body, but in fact encompass a movement concerning the very 'masculinised' issue of citizenship is the central thesis of my work. To that end, the chapter is organised into three main sections on situating the field, understanding Delhi's protests as a 'women's issue' (Basu, 2023), and the motivations (why) and methods (how) of their resistance.

This chapter, therefore, uses Basu's challenge to the political imaginary of 'masculinised national issues' as its analytical foundation to do three things. First, it explores the social, political, and emotional factors that propelled women into acts of active citizenship. Second, it critically analyses the creation of Shaheen Bagh as a feminist and pluralist counter-public; and third, it contends that the peaceful 101-day sit-in was not only a protest against discriminatory legislation, but also a direct confrontation with the violence of a hetero-patriarchal, authoritarian state. In doing so, the chapter nuances Basu's critique by demonstrating that gender is not marginal to the political - it is omnipresent, even in so-called 'national' issues.

To ground these arguments, I begin with a mapping of the field – Delhi as a gendered landscape of protest – and trace how my own situated presence shaped the methodological and epistemological commitments of this research.

6.1. Tracing the Terrain: Embodied Feminist Fieldwork in Delhi

India's capital city, New Delhi (alternatively referred to as Delhi), is no stranger to social movements. As the national capital, it commands substantial media attention, and is a popular choice for making dissenting voices heard. The city's student culture is politically charged, and often spearheads civil society's political articulation. There are two ways civil society reacts to social problems in the sphere of politics: opposition by public protest and the creation of self-organised alternative spaces (Adloff, 2021). In Delhi's anti-CAA/NRC movement, the public protests led to the creation of self-organised alternative spaces, the most prominent of which was the encampment at Shaheen Bagh. These spaces were not just oppositional - they were generative. These were spaces where

protest and care collapsed into one another, where the act of gathering was itself a claim to citizenship, visibility, and community.

My fieldwork in Delhi, as mentioned above, was in two phases - a pilot stage in 2023 and the substantive phase of data collection in 2024. However, in essence, the work had begun since before I started my PhD in 2021 – in terms of tracking the protests as they happened in university campuses across the city. It was not taking field notes from a researcher's gaze, but heated debates, solidarity marches and writing letters to editors of national newspapers as a student, to strengthen what was then a student movement. The Shaheen Bagh movement had collectivised shortly after, and lasted over three months before being forced to withdraw suddenly by the COVID-19 pandemic induced lockdown. This earlier involvement forms an important backdrop to my formal fieldwork for it is not background noise, but constitutive of my epistemic location. Feminist standpoint theory foregrounds such situated knowledge as a source of insight, rather than contamination.

I started my PhD data collection in Delhi in February 2023. By this time, nearly three years had passed since the anti-CAA/NRC protests were abruptly dispersed by the COVID-19 lockdown, and many student leaders had been incarcerated under the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA)[45]. Re-entering the field meant navigating a city marked by surveillance and fear - conditions that shaped both access and methodology. I had just spent a month in Guwahati, doing interviews and immersing myself back into the field I had left four years ago. It had helped reattune me to the affective registers of fieldwork, and I carried this sensitivity into my Delhi encounters. I found that while formal interviews were at times difficult to secure, the field itself was alive with memory - of protest, incarceration, and care. It took several cups of tea, meeting old friends and getting them to introduce me to new people – understanding the pulse of the city before bringing up the conversation around NRC and CAA. The interviews I secured of course form the core of my data, but the field notes proved indispensable when reconstructing feminist geographies of dissent in Delhi.

I had started the pilot study by calling friends in universities, and meeting them in their campus canteens. I spoke to professors and civil society activists, who could not give me

[45] The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA)is routinely used by the government to bypass human rights and stifle dissent. In 2018, the conviction rate under UAPA was 27% while 93% of the cases remained pending in the court. It is a mere tool of harassment that the government uses to harass, intimidate and imprison those who are critical of the government. The slow investigative processes and extremely stringent bail provisions under UAPA ensure that they are locked up for years altogether, creating a convenient setting for unlawful detention and torture. (Amnesty International, May 5, 2020)

an interview, but pointed me to people who could. The pilot study proved incredibly helpful in establishing trust and building networks, as I had intended. Although it proved difficult to get interviews because of the declaration of the rules of CAA at the same time had created a tense environment, and the overall fear around the incarceration of anti-CAA/NRC activists, I had access to a rich, colloquial discourse on the movement. In March 2024, I returned to Delhi for the primary data collection. This phase involved in-depth interviews and detailed fieldnotes, all grounded in the feminist ethics of care, consent, and relational accountability.

The movement started in Delhi as soon as the Act was passed in the legislature on December 11, 2019. In protest, the students of JNU, JMI and other campuses in and around the city started mobilising. It grew quickly, since JNU was already agitating over a recent fee hike, in addition to the overall inflation of expenses in public education in India. CAA was being protested since 2018, even before it had received the Presidential assent and became an Act, these early expressions of dissent had not yet coalesced into a sustained social movement. Where Guwahati had already collectivised over fears of legitimising illegal immigrants since 2018[46], interviewees in Delhi consistently recalled that it was the police brutality inflicted on student protestors on 13 December 2019 that galvanised widespread resistance. As McCarthy and Zald (1977) argue in their foundational work on resource mobilisation theory – social movements build momentum rapidly when they utilise an existing political mood, and do so at the right time.

Even before the CAA and NRC, disillusionment with the NDA-led government had been steadily mounting among India's progressive student and intellectual communities. The rise of Hindu supremacist rhetoric (Rashid, Abbas and Bilal, 2022; Chatterji, Hansen and Jaffrelot, 2019), the vigilante politics of cow protectionism[47], criminalisation of dissent (Sundar, 2019), anti-feminist political statements (Chacko, 2020) from leaders and attacks on critical academia (Das, 2024; Jayal, 2022) were among other concerning trends invoking this skepticism. Not to mention that these developments disproportionately

[46] When the CAB was first pitched at the lower house of the Parliament before being stalled for a year.

[47] On September 28, 2015, the 52-year-old ironsmith was dragged from his house in the village of Bishahra, in the district of Dadri in Uttar Pradesh, after a local Hindu temple announced that a cow, considered sacred by many Hindus, had been slaughtered. He was beaten to death and his son was severely wounded. Across India, gau raksha samitis have been formed which act as quasi-official bodies. The trend of mob lynching Muslim men over suspicions of beef consumption/sale has intensified since. In 2023, Abdul Ansari died of the same brutality. The conviction rate in such cases also remains low, according to a study published in 2020 by the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism. "The victims and their families are intimidated to not pursue legal course," the report said (Engineer et al.,2021).

impacted women and gender-marginalised individuals through hypermasculinist nationalism, moral policing, and targeted suppression of feminist academics and student leaders. It was thus no surprise that the protest ecology that emerged was already gendered, even if not yet self-consciously feminist.

The student movement clustering in Delhi in 2019 had all of the aforementioned reasons at its heart, resulting in a cumulative outrage. Demonstrations of this discontent included student-led rallies, sit-ins, and strikes within the campus. Concerns over the threat posed by CAA and NRC to India's secular fabric was Delhi's larger point of protest, accelerated by the anger and disbelief at Delhi Police's use of force on university campuses. Although the protests initially lacked an overtly "feminist agenda"[48], they quickly evolved into one of the most significant icons of feminist solidarity and mobilisation in contemporary South Asia.

For women in the anti-CAA/NRC protests, the discourse on the use of women's bodies by women themselves for a 'nationalist' cause is an issue of agency. While feminist theorists continue to question what women's participation in nationalist movements can possibly yield for a gender-just society, Muslim women at Delhi's university campus protests or at Shaheen Bagh demonstrated that 'nationalism' from the margins can be an effective tool in preserving a pluralist political framework. This, in turn, created the space to push for a gender-just society that transcends the narrowness of a religio-political state.

6.2. Visibility as Resistance: Gendered Participation and Performative Dissent

On December 13, the Delhi police lathi-charged and shelled tear gas on students inside JMI's campus[49], which the protestors alleged to be a direct violation of the Fundamental Rights in India. The Constitution of India enshrines the citizen's right to protest under two clauses of Article 19 – Article 19 (1)(a) guarantees the freedom to speech and expression[50], and Article 19 (1)(b) allows for assembling peacefully and without arms. A

[48] Referring to Tamanna Basu's conceptualisation of the cultural imagery that makes 'citizenship' a political, national issue, and therefore makes it too masculine to be the cause of a "women's movement".
[49] see "Recounting Police Brutality in Jamia", 2020; "Jamia Violence: Delhi Court Slams Delhi Police for Atrocities on Jamia Millia Islamia Students during Anti-CAA Protests", 2019.
[50] The Constitution (First Amendment) Act, 1951, made several changes to the Fundamental Rights Part of the Indian constitution where it amended Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution to counteract the

young Muslim woman, Rabia, who I interviewed on the third day of my Delhi fieldwork, was preparing for her end semester examinations when JMI was attacked. Sitting across me, alert in her posture, she said:

> I had my exams going on, it being December and all. We had been protesting for a couple of days already - in solidarity with friends at JNU - so we were attending meetings, walking in rallies within the campus. By this time, the people of Okhla in general had joined the protest against CAA and NRC, so it was no longer limited to the campus. On the 13th, I was with my friends. We were not scared of the police around us - it was just the police! Walking in a peaceful march is my fundamental right as an Indian citizen! I could never imagine that the law enforcement, somebody who is “paid to protect you" could do something like that.

The disbelief in her voice can be traced to India’s constitutional structure - the pluralist framework Bajpai (2022) refers to. The national school curriculum teaches the role of debate and dissent in the Constituent Assembly proceedings that formed the Constitution of India, 1951; the Parliament functions with legislative debates as its basis; the right to voice dissent is protected by two clauses of Article 19 - (1)(a) and (1)(b) – which is a Fundamental Right possessed by every citizen of India; and therefore shapes ‘The Argumentative Indian’, as the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen titled his book on Indian pluralism in 2006. It can thus be argued that India, from its very inception as a modern state, has had a structure that integrates differences, and thereby, the ordinary Indian citizen does not perceive peaceful protest as a punishable offence. The pluralist framework of the Indian polity forms the legal and legitimate basis for active citizenship – what Rabia was exercising before being subjected to police violence. She went on to say:

> We were marching a very peaceful, silent march to the Parliament. However, Sukhdev Vihar, right where JMI ends, was barricaded already. The police started lathi charging and beating people up in our march! So we ran back - and they started shelling tear gas. JMI has this gate no. 4, where we went in - all the women. The men, I am

"abuse of freedom of speech and expression." This decision followed criticism in the press regarding the government's response to issues like the West Bengal refugee crisis and extrajudicial killings in Madras. Initial attempts to censor the press were ruled unconstitutional, leading the government to employ judicial decisions as justification for limiting freedom of speech. Despite opposition concerns about democratic principles, the Congress government proceeded with the amendment, citing international examples of regulating speech to prevent abuse. (https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1218090/#:~:text=Freedom%20to%20Move%20Freely%20%2D%20Article,any%20place%20of%20their%20choice)

> so proud of them for realising that as a gender minority we were more in danger than they were. They pushed us in. They made us hide. There was still the belief that the police would not enter university grounds, so we would be safe there. So, a couple of my friends and I remained there. The police came in. Inside the campus, inside gate number 4! They came inside the campus and they mercilessly beat a young man right in front of us.

This excerpt from the interview is an interesting argument in favour of the agency of the female body in social movements. The interviewee noted the protection offered by her fellow male protestors, acknowledging the greater risk of sexual harassment and violence faced by women protestors in police custody. Two days later, three young women from JMI were hailed across India[51] for physically defending their male friend from the baton-yielding Delhi police. Here, the vulnerability of the female body is subverted and used as a shield – one that cannot be attacked as easily by the state in public. Thus, the debate on feminism's interaction with nationalism resurfaces, questioning the conceptualisation of the female body in the nationalist rhetoric. Nationalism's dialogue with feminism is fraught with tensions – since the former operates within the hetero-patriarchal status quo of the modern nation-state, where women and gender diverse people find themselves on the margins of several intersectionalities.

Bringing us squarely into the discussion on mother politics in Chapter 3 (3.1. Feminism and Nationalism), India's nationalist project has been fashioned and refashioned since its decolonisation from the British in 1947, but what has stayed constant is the image of 'Mother India' and its sons defending her honour. This is a loaded imagery – the construction of the nation as the 'mother' reestablishes the feminine as a relational identity, particularly, to be identified through her relationship with the masculine; mother, sister, wife, daughter etc. The existence of 'mother India' is thus through her relationship with her children, defended by her 'sons' on the frontiers, fighting off the enemy. This fuels a masculine, militarised political imaginary, where women are to be 'defended' and 'protected', and seldom acknowledged as agents of their own fate.

Across religions, and intersections of other identities in India, the female body continues to be seen through the lens of 'honour' and 'protection' – failing to break away from the patriarchal imaginary of gender. In this context, it manifests in 'dress codes' in

[51] See Kuchay, 2019.

universities that forbids women from wearing ‘revealing clothes’, stigmatising survivors of sexual violence for being outside in the city at night, imposing night curfews in hostels for ‘protection of young women’ and dumping on women the responsibility of not being harassed by behaving ‘modestly’ in the male gaze.

All the points mentioned above can be seen in the university campuses of Delhi, that are usually known to impose strict curfews on resident female students. Notorious for the same are private hostels and accommodations that crop up near the campuses. Collectives like Pinjra Tod (literally translating to ‘break the cage’) have been protesting this sexist agenda of a culture that restricts its women from leading full, adult, individual lives in the name of ‘protection’ (Lochan, 2019). In South Asia, women move through spaces defined by societal and civic authority perceptions of safety and risk.

Lochan (2019) uses Pinjra Tod and similar protest movements and individual acts of resistance to demonstrate that, for these women, the concept of “embodiment” of identity and politics underscores their treatment as mere bodies – vulnerable on the streets or deemed safe only when confined to their hostels after a specific evening curfew. In protest, these women use their bodies to reject the fabricated notions of safety and peril – a reminder of the conceptual vocabulary of this research, especially highlighting agency and solidarity (Chapter 4). The “embodiment” that Lochan talks about draws upon Butler (2015)’s contention that is best summed up in Riofrancos’ review:

> that by visibly and publicly inserting their bodies into the “sphere of appearance,” those who live under conditions of induced vulnerability not only disrupt that sphere – exposing themselves as its constitutive exclusions (its “structuring absence”) – but also through the concrete practices of resistance, assembly, and occupation prefigure a more livable world to come, “a future that is yet to be lived out” (Riofrancos, 2017, p.266)

These women indeed “prefigure a more livable world”; asserting their presence in previously inaccessible spaces, such as chai stalls, dhabas, playgrounds, and buses, where they engage in activities like street theatre, sit-ins or dharnas, dancing, singing, and reciting poetry. Through the reclamation of the everyday, comes into existence the self-organised alternative spaces that Adloff (2021) suggests as civil society’s way to address social problems. During the anti-CAA/NRC movement, these otherwise mundane and scattered acts of women’s everyday protest collectivised as methods of demonstrating

resistance at and beyond Shaheen Bagh – forming the 'infrapolitics' (Chapter 4, section 4.5) of the movement, and of a larger gendered citizenship.

6.2.1. The role of violence in making it a "women's movement"

Accessibility of public spaces as an assertion of feminist activism emerged as a recurrent theme in my research on Delhi – the Pinjra Tod brand of politics where they use their bodies as their tool for political assertion carried into the camps at Shaheen Bagh. However, it was the police violence in JMI on December 13, 2019 that pitted the otherwise conservative hostel authorities and students together, trying to create an envelope of safety in a breached campus. The strict segregation of male and female bodies demanded by the university accommodation was disrupted by the attack on its students on December 13. Rabia, a resident of the women's hostel recounted how the authorities behaved unusually in their urgency to protect their students, irrespective of gender. She said:

> I think that day everyone knew that something bad was going to happen. They let in all the men inside the hostel campus. They let all of them inside the hostel! They frown at us even getting dropped off by a male friend at the gate, and they let them in! All the male students, for their safety! They were all hiding in the first-floor dining hall. I think there were 250-300 male students there that day. Crazy! That was my hostel. I think there must have been a lot in the other hostel as well. Initially they were like no, then they saw a huge mass of panicked, hurt students running for shelter. You know, Jamia doesnot have a medical school, so they started calling for any student of Dentistry and any student of Physiotherapy and anyone with any kind of medical supplies, over the hostel announcement system. They said 'anyone with any kind of medical supplies should come down. We desperately need it.' I was in my room and I had some antiseptic. So, I took that and went downstairs. There was a student of physiotherapy, and she was trying to hold the bleeding head of someone. A guy had been hit on his head. I donot know what he was hit with, but it was so strong that his skull had cracked open. There are certain visuals in your life that you cannot ever forget. I just remember her hands trembling.

The violence on protesting students by the state machinery in India's national capital did not stay limited to charging batons and tear gas at rallies - but expanded to attacks on students studying for their exams in the university library in the next two days. The word 'attack' was used specifically by a legal practitioner in my interview with her, describing

the events on December 15, 2019, two days after the violence on protesting students in the rally. More students, even those who did not get involved in the anti-CAA/NRC protests before, were mobilised in anger over their peers being brutalised by Delhi Police. They had collectivised again in a rally on December 15, in response to which hundreds of police officers forcibly entered the campus and detained over a hundred students. In our conversation, Zoya, a legal practitioner talked at length on how she and her colleagues had hurried to reach the premises before the Police could cordon it off, making evidence inaccessible. We were having tea when she carefully looked around, checking for eavesdropping and surveillance before saying

> ...you had blood on chairs, on tissues, books torn apart. I remember seeing a book by Machiavelli on the floor at the library, under a chair, just lying there. There were tube lights hanging from their sockets in the ceiling. There were some lathis[52] of some of the cops, just on the chairs. There were chappals[53], like one pair of a chappal in one corner and the other one. The staircase had blood drops; there was blood throughout the libraries. There were two libraries. Both of them were attacked. I refuse to use another word here; those were attacks on students inside university libraries.

The women I interviewed in Delhi used the word 'attack' repeatedly when talking about what made them join the movement. This is important, for I asked no specific question regarding violence in the interviews. There was an almost unanimous identification of police brutality on unarmed students as the leading cause of galvanising Delhi's women in the forefront of the anti-CAA/NRC movement. When visualised, the data from my interviews with the protestors in Delhi show a clear tendency to identify the movement with a response to the physical violence suffered by university students. Below is a wordcloud (a cluster of the words that were used most by the interviewees in Delhi) testifying to the same. The bigger and bolder a word, the more is the frequency with which it was used. The most frequently encountered words are in orange and the largest font, followed by black, and lastly by grey in the smallest font. 'Attack' shows up in black, as one of the second most frequently used words across all the interviews in Delhi, along with 'harassment'.

[52] The Hindi word for sticks.
[53] Sandals or flip flops.

Fig. 6.1. A word cloud of the words used most frequently in the interview transcripts from Delhi

The condemnation in the interviewee's statement sparks a debate on the legal versus the legitimate in public consciousness. There is a palpable moral distaste towards police presence on the premises of educational institutes – also witnessed (most recently) in the Palestinian solidarity encampments by university students in the USA[54], and across the world. The attacks on the students of JMI inside their campus was perceived by the protestors directly violates the Indian citizen's right to freedom of speech under Article 19 of the Constitution of India. The academic ground is supposed to be a space for free and critical thinking - which is increasingly threatened by the NDA-led federal government.

The anti-CAA/NRC protests were already shaping up in the larger society of Delhi, but the police violence on students made it spill out of the campuses and into the encampment at Shaheen Bagh. The movement could always be located in the ambit of feminist politics, but this fuelled what would then be emulated across the country in female-led encampments until halted by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Prior to the attacks on JMI's students, the protests were isolated, in pockets of far spread university campuses. The anti-CAA/NRC movement in Delhi that went on to garner international attention for feminist activism, was galvanised not only by the passage of the contentious acts, but also by the common people's disbelief and disapproval of state attacks on university students.

[54]See Rozner and Fan, "NYPD Clears Encampments at NYU", 2024.

Indian university campuses are generally not prone to police infiltration of this kind, but there is no legal provision in the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) to prevent such intrusion. The Vice Chancellor of JMI met this with severe reproach, and was recorded telling the media: "Police entered the campus without permission. We will not tolerate police presence on campus. They scared our students with police brutality. There has been huge damage to university property," said Najma Akhtar, adding, "We will file an FIR on damage of property and police action on students."[55] The centrality of JMI in the discourse on the movement in Delhi draws from the importance of its physical location and the demographic constitution of Okhla, where the university is located. Sharma and Singh (2023) refer to Ghazala Jamil's work on Muslim segregation (2014) during the rise in communal tensions in the 1990s[56] to assert JMI as a key consideration in motivating Muslim relocation to Jamia Nagar.

> …JMI has always held aspirational status for the residents of Jamia Nagar due to its promise of socio-economic mobility. Considering the intricate ties between the occupants of Shaheen Bagh and JMI, it is easy to understand why the area erupted into protests when the Delhi police stormed the campus of JMI on 15 December 2019 and attacked the students demonstrating against the CAA" (Sharma and Singh, 2023).

This played an important role in the formation of the Shaheen Bagh encampment, which started as an organic gathering of worried family members, neighbours, civil society individuals, and students and eventually evolved into a momentous sit-in that lasted for over a hundred days. Shaheen Bagh is situated at the convergence of several Muslim residential localities. The area is home to Muslims of divergent socio-economic backgrounds, including labouring classes, wealthy businessmen, and white-collared professors teaching at the adjacent university. JMI, like its neighbouring Shaheen Bagh, is located in the larger urban neighbourhood of Okhla, which falls on the border between Delhi and the bustling satellite town of Noida.

Britta Ohm (2021) connects the 'legal awareness' of Shaheen Bagh residents to the 2008 Batla House encounter, during which Delhi police shot two Muslim men suspected of

[55] See Dutta, "Jamia Protest", 2019.

[56] In 1992, the demolition of Babri Masjid by the right wing extremist Vishwa Hindu Parishad led to several months of Hindu-Muslim riots in Delhi and its surrounding areas. Muslims were targeted and they sought refuge in numbers, relocating to muslim-majority areas in South Delhi's Okhla. Jamia Nagar, Shaheen Bagh are among such neighbourhoods.

terrorism in the Jamia Nagar area. Ohm observes that the residents experienced a wave of injustice and shock following the encounter, which led to an increase in police excesses against them. Consequently, the protesters had 'ample experience with family members being exposed to arbitrary police harassment and detention' (p.758). The December 13 violence had spilled out to the neighbourhood of Okhla. Civilians who were not a part of the protest rally caught stray bullets. In my interview with Zoya, the following case of a young man who caught a stray bullet surfaced:

> I remember there was this one person; he was twenty one or twenty two years old. He was at the NFC crossing, where students were marching and protesting, but it was time for the namaz, so they got a corner to sit down and pray. He parked the scooter to pray. He used to live in Okhla but mind you, he was not a student. He was not even participating in the protest! He was just a Muslim man on the road. He bent down to say his namaz. The police started shooting. They ran. He got a bullet on his thigh. In that condition, he somehow got on his scooter, and reached home. I am not sure how his case came to us. We went to the concerned police station to register the case. Stupid of us, now that I think about it, but this is how it happens. They started interrogating him instead. There was considerable intimidation, even with three lawyers in the room with him. Three of us! He was the sole breadwinner of his family, had two siblings, and a mother. Father is not there. It scared him so much. They did not register the case. He started being threatened on the phone, and he never registered his case, like most of such cases. We never heard from him again.

Three of my interviewees, all volunteers in legally combating the violence inflicted on unarmed civilians during the movement in Delhi, gave such accounts of people who were casualties of police violence without any involvement in the protest. Notably, the cases narrated always had a Muslim victim – especially one that was distinguishable through their religious clothing. The fez cap or the burqa made a common ground for vulnerability. This did not disappear with the forced end to the movement either – prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. During my fieldwork in 2024, a sub-inspector of Delhi Police was caught on camera kicking a man bent in prayer outside a mosque[57]. The burqa wearing Muslim woman in the anti-CAA/NRC movement, loudly blockading and occupying public space, thus becomes even more powerful as a symbol

[57]See Sankaran, "Delhi Police Suspend Official Caught on Camera Kicking Muslim Men Offering Prayers", 2024.

of resistance – the resistance Butler refers to in their theory of assembly through performative, embodied dissent (2015).

6.3. Feminised transgression into masculinised politics

Basu (2023) articulates this embodied, performative dissent by women in Delhi, who, she says,

> …had placed their bodies at the helm of marches, gatherings, sit-ins, and rallies; shouting, screaming, orating, sloganeering atop stages, barricades, and cars; making art, beating drums, laughing, clapping, singing, dancing bodies in rhythm; legs apart, arms raised, mouths open, commanding attention, taking up space (Basu, 2023, p.).

Not only women, but the larger city of Delhi raged in protest against this manifest and structural violence[58] in collectives - of students, of feminist activist circles, of intergenerational solidarity networks, and of completely spontaneous collectives forming to protest 'religious discrimination'. Most famous of this was older women from Okhla, who blockaded an arterial highway connecting Delhi with the satellite cities of Noida and Faridabad with a 101day sit-in strike, garnering international attention and support for the 'noticeably religious yet inclusive protest site' (Sharma and Singh, 2023). Known as the Shaheen Bagh protests, this encampment became an iconic visual representation of what the anti-CAA/NRC movement in India's mainland was.

[58] Johan Galtung (1969) talked about the harder to discern structural violence, which can be applied to the concept of CAA because it discriminates and thereby restricts a certain section of population from accessing an opportunity based on an ascribed factor - that of religion.

Fig 6.2. A postcard from Shaheen Bagh

Source: Sameera, Interviewee

Butler's 'Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly' that I referred to in the previous section is the most relevant this part of my research. Weaving their conceptualisation of precarity with the gendered politics of public assembly, Butler's political theory shows up as an interesting pivot for an analysis of the Shaheen Bagh encampment. Here I use the term encampment to denote the very organised camp(s) set up at Shaheen Bagh, using blockading as a protest tool to make their demands heard. There were several 'camps' (temporary structures erected by hoisting tarpaulin sheets on bamboo, doing nothing to insulate the protestors from Delhi's bitter January cold); a central sit-in area, a library, a legal-advice zone, a medical camp and very interestingly, a children's' library + care space where volunteers took time to look after the children while women sat in the demonstrations. There were books in abundance, philosophical discussions on secularism in India, young college students teaching history and political science to the children whose mothers brought them along. There was regular sloganeering, the most iconic being 'Hum kagaz nahi dikhayenge' - translating to 'we will not show our papers'. This was in protest to the NRC in Assam, where over 1.9 million were left out of the Register because they could not furnish the paper proof of their citizenship.

Fig 6.3. A photo of posters displayed at Shaheen Bagh

Source: Sameera, Interviewee

The protestors at Shaheen Bagh invoked the Constitution of India as the basis of their resistance, relying upon the secular doctrine of citizenship in it to challenge CAA as a fundamentally unconstitutional legal amendment. The people assembling at the encampment used a rights-based language to mobilise support from across the country. A PhD researcher at one of the universities in Delhi (and an interviewee), Sameera, referred to the presence of Delhi's intelligentsia at the site;

> that was the time when a lot of JNU professors were doing night lectures. A lot of other people were coming, and people would even show up simply to listen to these big names! We were thrilled! It triggers something, you feel like something is happening. The library at Shaheen Bagh, all the students volunteering, women talking about our Constitution, people from the community looking after each other – you could feel the electricity in the air.

Fig 6.4. An extracted frame from a video recording of a speech being delivered at the main camp of Shaheen Bagh

Source: Nadia, Interviewee

The assembly at Shaheen Bagh was spectacular in its politics of persistence - drawing upon Indian civil society's century old practice of nonviolent protest by using the body to make a political statement. Blockading, rallying, striking and sitting-in are all methods of nonviolent resistance used by the freedom fighters against the British colonists in the 1900s. Since then, the right to public assembly has been enshrined as a Fundamental Right of the Indian citizen in its Constitution.

Therefore, it can be argued that Shaheen Bagh was a case of exercising what Butler calls a 'plural and performative right to appear', explained as a

> … when bodies assemble on the street, in the square, or in other forms of public space (including virtual ones) they are exercising a plural and performative right to appear, one that asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field, and which, in its expressive and signifying function, delivers a bodily demand for a more livable set of economic, social, and political conditions no longer afflicted by induced forms of precarity (p.11).

As a protest site, it was a twenty-four hour sit-in, whose roster was populated with lectures, speeches, poetry and music performances and an overall buzz of political

literature. The attendance was mostly female, and not only from the neighbourhood. Not only Muslim women were in this demonstration, solidarity poured in from intersections across religious, gender and socio-economic identities. Women travelled from all over the city to attend these events. The encampment perhaps did not begin with that intention, but it created not only a safe space inside the camp, but also outside. The Shaheen Bagh protest thus embodied Tronto's theorised phases of care – from the attentiveness of recognising the threat to Muslim life under the CAA/NRC, to the assumption of responsibility in setting up the protest site, to the daily acts of caregiving that sustained it, and finally, to the responsiveness of those who joined, supported, and bore witness to it.

Fig. 6.5. The blockaded road at Shaheen Bagh had a cardboard India Gate

Source: Sameera, Interviewee

Phadke, Khan, and Ranade's 'Why Loiter? Women and risk on Mumbai streets' (2011) opens with a prologue that almost prophecies the space that was created by the anti-CAA/NRC movement at Shaheen Bagh. It reads:

> Imagine an Indian city with street corners full of women: chatting, laughing, breastfeeding, exchanging corporate notes or planning protest meetings. Imagine footpaths spilling over with old and young

> women watching the world go by as they sip tea, and discuss love, cricket and the latest blockbuster. Imagine women in saris, jeans, salwars and skirts sitting at the *nukkad* reflecting on world politics and dissecting the rising sensex. If you can imagine this, you're imagining a radically different city.

The encampment created this 'radically different city' in a nucleus for the 101 days that it existed. I have been in Delhi for various reasons over the years, and as a woman, have experienced the culture of fear preventing a woman from accessing public transport and public spaces after sunset. Delhi is a notably unsafe city[59] for women, and I know too well the cartographies of caution that structure everyday movement. Women in this city tend to move with an invisible map in their mind - telling each other which alleys to avoid, where the street lights are and the areas one should not go to alone. I would share my geolocation with a friend every time I was in a cab - and it is not out of the ordinary. These practices are not paranoia–they are survival, woven into the fabric of urban womanhood. During fieldwork in 2024, my Airbnb host reassured me of my safety unprompted; such concern is ordinary. Yet, every woman I spoke to told me that during the protests, Delhi *felt* safe, even at night. Sameera told me in an informal chat over a coffee:

> You could take public transport freely, and even the Uber drivers were talking to us about CAA at 2 am while dropping us off at Shaheen Bagh! Once, we did not know which drop off location to put on the map, but the driver told us he knew the gate, and would drop us exactly there. Delhi isnot like that all the time – you know?

This inversion of spatial norms exemplifies feminist infrapolitics - everyday acts that rupture dominant imaginaries not through spectacle but through presence, care, and persistence (Scott, 1990). Shaheen Bagh was not merely a protest site; it was a feminist counter-public that ruptured the gendered logics of public space, surveillance, and national belonging.

Embedded in its existence were multiple, overlapping acts of reclamation: the assertion of the right not to be discriminated against on the basis of religion; the right of women to occupy public space, even at night, without fear; the right of older women to act as political agents - not through spectacle or aggression, but through steadfast presence and care; and the right to frame community, collective embodiment, and care work as

[59] See: Viswanath and Tandon Mehrotra, 2007; Dhillon, and Bakaya, 2014; Karusala and Kumar, 2017.

inherently political acts. These forms of resistance collectively redefined the parameters of political legitimacy and visibility.

As a site for feminist transgression into the masculine imaginary of Indian society, Shaheen Bagh won several battles, even if briefly, against the patriarchal structure. For 101 days, the occupied stretch of road, along with bus stops, shops, and temporary structures around, became an alternative to the everyday of being a woman in the streets of Delhi. It was a rupture into the everyday of the average woman in the city – continuously shaping her choices to ensure her physical safety[60].

Fig. 6.6: The encampment at Shaheen Bagh showing hundreds of women sitting in at night, without any insulation from the cold

Source: Sameera, Interviewee

There was also a tremendous intergenerational and often intergenerational-familial solidarity at play among women at Shaheen Bagh. Deepta Chopra (2021) makes an important note here:

> …in a context of patriarchy and women's limited mobility (especially after marriage) into public spaces, most women, whether married or not, most women, whether married or not, came with the full support of their families - with alliances between women of

[60] According to the annual report from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), Delhi is the most unsafe metropolitan city for women in the country, with an average of three rape cases reported each day. The Crime in India Report indicated that the city recorded 14,158 incidents of crimes against women in 2022, marking the highest number among 19 metropolitan cities for the third year in a row, with approximately 186.9 crimes reported per 100,000 women.

> different generations and different families forming a tight support and solidarity network (Chopra 2021).

I had the opportunity to interview a protester who said she would take turns with her mother-in-law to alternate between household chores and coming to Shaheen Bagh. They would work in shifts – an unsaid collaboration – that they devised to enable both of them to sit in the protest while also keeping the home functioning. The mother-in-law did not finish school, does not have an income and usually looks after the men and children in the house along with her two daughters-in-law. The patriarchal gender roles were fully observed in this case, as in the case of many other women protesting in the Shaheen Bagh encampment - and that is precisely what makes them so remarkable. The family is a crucial variable in the analysis of women's participation in the Shaheen Bagh encampment. The family also prompted mobilisation among women who were neither Muslim, nor residents of Shaheen Bagh, and not even ardent supporters of the cause. At times, the call was simply to witness the spontaneous creation of a female dominant space. I spoke to a young therapist, Parmeet, who took her mother and sister to Shaheen Bagh. She said:

> I think I went to Shaheen Bagh a total of four or five times. Once I was with my mother and my sister. My sister was with me for most of the protest. She was not at Jamia, but she went with me to Shaheen Bagh. She went with me to a bunch of protests in Jantar Mantar. To those outside the Delhi Police High Commission in Barakhamba after the attack on Jamia on December 13. I am very proud of her. I am glad she was with me. My mom has always been on the fence about CAA and NRC. She was not quite sure. But both my sister and I insisted that she should come see what was happening. So, she came with us for one night to Shaheen Bagh. She talked to a lot of women there. That was an astounding female presence, surrounded by women. All age groups. What a goddamn sight, I tell you! Young girls, middle aged women, people my age, then older women. Then of course, the whole symbol of Dadi maa's[61] of Shaheen bagh! You could see them sitting right in front of you, refusing to budge. How could you not be inspired?

[61] The Hindi word for 'grandmother'. The term became representative of the iconic elderly women protesting in the bitter Delhi cold for 103 nights at Shaheen Bagh.

The women at Shaheen Bagh were exercising their 'performative right to appear', especially the older Muslim women who are often forgotten in the discourse on political visibility. Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks (2022) wrote 'Revenge of the Patriarchs - Why autocrats fear women', and released a podcast discussing their article. In the podcast, Chenoweth noted what successful mass movements do, and while they use movements that overthrow dictatorial regimes or create new nation-states, their conceptualisation can be safely extended to the ones like Delhi's anti-CAA/NRC movement.

One of the key points is that a large number of people from diverse sections of the society participate in the movement, which then has a larger sway over the power elites. They contend that movements that have around or over 50% participation from women, tend to score much higher in that regard. When grandmothers, actors, young university students, all come out in public, calling out a regime, the regime risks losing its moral narrative (Chenoweth and Marks, 2022). The Delhi protests struck this exact chord – it drew upon the 'feminised political potential' thrumming in the women-led protest sites in the city.

Fig 6.7 An elderly woman at Shaheen Bagh, representing the group that was colloquially known as the 'dadis' or grandmothers of Shaheen Bagh.

Source: Nadia, Interviewee

Rabia, a young student at JMI, asked me to note and quote her on this:

> …all it takes is our presence, our collective presence, our willingness to support each other, our willingness to realise that this may be another way for us to support men who are participating in these protests. We managed our home during the day and then we did our namaz and then we came and sat down here. It was an attempt at visibility which was collectively drawn. You dismiss us. We do not even exist for you. We are just wives of men you apparently hate so much. Surprise surprise. Here we are, here we are with all the force that we can gather. Do you see us now?

Thus, Shaheen Bagh stands to testify the feminist axiom I have anchored throughout this research – that personal, indeed, is political. If Delhi's everyday geography is structured by fear, surveillance, and gendered exclusions, the encampment at Shaheen Bagh was its radical inversion a feminist reimagination of the city itself. It was here, in the collective inhabiting of space, in the night-time laughter, the political discussion over chai, and the defiance of mere presence, that gendered citizenship was enacted – not claimed from the state, but performed into being.

Fig. 6.8: Young women at Shaheen Bagh. A male child can be seen in the background.

Source: Sameera, Interviewee

6.4. Why They Rose, How They Resisted

The solidarity observed in Shaheen Bagh forms the basis for an important point of my analysis: why did women protest the CAA *and* NRC in Delhi? In Chapter 3, I have mapped out a critical discussion on 'nationalist' causes for feminism. Although O'Keefe (2013) has made a strong case for women's identity development through their participation in revolutionary nationalist movements, her critique positions nationalism as a political doctrine that remains antithetical to many tenets of feminism. Additionally, there have been a scant few instances of translation of women's participation in nationalist movements into constitutional protections and electoral representation in the post-revolutionary body-politic.

It was no secret to the women assembling at Shaheen Bagh that their social position, access to opportunities, or familial structures would probably remain unchanged even if the movement were successful. This is particularly notable in case of the elderly women in the sit-in. Bilkis 'dadi', the iconic 83 year old woman who became the face of Shaheen Bagh was recorded telling the media in an interview that she protested the CAA and NRC to retain the multicultural India that she grew up in (Tarrant, 2021). Her statement does not appeal to rights or legal entitlements, but to memory, care for the pluralistic fabric of the nation, and an ethical duty to resist. This represents a moral rather than transactional orientation to citizenship - what I theorise as a distinctly feminist form of political belonging, summed up in my theoretical framework of gendered citizenship.

A key theme that emerged from my analysis was the emphasis on why the movement was a "women's issue" despite having no specific outcome for 'women' as a group. The categorisation of 'women' as an interest group has been already problematized in Chapter 3 (3.1. Feminism and Nationalism), but my interviews demonstrated what I have put forth as the constituents of a gendered citizenship. There was a clear departure in what motivated several women to join the anti-CAA/NRC movement from the usual markers of collective action – like identity and interests – to expressions of *morality, solidarity and agency*. To solidify the argument, I coded my interview data from Delhi to focusing on the motivations that led women from diverse social locations to participate in the anti-CAA/NRC protests. The resulting codes – derived from recurring phrases, themes, and narrative framings - were then grouped into five categories: constitutional and legal

concerns, documentation challenges, previous experience with student politics, police brutality, and religious discrimination.

Table 6.1: Motivations for protest in Delhi

What made women protest	Percentage coverage
Constitutional & legal concerns	16.67%
Documentation challenges	25.00%
Previous experience with student politics	33.33%
Police brutality	30.00%
Religious discrimination	33.33%

Table showing the percentage of interviewees responding with the five listed motivations to participate in the anti-CAA/NRC movement in Delhi. The interview data was coded using NVivo and used to generate the visualisation.

While these percentages do not aim to represent the full diversity of protest motivations, they illustrate key thematic trends in how women articulated their reasons for participation - offering insight into how feminist agency manifested across different social intersections. The five motivations that were recorded make no specific mention of gender-based violence or rights, but are laden with 'feminised political potential'; as Chenoweth and Marks' (2022) discussion referred to in the previous section. Evident from the chart above, women in Delhi protested for reasons that transcend the interest/identity based mobilising factors, proving how feminist agency is not always goal-oriented, but relational and affective. These protestors I had interviewed acted from a sense of collective responsibility, moral outrage, and political belonging; recasting what counts as 'rational' political behaviour. This theme speaks directly to Research Question 1, which interrogates how the anti-CAA/NRC movement revealed and challenged masculinised constructs of political legitimacy.

Each motivation carried with it the imprint of structural exclusions and everyday precarity. 'Constitutional and legal concerns' encapsulates the protestors' disapproval of

the insertion of religion into the determination of Indian citizenry, and 'religious discrimination' is code for the exclusion of undocumented Muslims from the scope of CAA. The motivation labelled 'previous experience with student politics' is particularly revealing: many participants – especially from JNU and Jamia Millia Islamia – described their political socialisation within campus movements as formative. Their exposure to leftist student organisations taught them the language of dissent, the tactics of mobilisation, and the importance of solidarity networks. These were not just political tools, they were feminist infrastructures of resistance.

The feminised political potential of these motivations becomes clearer when seen together with the other two motivations – 'police brutality' and 'documentation challenges'. In both, the gendered vulnerability that women carry under patriarchal structures and an increasingly authoritarian state converges into political agency. The challenge of documentation, particularly stark in the implementation of the NRC in Assam, posed unique and often insurmountable obstacles for women – a pattern I explore in detail in the next chapter. Within a patriarchal society where women's identities are constructed relationally, first through their fathers and later through their husbands, establishing documentary proof of lineage and residence becomes a bureaucratic impossibility for many. Women who had changed names, addresses, or lacked birth certificates often found themselves excluded from the NRC process in Assam. This fear of exclusion intensified for Muslim women who were denied the protective fallback of the CAA; and became a powerful driver of mobilisation. The spectre of statelessness was not abstract; it was lived, gendered, and immediate.

The second major trigger of mobilisation was police brutality. This code encompassed both the women who had directly experienced state violence – especially around Jamia Millia Islamia – and those who responded affectively to its impact on others. Several women described witnessing police brutality inflicted on male students and joining protests with greater urgency, believing their presence might deter violence. Some explicitly positioned their bodies as shields, invoking the social taboo against publicly beating women as a tactical defence. Others, especially mothers of Jamia students, entered the protest space in rage and disbelief that a place of learning had become a site of state-inflicted harm. Their mobilisation was rooted in a protectionist stance, yet this maternal anger was political: it transformed personal care into public resistance. These varied responses demonstrate what is theorised as affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012)

– an emotional and moral alignment with others' suffering that catalyses political action. As Chapter 4 has elaborated, such solidarity does not require ideological coherence or shared identity, but emerges from relational vulnerability and collective ethical responsibility.

To understand how these motivations converted into acts of resistance; how affective solidarity, fear of exclusion, and relational agency translated into method, I turn now to the repertoire of protest practices used by women in Delhi's anti-CAA/NRC movement.

6.5. The Feminist Infrapolitics of Delhi's protests

When I asked women how they protested, their responses revealed a repertoire of resistance that was rooted in affect, culture, and embodied presence.

Sloganeering and rallies were the most popular ways of articulating dissent within university campuses, and people from neighbouring residential areas joined in, transforming university protests into wider community movements. The slogans themselves carried political memory and imaginative power: they cited the Indian Constitution, invoked the revolutionary verses of poets like Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and echoed chants that emerged organically from the movement's own collective creativity. These words adorned hand-drawn banners, hastily printed posters, and walls temporarily turned into declarations of dissent.

Fig. 6.9: Slogans, art and symbols used to show dissent against the CAA and NRC at Shaheen Bagh.

Source: Sameera, Interviewee

Protest marches to symbolic sites such as Jantar Mantar (which is almost a designated space for civil society protests) the Parliament, and the Police Headquarters formed another strategy, though these were soon curtailed by curfews and legal prohibitions on assembly. More enduring and radical, however, were the encampments - most notably Shaheen Bagh, which became the movement's moral and geographic nucleus. Its organic cultivation of 'safe spaces' became a glowing path for reimagining the city for women.

Cultural expression also played a vital role in public protest. Street theatre performances ('nukkad natak'), spoken word poetry, music, and dance became vehicles for political messaging, often invoking a moral imperative to stand against injustice. These artistic interventions created emotionally charged atmospheres and made the protests accessible to those who might not otherwise be politically engaged. Most importantly, they served as entry points for participation that did not require formal political literacy but offered powerful forms of engagement through affect and performance.

I had an interview with Esha, a woman who navigated the demands of formal sector employment, and spoke of the tension between her desire to protest and her fear of professional repercussions. This was a common dilemma for middle-class Indians,

particularly those in corporate jobs, where political neutrality is often an unspoken condition of employment. She told me:

> We were all working professionals, and we all had our limitations. We wanted to be involved, but we could not be completely 'out there'. So, we thought we were going to start doing awareness drives. We did, for three months. In December, January, and February, we organised extensive awareness drives in all of Delhi's basti and slum areas. It was a citizen collective sort of thing, and we all mobilised our contacts. So, say if one of us had a person of contact in a basti[62], that person would ask them: "hey, we want to come to your basti and conduct an awareness drive. We will come with a nukkad natak group, and they will demonstrate for you what this whole deal of CAA and NRC is about, through a short play. If you have any questions about what this Act is; How will it affect you; What are the details of the legal things; you can ask us as many times as you want to". We had a lawyer in each group, who could take all the legal questions.

Many in her position found alternative ways to contribute – by creating and circulating protest art on social media, preparing food and supplies for protestors, or donating anonymously to support legal aid and logistical efforts. These quieter forms of resistance were no less significant. Rather, they reflected a political will shaped by risk and precarity, and underscored the relational, decentralised nature of the movement – one rooted as much in care and coordination as in confrontation.

Central to this coordination was the strategic use of information. As testified in the interview excerpt above, access to information was used as a method of mobilising people for the cause. In addition to creative awareness drives, the circulation of legal advice, protest logistics, and updates about police movements through WhatsApp groups, social media posts, and university networks became central to organising efforts. This organisation certainly had a spontaneous element, but Delhi's established political culture of dissent played no minor role in mobilising support for the cause. The infrastructure of protest did not emerge in a vacuum; it drew on pre-existing activist networks and student-led solidarities that had long contested authoritarian state practices.

To unpack what it meant for women to face and resist state violence while exercising their constitutional right to dissent, a feminist reading of agency in social movements

[62] An informal slum area.

becomes essential. Theorists have repeatedly asked what women have to gain through their participation in social movements - especially where the risk of being sidelined once the objectives have been attained is omnipresent. Through testimonies gathered in interviews and fieldnotes, women described themselves and others as direct counterforces to the violence exercised by (predominantly male) members of the Delhi Police. Their presence was not passive; it was a refusal. They met militarised masculinity with community care, public vulnerability, and a redefinition of political strength.

The encampment at Shaheen Bagh was ultimately dismantled on 24 March 2020 under the pretext of public health concerns at the onset of the COVID-19 lockdown. Though it did not achieve its immediate legislative aim - the withdrawal of the CAA and NRC – its success must be located elsewhere: in its disruption of the masculinised political imaginary of the nation. Space-making as an exercise in feminist agency emerges as one of the main contributions of the movement in Delhi, best encapsulated in the statement of Rabia, a young Muslim student of JMI:

> I do believe that the protest will be remembered. And all those people will always be remembered in the history of India, in the history of democracy, across the globe, as people who were brave and strong. As a protest, it was an awakening of sorts. Especially with respect to Muslim women. Whenever someone talks about Muslim women, the saviour complex comes on heavily, whether on an Indian or on a foreigner! That protest was proof that women can choose to wear whatever they want, to follow whatever faith, and that they can still lead. They are not supposed to be victimised. We are not victims. They are strong. They are brave. The world is telling them that they are not, and others need to give them a space where they could be all of those. But we proved that women make their own spaces to express themselves.

What followed the disbanding of Shaheen Bagh was a wave of systematic repression, marked most starkly by the incarceration of protestors - some of whom remain behind bars, still awaiting bail. During my fieldwork in Delhi, I often met interviewees in 'third spaces', neither their homes nor workplaces, but places chosen to feel safer, less surveilled. The fragile ‘safe space’ that Shaheen Bagh had momentarily created was reversed, replaced by the arrests of student leaders and the visible rise of militant Hindutva: saffron flags on street corners, nationalist stickers on the rear windscreens of

cars, and the everyday precarity of being a Muslim woman in Delhi's reasserted masculine public.

Even so, for the time it existed, Shaheen Bagh, as both a material site and a political symbol, created the possibility of reimagining the Indian city as feminist and democratic. It opened a space where citizenship could be practiced not through legal documentation or nationalist allegiance, but through solidarity, visibility, and persistence. It is here that Delhi's anti-CAA/NRC movement's most radical impact resides - not in state recognition, but in the collective refusal of invisibility and the active construction of a gendered, pluralist political space.

This chapter has shown how the Delhi protests disrupted the entrenched masculine–feminine dichotomy that structures India's political imaginary. By occupying and transforming public space, women redefined it as a site not of threat but of collective safety, resistance, and political community. The protest sites, particularly Shaheen Bagh, became prefigurative spaces where care was central to the political. Care took the form of everyday actions: from sustaining the sit-in through food, childcare, and coordination, to the quiet but powerful way interviewees referred me to other protestors – women they had not spoken to since the movement, yet remembered and reached out to in acts of feminist continuity. These gestures, though seemingly mundane, situate care as a radical political act. Thus, this construction of Delhi's anti-CAA/NRC movement, especially the nucleus of Shaheen Bagh, as a feminist transgression into the masculinised issues of the country's political imaginary is an academic contribution my research makes. In the following chapter, I turn to the Northeast to explore how the movement unfolded in Guwahati – a site with a radically different history and relationship to the CAA and NRC. There, I examine the extent to which feminist agency and solidarity can act as bridges across the fragmented terrains of regional and national politics.

7. Margins of the Nation: Feminist Solidarities and the Frontiers of Citizenship in Guwahati

The previous chapter traced the gendered reimagining of citizenship through performative dissent in the capital of the Indian state. In this chapter, the focus turns to Guwahati – where the performance of dissent was shaped by long histories of political dislocation, militarisation, and ethno-national anxieties. Here, I examine how women inhabit and contest a frontier regime of citizenship, where legal exclusion is compounded by spatial abandonment and the persistent demand to prove one's right to belong. Reiterating what chapter 2 and 3 have established, this chapter takes the opportunity to point at the double jeopardy of women's assertion of interests in the political expression of a 'minority' region and religion, multiplying the margins of belonging in Assam. In the movement, Delhi became a site of symbolic visibility and pan-Indian solidarities, Guwahati foregrounded the regional particularities of resistance in a 'frontier' space. Utilising that as its base, this chapter contributes to my broader argument for gendered citizenship in India by highlighting the gender-blindness of state policies, as well as the dominant movement narrative in Assam.

Overall, this thesis traces how gender emerged as the common axis of solidarity across otherwise heterogeneous, and sometimes conflicting imaginaries fuelling the anti-CAA/NRC movement. This chapter contributes to that by exploring how women's participation in Guwahati challenged dominant masculinist constructs of politics – not through institutional leadership or visibility alone, but through relational labour, affective mobilisation, and acts of care. Drawing on the tropes of the Northeast as a frontier, the unfinished project of Indian nationalism, and the gendered labour of citizenship, I argue that women's participation in Guwahati's protests cannot be read merely as reaction, but as situated, relational acts of care.

The interregional linkages between Guwahati and Delhi (to be elaborated in the next chapter) revealed solidarities forged not through sameness, but through shared experiences of precarity and systemic disregard. As I show in later sections, these exclusions are not isolated, but produced at the intersections of gender, class, and ecological vulnerability – what Crenshaw and other subsequent feminist scholars have described as the intersectional structuring of power.

Two points require clarification at the outset. First, my use of the term 'frontier' to describe Northeast India is deliberate, but not uncritical. In line with Harding's (1986) insistence that all knowledge is socially situated – and as I elaborate in Chapters 3 and 4 – I invoke frontier not as a static geopolitical descriptor, but as an epistemic condition, shaped through my experience of living, studying, and researching in the region since 2016. This usage acknowledges the layered critiques that surround the terminology. Sanjib Baruah's reconceptualisation of the Northeast as a periphery and postfrontier (2022), McDuie-Ra's (2015) notion of the region as a corridor, and Haokip's (2011) framing of it as a region are not in contradiction with my formulation. Rather, I work through them – not to produce a unified geography but to foreground the ways in which *frontiering* operates as a state practice: to militarise, marginalise, and extract. As scholars such as McClintock (1995) and Wainwright (2012) argue, the frontier is not merely a spatial margin but a temporal and epistemic construct – a site that must be tamed, known, and contained within the logic of the nation-state. The Northeast as a frontier is thus not a given, but a performative effect of colonial and postcolonial statecraft. It is this *frontier condition* – sedimented through settler-indigene contestations, developmental violence, and selective state abandonment – that shaped my everyday fieldwork experience, and from which this chapter departs analytically. This also aligns with what I elaborate in chapters 2 and 3 – that the frontier is not only spatial, but a distinct mode of governance that relies on exceptionalism and differential legibility.

Secondly, unlike the Delhi chapter where the protest narrative was saturated with resistance to both the NRC and CAA, in Assam, the anti-CAA movement initially articulated a more complex and regionally contingent agenda. While dominant discourses have cast Assam as uniformly pro-NRC – rooted in an ethno-nationalist demand for the detection and expulsion of 'illegal' migrants – my interviews revealed significant fissures within this narrative. Importantly, several interviewees voiced gendered concerns about the NRC, particularly regarding documentation, legacy data, and the gendered precarity of belonging. These dissenting voices, often sidelined in media and policy discourses, offer a critical entry point into rethinking both the national imaginary of citizenship and its gendered operations in the 'frontier'.

The Northeast's peripheralisation within the Indian political imagination is not simply metaphorical. As Baruah (2020) argues, it is materially produced through underdevelopment, infrastructural neglect, and the routinised invisibilisation of crises that

would generate national outcry elsewhere. The annual devastation caused by upstream Brahmaputra flooding – an event that repeatedly displaces tens of thousands, fails to breach the news cycle outside the region. This systemic disregard is compounded by infrastructural violence: those already living on precarious terrain are disproportionately unable to preserve the bureaucratic proofs demanded by the NRC. This is where gender, class, and ecology converge – rendering citizenship not only a legal status but a materially precarious, and a very gendered labour of survival.

Further entrenching this peripheralisation is the intensified militarisation of the region, a theme discussed in Chapter 2 (section 2.4). The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), in force across large swathes of Assam and its neighbouring states, institutionalises a regime of exceptionality – a suspension of rights predicated on a securitised imagination of the 'restive frontier'. As Bhattacharya (2018) and McDuie-Ra (2012) have documented, AFSPA normalises violence under the guise of national security, enabling routine human rights violations with near-complete legal impunity. Its continued enforcement, and the state-sanctioned violence it legitimates, seen in massacres like that of Oting in 2021 (Somingam, 2023), makes it clear that the region is not only imagined as India's edge, but that it is actually governed as one. While a detailed unpacking of AFSPA exceeds the scope of this chapter, its presence is inescapable. AFSPA's existence demands that any engagement with the Northeast's protest cultures attend not only to regional political histories, but to the militarised architectures that define its everyday. This is an everyday where immigration, citizenship, resource extraction, and dissent are all shaped by a logic of containment, evident in dissonance felt by its inhabitants.

It is against this backdrop of spatial abandonment, militarised exception, and epistemic marginality, that I developed my argument about gendered solidarity within an otherwise bifurcated protest ecology. The sections that follow are drawn from interviews and non-participant observation, conducted with civil society actors, development professionals, academics, daily wage labourers, informal sector workers, and student organisers involved in the anti-CAA protests in Guwahati and its adjoining areas. This fieldwork was shaped by a feminist ethic of care and accountability, attentive to the politics of representation and the asymmetries of research encounters. My own standpoint – as a Bengali-speaking, identifiably Hindu woman with ties to the region, shaped both access and interpretation. Across divergent identity groups, gender surfaced repeatedly as the

register through which participants navigated exclusion, articulated risk, and generated affective solidarities.

7.1. Tracing the Frontier: Situated Knowledge and the Everyday State in Assam

It is through these fragmentary yet powerful solidarities, often tenuous, and even more often unrecognised, that this chapter traces a feminist rethinking of citizenship at India's political margins. It shows how intersectional feminist solidarities challenged the dominant narratives of the anti-CAA movement in Assam, and opened space for a feminist rethinking of citizenship at the margins of the Indian polity – where legality, identity, and belonging are reconfigured through practices rooted in interdependence, survival, and feminist dissent.

I lived in Guwahati for three years before beginning my PhD, and this is where the feminist epistemological grounding of my research becomes most tangible. My ties to the region are both familial and political: as a descendant of Bengali Hindus who migrated to both Bengal and Assam during the Partition, I inherited a history shaped by displacement and contested belonging. I had to be mindful of how this facet of my identity as the researcher would affect the ways in which they were received. During the PhD, I returned to Guwahati twice, in 2022 and 2023, for a total of four months of fieldwork. By then, the protest moment had passed, but its afterlives lingered in collective discourse. The gap between the peak of mobilisation and the timing of my fieldwork offered a distinct vantage point: it allowed me to trace how people reflected on the movement, but also how disillusionment, political fatigue, and everyday survival reshaped the meanings of protest over time.

Fig 7.1: A sit-in around Gauhati University protesting the CAA
Source: Naveen, interviewee

When I was in Guwahati in 2022 for the pilot study, public attention had shifted, but the anxieties surrounding the NRC and its uneasy entanglement with daily life remained unresolved. In 2023, I conducted interviews with a range of actors: researchers, civil society members, development professionals, students, and informal sector workers. I sought to understand how the anti-CAA protests were remembered and interpreted in the longer arc of dissent and governance in the region. If Delhi had emerged as a site of symbolic contestation, Guwahati revealed a slower, more ambivalent terrain – where public visibility had faded, yet the underlying conditions of exclusion endured.

As Naveen, a researcher I interviewed in Gauhati University reflected,

> "India got its independence in 1947, and this is 2023. This entire issue of colonial subjugation, colonial relations of exploitation, or the colonial experience that this region went through, cannot suddenly be removed from people's minds, nor the society; and especially not from the material relations in 70-odd years. It takes time. I believe that in some parts of the country – in the Northeast, in the central Indian states of Jharkhand or Chhattisgarh – the association with the larger nation is very less. The psychological divide is strongly present, and people do not acknowledge this fact. They think that since Hindutva is making inroads here and the BJP has managed to win all the states in the Northeast, suddenly there will be a sense of unification! The point is that – on the ground, the sense of national identity that they expect may very well not be there!"

Naveen articulated a recurring theme across my fieldwork in Guwahati: the enduring sense of distance from the nation-state – not only political, but affective. As discussed in chapter 2, Assam's history of colonial extraction, settler-indigene contestation, and structural neglect has produced a region that is not simply peripheral, but actively governed as a *frontier*. In such a context, citizenship is not experienced as stable legal recognition but as a terrain of everyday negotiation, shaped by mistrust (manifested in the D-voter list), infrastructural precarity, and spatialised abandonment. This reinforces a central lens of this chapter: that in Assam, citizenship is lived not as a formal status, but as a practice shaped by racialised exclusion and the residue of both colonial and postcolonial statecraft.

This sense of estrangement (again, explored in depth in chapters 2 and 3) is not new, but materially reproduced through long-standing exclusions. They coalesce around land, language, and indigeneity, shaping the contradictions and the possibilities of resistance. One of the dominant themes that surfaced from my analysis of the Guwahati interviews, was a profound resistance to what participants saw as mainland Indian hegemony. The interviewees spoke of a longstanding regional grievance within the state, where the policies of the central government were interpreted as an extension of colonial-style exploitation that benefited external interests at Assam's expense.

Having personally witnessed the protests unfold in Guwahati, and then later across the rest of the country, the dissonance was striking to me. It was not only in the nature of the demands, but also in the idioms through which dissent was articulated and circulated. In Guwahati, resistance rarely named the NRC as a site of contestation. In several parts of Upper Assam, the Register remained a necessary, even desirable, tool, tied to a longstanding and fraught history with immigration. Slogans denouncing the NRC, which became emblematic of protests in Delhi and other metropolitan centres, were conspicuously absent in Guwahati. This absence was not merely strategic, but symptomatic of the region's specific terrain of political belonging, where the fear of cultural and linguistic dilution often intersects with an anxious defence of identity. The protests in Delhi, once they gained momentum, demanded the boycott of both NRC and CAA – a framing that presumed a shared adversary and a common political vision. That presumption faltered in Assam.

Yet, across this disjuncture, one feature remained consistent: women's presence. In both Guwahati and Delhi, and in many sites in between, women emerged not merely as

participants but as the connective tissue of protest – organising, sustaining, and embodying resistance in ways often erased from dominant narratives. My interviews revealed a circuit of inspiration and exchange that ran across WhatsApp groups, Instagram feeds, and late-night phone calls. The women I spoke to spoke of drawing courage from one another, not through abstract invocations of solidarity, but through shared gestures, visual cues, and political claims rooted in care, and survival. It is here that Nancy Fraser's critique of Habermas resonates: gender does not reside in the private or economic sphere alone, but underpins the very architecture of who can speak, organise, and be heard in the political realm. In the protests, women did not merely enter public space – they *reconstituted* it.

7.2. Through Fear: Militarised Repression and the Frontier Logic of Protest

> What has happened in Tripura has also brought a lot of fear in Assam. So, people of Assam said they would not accept it. If you want to give space to the religious victims, victims of the financial crisis who had to come from outside, then spread them across the entire country. But do not make Assam the dumping ground. Land and language were our main focus.

This articulation by Priya, an activist I interviewed, repeated across several interviews. It harps on the foundational anxiety that animated Assam's response to the CAA: that the region that is already saturated with histories of migration, resource pressure, and cultural marginalisation, was being re-inscribed as a sacrificial zone for the rest of the nation. The anti-CAA movement in Assam was driven by an uneasy ethno-regionalist concern with protectionism – often expressed in the language of land, language, and indigeneity. Crucially, the opposition to the CAA was not framed as a defence of pluralism here, but as a defence against further erosion of an already precarious cultural sovereignty.

Fig. 7.2: A sign inside Gauhati University's campus saying "no CAA".

Source: Author

The anti-CAA movement followed the passage of the Act on 12 December 2019, erupting quickly across Assam and spilled into neighbouring Northeastern states – Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, and eventually Sikkim. However, in the national political imaginary, this early wave of dissent remained peripheral. The protests in Assam were rendered invisible until it erupted in Delhi weeks later, reconfigured through a more explicitly religious and constitutionalist lens. I was in Guwahati when the agitation was building in 2018, when the early resistance was *already* being erased in real time. This erasure reflects a broader pattern in the governance of the frontier – where the region's political expressions are bracketed as provincial, irrational, or illegitimate, even as its land and labour are extracted into the national project.

> Nobody saw who was coming in the march or the movement. There was a call then everyone needed to come out. We all thought that if we do not stop the CAB now, then the existence of Assamese people, especially the indigenous people will be threatened. We can call Assam a 'mini India', because there are so many people speaking different languages. Even if we leave out religion, many languages are spoken here. Many communities stay here. The case of Meghalaya or Nagaland is different, they have the Inner Line Permit, and more homogenous societies. That protection is not present in Assam. We understood this.

Naveen, the interviewee here, named what the state does not: that difference in Assam – linguistic, ethnic, religious – is not aberrational, but foundational. The call to protest was

not filtered through organisational hierarchies or formal politics, but moved through a shared register of threat and loss. The fear of being overrun, of being rendered strangers in one's own land, animated a sense of emergency that blurred political lines. This invocation of a "mini India", however, sits uneasily with the demand not to share Assam's resources with new migrants. This is the paradox that structured the anti-CAA mobilisation in Assam: an aspiration toward pluralism entangled with ethno-nationalist anxiety. These tensions shaped not just the political content of the protests, but also their silences: determining who could speak, who was seen, and who remained outside the frame. The consequences of speaking, or even simply appearing in the protests were not abstract. In the days following the passage of the CAA, Guwahati witnessed a noticeable and sudden escalation of state repression. Interviewees described how the imposition of the so-called "red flag" transformed the city into a militarised zone, where dissent was not only silenced, but actively criminalised. Rai, a development professional I interviewed, recalled the sudden arrival of convoys bearing unfamiliar insignia: "A normal person could not come out of his house. If you came out, either the police would beat you or you would be shot."

The "red flag" became a potent symbol of arbitrary state power. Its meaning circulated through rumour and fear, rather than official decree. Rai had led me to interview her partner, Pranav, who was a part of the early demonstrations against the CAA. He elaborated on the symbolism of the red flag, and said: "we saw these trucks rolling in – truck after truck flying a red piece of cloth. Later, I learned the red flag meant the army had the liberty to hurt you in any possible way, even lethally."

Such responses reflect what is described as the *frontier condition* at the beginning of this chapter, where the state appears not as a provider of care, but as a coercive force that governs through suspicion, exceptionalism, and violence. In Guwahati, this was not metaphorical. On 12 December 2019, amid curfews and internet blackouts, a 16-year-old boy, Sam Stafford, was fatally shot (Saikia, 2019). The ambiguity surrounding his death – rumours of multiple bullet wounds, an alleged police shooting, and the official suppression of information – fed a broader sense that the state was not merely indifferent, but actively hostile to dissent.

The psychological toll of such repression was immense. Pranav described how a colleague, terrified of being identified through CCTV footage, was pushed into a state of paranoia and emotional breakdown: "Every day, he would come to the office, take me to

the pantry, and cry. He could not eat. He was terrified that his red sweater would show up on the footage. He said, 'I do not know what will happen to me. I have a wife and daughter."

Here, visibility – often celebrated in resistance movements – became a site of risk. As with women's invisibilised labour within the protests, here too, *invisibility* was a form of survival, and *appearance* a potential act of political suicide. The state's weaponisation of surveillance, and the unspoken threat of post-protest retribution, produced a climate in which no act of dissent could remain minor or inconsequential.

This militarisation cannot be understood outside the longer history of state control in Northeast India. The red flag regime echoed decades of governance under the AFSPA, where civil liberties have long been complicated in the name of national security. Yet, what happened in Guwahati in 2019 represented a new convergence, where the rhetoric of nationalism and the infrastructures of militarisation merged to cast an entire city as a zone of exception (which otherwise remains outside the scope of AFSPA).

Muneera, the local head of an NGO in Guwahati who I interviewed in her office, described the ripple effects of this environment of fear. She linked it to more recent state interventions that alarmed minority communities – and more specifically the Muslims in Assam, as she noted from her own experience as a Muslim woman. Recounting the attempted suicide of a young man accused of underage marriage, she talked about a man who had tried to end his life because of fear. His wife had held his legs for 35 minutes to stop him from hanging himself until help arrived. This story, like so many others, reveals a form of governance that operates through intimidation and uncertainty. The "red flag" was not just a tactical measure – it was a performative gesture of state sovereignty, announcing that even the barest acts of dissent would be met with force. It left a lasting psychic scar on those who witnessed the suppression, along with the physical casualties of five young people who died in Guwahati during the anti-CAA movement.

What emerged from the interviews with Muneera, Pranav, Rai, Priya and Naveen, was a regionally inflected dissent shaped by the enduring suspicion that Assam would once again be made to absorb the costs of the state's majoritarian vision. This contrasts sharply with Delhi, where the very same legislation catalysed a protest grammar rooted in constitutionalism, secularism, and explicitly female leadership. In Guwahati, the mobilisation surfaced long standing regional grievances and made visible the tensions around indigeneity and resource control. However, within this fractured terrain, the

gendered undercurrents of this movement were beginning to surface – quiet at first, but insistent. These were not always the voices on the mic or the faces in the press photos. But they were present – organising logistics, circulating information, tending to bodies, holding the movement together. It is to these undercurrents, and the women who made them visible, that the chapter now turns.

7.3. Gendered Erasure *within* the Frontier

The protests in Assam were spectacular in their size, but unlike the ones in Delhi, were not explicitly occupied by women. In contrast to the performative symbolism of Delhi's protest epicentres, women in Assam's anti-CAA movement mobilised through intimate, relational, and materially grounded practices of resistance. Their participation, often misrecognised or invisibilised, emerged through circuits of care and collective survival – constituting what this thesis theorises as *gendered citizenship*.

Using the triangular model of gendered citizenship – comprising citizenship, political participation, and social movements, interconnected through the *politics of care* – women showed how their presence in the Guwahati protests was not only a reaction to state policy, but a reconfiguration of the very terms of political engagement. Rather than framing citizenship as a juridical status, women narrated it as a site of embodied vulnerability and negotiation. Their dissent was often mediated through community responsibilities, domestic labour, and informal leadership, revealing the gendered underpinnings of who gets to dissent, how, and with what risk.

The difference in their methods of protest speaks more of the erasure mentioned above, rather than their physical absence. Bharat, an interviewee who worked for a development organisation in Guwahati, speaking of this multi-layered erasure said:

> We saw and heard about the big movement that started/happened in Shaheen Bagh, Delhi. But here it's like – they [women] do protest. But they also have to do housework. It's a kind of environment where women need to live inside. The outside work - you know, like a protest, is done by men... and the students were protesting anyway. So, they felt their going was of no use and they were a little scared too. We have Muslim minority people in our localities, who felt that if they protested, and later got mentioned in some kind of list for state incarceration, they would definitely be persecuted. What if their photo came out on TV saying that these people participated in the protest? What about their lives and citizenship then?

The tension here is palpable: between the desire to protest and the constraints of visibility, between political urgency and risk. The publicness of dissent in Guwahati was fraught, especially for Muslim women. Fear of surveillance, media exposure, and future targeting functioned as deterrents. Unlike the Delhi protests – where Muslim women made themselves hyper-visible as a political strategy – in Assam, many women negotiated dissent through less visible, but no less consequential forms of engagement. This recalls Scott's idea of infrapolitics of subordinate groups (pp. 183-184), and aligns with feminist theorisations of how dissent is often enacted through the margins: in "tactical choices born out of a prudent awareness of the balance of power" (ibid, p.183), logistical coordination, and acts of everyday endurance.

I interviewed women who confronted these precarities head on, and were visibly in the forefront of demonstrations in Guwahati. Among them, Taslima, a community leader and organiser spoke to me about a rally she *incidentally* led in December 2019, right after the passage of the CAA. Her leadership was incidental in this particular protest, because they had originally chosen a man to lead the rally. Explaining how that turned her into a leader - not only of this rally but the greater anti-CAA movement in Guwahati, she said:

> When I first saw the CAA protest, it was mainly from the colleges and from other places that the protest was happening. I saw it happening from my home... One day while me and she were travelling on a local bus, we decided that we needed to start a protest from our area... We went to every single household in our area and informed them that we will be taking out a rally the next day in the evening... We decided to start the rally here in Sijubari and take it till Hatigaon... But the next morning... I saw that a few boys were protesting by burning tyres.

Here, protest begins not with ideology, but with a sense of responsibility – *nothing has happened from our area* – a sentiment that catalyses action. This is precisely the kind of mobilisation that gendered citizenship captures: it is intimate, improvised, and intensely relational. It shows how dissent emerges not only in organised spaces, but through affective circuits of banal life: conversations on buses, observations from the home, and localised recognition of absence.

Taslima's recollection reframes what it means to *do* citizenship in the context of Guwahati. Rather than waiting for a call from established organisations, these women created the conditions for protest in their locality, drawing on feminised repertoires of mobilisation: house-to-house visits, coordination with neighbourhood associations,

informal consensus-building. Their preparation – thinking through what a protest "needs" (a name, banners, time, route) – reveals an implicit grasp of the performative and symbolic dimensions of dissent. But it also underscores a material understanding of risk and exposure: the timing, the route, the involvement of community structures like the ABC union [anonymised] are all measures of both ambition and caution. She went on to say:

> Around five thousand people came out that day, so many that the crowd became uncontrollable. I was standing at the front of the rally, and did not even check the back. When we reached Hatigaon, the man whom we took as a leader of the protest, said that "I do not care about the banner" and ran away. After crossing Hatigaon, the [ABC union] people tried to convince me to return. They said there was no way I could possibly take the lead of so many people! They told us that our area is a Muslim area but where we are now is a Hindu area. So, if anybody starts any trouble, the blame will be on us. Then the media arrived, surprised to see this huge crowd. They started asking us if we will go to Dispur - to the Chief Minister's office. We kept moving forward, but there were so many who tried to stop us, who called me on phone and tried to stop the rally. Now that you ask, it was only after watching videos of the rally that I realised our gathering was huge, there were actually so many people!

What unfolded here is not only a protest that exceeded its intended scope, but a rupture in the gendered and communal containment of public space. The speaker begins in a position of local mobilisation – part of a quiet, feminised labour of organising from within a community deemed peripheral to both the national and regional political narrative. However, as the protest swells and the male-designated leader abandons his post, she becomes unintentionally visible – not as a symbol, but as an organiser. This visibility is not chosen; it is assumed through relational necessity.

Her sudden position at the head of the protest is not a triumphant rise to leadership, but a politically precarious inheritance. In a movement shaped by exclusions, where gender, religion, and region intersect to define the boundaries of legitimacy, her presence at the front marks a radical disidentification with the structures that would prefer her to stay invisible. That community leaders caution her to retreat, citing the spatial boundary between a "Muslim area" and a "Hindu area," reveals how space is governed by communal codes, and how Muslim dissent is framed in advance as suspect, as incitement. Their concern is not unfounded; it names the reality of differential accountability – that the same act of protest will be read differently depending on who performs it. This moment, then, is a powerful instance of what Butler calls the politics of appearing: the

risks and consequences of being seen in spaces that do not guarantee recognition. Her refusal to withdraw, even under pressure, constitutes a form of performative dissent – not staged for effect, but enacted through bodily presence in a space structured to exclude her. The media's arrival, and their shock at the turnout, serves to underscore the epistemic violence of earlier erasures: the assumption that dissent could not emerge from this locality, or from these bodies.

These exclusions were not only externally imposed through communal and state logics, but also internally reproduced within the very movements that women helped sustain. Women showed up in large numbers, she said, but their presence was often reduced to a supporting role. "We were just the back force, the numbers," Taslima, an interviewee noted, frustration evident in her tone. Women were given space to stand but not to speak, to amplify the protest's size but not its voice. "*Ki bohut manuh hol protestot*" (there were *so* many people in the protest), they would say, but those *manuh* – the people – were women.

This theme has surfaced repeatedly in chapters 3 and 4. The gendered division of labour within protest spaces mirrored larger patriarchal arrangements, even when women's presence was crucial to the mobilisation itself. Muneera, a social worker for the youth in Guwahati, pointed to this exclusionary structure of the movement in Guwahati -

> Whatever panel discussions or protests were being organised under Nagorik Samaj[63], were all led by men. They positioned women in the forefront for the visuals, but often limited women to felicitating speakers in programmes, or asking them to arrange for tea... Men had the microphones, we had the tea kettles.

The irony is stark: a movement grounded in the rhetoric of protection and resistance reproduced the very gendered hierarchies it claimed to resist. This is a crucial point, for social movements are vital training-grounds for leadership and political engagement: many who ultimately take up positions of power within societies initially learned skills in negotiation and communication and built their reputations through work with social movements (Scriver and Fagan 2020). Feminist scholars have long pointed to this paradox – that such movements, while appearing emancipatory, often replicate the exclusions of the state within their own ranks. Jo Fisher's work on women's resistance across South America offers a generative parallel. In her interviews with women from

[63] A citizen's action forum in Assam that came up during the anti-CAA movement.

unions, grassroots feminist collectives, and associations of mothers searching for the 'disappeared', she highlights how dissent is performed differently depending on one's location within intersecting structures of gender, class, and race. My interviews with women across caste, class, and religious locations in Guwahati echo Fisher's findings: that the capacity to dissent is always structured by social position, and that women's resistance often takes forms unrecognised by dominant political scripts.

7.4. Gendered Mobilisations: From Margin to Centre

Feeling relegated in the movement led by men, women from across social, occupational and economical backgrounds in Assam collectivised in many forms. There were a number of spontaneous assemblies in December 2019, where women came together in Guwahati, leading to more organised action. Activists, lawyers, academicians and community mobilisers drew from the massive demonstrations that women were leading in Delhi's Shaheen Bagh, and called for women in Assam to assemble for what became known as the 'Padatik Nari Samaj'. While Padatik Nari Samaj became one of the focal points of female mobilisation, there were several unnamed, spontaneous collectives that worked in communities for the same cause.

Fig. 7.3: Women assembling at Lataxil ground, with the Gauhati High Court in the background.

Source: Naveen, interviewee

On February 8, 2020, the Padatik Nari Samaj organised its first march. Domestic workers and daily wage labourers across Guwahati were mobilised by activist collectives that work on labour rights, access to legal aid and domestic violence in the region. New networks were created and existing networks were tapped into to bring together women from disadvantaged intersections of society – economically and religiously. Priya, who was instrumental in the formation of this collective, recalled:

> The motive for creating Padatik and taking it to the streets was only to show that women can also lead! Slogans are not meant to be called out by men only! Most importantly, we took a stand against the elitism in leadership of the anti-CAA movement in Assam. It was not only about men, but the prominent participants almost always came from privileged backgrounds. We specifically worked on mobilising the poor, working class women who are marginalised in every space.

The intentional mobilisation of marginalised women directly challenged the hierarchical structure of the broader anti-CAA protests in Assam, where leadership was monopolised by upper-caste, upper-class men. In this sense, *Padatik* did more than call for women's inclusion; it disrupted the terms of who could speak, lead, and be seen as politically legible. The participation of daily wage labourers and domestic workers testified to the direct threat these women felt, which led them to not go to work and give up on the day's wage to participate in the rally. Why were women, particularly from marginalised groups,

so willing to take the risk of protest, even when it meant forgoing income and enduring state surveillance?

The answer to this question came from my conversation with Binita, who made an explicit connection between gendered responsibilities of the marginalised. She said:

> Any threat that comes upon any community or any family involving resources, the woman feels it more. We regularly see that men are more inclined to compromise in exchange for political incentives, or money, but the women remain steadfast. Especially in indigenous communities, where land is associated with the basic value of being, because you do not possess many other material resources. In the villages of Assam, these women neither have a job nor enough education to relocate to a metropolitan city should CAA bring in new settlers and their land is divided. They will have to survive here. If more people come from Bangladesh or other countries, land will shrink. If they had 5 acres of land to cultivate and fund their children's education, that would now reduce to 1 acre. Men, of course, have these concerns, but they can also find a way out. Becoming a migrant labourer or joining the local cadre of a political party are options for men – but not for women. What will the women do? They know that they do not have an option to go elsewhere. So, the threat is felt very directly by them.

What Binita said encapsulates the analytic core of this chapter: that women experience and respond to state violence differently; not because they are biologically predisposed to feel more, but because the conditions of precarity and responsibility fall unevenly along gendered lines. As Tronto and others have argued, women are often located at the junction where care becomes political, not because they are "natural caregivers," but because structures of labour, social reproduction, and risk have rendered them so.

Patriarchal division of labour prevents women from getting into traditionally masculine roles - and loss of land threatens their existence much more than any concept of religious intolerance. The Padatik march concluded at the Governor's House with heavy sloganeering against the CAA, but more importantly, also against the NRC.

7.4.1. Gendered Solidarities resisting Erasures

This cannot be ignored in any discourse on Assam's resistance to the CAA and demand for the NRC. A noteworthy number of women in the state raised their voices against the NRC process, not for reasons used by the pan-Indian movement, but for the gender

blindness in its implementation. Muneera, who worked as an organiser and wrote slogans against NRC for the march told me,

> In The Miya community, or what you call the Bengali Muslims community, they often marry their girls young. We dealt with a case where the girl was 13-14 years old. It also happens among Hindus. Child marriages are very prevalent. Now, the voting age is 18. So now when they register themselves on the electoral roll, whose surname will they put? Definitely the husband's. In India, or in any patriarchal society, really, a woman always takes a man's surname. So this girl too, like most others, wrote her husband's name when registering herself. But in the NRC process, you cannot show your legacy data referring to the name of your husband. Legacy data can only be shown from your parental or maternal family. Your fathers linkage needs to be shown in the family tree, connecting to your father's grandfather's legacy data. Legacy data should be before or from 1971. Can you imagine her plight?

I have elaborated on the existing feminist critiques of such gender blindness in chapter 2 (Section 2.1.2 The Gendered Dimensions of CAA and NRC). Here, it is important to underline how bureaucratic mechanisms (like the demand for legacy data) intersect with entrenched patriarchal norms (such as child marriage and patrilineal identity transmission) to produce conditions of exclusion. When the intersection of class is factored into this array of exclusionary conditions, it further entrenches the marginalisation encountered by women like Ruma (pseudonymised) – whose story I was told by Muneera.

Ruma, an Assamese Hindu woman from the Kayastha Scheduled Caste community, faced additional challenges because of her personal circumstances. She married a Bihari man as a young girl. They later separated informally - an arrangement that lacked the legal documentation middle-class families might take for granted. Her documents, created after her marriage, bore her husband's name. When the NRC process began, Ruma, who had been married as a minor and lacked education, relied on her employer, a man named Borthakur, to help her fill out the forms. Their efforts, however, led to further complications for Ruma's proof of citizenship.

In the first phase of the NRC process, Ruma's form was mixed with Borthakur's documentation. Her copies, including crucial linkage papers, were pinned together with his and submitted as a single file. When the error was discovered, it took considerable time and effort to correct it. Ruma's situation was worsened by her estranged relationship with her maternal family, who had disapproved of her marriage. Without family support

or her own independent documentation, proving her identity and lineage became almost impossible. Although affidavits were eventually allowed in the second phase of the NRC process, this change came too late for many, including Ruma, whose struggle to prove her citizenship reflected the broader structural exclusions faced by marginalised communities.

The culture of document preservation - as Muneera called it – a hallmark of middle-class life, has become a significant fault line in determining who is most adversely affected by processes like the NRC. For many working-class women, especially those from marginalised communities, the very terms of citizenship are rigged against their lived realities. In her own words,

> The culture of document preservation is totally a middle class culture. You know you will preserve all your data. But the people who reside in the riverine areas, flood prone areas, in very interior parts of villages, their lifestyle requires them to work very hard, without education. Documents do not really matter to them. They did not preserve their documents against the many natural disasters they have to survive. So, who becomes the victims here ? These people.

In this system, those without the resources or habits of documentation are disproportionately victimised. Ruma's case illustrates how the NRC process disproportionately penalised women like her, whose lives were already shaped by precarious circumstances. The intersections of class, gender, and bureaucratic rigidity exacerbated her vulnerability. It highlights the systemic neglect of those outside the middle-class framework, whose realities do not align with the assumptions embedded in state systems of verification and recognition. Ruma's experience underscores the urgent need to question processes like that of the NRC, which rely on the preservation of documents as a proxy for legitimacy, while ignoring the lived realities of those most vulnerable to exclusion.

Kalam, et al. (2022) have highlighted the long-standing atrocities inflicted in Assam on the communities most vulnerable to exclusion, through the state-manufactured category of "Doubtful Voter" (D-voter[64]). This mechanism enables the state to arbitrarily mark

[64] In 1997, the election commission of India introduced yet another mechanism to contest citizenship called D voter that further compounded statelessness. More than 300,000 voters were marked 'doubtful' in the electoral roll, and their political rights were suspended. Subsequently, they were forced to prove their citizenship in the Foreigners' Tribunal. (Kalam et al., 2022, p.3)

individuals as D-voters, thereby casting doubt on their citizenship. As a result, the legal and social identity of lakhs of people in Assam has been placed in limbo, producing an acute crisis of belonging for minority communities. As the community organiser, Muneera, who I quoted earlier pointed out, the D-voter regime, much like the NRC, has disproportionately impacted women:

> Even in the issue of D-voters, women were the major victims. And the reason was the same. Surname was different then and now it's different. Many people here have no education, they are school dropouts, there are too many kids. Having many kids is also not their fault – it's the system's fault. So many policies are made but not implemented at the community level. Sometimes they are Ali, then later on something else, then some also write their husband's name. Then when you show the linkage, a different surname comes out. Surname was a big cause of the problem.

This testimony again underscores the gendered fault lines of state surveillance. As with the NRC, the D-voter classification relies on consistent documentary proof across generations – a demand that erases the realities of women whose surnames change due to marriage, and whose access to education and documentation is severely limited. In contexts of poverty, patriarchal kinship norms, and repeated displacement, the demand for perfect documentary legibility becomes a mechanism of exclusion.

The systemic erasure of women from state records, whether through the NRC or D-voter regime, reveals how bureaucratic infrastructures reproduce caste, class, and gender hierarchies. The D-voter designation, ostensibly a neutral category, is weaponised against those whose lives are least likely to conform to rigid documentation norms. For women, especially from working-class and marginalised communities, the consequences are existential, stripping them not only of citizenship but of access to basic rights and protections.

Muneera told me about the case of Parvati Bhoj, highlighting the layered complexities and systemic exclusions faced by women in the NRC process and the subsequent delisting of their citizenship claims. Known colloquially as Parvatiya in her Bhojpuri-speaking community, her identity was revealed to be far more complex during her NRC hearing. She was originally from a Muslim Bengali-speaking family in Goalpara but had married a Hindu man from the Bhoj community as a minor. Like many women, Parvati’s

documentation was tied entirely to her husband. All her official papers were in his name, leaving her dependent on his identity for her own claim to citizenship.

When Parvati submitted her documents, they were rejected during the hearing, labelled as "wrong." This rejection was not due to any deliberate fault of her own but because the system's rigid criteria failed to account for the nuances of her lived reality. As a woman with overlapping vulnerabilities - being Muslim, Bengali-speaking, and married into a Hindu household - Parvati's case fell through the cracks of a bureaucratic system that prioritised fixed categories over the complexities of individual identities. Her case is not exceptional, but emblematic of the NRC's systemic gender blindness – especially in rural Assam, where women often lack independent documentation, and where displacement and disaster render even survival precarious. Her lack of awareness of the NRC process further exacerbated her vulnerability. Married as a minor and without formal education, she relied on her husband's documents to assert her claim, unaware that these would not suffice.

Her case underscores how women's identities and citizenship claims are frequently mediated through male relatives, leaving them powerless when these relationships fail to align with state-imposed standards. Severe administrative incompetency rendered several women excluded from the list - a critique that has been established in Chapter 2. The requirement to prove 'linkage' and 'legacy' through papers, as discussed in that chapter, already made women more vulnerable. In addition, women from the 'char' and flood-prone areas faced the impossible task of preserving their documents while facing disaster-induced displacement. The protestors wanted to register their solidarity with the plight of these women - who were pushed to the brink due to the systemic ignorance of the Indian bureaucratic processes.

7.5. Intersectionality as Praxis: Padatik and the Feminist Reconstitution of Protest

In the movement against the CAA in Guwahati, women mobilised not only against the law, but also against the structures that had persistently erased their agency. These structures exist within the state, within society, and even within the movements that purported to represent them. Where dominant political discourse frames citizenship in legal terms – as a status granted or denied – for many of the women I interviewed,

citizenship was experienced as *proximity to dispossession*, and dissent as *a refusal to be erased without recognition*. In this narrative, land is not simply a resource, but a condition of survival of their generations, and gendered labour is central to both its cultivation and its defence. In the same way, women's presence in the anti-CAA movement was not a response to abstract constitutional principles, but to material anxieties about displacement, scarcity, and the absence of viable alternatives. This reaffirms what I argue throughout the thesis: that gender is not incidental to citizenship; it is one of its most contested terrains.

Fig. 7.4: A poster in the women's protest against CAA and NRC in Guwahati

Source: Priya, Interviewee

It was followed by another demonstration in Guwahati on the International Women's Day, celebrated across the world on March 8 as an assertion of the demands of feminism. Building on the momentum of Padatik, the International Women's Day rally expanded the frame of dissent – linking the anti-CAA struggle with a broader feminist critique of majoritarian masculinity and cultural authoritarianism. All protestors wore black, giving the demonstration the name of 'Women in Black'. In it, women rallied against the CAA as an extension of the 'hetero-patriarchal Hindu rashtra'. Priya, an organising member of the march explained the connection of CAA to a 'patriarchal Hindu rashtra' that the protestors were rallying against:

> "Encouraging Hindutva is not just about bringing in hindu people like the CAA is trying to do. It is also about creating a very challenging society for women. To bring a feudal culture that reduces women to non-entities, meant only for reproduction and

> household maintenance. Many leaders of the ruling party make statements defending rape culture, and they do it openly. Even the movement against CAA is not free of sexism! We noticed some artists and illustrators, who were using their art to protest, were making cartoons that showed women in short clothes as 'foreigners'. This association of women's clothing choices with them being 'Indian' is dangerous! The vilification of women who choose to wear short clothes is pervasive, even beyond the Hindutva culture. A prominent, young leader of the Left asked his opponent to "wear bangles" on national television in a debate where he was criticising the CAA! "Arey bhai, aap chudhiya pehen lo phir" - implying that his opponent was not 'man enough'. This has to be stopped. That is what we are doing."

The interviewee detailed how sexist tropes operated not only within Hindutva narratives but also within the protest culture itself – in the symbolism of protest art, the language of male leaders, and the casual deployment of gendered slurs. From cartoons that vilified women's clothing choices to televised debates that weaponised bangles as symbols of emasculation, this feminist collective named and resisted the multiple registers through which patriarchy sustains itself – across ideological lines. She summed it up in her statement: "first, we were against CAA and the coming of Hindutva. Secondly, we opposed the mindset - shared by both progressive and anti-progressive factions, including the ruling party - about women."

This insistence on reframing the narrative, even in the absence of immediate policy shifts, reflects what Scott calls infrapolitics – the quiet, often unrecognised acts of resistance that shape political discourse from below. Padatik's role in organising women highlighted a critical shift in the protests. It was no longer enough to be present; women were demanding to be heard. They were no longer content to be the numbers that legitimised a movement; they were asserting their right to define it. "It's not an organisation," another participant explained. "We named the movement itself." The term *Padatik* - referring to soldiers or youth walking on foot - captured the spirit of grounded, grassroots resistance. The *Samaj* was intentionally inclusive: "Every woman, irrespective of any lobby, organisation, party–or none–who wants to be a part can join."

This inclusivity was not a token gesture, but a deliberate intersectional intervention – a rejection of the elite, male-dominated consensus that had shaped NRC-related discourses in Assam. As I argue in Chapter Four, intersectionality is not merely a framework for understanding layered disadvantage; it is a theory of power – one that reveals how

domination operates through interlocking structures of gender, class, caste, and region. Padatik's mobilisation of domestic workers, *safai karmis* (workers with cleaning jobs), and other precarious women workers was a refusal to separate the anti-CAA agenda from the realities of economic survival and social reproduction, and building a fiery critique of the NRC.

Their feminism was unapologetically classed. "Why would we not we include the basic rights of the working class in this?" asked one organiser. "Feminism cannot be complete without the working class." Rather than catering to the limits of what was politically expedient, Padatik demanded that the movement centre those most affected – even when critics dismissed their vision as overly ambitious. As Priya said it: "It was not like we expected to get something out of this immediately. But we had to set the narrative."

This act of "setting the narrative" reflects how infrapolitics operates not as spectacle but as meaning-making. It is also where intersectionality becomes praxis. As I have elaborated in my theoretical framework, intersectionality must be understood not only as a critique of exclusion but also as a strategy of resistance – one that generates solidarities through a recognition of differential vulnerability.

Padatik's work was thus not only against the CAA, but also against the epistemic and material structures that had persistently erased working-class and minoritised women – within the state, within society, and even within social movements. This resonates with what bell hooks describes as the absence of a "love ethic" in masculinist resistance movements – a structural tendency to reproduce domination even while claiming to fight it. hooks talks about masculinist, sexist biases, especially in leadership, that are often found in popular movements of resistance that lack what she calls 'the love ethic' (2000). When studying women's participation and leadership in the anti-CAA movement, I was repeatedly referring to her work on the transformative capacity of leadership that is rooted in love, and not self-interest. Structural change, asserts hooks, is possible only when popular resistance to domination stems from the recognition of the "interlocked, interdependent nature" of those very systems of domination. Padatik's feminist ethic was built precisely on that understanding.

Women's dissent in Guwahati, then, was not grounded in an abstract legalism or constitutionalism alone, but in an everyday ethic of survival, and mutual care. It did not require institutional legitimacy to be politically meaningful. Rather, its radical potential lay in the claim that women from the margins could not only participate in dissent but

also redefine its very contours. They demonstrated what it means to theorise citizenship from below.

Thus, Guwahati's protest landscape, unlike the symbolic centre staged in Delhi, revealed a more precarious and fragmented terrain of dissent. Here, the anti-CAA movement was shaped not only by legal anxieties or constitutional claims, but by the material urgencies of land, labour, and survival – especially for women already inhabiting the margins of state legibility. Through Padatik and other feminist interventions, women articulated a radical critique of both state violence and the patriarchal exclusions embedded within dominant protest cultures. Their mobilisation was not rooted in the promise of immediate recognition, but in a politics of care that made dissent possible in a context governed by fear and fragmentation.

This chapter has traced how gendered precarity, intensified by militarisation, ecological displacement, and bureaucratic erasure, shaped the ways in which women reimagined citizenship from below. While the Guwahati protests lacked the spectacle and centrality afforded to Delhi, they forged their own vocabularies of resistance: grounded in intersectional solidarities, affective labour, and the refusal to remain silent in the face of exclusions.

As I turn to the synthesis chapter, I examine how these seemingly disparate geographies – the centre and the frontier – are held together not by ideological coherence, but by women doing acts of citizenship (Isin and Nielsen, 2008). In this convergence, I ask what it means to theorise citizenship not as a legal status, but as a contested terrain produced through the politics of care.

8. Analysing Feminist Solidarity and its Transformative Potential

"A lot of media is calling students 'first-time protesters'. Were they blind to us protesting against curfew timings, sexual violence, #MeToo cases? Do they only notice protests driven by men?" - Salma, Student protester in the anti-CAA movement interviewed by Neha Dixit for Al Jazeera, 2019

The two preceding chapters detailed how women navigated visibility, risk, and dissent through distinct strategies – performative hypervisibility in Delhi, and relational[65], sometimes invisible, mobilisation in Guwahati. This chapter now brings these field sites into dialogue, not to flatten their divergence, but to explore how gendered citizenship is refracted through uneven terrains of power.

The analysis here directly addresses the two core research questions underpinning this thesis. First, it examines how the protests challenged the masculinised political imaginary of India which codes citizenship in terms of legal recognition, control, and national sovereignty. In its place, it posits a political grammar built on care, manifested in acts of relational and affective solidarity. In both Delhi and Guwahati, women's participation unsettled the boundaries between 'national' and 'women's' issues, revealing that the defence of secular democracy and pluralist citizenship was itself a gendered act. The so-called feminine – care work, neighbourhood organising, emotional labour – became the infrastructure of political resistance (what chapter 4 has identified as its *infrapolitics*).

Second, it reflects on how these feminist interventions reconfigure the relationship between citizenship, belonging, and gender. Rather than viewing citizenship solely as a legal status conferred by the state, women enacted it as an *embodied, precarious, and relational practice*. In Delhi, this took the form of occupying public space in defiance of both state repression and patriarchal restriction. In Guwahati, citizenship was negotiated more cautiously, under the shadow of surveillance, militarisation, and ethno-nationalist anxieties – but no less meaningfully. Across both sites, the personal remained political, in potent and complex ways.

This synthesis consolidates the three key arguments emerging from the interviews, that have been developed throughout the thesis:

[65] Relational solidarity, underlying this mobilisation, is grounded in the recognition that people are constituted through their relationships and specific social, economic, and historical contexts.

- that feminist solidarity, even when emergent or unintentional, proved a vital resource in challenging masculinist and exclusionary state imaginaries;

- that the current liberal model of citizenship systematically marginalises women, necessitating a more inclusive, relational model – what this thesis maps within the framework of gendered citizenship; and finally,

- that the protests reaffirm that the personal is still political in the 2020s: intersectional feminism endures not only as critique, but as praxis, visible in everyday organising, mutual care, and acts of care.

Ultimately, this chapter proposes that gendered citizenship is not a derivative or partial form of political engagement – it is a *transformative framework* through which the very meaning of belonging, legality, and resistance in a postcolonial democracy can be reimagined. It is the final argument of this thesis to strengthen the radical feminist assertion that "the personal is political" by showing how personal experiences (of caregiving, exclusion, and layered violence) were transformed into collective political action. From the Shaheen Bagh “dadis,” who became symbols of intergenerational leadership, to the Assamese women rallying to protect their land, this movement reveals how feminist solidarities can transcend geographic and cultural divides. By centring the voices and experiences of women, it argues for a reimagined framework of "Gendered Citizenship" which critiques the liberal model’s reliance on territoriality and documentation, and instead emphasises relationships, acts of care, and intersectional solidarity.

Rooted in the critical feminist standpoint established in the initial chapters, this chapter situates these movements within the broader postcolonial politics of resistance in India. It draws on the everyday acts of care and solidarity that these women practiced, showing how their actions not only disrupted state mechanisms but also created spaces for reimagining citizenship. Finally, it builds upon the central argument of this research: that gendered resistance within the anti-CAA/NRC movement reveals the transformative potential of feminist solidarity in reimagining citizenship within postcolonial India.

To that end, this chapter is organised in six broad sections, each of which synthesise the findings from both field sites on the framing, reasoning, leadership, relationality, spaces and organisation of the movement.

8.1. Frames of Comparison

In doing reflexive thematic analysis, I began by looking for what would overlap between the field sites, and then for what would set them apart. Guwahati and Delhi differed in their specific grievances – Guwahati grappling with fears of losing indigenous land, resources and culture, Delhi fighting against the erosion of secularism – but shared a common thread of feminist practices. The community kitchen and childcare arrangements at Shaheen Bagh mirrored the care networks that women in Guwahati relied upon to navigate the anxieties of documentation and displacement. In both cities, care emerged as a radical act of resistance, subverting the masculinised aggression of the state and carving out spaces of inclusion and dignity. When compared, the protests in Delhi and Guwahati have shown how distinct regional contexts and histories shape localised dimensions of resistance, while simultaneously reflecting shared strategies of feminist solidarity and defiance. I found that the performance of this solidarity differed in the two sites, and the difference in the *framing* of the protests shaped much of its public perception as a movement.

The findings from Delhi and Guwahati do not merely illustrate three discrete domains of citizenship, participation, and movements – they actively connect them through a shared political logic: care. Each axis of the triangular model is transformed by the Politics of Care and interlinked in lived practice. First, 'Citizenship' and 'Political Participation' are connected through the bureaucratic regimes of documentation that compel public engagement under precarious conditions. In Guwahati, women's struggle with NRC paperwork due to natural disasters, gendered naming practices and early marriage, exposes how citizenship is not a legal given but a labour marked by exclusion. In Delhi, the refusal to "show papers" (*hum kagaz nahi dikhayenge)* becomes a collective act of resistance – where the demand for documents meets a vociferous politics of refusal. Participation, here, is inseparable from the experience of contested citizenship.

Second, 'Political Participation' and 'Social Movements' are bridged through the forms of collective risk management that allow protest to emerge and endure. In Delhi, student protestors protecting women during police attacks reflects an ethic of shared vulnerability and mutual defence. In Guwahati, the fear of surveillance meant many protestors adopted careful, localised forms of dissent – where strategic invisibility itself was a form of

political engagement. These acts show that participation is not an isolated event but a relational continuum sustained by emotional labour and care.

Third, 'Social Movements' and 'Citizenship' connect through the reimagining of political belonging in spaces built by care. The Shaheen Bagh encampment, with its kitchens, childcare areas, and legal aid stations, created an alternative civic infrastructure – where the right to appear became a demand for inclusion. In Guwahati, collectives like Padatik Nari Samaj mobilised the most marginalised women, not only to join and add to the numbers, but to lead. These movements do not merely demand rights; they enact new forms of citizenship grounded in care, visibility, and survival.

Through these interconnections, the Politics of Care (again, invoking Fisher and Tronto) emerges as a relational mechanism – the force that animates and binds the model of Gendered Citizenship. It transforms citizenship into a negotiated, embodied practice; turns participation into a shared ethical responsibility; and enables movements to prefigure alternative futures.

This framing, grounded in the empirical themes generated from the data analysis, reveals how feminist dissent is both locally contingent, and structurally resonant. The model helps to clarify not just *what* women did, but *how* and *why* they mobilised in the ways they did, given the constraints of militarisation, surveillance, legal exclusion, and regional marginality. In reading these differences not as divergence, but as a plural feminist praxis, the table reinforces the thesis' central contention: that gendered citizenship in India is enacted through a spectrum of political acts, from performative visibility to strategic invisibility, and from national claims to hyperlocal solidarities. This reframing opens up new conceptual space for theorising citizenship.

This new space enables more inquiries into the communities that find themselves in the politico-legal limbo of claiming citizenship as an 'illegal migrant". A researcher I interviewed in Delhi, Prabhat, who works closely with one such group – the Matua community in West Bengal – offered a perspective that disrupts the more common critiques of the CAA. The Matuas, a Dalit community whose migration history spans the chaos of Partition and the 1971 Bangladesh War, have long been caught in the precarious liminality of citizenship[66]. For decades, they have lived under the shadow of legal

[66]Despite the CAA's enactment in December 2019, the lack of clarity in its implementation has caused frustration among the Matuas, who feel their issues remain unresolved. The Matua community enthusiastically welcomed the Citizenship (Amendment) Rules, 2024, which were formally introduced in April 2024 to implement the CAA of 2019. To their dismay, many have been facing problems as the

frameworks – most notably the 2003 Citizenship Amendment Act - that labelled them as "illegal migrants." This categorisation left them disenfranchised, marginalised, and constantly negotiating the precarities of statelessness. Against this backdrop, the 2019 CAA occupies a fraught position in their collective imagination. It is, on the one hand, a legislative act that promises long-awaited recognition. By regularising the citizenship of non-Muslim migrants who arrived before December 31, 2014, the CAA appears to address some of their immediate concerns, offering what many see as a pathway to belonging. However, this pathway is far from absolute. The cutoff date excludes more recent migrants and those who might still arrive, leaving segments of the Matua community in a familiar state of uncertainty. As Prabhat noted, this conditional inclusion encapsulates a tension at the heart of the law: while it gestures toward resolution, it simultaneously reinforces and introduces exclusions.

Prabhat's perspective is critical because it complicates broader critiques of the CAA in Delhi, which have often framed the law as wholly exclusionary. For the Matuas, the Act does not sit easily within such binaries. Their cautious acceptance reflects a negotiation of priorities – balancing the immediate relief offered to some against the enduring limitations imposed on others. The Act is not a definitive solution, but neither does it appear as an unmitigated harm. This complexity sits uneasily within the broader anti-CAA discourse, which often foregrounds the law's violation of constitutional secularism and is precisely where Bajpai's portrayal of Indian liberalism (2011) gains traction. Bajpai sees it as grappling with the challenge of reconciling individual rights and secular citizenship with the demands for group-based protections and affirmative action. She says that while liberalism provided a framework for equality and democracy, it also imposed limits on minority rights in the interest of national unity and secularism, reflecting complex and sometimes contradictory political and normative commitments. For the Matuas, the abstractions of constitutional secularism took a backseat to the tangible gains that the CAA promises, however incomplete they might be. This is a reminder of the fragmented realities of citizenship in India – where legal recognition can both alleviate and perpetuate marginalisation. It is also a reminder of how even within a single policy, the stakes of inclusion and exclusion vary dramatically depending on whose story is being told (Putatunda 2024).

online application requires several documents, including proof of original residence in Bangladesh. (Paul and Joseph, 2025)

In terms of framing, the Delhi protests were predominantly centred on the *exclusion* of Muslims from the CAA, framing it as a "Muslim question" – underscoring what they vocally challenged as the discriminatory nature of the legislation. This galvanised solidarity (the relational variant) across communities who feared a similar fate should they ever fall into the 'minority'; and also, the affective variant that emphasised secularism and constitutional values. Parmeet, an interviewee from Delhi, saw the CAA and NRC as part of a larger project aimed at cornering and expelling Muslims, stripping them of their rights and status as equal citizens in their own country. Coming from a Sikh (another minority religious group in India) family, she described feeling a personal stake in the protests. For her, it was not just about standing in solidarity with Muslims, but recognising that such measures were part of a wider "Hindutva agenda" that she said would inevitably target other minorities, including Sikhs. Joining the protests, she said, was not a matter of waiting for persecution to reach their own community but an urgent stand against the unfolding project of exclusion. Protest spaces such as Shaheen Bagh emerged as densely populated, emblematic sites of defiance - hugely driven by this affective and relational solidarity.

On the other hand, in Guwahati, the protests were rooted in *resource politics* (Deka 2019) entwined with Assamese *nationalism*. The vociferous opposition to the CAA was driven by concerns about the demographic and cultural impact of migration from Bangladesh. This is a crucial point to note, that while some protesters I interviewed rejected the CAA's religious exclusions, they were equally opposed to granting citizenship to Bengali migrants – "Hindu or Muslim", they said – whom they perceived as threats to the linguistic and cultural identity of the Assamese population.

The divergent nature of grievances articulated in the protests also shaped their dynamics. In Delhi, the movement drew connections between citizenship and material concerns, such as fears of disenfranchisement and economic marginalisation[67], particularly among Muslim communities. Protesters emphasised how the NRC disproportionately targeted marginalised populations, who often lack access to documentation, compounding existing inequalities - linking questions of identity with broader socio-economic justice, broadening the movement's appeal. When analysed, the Guwahati interviews also

[67] Some interviewees made references to "bulldozer raj" - a term used to refer to bulldozing homes deemed as encroachments. This is a controversial state action. Pandey (2022)'s report gives a critical account of the use of this term in Delhi's context (see Pandey, 2022).

critiqued the NRC for its document-heavy demands along with their fierce opposition to the CAA. The emphasis, however, remained on cultural and linguistic identity of Assam, with less overt attention to 'secularism'. This focus reflects the broader political trends in Assam, where issues of identity and migration have historically overshadowed overt socio-economic debates. The movement's prioritisation of Assamese cultural preservation shaped its narrative, but this framing also limited its inclusivity, sidelining discussions about gender and the Miya community.

The nationalist framing of the movement in Guwahati had an interesting and more complex impact on women's agency when compared to Delhi. In fact, one of the most striking contrasts between the two field sites was the role of women. In Delhi, women were physically at the forefront, particularly at Shaheen Bagh, where they organised, spoke publicly, and sustained the protest site for months. Their leadership defied entrenched stereotypes of Muslim women as passive or invisible in public life, positioning them as central agents of resistance; while the physicality of their presence redefined public space as inclusive, intersectional, and democratic. The media's portrayal of the female students at university campus protests and of women at Shaheen Bagh further amplified the image of the protests as a women-led movement. Photographs and videos of women occupying public spaces, leading chants, and holding placards became symbols of resistance, drawing national and international attention to the movement's message. However, as Swara, an interviewee from Delhi cautioned, this visibility also raised critical questions about representation. Were the women of Shaheen Bagh genuinely shaping the movement's direction, or were they being instrumentalised as symbolic "poster women" for a broader agenda? This concern is not unfounded, feminist critiques of movements (O'Keefe, McClintock), especially those with a nationalist agenda have highlighted the complexities of women's visibility in political movements, where symbolic power does not always translate into structural shifts in agency or decision-making. This argument has been established in detail in chapter 3.

In contrast, women in Guwahati were less visible in leadership roles in the more visible protests initially, reflecting the nationalist framing of the movement. It reveals the sidelining of the direct, immediate threats to women and marginalised groups within the movement. While women participated actively in rallies and marches, their contributions often went unacknowledged, or, were relegated to supporting roles of 'felicitating the male speakers' and 'bringing tea to the audience'. Priya, the interviewee in Guwahati who

gave the most detailed account of the Padatik march, said that this was the precise reason she had felt compelled to organise a women's movement within the larger anti-CAA movement in Guwahati where Assamese *jatiyotabad*[68], dominated leadership structures, often perpetuating patriarchal hierarchies. According to the interview data, some progressive organisations (the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) led by Akhil Gogoi, for instance) did seek to broaden the movement's focus by introducing more secular and inclusive narratives. While their intervention potentially tempered the movement's overtly ethnic assertions, and prevented it from devolving into physical hostility against Bengali Muslims, the dominance of nationalist priorities continued to shape the movement's leadership and rhetoric. A significant fallout of this framing was the oft sidelining of concerns about gender and minority rights.

Looking back at the variations in leadership and framing across different protest sites, what stands out is how these shaped inter-community relations. In Delhi, participants spoke about how the protests became a crucible for fostering solidarity between Muslims and other communities – Dalits, university students, and civil society organisations that opposed the CAA. The protest sites, though not without moments of tension and violence, were remembered as spaces of dialogue and collective action, where communities came together to resist what they saw as authoritarianism and communalism. The coalition-building that emerged from this context, I argue, was not incidental but a direct result of the movement's inclusive framing, which deliberately centred inclusivity and positioned unity and constitutionalism as a counterpoint to the divisive basis of the CAA and NRC.

Guwahati was a trickier field to analyse in terms of inter-communal relations. The nationalist framing of the protests worsened existing tensions between Assamese-speaking communities and Bengali Muslims. Participants pointed to how the emphasis on Assamese identity and the persistent portrayal of Bengali Muslims as "outsiders" exacerbated the divides that had peaked during the Axom Andolan. Historical prejudices intersected with material anxieties over land and resources, making it more difficult for protesters to mobilise support across communities. However, Muneera, hailing from a Bengali-speaking Muslim family residing in the Barak valley, said that many Bengali-speaking Muslim people in Assam were showing support for the NRC to prove their allegiance to the 'Assamese cause'. Fearing further alienation and accusations of being

[68] Jatiyotabaad is the Assamese word for nationalism.

'illegal immigrants', the support for the NRC from Bengali-speaking community in Assam sat uncomfortably between socioeconomic anxieties and questions on belonging.

The tension between the two field sites on this theme highlights the challenges of building solidarity within movements that must navigate exclusionary identity politics. It is in such contentious spaces that the limitations of coalition-building and the potential for deeper intersectional solidarities become evident. These framings, thus, not only structured inter-community dynamics but were also foundational in analysing the motivations underlying participation in the movement.

8.2. Why did the women participate?

In this context of divergent framing, gender emerged as a critical axis of solidarity. It offered a lens through which shared vulnerabilities could be recognised and collective action imagined – within not only Guwahati or Delhi as individual sites, but also between the two. The intersectional feminist standpoint used in this thesis becomes particularly useful for this. In my interview with Taslima (a community organiser in a lower-income neighbourhood in the outskirts of Guwahati), she described the emotional toll of witnessing the aftermath of the NRC process on women and how the introduction of the CAA compounded these fears. "What kind of impact will it have on us?" she asked, her voice sharp with concern. The legislation was not just a law to her; it was personal, tied to the lived realities of women in Assam, many of whom had already borne the brunt of proving their citizenship. She explained how the protests in Assam were rooted not in opposition to Hindu culture but in a rejection of Hindutva, which she saw as an ideology intent on imposing rigid patriarchal norms. "They are not even saying Hindu, but Hindutva. Hindu is different," she insisted, pointing to how the rise of this ideology was accompanied by regressive narratives about women's roles - "Women should give birth to 100 children," she recounted, referencing comments by politicians, "but what about their education? Their security?"

Her frustration linked these ideological shifts to broader failures in governance. The state, she argued, was promoting slogans like *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*[69] while neglecting to

[69] Save the girl child, educate the girl child – a slogan used by the Government of India to encourage gender equality in the society.

address systemic barriers like high dropout rates among girls or the lack of safety for women. “You are asking women to not wear jeans or use mobile phones in a globalised world,” said Priya, when asked about her reason to participation in the movement. She tied this contradiction to the push for Hindutva as a majoritarian, religio-patriarchal model of governance. For her, the CAA was not just a legislative issue; it was a sign of a more sinister attempt at controlling women’s bodies and futures.

This critique resonated with narratives I heard in Delhi, where women at Shaheen Bagh were raising parallel concerns about how the CAA-NRC disproportionately targeted Muslim women. Across both sites, women articulated a shared fear that their autonomy and citizenship were under threat, whether through systemic exclusions or ideological impositions. These moments of critique were not only personal, but inherently political, as women linked their struggles to the broader exclusions embodied by the CAA-NRC.

Gender emerged as not just a side note from the analysis of the interview data, it was a rallying point. Women in Guwahati and Delhi spoke about these issues not as abstract debates, but as lived realities, connecting their everyday experiences to the structural violence embedded in these policies. For many women I spoke to, joining the anti-CAA/NRC protests marked their first experience with such direct political action. Their motivations ranged from feeling personally threatened by the narrative around the legislations, often intertwined with a broader sense of injustice and a desire to claim agency in a sociopolitical landscape that had historically sidelined them. Some saw their participation as a way to resist exclusionary practices threatening their identities – individual, familial, and communitarian, while others described it as an act of solidarity with those being targeted. Fewer still went to witness the spectacle of women-occupied protest sites like the one at Shaheen Bagh. However, what prompted protesters could not be seen in isolated categories. The triggers interrelated with each other; but what remained constant in both sites was the recognition of a clearly gendered solidarity - manifested in slogans, posters and images embedded in the two previous chapters.

8.2.1. Motivations for Protesting the CAA/NRC in Delhi

The motivations that drove participants into the protest spaces in Delhi were multifaceted, shaped by personal fears, relational and affective solidarities, and a shared desire to engage with questions of justice and belonging in contemporary India. Central to the protests was a widespread critique of the CAA. For many, the legislation raised concerns about its alignment with the constitutional values of secularism and equality. By selectively granting citizenship to non-Muslim refugees from neighbouring countries, the law was viewed by critics as excluding Muslims and, in doing so, introducing a religious criterion into citizenship. Most interviewees in Delhi described the legislation as "biased" or "unconstitutional," raising concerns that it would represent a shift toward a more exclusionary framework of governance.

The proposed NRC added another layer of urgency to the protests, particularly for those concerned about disenfranchisement. The requirement to produce decades-old documentation was perceived as disproportionately impacting vulnerable communities, including those without the resources to secure such records. These anxieties were particularly acute for Muslims, who faced the dual burden of proving citizenship under a system many believed was designed to exclude them. Stories from Assam, where the NRC had already left many stateless or disenfranchised, were often cited by protesters as cautionary tales. Yet, as mentioned above, there were also those who supported the NRC as a necessary measure to address unregulated migration and protect Assam's resources, reflecting the complexity of public opinion surrounding the issue.

Solidarity emerged as a defining feature of the anti-CAA/NRC protests in Delhi, offering a glimpse into how alliances can be formed across entrenched divides of religion, region, and class. Many non-Muslim participants I spoke to described their involvement as a moral responsibility to stand with Muslim communities, whose rights and safety they believed were most directly threatened by the legislation. Feminist scholarship underscores that solidarity is not purely intellectual or ideological; it is pronouncedly embodied and affective, rooted in shared experiences of vulnerability and the emotional responses they evoke (Hemmings 2012; Wickström et al. 2021). For many participants, strong emotions of care, anger, and empathy became the driving forces behind their decisions to join collective action – manifested in the rallies and blockades.

These transcend the usual drivers in the literature explaining collective action – such as identity, interests and shared cultural values, identified by the communitarian school of thought. Non-Muslim participants often described feeling a sense of moral responsibility, while Muslim women spoke of fear and defiance as intertwined motivators. These emotional responses helped to forge bonds across lines of religion, region, and class. When looked through the lens of feminist solidarity, it helps make sense of these actions, especially its focus on shared vulnerability, care, and allyship in moments when other avenues of resistance are closed (Wickström et al. 2021). Remarkably, these affective solidarities took shape in response to visible displays of vulnerability, such as the fear within Muslim neighbourhoods or instances of state violence, including police actions against students at JMI. However, the concern raised by Wickström et al. reverberates here: could these solidarities hold as emotions gave way to the structural challenges of sustaining collective resistance? Or were they bound to dissipate as the immediacy of the crisis waned - had they not been upended by the COVID-19 lockdowns?

A particularly compelling dimension of the protests in Delhi was the role of gender and public space. Women's leadership, exemplified by the iconic sit-in at Shaheen Bagh, transformed the protests into a broader commentary on gender, visibility, and resistance. The women of Shaheen Bagh turned a bustling urban area into what Singh (2020, 102) describes as a 'micropolitical adda', a space where political expression was interwoven with acts of care and solidarity. Care, and solidarity, the two axes of political labour that emerge here, informs the basis of my argument for recognising a framework of gendered citizenship. This is significant not only for its symbolism but also for the ways it disrupted traditional notions of public space and political engagement. Singh (2020, p. 103) observes that the protest did not fit neatly into conventional frameworks of political resistance. Instead, it was diffused in the everyday lives of the women who sustained it, with their presence itself serving as a form of resistance. This blending of the political with the personal created a space where acts of care – bringing blankets, cooking meals, and caring for children - were inseparable from acts of dissent.

However, while some celebrated this as a radical reimagining of political participation, others critiqued it as insufficiently disruptive, questioning whether such micropolitical forms of resistance could achieve structural change. This reclamation of space also raised questions about the sustainability of such movements, particularly in contexts where

women's agency remains constrained by rooted societal norms. Does that dismiss the transformative potential of this movement?

For many women I interviewed, participating in the protests was transformative. Occupying public spaces, voicing dissent, and leading movements challenged traditional gender norms and created new possibilities for agency. However, this empowerment was not uniform; it varied depending on intersecting factors such as caste, class, and religious identity. As Singh (2020, p. 102) notes, the inclusivity of the protests at sites like Shaheen Bagh was both their strength and their limitation. While they created spaces for dialogue and solidarity, they also reflected the broader inequalities and exclusions that shape Indian society.

The motivations for women's participation were thus not monolithic; they reflected the diverse and often contradictory realities of those who participated. By foregrounding these complexities, the protests offer valuable insights into the dynamics of resistance in contemporary India. They remind us that acts of dissent are rarely straightforward; they are shaped by overlapping identities, structural inequities, and the ever-present tension between the personal and the political.

8.2.2. Motivations for Participation in Assam's anti-CAA Protests

In Guwahati, women's participation in the anti-CAA protests appeared as both essential and peripheral. Essential, because their presence at marches and demonstrations was visible and transformative. Peripheral, because their contributions, though indispensable, were rarely placed at the forefront. It was in neighbourhoods like Hatigaon in Guwahati where women organised rallies and protests, often braving police intimidation and social disapproval. These were not acts of defiance undertaken lightly; they pushed against patriarchal norms that had long constrained women's political visibility in the region. Still, their involvement was framed more as support rather than leadership - a recurring pattern in nationalist movements where women are often mobilised yet excluded from positions of real authority (detailed in 3.1. Feminism and Nationalism).

The motivations that brought these women to the streets cannot be disentangled from the intimate and relational roles they occupy within their families and communities. For many, the CAA was not merely a policy issue; it was an existential threat. In Assam, the

Act was seen as a disruption to the state's cultural identity, economic resources, and fragile social fabric. These fears were amplified by economic precarity and the enduring uncertainty surrounding their children's futures. As Taslima told me, "Tomorrow my daughter will graduate…our family of three is here, but none of us have a government job… So, we will have to protest." Statements like that speak to the ways in which economic anxieties and familial responsibilities become inextricably linked to political action. Feminist scholars have long argued that the divide between the "private" and "public" is a false one, and these women's motivations reinforce that point (Chari 2009; Turbin 2003). Their political engagement was rooted in personal and community concerns, collapsing the boundaries between home and the street, the family and the state.

The experience of navigating the National Register of Citizens (NRC) served as a critical backdrop to these mobilisations. The NRC process disproportionately impacted women, who were often left vulnerable due to systemic barriers tied to documentation, inheritance norms, and the undervaluation of women's labour. Many women lacked the birth certificates or land documents needed to prove their citizenship, a reality compounded by the patriarchal structures of their households - leaving them on the brink of statelessness, heightening their fear of what the CAA could mean for their futures. For the interviewees in Guwahati, these fears were not theoretical. The NRC's publication had already excluded many from its rolls, and the prospect of coupling it with the CAA created a sense of urgency that propelled women to the forefront of the protests.

Even so, the barriers to leadership within the movement were palpable. Women described feeling relegated to supporting roles - making tea, providing hospitality, and performing cultural tasks - rather than being invited to lead marches or speak publicly. During one of my interviews, a participant, Binita, a young software engineer who was very active in the movement on both the field sites, recounted the role women played in the Tengani mass gathering. Tengani is a small village in Assam where the anti-CAA movement saw women taking the helm, unprompted. "The women's forces came out," Binita said, describing how they, many without prior experience in protests or organisational roles, took the initiative to mobilise resources. They went door to door, collecting funds and provisions. "If you cannot give us cash, then give us food or something so that we can distribute it at the protest," they told their neighbours. On the day of the gathering, the women took it upon themselves to cook meals and provide for the thousands who had come to protest, even carrying water in buckets to make it all happen.

This labour was essential to the success of the protest, but, as Priya had pointed out while talking about the Padatik march, "the stage was occupied by men." Men delivered the speeches and were the public face of the gathering, while the women worked behind the scenes, their efforts invisible but indispensable. For Priya, this reflected a familiar pattern: the gendered division of labour. Women were expected to take care of the "guests," to handle food and lodging, while the men handled the politics. It was caregiving, repurposed for the protest space – a gendered dynamic that mirrored societal expectations. This reflects a familiar feminist critique of nationalist movements, which often deploy women as symbols of cultural preservation while denying them substantive political agency (as detailed in chapter 3). Some women expressed frustration at how quickly the movement turned its focus toward prominent figures and celebrities, leaving behind the contributions of grassroots activists whose work sustained the protests day to day.

Despite these challenges, they found ways to carve out their own spaces of resistance. Collectives like the Padatik Nari Samaj emerged as critical sites for women's organising, allowing them to articulate their perspectives and demands on their own terms. This is an important culmination of gender being an intersectional point of convergence for political action – spaces like this within the movement challenged the exclusionary tendencies of both the state and elite feminist spaces, reframing the anti-CAA/NRC protests as a site for working-class feminist resistance. Padatik's narrative was a powerful refusal to sideline the most marginalised, foregrounding intersectionality and insisting that any meaningful feminist politics must begin by addressing the intersecting oppressions of class, religion, and gender. Collectives like this amplified voices that might otherwise have been overshadowed, challenging the privileged, mostly male-dominated leadership of the broader movement. Their efforts were not just about opposing the CAA and NRC but also about resisting the patriarchal and nationalist hegemonies that often circumscribe women's participation in political struggles. In these spaces, women articulated a vision of resistance that was intersectional, one that acknowledged the multiple and overlapping oppressions of gender, class, and ethnicity.

In speaking with participants in Guwahati, I was struck by the ways in which their experiences mirrored broader debates about citizenship, belonging, and identity in Assam. These were not abstract issues; they were personal - tied to histories of migration, marginalisation, and survival. Women's involvement in the protests reflected not just their own stakes in the outcome but also their capacity to reshape the terms of resistance.

Much like their counterparts in Delhi, who turned sites like Shaheen Bagh into spaces of radical care and solidarity, women in Assam demonstrated that political participation is as much about reimagining what it means to belong as it is about opposing state policies. Their actions underscored how this movement was lived and felt - intimately, relationally, and often on the margins.

8.3. Leadership and the Politics of Care

Women's leadership in the movement, therefore, redefined citizenship – not as a legal or bureaucratic status, but as a relational, collective, lived practice rooted in care and solidarity. During my fieldwork, one observation came up repeatedly: misogyny does not vanish just because a cause is progressive. A participant at Gauhati University, Mehar, described their campaign against the 'Hindu Rashtra', a collaboration with queer activists and the Women's Studies department. The aim? To resist Hindutva's patriarchal ideology, which, as she put it, "reduces women to machines." But their challenges were not confined to the ruling party. Misogyny, she observed, was equally present among their supposed allies. She pointed to political cartoons by anti-CAA cartoonists, portraying women in short dresses as symbols of "foreigners." "We realised this is also there in this so-called progressive section," she reflected, exasperated. These depictions reduced women to moral symbols, reinforcing feudal stereotypes in a movement that should have sought to dismantle them. Language, too, betrayed patriarchal biases. The famous leftist student activist, Kanhaiya Kumar, while speaking on national television dismissed the ruling party by saying, "*Arrey bhai aap chudhi pehen lo*" (go wear bangles), his words equating femininity with weakness.

This was not just about offhand comments or misplaced imagery. It exposed the structural reality that even movements claiming justice often fail to escape entrenched hierarchies. For women and gender-diverse individuals, resistance was not just about fighting Hindutva. It was about challenging misogyny within their own spaces – holding their allies accountable while continuing the fight against the state. This dual battle was exhausting, but it was also transformative. The participants I spoke with emphasised that this reckoning was not optional; it was essential to the movement's legitimacy. "If we cannot clean up our own house, what are we even fighting for?" Mehar asked rhetorically.

In Delhi, women at Shaheen Bagh redefined what political resistance could look like. "We are not just fighting for our rights; we are fighting for the soul of the republic," Rabia, a young Muslim participant told me. Her words captured the intertwined stakes of the protest – personal and collective, intimate and political. These women had transformed caregiving, so often dismissed as apolitical, into a radical form of dissent. They provided food and water, ensured physical safety, and took turns caring for children, together, so everyone could fully participate. These acts were not peripheral; they were central to the protest's endurance and vitality – providing life and creative ideas.

Caregiving was not just labour in this context – it was resistance. It challenged the masculinised narratives of citizenship that centre on control, exclusion, and documentation. By embedding care into the fabric of the movement, these women demonstrated how citizenship could be lived relationally, enacted through solidarity and mutual support. Shaheen Bagh blurred the boundaries between the personal and the political, showing how care could sustain not only individuals but entire movements. This transformation speaks to the heart of feminist critiques of citizenship. Nancy Fraser (2016) identifies care as part of the "hidden infrastructure" of societies – essential but systematically devalued. At Shaheen Bagh, women reversed this devaluation, showing that care is not secondary but foundational to political action. The protest space became a microcosm of an alternative vision for the republic, where care, solidarity, and collective agency were central to reimagining justice. Scholars like Tronto (1993), as I have referred to in several instances, have argued decades ago that care ethics provide a powerful counterpoint to the atomised, competitive logics of neoliberalism. At Shaheen Bagh, this counterpoint was lived, woven into the everyday rhythms of resistance.

These relational, affective acts of citizenship was not confined to Delhi. In Guwahati, the protests carried the weight of Assam's historical memory. The shadow of the Assam Movement (1979–1985) loomed large, with its anxieties around migration, Assamese identity, and resource alienation. Nationalism, even in opposition to the state, often reproduces its own gendered hierarchies. Women, though visible in these protests, were frequently confined to symbolic roles, celebrated for their presence but not their leadership; and yet, women in Guwahati disrupted these expectations. They turned resistance into dialogue, using poetry, songs, and speeches to create spaces for care and inclusion. Their leadership did not erase the regional specificity of the protests but reimagined it – connecting local struggles to broader feminist practices. As Taslima

explained, “We were not just fighting the CAA; we were fighting for the right to say what our identity means, on our terms.” In doing so, women navigated a dual resistance: confronting patriarchal norms within their communities while pushing back against the state’s exclusionary apparatus.

The NRC process epitomised these exclusions. Its reliance on documentary evidence to establish citizenship disproportionately impacted women. Ruma, a domestic worker in Guwahati whose experience I have detailed in Chapter 7, explained how her estranged relationship with her husband and lack of independent documents left her invisible to the state. “We were born here,” another Bengali-speaking Muslim woman, Sadia, told me, “but the state asks us for proof we cannot give.” These stories are not just individual tragedies; they reveal a larger system of erasure. The NRC relies on what Scott (1998) calls “state legibility” – a preference for standardised, linear identities that fit neatly into bureaucratic forms. For women like Ruma, whose relationships and lives defied these tidy categories, the process was not merely exclusionary. It was violent. For Ruma, this logic rendered her precarious position as a working-class woman nearly illegible to the state. Her estranged relationship with her maternal family, informal separation from her husband, and reliance on her employer to complete forms all challenged the NRC’s narrow assumptions about identity and citizenship. The expectation that a woman’s identity is contingent on her relationships with men – whether as a daughter, wife, or mother – leaves those like Ruma, whose connections are unstable or undocumented, particularly vulnerable to exclusion. The state’s demand for documents that many women could never produce, made citizenship not about belonging, but survival.

Thus, the women resisted. Across both Delhi and Guwahati, they refused to be erased. At JMI, women were placed at the forefront of protests, initially to deter police violence, but this tactical decision quickly evolved. Women became leaders, resisting brutality, building solidarities, and reshaping what dissent could look like. Their participation was no longer about being included; it was about refusing marginalisation altogether. These acts of care (Isin and Nielsen, 2008) – giving and receiving it – were relational, emphasising interdependence within the protest space. By creating an environment where all women could fully participate, the protesters demonstrated how citizenship, especially for marginalised groups, is not simply a matter of rights but one of active, relational engagement.

The anti-CAA/NRC movement transcended the laws it mobilised against. Women's contributions in this movement redefined citizenship as relational and intersectional, rooted in care and solidarity rather than control and exclusion. These women disrupted the masculine monopoly over the public spaces in India, asserting their agency in spaces that had long relegated them to the margins. This movement revealed a different vision of belonging. Citizenship, as women articulated it in the protest sites, was not about documents or laws, but emerged around acts of building relationships, survival, and collective hope. Across the two field sites, women's leadership demonstrated not only how power operates along intersecting axes of identity but how those same axes can be subverted to create new possibilities for justice and dignity. This *visible leadership of women* - a pertinent theme emerging out of my analysis – fundamentally disrupted entrenched tropes rooted in passivity and helplessness around the political imaginary of womanhood. The figure of the "silent" Muslim woman (Bjoernaas, 2015), so often invoked in public discourse, was redefined through acts of collective resistance, where they reframed themselves as agents of political and social transformation. This reframing, however, is shaped by the complex terrain they had to navigate – negotiating patriarchal constraints within their communities while confronting a state apparatus that often positions them as subjects of surveillance and exclusion. As Ansari and Chambers (2022) argue, the persistent portrayal of the passive citizen is not only reductive but also functions as a tool of erasure, flattening diverse experiences into monolithic representations.

This duality – the fight against state exclusions and the simultaneous confrontation of patriarchal norms – was the most striking aspect of these movements. Resistance, for these women in Guwahati and Delhi, was not singular. It was multi-layered, constantly negotiating power structures within and beyond the spaces of protest. They were positioned at different intersections of marginality: Bengali/Muslim/Lower Caste/Socioeconomically disadvantaged; and while some navigated a few, others had to tackle the entire spectrum of disadvantage. This is why their leadership was transformative, and dispersed the apprehensions against appropriation. They were not merely present; they were reshaping the very terms of what it meant to resist.

8.4. Motherhood, undeniably

Motherhood was not a lens I explicitly sought during my research, but it emerged persistently. Sometimes subtly, sometimes forcefully, it found its way into the narratives of participants across Delhi and Guwahati. Without reducing women's activism to their roles as mothers, it became evident that motherhood, as both identity and experience, shaped the contours of participation and reframed the notion of gendered citizenship during the protests. What struck me most was the resonance between Delhi and Guwahati: despite their distinct political contexts, maternal identities wove a shared thread of care, protection, and resistance. This thread transcended regional divides, binding the two sites with a common focus – safeguarding the futures of their children and communities.

The presence of women who identified themselves as mothers at the protests embodied an interplay of vulnerability and strength. For them, particularly for Muslim women, the CAA-NRC represented an existential threat, not only to individual rights but to the survival of families and communities. Taslima, for example, described the legislation as a "threat to existence," explaining how it compelled her to act for the sake of her children. For many mothers, the violence inflicted upon students during the protests was a visceral catalyst to affective solidarity. The sight of their children beaten, detained, or harassed by the state transformed fear into resolve for visible resistance. The looming spectre of statelessness, compounded by generational marginalisation, became a call to action. Their activism was at once political and personal.

Several women I interviewed in Guwahati and Delhi framed the CAA-NRC policies as amplifying their anxieties about their children's futures. Nadia, a hijabi single mother I had interviewed in Delhi observed, "Experiencing an atrocity as a mother is very different," pointing at how policies threatening familial security become magnified through maternal care. While not universal, this framing of motherhood as both a motivator highlights the relational dimensions of exclusion and resistance. For many women, the fight against disenfranchisement was inseparable from their desire to protect the lives and futures of their families.

In Delhi, the "dadis" of Shaheen Bagh became the living embodiment of this maternal resistance. These elderly women, who had no direct stake in the outcomes of the movement, stood steadfastly at its centre. Their resilience became a symbol of intergenerational care and collective responsibility, reverberating far beyond the protest

site. Younger participants described the dadis as a source of both inspiration and comfort, with Parmeet explaining how their presence made her feel "protected in a way I had not felt in public before." Their actions were symbolic, indeed, but also intensely practical. They occupied physical spaces of leadership, bringing the ethos of care associated with motherhood into the public domain. In doing so, they redefined gender roles and reimagined what maternal agency could look like within a context of dissent.

In Guwahati, motherhood surfaced as a quieter yet equally powerful force. Mothers there spoke not only of fears for their children's futures but of losing the cultural and linguistic heritage that defined Assamese identity. In a region marked by militarisation and a history of political conflict, their anxieties carried a distinct weight. These fears of exclusion were intimately tied to the preservation of land, language, and the sense of belonging in a frontier area – a theme established in chapter 7. Women in Guwahati, though less visible in leadership roles than their counterparts in Delhi, took to the streets in large numbers. Their presence underscored the stakes of the protests for their families and communities, and was galvanised with inspiration from women who showed up with their children in sit-in sites like Shaheen Bagh.

Motherhood, in this context, was not merely a motivation. It was a dynamic blend of vulnerability and agency. Many women I spoke with, who had children, described how their activism challenged conventional gender norms; by stepping into public spaces, voicing demands, and asserting their agency, these women disrupted binaries of private and public, domestic and political. These women transformed maternal roles into acts of political defiance, and in turn, into acts of citizenship. Their presence in the public sphere disrupted the state's attempt to monopolise citizenship as a bureaucratic and exclusionary process, asserting instead a relational, intergenerational vision of belonging.

However, it is equally important to recognise that while motherhood provided motivation and resonance for many, it did not define or limit women's participation in these protests. Women who were not mothers, or who did not foreground motherhood in their narratives, played equally critical roles. Their activism highlights the multiplicity of identities and motivations that underpinned the protests, pushing back against a reductive framing of women's participation.

8.5. Spaces of Mobilisation

Through the participation of women, the protests became not only sites of resistance against state exclusion but also spaces where they challenged patriarchal norms, within and beyond the movement. In both locations, the protests were marked by organic, spontaneous mobilisation, shaped by the specific sociopolitical contexts of each region. In Guwahati, students and cultural figures played a pivotal role, catalysing resistance against the perceived threats the CAA posed to Assamese identity. Participants described these initial demonstrations as urgent and charged, rooted in historical anxieties over land, language, and demographic shifts. While this spontaneity was powerful in igniting resistance, it also revealed structural limitations. The movement struggled to develop mechanisms for sustained coordination and long-term strategising, a challenge that became increasingly evident as the initial momentum began to wane.

In Delhi, the protests similarly began with spontaneous student-led mobilisations at higher education institutions like Jamia Millia Islamia and Jawaharlal Nehru University, galvanising public outrage. The emergence of Shaheen Bagh as a focal point of resistance, however, demonstrated the transformative potential of decentralised leadership. Delhi's protests benefited from pre-existing activist networks and the civil society infrastructure, which provided crucial logistical support and amplified women's leadership. Still, even in Delhi, the movement grappled with the challenge of articulating a cohesive vision that could sustain engagement beyond the immediate crisis. The question of how to translate spontaneous mobilisation into durable political strategies remained unresolved.

A key distinction between the protests in Delhi and Guwahati lies in the use and transformation of space. In Delhi, Shaheen Bagh became a feminist political space where women claimed public visibility and redefined the norms of protest participation. Many participants described the space as both enabling and protective, offering an environment where they could resist without fear of patriarchal or state violence. This transformation of a public space into a site of intergenerational, intersectional feminist praxis exemplifies what bell hooks (1990) describes as "spaces of radical openness," where marginalised voices articulate alternative ways of *doing* citizenship. Shaheen Bagh's reclamation of public space not only disrupted state narratives but also provided a platform for women to lead and reimagine protest practices on their own terms. By centring care, solidarity, and collective action, it embodied a radical rethinking of both protest and citizenship.

In Guwahati, by contrast, the spatial dynamics of protest were more constrained. The early stages of the movement were characterised by spontaneous street demonstrations, charged by cultural and ethno-linguistic resistance. However, as the movement progressed, these gave way to controlled, organised gatherings led predominantly by groups like the All Assam Students' Union (AASU). While this strategic shift aimed to maintain order and coherence, it inadvertently diluted the protests' disruptive potential. Women, who were visible in the earlier phases, were increasingly marginalised as male leadership dominated these organised spaces, relegating women to supportive or less visible roles. Unlike Shaheen Bagh, the absence of feminist spatial interventions in Assam underscored the limitations of nationalist framings, which often constrain the possibilities for transformative resistance, particularly for women.

Talking of transformation and resistance, the relationship between women's safety and their participation in the movement emerged as one of the most layered and nuanced themes. While these protests did not suddenly transform Delhi (or any other city) into a safer space for women, they profoundly shaped the experiences of those who took part. Protest sites like Shaheen Bagh offered moments of empowerment and solidarity, yet they also showed the pervasive anxieties and risks that define women's relationship with public space in India.

A heightened awareness of vulnerability was a recurring theme in the stories women shared. For many, participating in the protests meant navigating the dual threats of state repression and societal harassment. Rabia recounted how police officers harassed women demonstrators, describing the unsettling reality of being both physically targeted and verbally humiliated. "It was not just the lathi charge," she said. "It was the way they looked at us, the things they said – they wanted us to feel small, to feel like we should not be there." These experiences were compounded by the fear of retaliation, which deterred many from formally reporting such incidents.

Instances of police brutality further exposed the dangers women faced while resisting the state. Women's hostels were stormed during raids, leaving students traumatised and afraid to return to their rooms. These moments of violence, as devastating as they were, became catalysts for further resistance. "We were scared," Rabia told me. "But the fear also made us angrier. We were not going to let them push us back into silence." For these women, the risks of participation were lived, embodied reminders of the precarity they navigated daily. Still, they resisted. Amid this climate, Shaheen Bagh stood out as a

paradox – a space that was both a refuge and a reminder of the very fears these protests sought to address. For many women, it was the first time they felt a sense of ownership over public space. Sameera reflected on the novelty of traversing Delhi late at night to reach the protest site, saying "I would never do that on a normal day, but at Shaheen Bagh, it felt different. We were together, and that made it feel safe." The protest tent, crowded and alive with conversation, became an anchor where women could voice their anxieties and find solidarity. Yet, the very reasons Shaheen Bagh existed: the fear of disenfranchisement, systemic marginalisation, and rising right-wing aggression, remained constant undercurrents. These dualities of safety and precarity, of empowerment and fear defined the experience of resistance for many women in the anti-CAA/NRC movement.

Affective solidarity was a defining feature of these protests in both Delhi and Guwahati. Sharing space, marching side by side, and witnessing each other's courage fostered a profound sense of camaraderie. "We did not know each other before this," Parmeet told me while giving me Rabia's contact, who I would go on to interview a week later. "But in those moments, we became family." Women at the helm of student organisations and protest sites shaped the trajectory of the movement, demonstrating that their leadership was not merely symbolic – it was transformative. Their actions imbued the protests with the politics of care and collective responsibility, where looking out for one another was both a political and personal act.

Yet, the question of whether the protests fundamentally altered perceptions of safety remains complex. The lived experiences of participants suggest that safety is not a singular concept but a layered one, encompassing heightened vulnerabilities, together with newfound empowerment. For many, the protests were not just about opposing the CAA-NRC. They were about reclaiming public spaces, building solidarities, and challenging the norms that rendered them unsafe in the first place. Shaheen Bagh, with its vibrant chaos, was emblematic of this transformation. The very act of gathering in defiance of an antagonistic state turned fear into collective strength. Women found agency not in the absence of danger but in their ability to confront it together.

8.6 Contrasting Roles of Civil Society Organizations

In early conversations with activists in Assam and Delhi, one contrast struck me: the roles civil society organisations (CSOs) played in the anti-CAA protests were as different as the contexts they emerged from. In Assam, CSOs stepped into a movement that had already been ignited by student-led mobilisation. Their role, while supportive, was largely in the background. In Delhi, however, CSOs were integral from the outset. They shaped, sustained, and amplified the protests in ways that felt far more central. These differences were not incidental. They reflected the distinct histories, political contexts, and organisational landscapes of the two regions–each revealing a unique trajectory of resistance.

In Assam, the protests were tied to nationalist anxieties. These anxieties were not new; they echoed the unresolved fears of cultural and demographic erosion that had fuelled the Assam Movement (1979–1985). The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), with its selective exclusions, was seen as a direct threat to Assamese identity. It was not surprising, then, that student organisations like the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) – long recognised as custodians of the region's nationalist sentiment, took the lead. This leadership framed the protests around land, language, and cultural survival. Binita, reflecting on this framing, observed that civil society actors joined later, primarily through public seminars, writings, and discussions that sought to strengthen the narrative. "Their role was supportive, not central," she explained, describing how nationalist student leaders dominated the movement.

The shadow of the Assam Movement loomed over everything. For many civil society actors, the memory of past violence was a cautionary tale, shaping their approach to this moment. Intellectuals and cultural figures worked to emphasise peace and democratic methods, determined not to let the protests spiral into unrest. These efforts brought a necessary sobriety to the movement, but also limited its transformative potential. The focus on maintaining order and avoiding communal conflict meant that the protests remained tethered to familiar nationalist frameworks, leaving little room to imagine possibilities beyond them.

In Delhi, the story unfolded differently. Here, civil society organisations were embedded in the protests from the very beginning. Student-led demonstrations at institutions like Jamia Millia Islamia and Jawaharlal Nehru University may have ignited the resistance,

but it was the pre-existing networks of activist groups, CSOs, and legal aid organisations that transformed these sparks into a sustained movement. Unlike Assam, Delhi had a robust ecosystem of civil society actors already mobilised around issues of secularism, minority rights, and social justice. This infrastructure allowed for rapid coordination and offered logistical support that became critical to the protests' endurance. CSOs in Delhi supported and sustained the space for inclusion and leadership that was created by the spontaneous mobilisation. At Shaheen Bagh, civil society organisations facilitated everything from food supplies to legal aid, enabling the women-led resistance to flourish.

The spatial dynamics of the protests also revealed key differences. In Delhi, spaces like Shaheen Bagh became sites of intergenerational and intersectional praxis. Women described feeling both empowered and protected within these spaces, which enabled them to resist without fear of patriarchal or state violence. In Assam, the dynamics were more constrained. Early street demonstrations, charged with urgency and emotion, eventually gave way to organised gatherings led by groups like AASU. These gatherings were strategic, aimed at maintaining order, but they also diluted the disruptive energy of the protests. Male leadership increasingly dominated these spaces, relegating women to peripheral roles. Priya lamented this shift: "Women were visible in the beginning, but then it became about the numbers, not the voices."

These differences in how space was used and transformed speak to the broader contexts shaping the protests. In Assam, the nationalist framing of the movement prioritised the leadership of nationalist organisations (even when named as student unions), leaving CSOs to play supporting roles. In Delhi, the framing of the CAA as an assault on secularism and minority rights resonated across communities, galvanising a more inclusive and expansive resistance. CSOs were not just participants but architects of this inclusivity, shaping the agenda and amplifying the protests' impact at both national and international levels. Reflecting on these contrasts, it becomes evident that the role of civil society is never static. It is shaped by the histories, priorities, and possibilities of the contexts they emerge from. In Assam, civil society actors worked to maintain peace and strengthen narratives but remained constrained by the nationalist framing of the movement. In Delhi, they created spaces where marginalised voices could not only participate but lead. Together, the varied capacities of civil society in responding to state policies revealed how resistance movements are as much about their histories, as they are about the futures they dare to imagine.

9. In Conclusion

The comparative approach taken in Chapter 8 is meant to highlight the importance of context-sensitive analyses in understanding resistance. In Delhi, pre-existing activist networks and civil society organisations were instrumental in shaping the protests, providing logistical support and amplifying women's voices. In Assam, the legacy of the Assam Movement and the dominance of nationalist framings led to a huge uproar against the CAA, but constrained the scope of feminist interventions, relegating women's contributions to less visible roles. The differences highlight how historical and socio-political specificities shape the trajectories and outcomes of resistance, offering critical insights for scholars of social movements and postcolonial democracy.

The thesis has argued that the anti-CAA/NRC movement was not merely reactive protests opposing discriminatory policies. Instead, they were transformative spaces where feminist solidarities redefined public space, political agency, and the meaning of citizenship. The protests in Delhi and Guwahati, though emerging from distinct regional contexts, shared practices of care and inclusion that traversed geographic and cultural divides. Women's leadership, the politicisation of care, and the reframing of citizenship as relational and intergenerational revealed how feminist solidarities can challenge both state violence and societal exclusions.

An intersectional analysis of these protests reveals the varied and layered ways in which women experience violence, exclusion and craft strategies of resistance. Muslim women in Delhi framed their struggles around questions of secularism and constitutional justice, highlighting how state mechanisms of exclusion target religious and gendered minorities in tandem. In Guwahati, Assamese women contended with the dual threats of cultural erasure and systemic marginalisation, negotiating their participation in a context fraught with nationalist anxieties. These divergent framings underscore how citizenship, even in its existing model in postcolonial India, is not a uniform experience but one shaped by the intersecting forces of gender, caste, religion, and region. A central contribution of this thesis lies in the development of gendered citizenship as a theoretical framework through which to analyse the anti-CAA/NRC movement. This framework, grounded in the politics of care, intersectionality, and feminist resistance, reconceptualises citizenship not as a fixed legal status but as a lived, relational, and performative practice constituted through everyday acts of dissent, care, and solidarity. In this context, the thesis advances the argument that women were not peripheral or incidental participants, but the symbolic and

strategic anchors of dissent. Their mobilisation shaped not only the material and affective dimensions of the protests but also redefined the movement's political grammar. By foregrounding their roles in reconfiguring public space, asserting moral authority, and invoking constitutional principles, this thesis centres women as political agents whose actions are foundational to understanding the form, texture, and impact of the movement. In doing so, it offers a significant contribution to feminist scholarship on social movements and citizenship in the postcolonial context, insisting that analyses of political resistance must account for the gendered and affective dimensions through which such movements are enacted and sustained.

To break it down, it is helpful to revisit the research questions in chapter 1 that guided this thesis. The first one asked how does this movement reveal and challenge the masculine and feminine constructs in India's political imaginary? After carrying out the research, I conclude that the anti-CAA/NRC movement, especially in its site-specific manifestations in Delhi and Guwahati, not only challenged but reconfigured the gendered contours of India's political imaginary. In Delhi, the encampment at Shaheen Bagh and the mobilisation within Jamia Millia Islamia and Jawaharlal Nehru University became iconic precisely because they recast feminist dissent as both embodied and collective, rooted in everyday practices of care and mutual protection. Women at Shaheen Bagh transformed urban streets into spaces of constitutional pedagogy, moral protest, and feminist relationality; thereby collapsing the divide between the "personal" and "political," and asserting caregiving as a legitimate political act. These interventions did not only "feminise" a political issue presumed to be masculine - citizenship - but demonstrated that gendered labour and leadership were already inscribed in the fabric of protest. In Guwahati, women's leadership took less visible but equally significant forms. The movement's dominant narrative in Assam foregrounded indigeneity, territorial autonomy, and resource protection–registering protest within a framework often marked by nationalist and masculinist rhetoric. However, as my interviews show, women's involvement was sustained and strategic: from managing logistical operations to negotiating safety in a militarised environment to refusing to replicate xenophobic discourses in their articulation of dissent. This reveals the multiple feminised registers through which protest was performed – some visible, some infra – yet all integral to the movement's endurance.

In saying all this, this thesis has hoped to contribute to feminist scholarship as much as praxis by centring the transformative possibilities of feminist solidarities, particularly in contexts of systemic exclusion. The anti-CAA/NRC movement, researched through this intersectional feminist standpoint, challenges us to rethink citizenship as a rigid, legal construct and instead imagine it as a relational, intersectional practice grounded in care, community, and inclusion. By reclaiming public spaces - both in physical reality and in the political imaginary, women in Delhi and Guwahati demonstrated that the political is inseparable from the personal, that care can be a radical act, and that resistance can reconfigure the boundaries of belonging and justice. The occupation of this public space constituted not merely a strategic intervention but a critical enactment of gendered citizenship as I have theorised in Chapter 4. Protest sites such as Shaheen Bagh emerged as emblematic spaces where the quotidian practices of care and resistance intersected to challenge dominant constructions of citizenship, visibility, and belonging. These spaces unsettled the conventional public/private dichotomy and destabilised liberal conceptualisations of citizenship as an individuated legal status. Instead, they embodied a relational and performative model of citizenship grounded in feminist praxis – where care, solidarity, and affective labour became central to political subjectivity. Through community kitchens, collective reading circles, childcare arrangements, and informal infrastructures of safety, women redefined public space as a terrain of political belonging and mutual sustenance, thereby demonstrating what Joan Tronto describes as the ethical imperative of care in political life.

For Muslim women, this spatial reclamation held particularly subversive potential. Their visible and vocal presence in these sites directly countered discourses that render them either victims of patriarchal religiosity or as threats to national integrity. By occupying public space while donning the hijab or burqa, these women did not merely assert a right to visibility; they rearticulated citizenship through a politicised embodiment that foregrounded affective and epistemic agency. Their participation challenged both statist and communal patriarchies, creating a collective subjectivity that cannot be reduced to religious identity alone. Instead, they spoke and acted as political agents whose citizenship was enacted through a sustained commitment to care, solidarity, and justice.

In doing so, they effectively disrupted the masculinised logics of liberal and majoritarian statehood, enacting a form of feminist infrapolitics rooted in the ethics of care. This mode of resistance exemplifies the reconceptualisation of citizenship advanced in this thesis:

not as a static, state-sanctioned status, but as an ongoing, collective, and political practice that emerges from the margins through solidarities of care and contestation. Yet, these solidarities were not without tension. In Guwahati, women navigated the constraints of nationalist framings, which often subsumed their voices under male-dominated leadership. Even within movements that sought to resist exclusionary state practices, patriarchal hierarchies persisted, complicating the potential for feminist transformation. By contrast, in Delhi, women reimagined public space through collective agency, creating a radical alternative to the masculinised aggression that characterises state and nationalist politics. These contrasting dynamics testify to how regional histories, organisational ecosystems, and intersectional identities shape the possibilities and limitations of resistance.

What renders this movement transformative is its refusal to be circumscribed by the traditional boundaries of "women's movements." I began my inquiry looking to problematise the understanding of "women's movements", and opened my abstract with the same question. My research yielded a resounding answer. Rather than rallying around issues conventionally framed as "women's concerns," – sexual and domestic violence or reproductive autonomy, although these remain crucial – the anti-CAA/NRC movement contested the very architectures of state power and citizenship that enable such oppressions. This, I contend, makes it a "women's movement". By foregrounding questions of constitutionalism, secularism, and the right to belong, these women protestors enacted a form of gendered citizenship that was profoundly intersectional, relational, and insurgent. Their actions exemplify what I have theorised in this thesis as the politics of care and infrapolitical resistance: a feminist practice grounded in solidarity, labour, and defiance. In doing so, they expanded the epistemic and political possibilities of feminist praxis in India, reimagining citizenship itself as a lived, collective, and contested endeavour.

This effectively leads to my second research question that asked how does women's resistance in the anti-CAA/NRC movement reconfigure the relationship between citizenship, political participation, and social movements in a postcolonial democracy? Women's resistance in the anti-CAA/NRC movement offers a radical reimagining of citizenship as not merely a legal status mediated by documents and state recognition, but as a lived, collective, and relational practice grounded in feminist ethics of care. In both Delhi and Guwahati, my research found that women mobilised in response not only to

exclusionary state policies, but to the affective and material conditions that these policies produced – dispossession, fear, and erasure. In Delhi, the protests' very architecture – community kitchens, child-care spaces, legal aid desks – demonstrated a politics of care that defied the bureaucratic and securitised logics of citizenship. Women reclaimed public space not simply as protest sites, but as alternative civic infrastructures – places where the constitution was read aloud, rewritten through lived experience, and collectively defended.

In Guwahati, the entanglements of frontier politics, settler-indigene tensions, and militarisation produced a very different yet equally potent rearticulation of citizenship. My fieldwork repeatedly pointed at how the NRC process – ostensibly neutral – was experienced by women as a gendered and classed process of exclusion, made even more precarious by infrastructural vulnerabilities like flooding and documentation loss. Women's dissent in this context becomes a claim to constitutional belonging that resists both ethno-nationalist containment and statist erasure. The framework I have tried to build understands Gendered citizenship not as an identity category, but as a performative, resistant practice shaped through the politics of care.

At the same time, it is necessary to resist romanticising this movement or overlooking its limitations. In both Delhi and Guwahati, women's leadership was often celebrated symbolically but marginalised structurally. The persistent tension between feminist solidarities and patriarchal hierarchies raises critical questions about the sustainability of such resistance. How can movements ensure that the feminist practices they rely on are not undermined by the same exclusions they seek to dismantle? This thesis has begun to address these questions, in the hope that they will be revisited over and over, across the world.

The contributions of this research can thus be summarised in the following order. **Theoretically**, this research develops a triangular model of **gendered citizenship**[70] that centres care, solidarity, and intersectional resistance as foundational political acts. Drawing from a feminist theorisation of intersectionality and infrapolitics, it reconceptualises citizenship not as a legal status or identity, but as a relational and performative practice through the standpoint of women. By integrating Joan Tronto's politics and Isin and Nielsen's AC framework with James Scott's concept of infrapolitics,

[70] influenced by Marshall's 3-tiered construction of citizenship into its social, political and civil components.

the thesis frames care as a form of political agency and resistance, especially within the context of state-sanctioned exclusion. It challenges the gender-neutrality and universality presumed in liberal and republican models of citizenship. Instead, it proposes a bottom-up, care-oriented framework that foregrounds affective and agonistic solidarities. Through a triangulated model connecting *citizenship, participation, and social movements* as *acts of care*, it builds on, and moves beyond existing theories by articulating a context-specific, decolonial, and feminist account of citizenship that resists the public-private binary and centres women's epistemic privilege as a site of prefiguration of India's political imaginary.

Empirically, this thesis is the first to bring Delhi and Guwahati into a shared analytical frame to examine the anti-CAA/NRC movement – two cities crucial to the movement but shaped by distinct political imaginaries and protest agendas. While Delhi became the epicentre of Muslim women's constitutional dissent and visibility, Guwahati mobilised around ethno-regional anxieties tied to land, language, and indigeneity. The analysis is based on a total of 22 semi-structured interviews in the two cities, which were obtained using purposive snowball sampling with 25% representation of Muslim women. No existing scholarship has analysed these two sites together, nor explored the implications of their divergence for feminist resistance. By placing them in conversation, this research shows that while the protest agendas diverged, women's participation and affective solidarity emerge as the golden thread linking these otherwise apparently disconnected sites. Reading these two sites together, the thesis demonstrates that while Delhi and Guwahati diverged in the articulation of their protest agenda, the feminised political potential of care and solidarity recurred across both. This comparative empirical analysis extends current scholarship by offering a regionally differentiated yet structurally resonant account of gendered citizenship, showing how feminist solidarities travel across fragmented protest ecologies[71].

Analytically, this thesis advances a reflexive, feminist mode of analysis that integrates Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) with Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to investigate how women enacted and experienced citizenship in India's anti-CAA/NRC movement. This approach foregrounds women's epistemic privilege – their socially situated capacity to expose the exclusions and violences embedded in dominant

[71] Protest ecology refers to the complex, interconnected system of actors, organizations, communication practices, and resources that shape how protest movements emerge, operate, and evolve within their broader social, political, and technological environments.

citizenship regimes – while also remaining attentive to the plural, intersectional, and regionally contingent nature of feminist political agency. It contributes to feminist political sociology by demonstrating how themes are not passively "found" in the data but are actively constructed through iterative, critical engagement shaped by both the researcher's standpoint and the interviews embedded in the specific political and cultural contexts of Guwahati and Delhi. In doing that, it applies the triangular framework of gendered citizenship (developed in chapter 4).

Methodologically, the in-depth, semi-structured interviews form the backbone of the analytical claims made in this thesis. They offer thick descriptions of protest motivations, everyday political practices, and the emotional and physical labour that underpinned the movement. Participants articulated complex positionalities – as mothers, students, scholars, and workers – often all at once, and often as multiply marginalised citizens negotiating exclusion not only from the state but also within the movement itself. Their narratives were not read as mere 'data' but as situated knowledge. FST prompted the co-construction of this knowledge through a reflexive research design, shaped by shared and dissonant positionalities. The data analysis draws on a two-tiered coding process – first coding each site independently to maintain contextual integrity, then analysing points of convergence and divergence. Through this method, the thesis develops three analytic anchors – gendered citizenship, affective solidarities, and the politics of care, which structure the interpretation of the protests. These anchors can provide a transferable toolkit for analysing feminist resistance in other contexts, particularly where protest unfolds under authoritarian conditions, communal targeting, or regional marginalisation.

This research is decolonial in aspiration – it does not seek to merely incorporate marginalised voices into dominant theoretical frameworks, but to challenge the very logics that render certain voices marginal. Drawing on feminist standpoint theory, it takes seriously the knowledge produced from the vantage points of those structurally excluded from the state's imagination of citizenship. Rather than treating feminist resistance as illustrative of pre-existing theories, this project insists on theorising *from* those practices. It foregrounds contextual specificities and care as conditions of political labour. However, this thesis does not romanticise resistance. While it foregrounds women's leadership and the transformative potential of care-based protest, it also remains attuned to the contradictions within this movement.

The thesis thus critiques the binary construction of masculinity/femininity in political participation and instead reveals a spectrum of feminist political acts that challenge the very logics of exclusion and citizenship central to the state's Hindu majoritarian and masculinist framework. By foregrounding the centrality of women – especially Muslim women – as architects of dissent, it challenges the masculinised coding of the political as rational, aggressive, and state-oriented. The role of care in these protests emerges as particularly significant. At both sites, women transformed caregiving into a political act, challenging the public-private dichotomy that often sidelines their contributions. Maternal identities, while not universal among participants, provided a critical lens through which many women articulated their motivations and strategies for resistance. This relational framing of citizenship disrupts the liberal model's emphasis on formal rights and documentation, foregrounding dignity, survival, and lived realities instead. Such practices, as this research has shown, are neither peripheral nor supplementary - they are foundational to reimagining both citizenship and resistance in hierarchical contexts.

This brings us to the epistemic intervention: again, this thesis is *decolonial in aspiration*. It does not merely add marginal voices to dominant theories but seeks to invert the centre-margin logic of knowledge production. It draws from subaltern feminist epistemologies, contesting the universality of Western feminist frames and insisting on contextual specificity as a condition of theorising. By tracing how feminist acts of resistance disrupt dominant grammars of belonging, the thesis reconfigures the relationship between citizenship, political participation, and social movements in the postcolonial context. In that, it hopes to invites scholars, practitioners, and movements to recognise care as politics, visibility as strategy, and solidarity as infrastructure – to imagine citizenship not as a status granted by the state, but as something done, demanded, and defended together.

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Appendix A: Ethical Approval

Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences
DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY

01 December 2022

CONFIRMATION OF RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL FOR A PROJECT

Application Reference:	**DCU-FHSS-2023-006**
Project Title:	**Women and Contentious Politics in South Asia: Learnings from India's anti-CAA/NRC Protests**
Project contact(s):	**kusumika.ghosh2@mail.dcu.ie**

Let this letter certify that the proposed project identified above has been reviewed by the *Humanities & Social Sciences Faculty Research Ethics Committee* (F-REC) and has been approved as a low-risk project. The application was found to comply with university requirements and best practices for research ethics, and with GDPR guidelines and requirements where personal data is processed in the project.

A copy of the application, including appended documents related to participant consent, is archived under the reference above. Queries about this project's approval may be directed to the F-REC Chair.

Sincerely,

Dr Dónal Mulligan
donal.mulligan@dcu.ie

Chair, Faculty Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences
Dublin City University

Dámh na nDaonnachtaí agus na nEolaíochtaí Sóisialta
Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath

Appendix B: Interview Schedule

Biographical information:

I. Name
II. Age
III. Religious affiliation
IV. Institutional affiliation
V. Educational Qualification
VI. Domicile

Guwahati

- What is your opinion of the NRC?
- Did you register yourself in the NRC? How was your experience?
- Did you or your female family members encounter any additional difficulty in the process?
- What is your opinion of the CAA?
- Did you observe/participate in any of the protests/demonstrations against the CAA?
- If yes to 'participated', why? What prompted you to participate?
- How were the protestors mobilized?
- What role did you play in it?
- Did you play that role on behalf of any organisation (including NGOs, student unions, civil society organisations etc)?
- Did you see other women in roles of leadership in the demonstrations?
- How did you perceive the Assamese media's portrayal of the demonstrations in Assam?
- How did you perceive the national media's portrayal of the demonstrations in Assam?
- What did you expect from your participation in the anti-CAA demonstrations?
- Did the COVID-induced lockdowns impact your participation in the movement?
- What do you think about the future of the anti-CAA movement?

Delhi

- What is your opinion of the NRC?
- What is your opinion of the CAA?
- Did you observe/participate in any of the protests/demonstrations against the CAA?
- If yes to 'participated', why? What prompted you to participate?
- What role did you play in it?
- Did you play that role on behalf of any organisation (including NGOs, student unions, civil society organisations etc)?
- Did you see other women in roles of leadership in the demonstrations?
- How were the protestors mobilized?
- How did you perceive the national media's portrayal of the demonstrations in Delhi?
- What did you expect from your participation in the anti-CAA demonstrations?
- Did the COVID-induced lockdowns impact your participation in the movement?
- What do you think about the future of the anti-CAA/NRC movement?

Appendix C: PLS and Informed Consent

Plain Language Statement

This research will explore what constitutes citizenship in a democracy as a lived practice for a woman. While many reports on the anti-CAA/NRC movement carry the angle of gender, it seeks to understand the interests of women who participated in the protests.

To attain that, it will investigate the triggers of the protests, how they changed character as it spread from Assam to Delhi, and why the movement was characterised by a high turnout of women as protestors and leaders.

Should you choose to participate, I will schedule a time and date for an interview with you, as per your convenience. I will ask you questions about where and how you participated in the anti-CAA/NRC movement, what prompted you to join the demonstrations, what role did you play, your observations and experiences with the movement, and your expectations from it.

The interview will be recorded with your permission (audio only), will be password protected and stored in an encrypted file. Your personal data will be safely disposed of after the publication of my thesis and before 2027.

Your privacy will be protected completely in compliance with the European Union's standards set out in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which is a legal framework that sets guidelines for the collection and processing of personal information from individuals in Europe. Even if you are not a resident of the European Union, your data will be processed in accordance with the principles of data protection in GDPR subject to legal limitations to data confidentiality.

You can access the principles of the GDPR here.

You can change your mind at any time and choose to withdraw your consent, even after the interview has been conducted. Your data will then be destroyed and not used to derive any findings for the purposes of this research.

My thesis will be available for you to read when it is completed, and a report of the findings will be sent to you.

For any further information/concerns, you may contact me at kusumika.ghosh2@mail.dcu.ie, my PhD supervisor at jivanta.schottli@dcu.ie or the Faculty Research Ethics Committee at hss.frec@dcu.ie.

Informed Consent

I, _____ agree that I have been briefed about Kusumika Ghosh's doctoral research at the School of Law and Government in Dublin City University, Ireland, under the supervision of Dr. Jivanta Schottli. I have read and understood my rights regarding protection of personal data under GDPR, and the same has been explained to me in a **plain language statement**, given to me before this interview. I hereby consent to have this interview recorded on audio.

The data derived from this interview can be pseudonymised and used in her thesis.

Signed:

Date:

Appendix D: Code Book

Interview Schedule themes:

Perceptions and Experiences with NRC/CAA: Explored participants' views on the impact of NRC and CAA, focusing especially on any gender-specific challenges related to the NRC documentation process.

Participation and Leadership: Examined motivations for joining the protests, roles of participants, visibility of women leaders, and experiences of agency and leadership within the movement.

Impact of COVID-19 on Activism: Addressed how pandemic restrictions affected mobilisation strategies and participation in the protests.

Movement's Future and Expectations: Explored participants' aspirations for the movement's outcomes, changes in strategies post-COVID, and visions for the future of citizenship.

Main categories:

Movement
Context

Perceptions+Experiences of NRC/CAA	Context
Participation and Leadership	Movement
Impact of COVID-19 on Activism	Movement
Movement's Future and Expectations	Movement

GUWAHATI

Main codes (emerging from data): GUWAHATI

1. Resistance to Mainland Indian hegemony
2. Assamese Nationalism
3. Opposition to colonial divide-and-rule strategies
4. Women's experience of erasure in the movement
5. Women's Mobilisation strategies
6. Fear of surveillance
7. Fear of losing land
8. Fear of Linguistic and Cultural Erosion
9. Fear of Demographic Shifts

Themes emerging from codes (nested)

Theme	Codes nested under Theme
Perceptions and Experiences with NRC/CAA	2, 7, 8, 9
Participation and Leadership	4, 5
Impact of COVID-19 on Activism	6
Movement's Future and Expectations	1, 3

Sub codes with description: GUWAHATI

1. Resistance to Mainland Indian hegemony
1.a. Colonial Legacy and Regional Discontent: Framing of Assam's relationship with the Indian central government as a colonial or exploitative dynamic.
1.b. Perceived Betrayal by the State: Feelings of distrust and betrayal by the Centre, with CAA seen as part of a larger agenda against Assam's interests.

2. Assamese Nationalism and Protection of Indigenous Identity
2.a. Ethnic Identity and Cultural Pride: Expressions of Assamese identity, pride in local heritage, and cultural traditions.
2.b. Historical Memory of the Assam Movement: References to the 1980s Assam Movement, linking anti-CAA sentiment to a broader legacy of resistance against perceived threats to Assamese culture.

3. Opposition to colonial divide-and-rule strategies
3.a. Perceived Regional Fragmentation: Belief that the government is deliberately dividing Assamese resistance by exempting certain regions, such as Bodo areas.
3.b. Distrust of CAA/NRC Exemptions: Suspicion that selective application of CAA is intended to weaken collective opposition.

4. Women's experience of erasure in the movement
4.a. Logistical and Support Roles: Women's roles in organising food, water, and supplies for protesters, contributing to the protest infrastructure.
4.b. Gendered Division of Labour: Recognition of how traditional caregiving roles shape women's participation, often in background support capacities.

5. Women's Mobilisation strategies
5.a. Organic, Grassroots Organisation: Descriptions of protests arising spontaneously without centralised leadership, often led by local community members.
5.b. Student and Youth Activism: Key role of university students in mobilising peers and the public, creating energy and momentum for protest actions.

6. Fear of Surveillance and Stigmatisation

6.a. State Surveillance Concerns: Anxiety about being monitored, particularly among Muslim participants, due to the potential repercussions of being publicly associated with the protests.

6.b. Fear of Public Identification: Reluctance to appear in media or protest photos, fearing identification and subsequent targeting.

7. Fear of losing land

7.a. Motherhood as a Motivation for Protest: Women's participation framed by a desire to protect their families, land, and community for future generations - also more practical requirements of having to depend on the land for survival when men become migrant labourers.

7.b. Connection to Land and Livelihood: Land as a vital resource linked to survival and cultural heritage, motivating women's involvement in defending it.

8. Fear of Linguistic and Cultural Erosion

8.a. Language Preservation Concerns: Fear that Assamese language and linguistic identity might be undermined by an influx of non-Assamese speakers.

8.b. Comparisons to Tripura: References to Tripura's demographic changes as a warning, highlighting concerns over a similar fate for Assam.

9. Fears About Demographic Shifts

9.a. Threats to Indigenous Land Ownership: Fear of land scarcity due to an increase in the non-Assamese population, with land rights a core concern.

9.b. Economic Insecurity: Worries about job competition and the economic impact on indigenous Assamese communities if CAA is implemented.

DELHI

Main codes (emerging from data): DELHI

1. Concerns over Citizenship
2. Religious Discrimination
3. Motivations for Protest
4. Female Leadership and Motherhood
5. Community Solidarity and Mobilisation
6. Negative Media Portrayals
7. Surveillance and Security Concerns
8. Impact of COVID-19 on Activism
9. Movement's Future and Expectations

Themes emerging from codes (nested): DELHI

Theme	Codes nested under Theme
Perceptions+Experiences of NRC/CAA	1, 2
Participation and Leadership	3, 4, 5, 6
Impact of COVID-19 on Activism	7, 8
Movement's Future and Expectations	9

Sub codes with description: DELHI

1. Concerns over Citizenship
1.a. Fear of Statelessness: Anxiety over losing citizenship status.
1.b. Documentation Challenges: Issues with meeting NRC requirements and fear of exclusion.

2. Religious Discrimination
2.a. Perceived Anti-Muslim Bias: CAA viewed as targeting Muslim communities.
2.b. Violation of Secularism: Belief that CAA and NRC undermine India's secular foundations.

3. Personal Motivations for Protest
3.a Ethical and Moral Reasons: Personal convictions about justice and fairness.
3.b. Identity and Belonging: Desire to protect a diverse, inclusive Indian identity.

4. Female Leadership and Role Models
4.a. Influence of Shaheen Bagh Leaders: Inspiration drawn from the "Shaheen Bagh dadis" and other visible female figures.
4.b. Women-Led Spaces: Creation of inclusive spaces where women could lead and feel safe.

5. Community Solidarity and Mobilisation
5.a. Building Collective Identity: Sense of unity across communities.
5.b. Support Networks: Formation of community alliances and neighbourhood support systems.

6. Negative Media Portrayals
6.a. Misrepresentation of Protestors: Frustration with national media bias and negative framing.
6.b. Stereotyping and Bias: Media depiction of the protests as divisive or disruptive.

7. Surveillance and Security Concerns

7.a. Fear of State Surveillance: Worries about being monitored or targeted by the government.

7.b. Public Identification Risks: Reluctance to appear in media due to fears of reprisal.

8. Impact of COVID-19 on Activism

8.a. Disruption of Physical Protests: Challenges in sustaining in-person protests.

8.b. Shift to Digital Platforms: Increased use of online spaces for mobilisation.

9. Movement's Future and Expectations

9.a. Hopes for Repeal and Long-Term Change: Aspirations for policy reversal and inclusive citizenship.

9.b. Intergenerational Dialogue: Youth and elders working together to envision a better future.