

Skye Arundhati Thomas  
**Remember the  
Details**



Students from Jamia Millia Islamia (National Islamic University) are blocked by police while marching towards parliament in New Delhi, January 2020. The march came after a pro-government supporter opened fire on protesters at the university, injuring a student. Photo: Ishan Tankha.

*On December 11, 2019, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) was passed in the Indian parliament. Proposed by the Narendra Modi–led Bharatiya Janata Party, it included a religious classification: when granting asylum to religious minorities from neighboring nation-states, it excluded Muslims. This was designed to work in tandem with a new National Register of Citizens (NRC), which required Indians to provide documentation, if and when asked by local state authorities, as proof of ancestry. This targeted indigenous and lower-caste communities, who are often undocumented, with no rights to the land they occupy or work on. The first law determined who got to call themselves Indian, and the other imprisoned those whose definition the state found lacking. Detention centers were readied; in the Indian northeast, people had already been taken in under the NRC. In response, a protest movement bloomed across the country. India was energized by a revolutionary spirit. Muslim, Dalit, and Adivasi students, activists, writers, musicians, and poets addressed crowds at twenty-four-hour sit-ins and occupations of public space. People shared snacks, and held hours-long debates about the intention of words like “citizenship” and “democracy.” These peaceful protests were met with severe police brutality, and the clashes were deeply uneven. The police wore riot gear – flak jackets, combat boots, helmets, shields – and carried machine guns. Protestors were unarmed, sometimes holding only their phones. In February 2020, just before the pandemic was announced, tensions escalated, and violence raged through northeast New Delhi. Muslims were targeted by Hindu mobs, as groups of masked civilians burned down shops and threw cooking-gas bombs through windows. Hundreds were injured, and at least*

seventy people are known to have died. In March 2020, the New Delhi Police filed a case claiming that the attacks were the result of a conspiracy led by a group of young Muslim activists, and a series of arrests were made in what is now known as the “Delhi riots case.” Footage of this people’s protest movement has lived several lives. First, it flashed across social media as evidence of state brutality. It was later repurposed, entering courtrooms and charge sheets as key evidence against the young activists. This essay tracks some of this footage; it is an attempt at writing a history.

– Skye Arundhati Thomas

## I.

On September 16, 2020, a group of independent journalists, activists, and academics held a conference in the tree-shaded courtyard of the Press Club of India in New Delhi. A pre-recorded video was switched on. “If you are watching this,” said the lone figure on the screen, “it means I have been arrested.” Umar Khalid, a young Muslim activist and scholar of indigenous histories, had been taken into custody three days prior. After being interrogated for eleven hours by a special cell of the Delhi Police – assembled to investigate the Delhi riots case – he was booked under sections of the Indian Penal Code, the Prevention of Damage to Public Property Act, and the Arms Act. He was charged with rioting, conspiracy, murder, and arms trade. Allegedly, the evidence incriminating Khalid ran to a hundred thousand pages. “What is the risk I pose?” he asks in the video, continuing, “Is it that I claim this country to be as much mine as it is yours?” Dressed in a pale cotton shirt, seated in front of a blank, white wall, Khalid is speaking from the past with a warning for the future. As he talks, he gesticulates with one hand, his movements punctuating what he says: “They are trying to trap you in their lies.”

In the months leading up to his arrest, Khalid had been one of the most visible figures of the anti-CAA/NRC protest movement. On February 17, 2020, he addressed a rally of primarily Muslim men in Amravati, a city in the state of Maharashtra. An attendee uploaded a video of his speech onto YouTube. In it, Khalid is invited on stage, where he speaks about the assault against students at Jamia Millia Islamia, the National Islamic University in New Delhi, which had taken place three months before. Standing behind a red podium, with one arm on either side, he begins by thanking “the women, the mothers, the sisters, the grandmothers” of northeast New Delhi, who had taken to the streets in protest against the state’s brutality. He

tells the story of the night of December 15, 2019. An anti-CAA/NRC protest had taken place near Jamia Millia, and in an attempt to identify and arrest “vandals,” New Delhi state police and paramilitary personnel had entered the university campus. They carried no warrant or paperwork detailing grounds for entry or arrest. It was a Sunday evening. Officers stalked into corridors after sunset, and, without warning, fired teargas shells and stun grenades. Students ran for cover, hiding behind upturned cabinets, shelves, desks. The police ransacked rooms, and broke tables and chairs. Dispatches from the scene overwhelmed social media: short, trembling videos evidenced the crushed glass and mangled metal covering the hallways, and the deafening, uninterrupted sound of tear gas shells. Walls were bloodstained. Later, witnesses spoke of hearing gunfire. In an act of cruelty designed to degrade its victims, state forces dragged praying students out of the university mosque, despite not being allowed to enter places of worship.

On stage in Amravati, Khalid explained how the stun grenades sounded like bombs, how the explosions reverberated for hours through the neighborhood, how the cloud of tear gas was so thick that even two kilometers from the campus, people’s eyes watered when they stepped out of their homes, or opened windows. When residents tried to approach a local police station, they found that the doors were locked. “It was the grandmothers who found the courage,” Khalid explains. A group of women led people to a sit-in site on the banks of the Yamuna River, in a neighborhood of New Delhi that would soon take over the Indian news feed – Shaheen Bagh. As Khalid speaks, the camera filming him – a mobile phone – clumsily pans across the crowd, showing the hundreds of men seated in the audience. Khalid addresses the congregation not as a lone revolutionary figure, staking an individual claim of leadership, but reiterates how Muslim women were leading the movement. It’s nighttime, the crowd is seated on white plastic chairs and rugs laid on the ground. The area is enclosed by blue satin curtains. Audience members are clutching their phones, recording Khalid, periodically breaking into applause.

## II.

On March 2, 2020, politician Amit Malviya tweeted a forty-two-second-long excerpt from the video of Umar Khalid’s Amravati speech. Malviya is a member of Modi’s BJP, the Bharatiya Janata Party, which translates to the People’s Party of India. “Umar Khalid, already facing sedition charges,” Malviya writes alongside the video clip, “exhorted a largely Muslim audience to come out on the streets in huge numbers ...

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Was the violence in Delhi planned weeks in advance?" In the extracted footage, Khalid simply says: since the state is trying to divide the country, people must come together to unite it. "Will you join me?" he asks the crowd. Republic TV, a rightwing media channel, prolific in amplifying fake news, picked up Malviya's edit of the video and broadcast it on primetime news, accusing Khalid of inciting a riot. In the charge sheet filed against Khalid, this video clip is listed as a reason for his arrest; it is a crucial piece of evidence. At a bail hearing in August 2021, Khalid's lawyer called Republic TV's decision to broadcast the truncated video the "death of journalism." When counsel asked the news channel where they sourced the footage from, they admitted it had been taken from Malviya's tweet. Far from being seditious, the full video of Khalid's speech is deeply moving footage, a testament to the dignity of those facing state subjugation. "The history of Jamia Millia, our history, is a history of sacrifices made for this country," Khalid says. "If you want to rain your sticks on us, if you want to shoot your guns, if you want to put us in jail, then go ahead, we are willing to make the sacrifice."

Not one police officer was prosecuted for the incident at Jamia Millia University. On December 21, 2019, a week after the incident, journalists Shahid Tantray and Ahan Penkar interviewed Mohammed Minhajuddin, a young Jamia Millia student with a bruised and swollen eye for *The Caravan*, one of India's few independent political journals. In the video, Minhajuddin sits at home in front of blue patterned wallpaper, a prayer ringing through the air. A philosophy student, he explains to the camera how he ran into a library to take cover. The police broke windows to enter and hit him squarely in one eye with a wooden stick. His eye was instantly blinded. They were "fully prepared to attack students," he explains, "no talk, no interrogation, no questions were asked." After he was hit, Minhajuddin was taken into custody. When he asserted his legal right to record a statement, the police interrogated him instead of noting down what he said. According to reports, over two hundred people were injured during the ambush, nearly all of them Muslim. Several nearby hospitals treated bullet wounds.

Two months after the Jamia Millia incident, in February 2020, the Jamia Coordination Committee, a student organization, released CCTV footage from that night. It shows armed paramilitary and police agents entering the Old Reading Hall dressed in camouflage combat gear, faces covered in scarves. They lean over desks and beat students working at computers or huddled over stacks of paper. Despite the narrative the state has maintained, the video

proved, without a flicker of doubt, the sadism inflicted on students. "I'll end my message with this one appeal," says Khalid in the dispatch he recorded before his arrest. "Do not get scared."



In a prerecorded video released three days after his arrest, Muslim activist and scholar of indigenous histories Umar Khalid addresses the public. For full video, see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCJ4vkuo\\_m4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCJ4vkuo_m4).

### III.

Umar Khalid and his comrades have been charged with the most severe offenses a nation-state can levy against its people, including terrorism, murder, and the manufacture and sale of arms. Nearly all of the activists have been charged with the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), which ambiguously determines what constitutes "terrorist activity." Given its interpretative definition, sections of the UAPA prove exceptionally difficult to petition against, especially for bail. On February 26, 2020, before the special cell of the Delhi Police began its flurry of activist arrests, four video clips were played in the Delhi High Court. The judges were conducting hearings to determine a response protocol. They confronted representatives of the Delhi Police, including the deputy commissioner, stating that the police had not taken sufficient action against violent perpetrators. The judges played the videos – all from the months leading up to the clashes – as evidence of the genesis of the attacks, marking the individuals in them as instigators. Each video was of a BJP party member rousing, or being involved in, the savagery that had taken over the city. The Delhi Police claimed to have never seen or heard of the videos, or what they depicted and, so, the judges put them on.

The first video, from late January 2020, was of Anurag Thakur, a BJP minister of state, addressing a large, agitated crowd. He is dressed in a saffron-colored scarf and stands in front of a poster of Home Minister Amit Shah, Modi's right-hand man. Shah's face is enormous, zoomed-in and blown-up. "Desh ke gaddaron ko," Thakur chants to the riled-up audience. *The traitors of*

*this country.* The crowd responds: “Goli maron salon ko.” *Let’s shoot the bastards.* The second video was of an Asian News International (ANI) interview with BJP member of parliament Parvesh Sharma, also from late January. Sharma is seated at a desk, wearing a starched black waistcoat over a white shirt. The people of Shaheen Bagh, Sharma says, “will enter your homes, rape your sisters and daughters, kill them.” His voice is clear, unwavering. He appears calm, speaks monotonously; he is entirely convinced of his accusations.

The third video was a clip of a demonstration held at the Maujpur metro station by BJP leader Kapil Mishra on February 23. Mishra stands flanked by a policeman in a bulletproof vest and wired helmet. He speaks to the crowd in no ambiguous terms; his speech is mutinous. He calls the protestors criminals and demands immediate punitive action. He directs attention to a sit-in led by a group of women at the next station on the metro, Jaffrabad, where the assembly was occupying a carriageway. He issues an ultimatum to the police: either clear out the Jaffrabad and nearby Chand Bagh protest sites, or his supporters would do it themselves. “We will be forced to descend into the streets,” he declares. The crowd is provoked. Shortly after Mishra’s speech, BJP supporters in the area – throngs of upper-caste Hindu men – started to throw stones, swing batons and iron rods. By early the next morning, there was an official estimate of eight people dead. The mobs were bloodthirsty; a group demolished the protest in Chand Bagh, as though taking a literal cue from Mishra’s speech. They had used petrol bombs to set the site on fire. At midday, the police arbitrarily teargassed a women’s sit-in tent in Kardampuri. The arson, stone-pelting, and shooting continued for the next four days, moving through the city’s northeastern neighborhoods. Both sides suffered casualties, as did the police. Mosques and car parks were burned down; journalists beaten up for attempting to do their jobs. A fourteen-year-old Muslim boy was hit by a stray bullet in the crossfire, wounded along his spine. It took six hours for an ambulance to reach him.

The last video played in court, taken on February 25, was a recorded excerpt of a Facebook Live broadcast by BJP official Abhay Verma, who live-streamed a scene from an alley at nighttime. Around him, a large group of enraged men – some wearing bright orange shirts, others covering their faces, lifting the cameras of their own mobile phones – chant violent obscenities. In the screen recording shown in court, blue “Like” and red “Heart” bubbles fill up the screen. After playing the videos, the court called for the arrest of Thakur,

Sharma, Mishra, and Verma, and Justice S. Muralidhar critiqued the Delhi Police. Just a few hours after the judges had held three crucial hearings on the riots, Justice Muralidhar was transferred out of the Delhi High Court, the news announced close to midnight. By February 27, the Delhi Police began to arrest young activists instead, one of the first being Khalid Saifi, a charismatic orator. A few months on, it would be Umar Khalid’s turn. In February 2021, Mishra – still roaming scot-free – will giddily declare to the press that, should he have to, “I will do what I did again.”

#### IV.

On December 20, 2020, Chandrashekhar Azad, leader of the Bhim Army, a Dalit resistance movement, issued a call to action. As part of the ongoing anti-CAA/NRC protests, he asked people to gather at the Jama Masjid in old New Delhi, a seventeenth-century Mughal mosque made from carved red brick. It was, at one point in history, the holiest site of Emperor Shahjahan’s imperial seat. The police had been doggedly following Azad’s movements, and even attempted to arrest him in advance of the protest. In old Delhi, a constable reached for the collar of his shirt. Azad escaped.

The police imposed Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code, which forbids the assembly of four or more people on the grounds of the potential for damage to human life or property, under the charge of rioting. It was a frantic move, and ultimately too late. Thousands had already begun to travel toward the mosque, from within New Delhi and from its two neighboring states, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. By late afternoon, the steps of the mosque were overrun with people bent forward in prayer for the afternoon *namaz*. Media personnel and police officers had surrounded the gates of the mosque, standing outside, looking in, as though the scene were an elaborate performance. By law, police forces are not allowed to enter places of worship, so they circled the perimeter. The *azaan* rung across this impasse. It was met with the low rumble of water cannon engines. As the prayers ended, the crowd turned to face the cameras and the police, opening banners and flags, bursting into protest chants.

As cameras moved across the crowd, like owls hunting in the dark, Chandrashekhar Azad came into view, surrounded by a protective group of comrades, his lawyer behind him. He held up a copy of the Indian constitution: a document that protects the rights of citizens regardless of religion or caste. Every detail of this moment was enormously significant: Azad was surrounded by Muslim and Dalit protestors in solidarity with each other, gathered together in a historic

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Islamic city, on the steps of a mosque whose Persian name, Masjid-i-Jahan Numa, loosely translates to “a mosque that commands a view of the world.” The copy of the constitution in Azad’s hand had a photograph of the revolutionary leader Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on its cover. Dr. Ambedkar was a lawyer, economist, politician, and social justice reformer, and the writer of the Indian constitution. He had converted to Buddhism in a sharp critique and rejection of Hinduism and its embedded cruelty, particularly in how it devises, maintains, and rigorously upholds the caste system. Dr. Ambedkar wrote in legislation to override caste hierarchies and set affirmative action policies. The subcontinent, as structured by caste, had always been “essentially undemocratic,” he said. He enabled a sophisticated set of reforms, those that were feminist, safeguarded the rights of laborers, and undermined caste monopoly over resources. In the present day, the Modi regime has instead emboldened casteist Hinduism, and all but granted impunity to its violent actors. As much as a contemporary Indian public, state, and judiciary deny the omnipresence of the caste system, India is still entirely governed by its tyranny.

The photograph of Dr. Ambedkar is crucial to understanding the significance of Azad’s gesture. A return to the constitution was an obvious rebuttal to the state’s rewriting of what the Constitution of India declares: that the Indian nation-state will not be governed by religious sentiments or majorities, and that the new republic’s law will work toward the undoing of years of caste- and religion-based brutality. Yet Azad’s gesture was not to return to a document that is otherwise enshrined within a narrative of decolonization, or of the first Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s vision for a “modern” India. It was instead an invitation to look at the constitution as an anti-caste document, and to see secularism not just as an ideological position, but as the only manner by which the Indian nation-state could begin to negotiate its overwhelming daily violence. The images taken of Azad, the protestors, and of Dalits and Muslims clutching the constitution remind us that the end goal of resistance against the Modi regime is not to return to an India of the past, but to fundamentally reimagine the country we have inherited.

Watching the footage of that day was a visceral experience: history collapsed into the contemporary moment. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, an Islamic theologian and India’s first minister of education, had given an anti-Partition speech on the steps of the very same mosque in 1948. “I am an orphan in my own motherland,” he had declared. While Partition sought to extract

Muslim legacy from Indian soil, he had remarked on the impossibility of such a premise. “Remember,” he said, addressing the Muslims present in the crowd, “Delhi has been nurtured with your blood.”



Students and activists hold hands during a protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act in the Shaheen Bagh neighborhood of New Delhi, 2020. Photo: Ishan Tankha.

## V.

Since the 1990s, protests that take place in central New Delhi have often been corralled into the grounds of Jantar Mantar. The site is close to the parliament buildings, it’s small enough to be managed by state forces, and with only two entrances and exits, it’s easy to block off. Apart from its logistical value for the state, it makes for a surreal backdrop: Jantar Mantar – which translates to “calculating instruments” – is comprised of thirteen astronomy machines. Built in the early eighteenth century by a Rajput king, these large, stately red-brick structures are situated across the park, designed to predict the movements of the moon, the planets, and the sun. They are surreal objects with their many steps and curves, their ancient presence. Protesters gather amid this cosmological plain. Surrounding Jantar Mantar are several towering modernist buildings that remain from Nehru’s time, in brutish stacks of concrete. The entire site – both cement and brick – is located in the heart of Lutyen’s old colonial New Delhi and its neoclassical, grandstanding facades. Three visions of India are present in a single space, where they are met by an alternative: the public gathering of dissenting, critical, and impassioned Indian citizens.

The epicenter of the anti-CAA/NRC protest movement was the site in the neighborhood of Shaheen Bagh. Different from the grandstanding, formal architectures that are joined in Jantar Mantar, Shaheen Bagh is a Muslim locality comprised of mixed social classes. Up until the

mid-1980s it was mostly farmland, but by the 1990s the land had been parceled off and sold for development projects. The first influx of new residents lived with open sewers, dirt roads, and poor electrical connections. Many were migrant laborers who had traveled to New Delhi from neighboring states. Over two decades, Shaheen Bagh became a dense, hybrid community of working- and middle-class inhabitants. In the days after the students of Jamia Millia University were attacked by state officials, four generations of locals spilled out into the streets in protest. A tent was put up to mark the center of the sit-in, mattresses and blankets laid out. People served “secular chai” and samosas.

In the discourse produced by the speeches, conversations, artworks, and poetry, the anti-CAA/NRC protests had begun to critically revisit the language that had, within the logic of the Indian nation-state, become sacred – words like “citizenship,” “secularism,” “democracy.” Community leaders actively questioned this political jargon, which had largely been taken for granted, or left unexamined, by the mainstream since independent India was first formed. Citizenship and democracy, on some level designed to imply the safeguarding of populations, had turned monstrous. They also hinged on narratives of progress: since the formation of the Indian republic, in simply stating – and aestheticizing – conditions for progress, successive governments have maintained the illusion that progress is underway; that progress is the ultimate project of a postcolonial nation. The first aesthetic of this was conceived by Nehru’s preoccupation with European modernism; the blankness of concrete was symbolic of change, aimed to imply an objective distance. It was the aesthetic bleaching of hundreds of years of casteist and Islamophobic history – concrete would symbolize the secular ideals of the new republic. Nehru had a great passion for cement, for dams, buildings, bridges; for a new, modern public infrastructure. Today, this concrete looks like poor camouflage. Both casteism and Islamophobia remain visible in the architecture of most modern Indian cities: we occupy segregated landscapes, coded by layers of access and privilege. This makes the occupations of public space during the anti-CAA/NRC protests, and the protests that have come before them, all the more revolutionary.

After 2014, with the election of Modi’s BJP, the narrative of progress was exponentially accelerated. “Acche din aane wale hain.” *The good days are on their way.* They did not arrive. The social and economic structure of the nation lies in ruin, particularly with the constant addition of policies that seek to strip regional

state governments of their autonomy and centralize all power. The handling of the Covid-19 crisis exemplified this: state governments were unable to enforce local lockdowns or specific healthcare policies because the central government filed petitions in the Supreme Court to make itself the sole proprietor of pandemic handlings. The Modi regime repeatedly lied in open court: about the deaths of migrant laborers who were rendered unemployed overnight after the declaration of the national lockdown; about the lethal shortage of oxygen during the deadly second wave. Despite an enormous death toll, and the total collapse of healthcare infrastructure, the regime actively ran a parallel operation to malign a nonviolent people’s movement. It has incarcerated the leaders of this movement under notorious and archaic laws, blindly characterizing young students as terrorists, as murderers, as manufacturers of arms. In doing so it not only criminalizes them – these spirited leaders – but has also taken away their capacity to do the work of holding space for public discourse and critique. The physical sites of the movement have been destroyed; its revolutionaries placed in prisons.

## VI.

In August 2021, the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. As Afghans began to seek asylum, the Modi government seemed to issue “emergency visas” only to Hindus and Sikhs; the CAA was effectively put into action. Earlier the same month, at Jantar Mantar, a group of BJP supporters gathered in an anti-Muslim demo, children holding up posters calling for the “Annihilation of Islam.” Thirty-four-year-old eyewitness Mohammad Nasir told *Al Jazeera* that Muslims in India live in “an atmosphere of perpetual fear.” Nasir had lost an eye in the February 2020 clashes. On September 10, 2021, Nupur Thapliyal, a correspondent for *LiveLaw India*, tweeted an update from inside a courtroom hearing a petition in the Delhi riots case. “UAPA accused Khalid Saifi and his wife [are] exchanging smiles,” writes Thapliyal. She describes how Saifi’s daughter shows him how long her hair has grown since she last saw him, how she smiles.

In a July interview with Sharjeel Imam, one of the first activists and scholars to be arrested by the Delhi police in the riots case, *Article 14* asks, “What drove you to protest?” In response, Imam posits, “What drove millions of others to protest beside me?” It was only because of several petitions filed by Imam’s lawyer – and nearly a year after the first request was made – that he was finally given access to the seventeen-thousand-page charge sheet levied by the Delhi Police against him. He expects to be

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held for up to seven years in pretrial detention. Imam spends most of his time in solitary confinement in Tihar Jail, a maximum-security prison in New Delhi. He reads, he works on his PhD thesis, which is on Partition and the subcontinent's history of communal violence. One of the primary sources for his research, Imam explains in the interview, is his own charge sheet.

Natasha Narwal, Devangana Kalita, and Asif Iqbal Tanha were granted interim bail in the only glimmer of hope the riots case has seen so far. The New Delhi High Court wrote, "It is not uncommon for protestors to push the limits permissible in law," and, importantly, that this does not "amount to the commission of a 'terrorist act' or a 'conspiracy' or an 'act preparatory' to the commission of a terrorist act as understood under the UAPA." As Khalid had emphatically declared in his Amravati speech, "This fight is long." We must attend closely to the details. The fists, the upturned faces, the books, the drawings, the protest signs; the barricades, the tear-gas shells, the metal bullet casings, the batons, the speeding jets of liquid spouting from water cannons.

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