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Chapter 10

Muslims between Citizenship and Media Bias

Insights from Anti-CAA Protest Sites

Mohammad Reyaz, Kaifia Ancer Laskar and Furquan Ameen

I Introduction

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019, and the proposal for the controversial National Population Register (NPR), leading to the National Register of Citizens (NRC) witnessed countrywide protests, particularly by Muslims. Driven by the survival instinct of now or never, Muslims feared losing citizenship like many did in Assam after the state-wide NRC process. Reyaz (2021a) notes instances of inhabitants of Assam such as the Assamese Muslims, Hindus with North Indian origin, ethnic Koch Rajbongshi also being "declared illegal immigrants" by the Foreigners Tribunals. Stories of long-drawn-out legal hassles and harassment of the marginalized during the Assam's NRC process furthered the fear and desolation among protesters. The pent-up anxieties found expression in sit-ins at protest sites across India after the brutal police crackdown on the students of Jamia Millia Islamia. The protests, primarily led by women, also brought to the fore their assertion of religious identity while simultaneously pressing for civic and legal rights as equal citizens who were not willing to accept second-class citizenship. But the February 2020 targeted violence against protesters on multiple sites – particularly in north-east Delhi and the state crackdown in Uttar Pradesh – appeared to be aimed at teaching a lesson or two to the Muslims and showing them their place in India.

The coverage of the protests (Alam, 2019) and the subsequent violence (Ahmad, 2020; India Today, 2019) has further deepened the general distrust Muslims held against the media, who perceive the fourth estate as prejudiced and an organ of the ruling dispensation. In contrast, our ethnography revealed how protesters utilized new media as an alternative channel of communication to reach out to their target audience.

II Sociopsychological Factors and Moral Outrage

After the electoral victory in 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (henceforth BJP) provoked debates and enacted laws that were largely seen as a part of its ideological baggage, aimed at vilification of Muslims. The included laws