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THE MICROPOLITICS OF AN 'ADDA' FOR WOMEN IN INDIA: SHAHEEN BAGH

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It was in 2004 that the concise Oxford dictionary decided to include the word 'adda' among the pages of its 11th edition. It was another step for the ex-Colonial masters to appropriate another Indian concept as their own. *Adda* has been associated with the Bengali identity for the longest time but the word never remained limited to the area of Bengal. It is presented as a noun meaning an "Informal conversation among a group of people"[1]. In Bengal, *adda* is used more as a verb than as a noun. The Bengali tradition of *adda* is an especially enriching experience since the conversations revolve around intellectually and culturally stimulating topics. But anyone in India who has witnessed a fully functional *adda* will tell you that this definition is insufficient. *Addas* have been an almost exclusively male space and therefore, any definition of the word without this detail won't ever capture its true essence. Nevertheless, with the changing socio-professional landscape of urban India, some women can often be spotted invading all-male *addas*. This welcome change has gone somewhat unnoticed in the routine din of the metropolis.

The traditional "*adda*" is essentially an open space for strengthening the community. Unlike parks and open-air theatres, the *adda* does not offer any real cultural activity, even though it is a platform for vibrant social and political exchanges. It is just a space which is not pre-assigned this name but acquires it over a period of time with related usage. Even in urban centers where malls, pubs and restaurants dominate the social scene, *addas* crop up in narrow lanes as a spot for social interaction.

Another traditional virtue of an *adda* worth the name is that the discussions are

1 See https://www.lexico.com/definition/adda.

either cultural, political, philosophical or intellectual, basically fields where, it's believed, women don't have much to contribute. In urban parts of the country, women have mostly been limited to marking their presence in restaurants, clubs, bars, discotheques, etc. An *adda*-like space for women is not exactly commonplace. The situation for rural women is even more confined, especially from the perspective of *adda* participation. It's not that rural women don't socialize, gossip or exchange ideas, it's just that they don't have any specific space to do it. This might be the reason why their discussions while talking at the village well are mostly about domestic issues, or at best about films. While women converse at their undeclared *addas*, they usually have a job at hand which needs attention. For example, I have seen women talking freely while getting water and other supplies for the household, or while queueing up at the doctor's clinic, or standing at the threshold of their homes with one eye on the kitchen stove in the verandah. In all these situations, women don't have the mental ease to linger around and digress beyond a point. The discussions are usually short and 'socially acceptable'. There are two reasons for this: first, women usually talk to other women who are either their own relatives or very well known to their families. This creates a situation where women don't feel at ease about sharing any great secrets or making any great query. In fact, this is one of the crucial points which makes these women spaces non *adda*-like. The second reason is that women have a lot more to get done in a day than men in the rural sphere. Their endlessly long days have a million chores to be completed and hence they lack leisure.

I have always felt that *addas* are a great place for understanding any community and their issues. While traveling for social and political pursuits, I have often found myself in rural areas invading male *addas* and trying to become invisible, so that I can assist to an unhindered, colloquial, almost-offensive *adda*-conversation. But alas, I have mostly failed because men change their mannerisms, tone and topics when being observed by an educated urban woman. Consequently, *addas* became a source of much intrigue and interest to me.

Over the last two decades or so, a rich literature has emerged about the politics of public space. This includes Kurt Iveson's (2007, 2013, 2016 (together with Setha Low), etc.) work on the appropriation of public spaces by active/activist citizens involved in 'DIY urbanism, Jeffrey Hou's (2010) work on guerrilla urbanism, James Holston's (2008) research on practices of everyday resistance and insurgent citizenship and Engin F. Isin's (2008) and Douglas S. Massey and Mary J. Fischer's (2000) interventions on claiming rights to the city. All of these works by urban theorists explore not just the idea of public space but also which effects does the sharing of such a space lead to on a societal level. The most interesting aspect of public space studies, in my opinion, is that there is a very strong political undercurrent to them. The activism which Ivenson talks about in his work and most of his interviews is especially relevant if undertaken by women in a country like India.

Women have increasingly been committed to reclaiming their own public spaces. This is mostly done to improve awareness for issues of women's safety and, sometimes, also as an

act of defiance against the patriarchy which tells them to remain behind closed doors, especially after dark. These are bold attempts to hold not just the government accountable for their well-being but also the men at large. But if one were to analyze them further, it is remarkable to note that the mere presence of a few women on the street, without any chanting of slogans or, for that matter, call for attention, could bring about such a conspicuous change… or at least, act as the first step towards a bigger change. Political expression in such cases is limited to the physical presence of women in a public space at a time which is not deemed 'fit' for them. As revolutionary as these attempts can be, they simply use public spaces that during the day function as normal urban-scape. In other words, there is no specific *adda* which is used for the purpose. The being together of those women at that time of the day itself becomes an *adda* of sorts.

In most of the metropolis across the world, there are some designated areas for protests and public demonstrations. These are places either officially assigned by the state for such purposes or just taken-over by dissenting crowds for venting their emotions. Either way, I don't see these areas as *addas*. For example, Jantar Mantar in Delhi is one such site of protest. Now, although there are men and women of all age and provenance who fill up the space, they are not there for a casual, informal chat. They are there for the explicit function of staging a protest against some occurrence. The beauty of a true *adda* is that people get together for an informal chat which can float away in all directions. It can swing easily from the mundane to the philosophical and just as casually from the religious to the extraterrestrial. It is the non-conformed spirit of an *adda* which makes it the perfect avenue of endless possibilities.

Scholars Mokarram Abbas and Bas van Huer (2013) have talked at length about everyday appropriations of public space. Beyond the revolutionary images of people claiming their rights during mass demonstrations at Tahrir Square, Maidan, Gezi Park, and an occupied Wall Street, we are interested in everyday appropriations of public space by marginalized groups and the ways in which they claim spaces of intimacy, privacy and freedom, while seeking to shape the city to their needs. The spatiality of intimacy versus exposure, of visibility versus invisibility, and of recognition versus misrecognition, puts an emphasis on the different ways in which spaces are experienced by individuals and groups. This can be extended to women in public spaces since most of the *addas* for women have to struggle with the dichotomies they mention.

Ivanson (2007) has famously claimed that it is not easy to distinguish the private from the public. This has been made evident by the recent events in Delhi leading up to a great public movement. With a population of 1.3 billion people, India cannot claim to provide a spacious haven to its inhabitants. Space is such a critical issue for us Indians that most times, we completely ignore it, as we do with many other critical issues I daresay. But last year, before Corona made its presence felt, a series of events in Delhi made giant leaps for the cause of female *addas* in the country.

Since December 2019, in Delhi, a silent protest against government's non-secular policy gave rise to an impromptu *adda* for women in Shaheen Bagh area. This movement slowly became a huge phenomenon which would have still been going had it not been doused by the pandemic.

The unique case of Shaheen Bagh must be studied not just for understanding of people's movements can make a huge influence, but also for how women without any political training or inclination can transform a bustling part of a metropolis into an efficient *adda*.

As economic, gender and communal inequality increased in India after the right wing NDA government came to power in 2014, it was becoming clear that a people's movement was on its way. More so because Delhi had witnessed another watershed moment when the Aam Aadmi Party came to power in Delhi as a result of a long hauled people's movement.

The NDA government's tactics of segregation and control reached an apex with the passing of the Citizen's Amendment Act (CAA) which dictates the creation of a National Citizen's Register (NRC). Those who are risking to be worst affected by such a register are millions of people who don't possess all their formal documents. While in the West, it is unthinkable of a person with a national security number and all documents of birth, education and profession, India is a completely different reality. The country has seen enough turmoil for there to be many people left without their documents of identity. This is especially worrisome for the minority communities like Muslims, Christians and tribal communities etc. who do not fit the agenda of the NDA government of creating a Hindu India. There were a few newspapers talking about the CAA-NRC issue but it was largely seen by the majority Hindu population as a 'great initiative' to get rid of infiltrators from Bangladesh, a hogwash though spread by the government to get away with their plan of skimming the population.

Men and women in Jamia Nagar area of Delhi were hearing about this CAA-NRC debate and they became restless. They knew that it may not affect them directly but many others living in far flung areas of the country would find it very difficult to prove their identity by means of specific documents (as the Act stipulates). The women decided to sit outside their homes, by the side of a big road and began talking to each other about it. It was started by ordinary Muslim women but soon, it was joined by people from a cross-section of religions, gender, caste and social status. As their protest against the CAA and the proposed NRC grew louder, similar movements, led by women and students, sprung up in other parts of the country. From Park Circus in Kolkata to Lucknow's Ghantaghar to Bengaluru's Bilal Bagh, relatively less-known neighborhoods in Indian cities began to fill up with people from all walks of life.

The beauty of Shaheen Bagh was that it was the quintessential *adda* because you could spot women talking about their day, their children, life in general with the same enthusiasm, as they did about the CAA-NRC. It was getting cold and the women just refused to go back to their homes. They would walk up to their homes for fixing a meal for their family or for using the lavatory, but they never really left the

adda. They decided to bring their blankets and pillows on the streets and just made the *adda* their home. Visitors would frequent the place, talk to them, hear from them, laugh, cry, offer help, offer food, clothing etc., but these women, they behaved as if they had forgotten what normal life was. The *adda* became their life. I spoke to many women in Shaheen Bagh and they said they liked this idea of being close to one another, not only was it great to talk freely about things, it also gave them a sense of security. They were not alone anymore. And every time I went to Shaheen Bagh, I felt this sense of safety was not just limited to the CAA-NRC. The women felt safe because they were talking about themselves and their idea of India, they felt safe in their self-realization through that historical protest. For weeks, speeches were made, poems recited, songs sung. The Preamble to the Constitution was read aloud in chorus. Political parties made attempts in between to oust the protesters; a man called Kapil Gurjar fired bullets at the gathering in Delhi; communal violence broke out. But the protesters stuck to the rule-book definition of non-violent agitation.

Until 15 December, when women came out of their homes for the protest, not many were aware of the existence of a neighborhood like Shaheen Bagh. But within days, the name came to signify much more than a geographical site: Shaheen Bagh became a trope for the democratic ideals of the Indian nation. It was invoked to remember the constitutional principles that bind the citizenry together: fraternity, compassion, kindness, unity. Although for me, it became that one space which I had been looking for –a women-centric *adda*. It was not that the men were not included. They too were a part of the protest but they were not the pivot of the space. The place hinged on the women and their sit-in. It was remarkable to see Muslim women, who usually follow the custom of purdah, were out in the open battling cheeringly for the rights of the whole country.

The stories of fortitude and valor at Shaheen Bagh have often been told and will continue to be told for a long time to come but the stories of lighthearted conversations and togetherness also need to be highlighted. These women had no political goal, even though they were encouraged by support from Left wing activists and politicians. These normal women, with basic understanding of issues and a human desire to save their fellow citizens from the wrath of CAA-NRC, managed to bring the issue to the fore even on an international level. Their protest was not just relentless, it was creative and had almost a pedagogic element to it, even for their own selves (along with the rest of the citizenry which had to take note of these 'half-educated' women struggling for human rights). The protest was not an overt attempt to reclaim a space or an idea but their wish to just stick together made them reclaim the very soul of democracy in India.

Early visits to the protest made it clear to me that the government would do all in its power to trivialize and infantilize it, after all, it was just a group of women sitting together, smiling, chatting, eating, singing lullabies to their children, singing and, most importantly, refusing to quit. In my view, it is this very nature of Shaheen Bagh protest which made it effective and special.

I find myself in complete agreement with Himada and Manning (2009) in this regard –'Politics' with a capital 'P' is much less the 'real deal' than it presents itself. While 'Politics' operates in the sphere of representation, where precomposed bodies are already circulating, "the micropolitical is that which subverts this tendency in the political to present itself as already formed" (p. 5). The fact which must be acknowledged and underlined is that Shaheen Bagh's women are a part of this micropolitical cosmos. This shift from the 'Political' to the micropolitical can be considered an important achievement of the current times. This cause has also been heavily aided by the social media which have acted as invaluable promoters of such movements. In fact, the presence of children at the protest site brought the micropolitics of Shaheen Bagh to another level. Children not only dissipated any extremism from their protest, they gave the female *adda* validity and fodder. While yawning away in the middle of chilly-rainy winter nights, women would exchange thoughts about their children's futures. Thus, I would like to argue that such *addas*, especially those involving women can become great vectors to the concept of micropolitics and liberate protests from their sharply political edge. This method of disobeying norms by women in a patriarchal set-up can appeal to people across political beliefs. It can also be said that viewing the protests are people who 'politicized' the CAA-NRC issue is entirely unfounded because this specific is a case of a women's *adda* based on micropolitics of a certain kind. They were not in it for any political gain and hence, their actions (at least to begin with) were far from political.

But the government did not let it go so easily. The police was regularly sent to the site to instill fear in the hearts of the protesters. In fact, the entire state apparatus and the corporate media was being used to attack peaceful protestors, their cause, action and ideology. But the women stayed. These women were well aware of dangers of being arrested, of facing lathis, tear gas shells, pellets or guns, of being hit by goons, of being labelled as anti-national, terrorists and jihadis but they relentlessly protested facing chilly winters and rains of Delhi. They dealt bravely with the violent tactics and threats of forceful eviction deployed by police and state to remove protestors as they claimed to have block the roads.

It took a global pandemic and a court order to displace the women of Shaheen Bagh but they have come out stronger and more firm in their resolve to oppose CAA-NRC.

It can be said that Shaheen Bagh protest will go down herstory as a landmark move by women for citizenship rights in India. And its greatest strength will always reside in it being a leaderless, fearless micropolitical *adda* for women.

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