

Research Article

A Feminist Overview of Participation of Women Students in Significant Social Movements in Contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

India has been a witness to some of the largest social movements in the last two decades and a key aspect of these movements has been the high participation of youth in them. The student community has been at the forefront of participating and even leading many such movements namely Pinjra Tod, Justice for Nirbhaya, Fee Must Fall, Women's Safety Movement, Anti caa/nrc Movement and many more. The huge participation of women students in all these movements has challenged the masculine nature of social movements in India which have been generally dubbed as male centric owing to more participation from men as both foot soldiers and leaders of these movements. Women students in various universities have raised their voice against the growing cases of sexual harassment of women in academic institutions and have led the movement for women's safety in both public and personal spaces. The biggest push to the participation of women students in student activism came during the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests in which the women students of Jamia Millia Islamia led the movement from the front. The iconic picture of courage of women students of Jamia Millia Islamia namely Aysha Renna and Ladeeda Farzana saving their fellow male protesters from police brutality resonated with millions of women across the nation and the anti-CAA movement soon became a movement led by women all over the country. The research article has especially focused on the participation and role of women students in social movements. It has also encapsulated in detail about contemporary women-led movements and protests that are witness to the emergence of many women student activists as leaders in their own right. The article has specifically emphasized on the emergence of women's participation in significant social movements of the last two decades such as Pinjra Tod, Hijab Ban Movement, Justice for Nirbhaya and many more.

Keywords: Women's Movement, Feminism, Gender Studies, Social Action, Student Movements

INTRODUCTION

India has a rich history of student activism as students actively took part in the freedom struggle and were often found at the forefront of the Independence movement. In 1905, the students of Eden Hindu Hostel in Calcutta protested against the decision of partition of Bengal by the British authorities and boycotted their examinations to register their disapproval against the partition. They also burnt British clothes and a statue of Lord Curzon who was responsible for the partition. This burning of Lord Curzon's effigy by the students marked the beginning of student movements in India and it was followed by widespread protests by students against the British authorities across the country in the years leading up to the independence of the country (Shinde, 1978).

The participation of women students in student activism and the freedom movement leading up to the independence of India is a significant feather in the cap of the rich history of student activism in India. The most noted contribution of women students came during the Quit India in 1942 where they actively took part in the movement and captured back an office of the Indian National Congress which was forcefully occupied by the police in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Many women students actively participated in relief work and also documented the stories of women protestors who had suffered heavily as a result of the police atrocities in the districts of Uttar Pradesh. Women students from Banaras Hindu University actively participated in the Quit India movement, many of whom were arrested or expelled from the university for their actions (Ganamukhi, 2014).

In contemporary India too, women students have taken up to student activism, a collective of women students named Pinjra Tod was formed in the year 2015 and comprised of students of Delhi University, Jamia Millia Islamia, JNU, Ambedkar University and many other higher educational institutions in Delhi to challenge the discriminatory and regressive hostel rules and curfew timings and have also pressed the authorities of these institution to make internal complaints committees to address the complaints of students who have faced sexual harassment in the campus or at the hands of their fellow students, teachers or university staff outside the campus premises. The Pinjra Tod movement has also spread to other parts of the country including Raipur, Patiala and Bhopal where women students have protested against discriminatory hostel rules and curfew timings (Barua, 2020).

The images of women students of Jamia Millia Islamia namely Chanda Yadav, Ladeeda Farzana and Aysha Renna protesting against the trio of Citizenship Amendment Act, National Register of Citizens and the National Population Register caught the attention of the nation and later the same women students went viral for saving their fellow

activists from police atrocities (Sarkar, 2020). Similarly, the many photos and interviews of Aishe Ghosh, the president of Jawahar Lal Nehru University Students Union (JNUSU), who was beaten for protesting against the fees hike in JNU and leading the Fees Must Fall movement, also resonated widely with the people who came out in her support in large numbers. She also went on to contest the legislative assembly polls in West Bengal as a CPI (M) candidate (Varma, 2021).

SIGNIFICANT SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA AND PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN STUDENTS

Justice for Nirbhaya Protests

Two gruesome incidents of rape which occurred almost 40 years apart became defining moments in the history of rape laws in India and also sparked feminists protests across the country. The first was the Mathura rape case in 1972 and the irrational judgement of the courts which followed the case. The second was the brutal gangrape of a 23 year old woman student on a moving bus in Delhi on the night of 16th December, 2012. The woman student came to be known as 'Nirbhaya' in the media, meaning 'fearless' in Hindi. Nirbhaya who aspired to become a physiotherapist could not survive the brutal gangrape and violent attack on her. She succumbed to her injuries and died on 29th December, almost two weeks after the attack (Squire, 2021).

The news of Nirbhaya's brutal gangrape spread like wildfire and people took to the streets demanding justice for Nirbhaya and safety of women in Delhi. The protestors reaches Raisina Hills, known for housing major ministries of the country and police resorted to brute force to stop the protestors. The police fired teargas and water cannons on the protestors and on 22nd December at least 35 protestors were injured due to police action on peaceful protestors at Raisina Hills (Suresh, 2020).

The protests intensified after Nirbhaya's death and within hours over four thousand protestors assembled at Jantar Mantar and other protest marches were carried out across Delhi. The protests also spread to other parts of the country making the demand for women's safety a nationwide call. The protests changed the patriarchal discourse around rape and conscience of the nation was drawn toward the heinous nature of the crime. The focus remained firmly on demanding justice for Nirbhaya and punishment for the accused, forcing the authorities to move swiftly and make arrests within 24 hours of the incident. The police also filed a charge sheet within one month of the crime (Suresh, 2020; Squire, 2021).

There was active participation of students in the Nirbhaya protests and both men and women students appealed to the women of the country to come together and demand

safety and dignity for women across the country. Student leader and President of the North East Girl Students' Association Munmi Dutta, termed the death of Nirbhaya as the beginning of a new struggle which will unite women across the country. The students affiliated to SFI also participated actively in the Nirbhaya protest in Delhi as well as other cities (Times of India, 2013).

The Nirbhaya protests saw spontaneous gatherings of people at various protests sites across the country but the entire struggle was given a direction and was led in an organised manner by students' organisations including but not limited to AISA, SFI, AISF, ABVP, NSUI and women's organisation including but not limited to All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) and All India Progressive Women's Association (AIPWA). Students held banners to make their voice heard with slogans like, 'My Body, My Rights', 'My City My Right' and the media took their photos and videos while they faced the police (Rana, 2020).

The students of JNU and DU had also organised protests in their university campuses and were committed to keep the struggle alive in the vicinity of their academic institutions. A woman student of DU present at Jantar Mantar after the death of Nirbhaya said that, "Her death won't be in vain. There will be change, there must be change." Kavita Krishnan, one of the prominent women activists who led the protests, wanted the Nirbhaya movement to finally begin a discourse on the position of women in Indian society and the many ways through which women have to bear injustice and inequality (Nandi and Ghosal, 2012).

The many pictures of young women seen fearlessly at the protest sites braving the police and pushing the barricades are a witness to the huge participation of women students in the Nirbhaya protests. These young women made their voice heard while facing the water cannons and heckling from the police. They held posters with slogans that challenged the patriarchal status quo like, "We live in a society that teaches women not to get raped instead of teaching men not to rape" (Taylor, 2012).

The massive protests led to the formation of new anti-rape laws in India in the year 2013 which eventually came to be known as the Nirbhaya Act. The laws broadened the definition of rape stating that lack of physical struggle by the victim did not mean consent. The law also formulated stricter punishment for rapists and giving death penalty to repeat offenders. The Nirbhaya Act also prescribed punishments for crimes like stalking and spying on women and also the for the act of acid attacks. The Juvenile Justice Act was also amended in the year 2015 which allowed accused above 16 years of age to be tried as adults in case of heinous crimes like rape (Suresh, 2020; BBC, 2020).

The protests had policy level impact as in the year 2013 a Nirbhaya Fund was formed and it was allocated Rs 1000 crore to implement schemes for providing safety and security to women. One of the goals of the fund was to work towards women empowerment. The rapists of Nirbhaya were finally hanged to death on 20th March, 2020 after they had exhausted all the legal remedies available to them. Nirbhaya's mother reacted to the execution of the rapists and said that her daughter finally got justice (Suresh, 2020; BBC, 2020).

There were amendments in laws and policies after the Nirbhaya protests but at the structural level the problem of rape and violence against women still exists starkly. Rape is still a rampant crime in India and the statistics from the year 2018 reveal that 89 rapes happened every day in the year 2018. The Nirbhaya fund which was created also remains underutilised and no state had utilised more than 50 % of the funds (Pandey, 2020; Suresh, 2020). In fact Nirbhaya's mother also pointed out that structural level change to ensure safety of women has not occurred. "If you ask me if there has been any change in the system, I would say no with a capital N," she, said (Squire, 2021).

Pinjra Tod

Pinjra Tod was born in the year 2015 when an order of the Delhi Commission of Women termed the hostel curfew rules for women students of Jamia Millia Islamia which did not allow them to stay out of the campus till late nights as discriminatory in nature. It was then that the women students studying in various universities in Delhi came up with their own stories of hostel curfew rules which were discriminatory in nature and started a campaign against these rules. The universities too had to respond to some of the demands of the women students as many colleges in the Delhi University had to extend their curfew timings and even Jamia Millia Islamia came up with a statement that assured the women students of ensuring gender equality in the campus (Saxena, 2015).

The Pinjra Tod movement advocated that the mobility of women students in particular and women in general should not be limited by imposing unjust rules on them in the name of providing them safety, instead the streets should be made safe for women so that they can move around freely without experiencing any fear or hesitation. The movement started with a Facebook Page named Pinjra Tod and soon took the form of a collective of women students fighting for their freedom and dignity (Mukhopadhyay, 2015).

Women student activists of Pinjra Tod staged a huge night long protest in Delhi University against the hostel rules and even broke the lock of university gate and blocked

the mall road in front of the university. The demands of the women students included twenty four hour access of women students into their hostel and strict implementation of the internal complaints committee code on sexual harassment (Times of India, 2018). The demands also included the removal of curfew timings from all women's hostels in Delhi University and doing away with the process of daily attendance by the wardens in women's hostels. The huge protest by the women student activists of Pinjra Tod forced the proctor of the university to come out and read the memorandum of demands submitted by them (Rai, 2018).

The protests by the women students of Pinjra Tod forced many DU colleges to extend their hostel curfew timings although most of these extensions were symbolic in nature and were not even close to what the women students demanded. Miranda House was one such college which extended its curfew timings by 30 mins allowing women students to enter their hostels till 9 pm instead of the previous curfew timing of 8: 30 pm. However, the move was rejected by Pinjra Tod activists terming the extension as a cruel 'joke' and an insult to the dignity and freedom of women students (Hindustan Times, 2018).

The prestigious Lady Shri Ram College also extended the women's hostel curfew timings to 10:30 pm and allowed night out on all days of the month with a condition of mandatory 60% hostel attendance for women students. They also ended the rule of requiring a permission from the parents or local guardians for permitting night outs to women students (Gulati, 2018). Women students of Jamia Millia Islamia along with women activists of Pinjra Tod were instrumental in forcing the university administration to roll back their decision of a hostel fees hike in the year 2018 (Benu, 2018). Women students of Jamia Millia Islamia were also successful in getting the hostel curfew timings of their hostels extended to 10:30 pm from 8:00 pm as designated before (The Quint, 2018).

In the year 2020, two prominent women activists of Pinjra Tod studying in JNU namely Devangana Kalita and Natasha Narwal were arrested thrice in a span of ten days in various cases for their participation in anti caa/nrc protests. Devangana and Natasha were first arrested on 23rd May, 2020 and a day later the court granted them bail stating that the charges against them were 'not maintainable' as they had only taken part in the anti caa/nrc protest. The court order further stated that, "The accused have strong roots in society and are well-educated. Accused are ready to cooperate with the police regarding the investigation" (The Wire, 2020).

However, the Delhi Police arrested Devangana and Natasha again on 28th May, 2020 and charged them with rioting, attempted murder, criminal conspiracy in a case related to riots that occurred in areas of North East Delhi in February, 2020. Natasha was

also charged under the stringent ‘Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act’ (UAPA) which is usually invoked for people involved in terrorist activities (The Wire, 2020).

Pinjra Toda in an official statement condemned the arrest of their activists stating that, “The use of draconian laws such as the UAPA, and their invocation against democratic activists is a clear abuse of the powers vested in the state. We condemn the strategy being used by the police of invoking new and unsubstantiated charges on Devangana and Natasha as per the convenience of their narrative and without any basis” (The Wire, 2020).

The arrests of founding members of Pinjra Tod namely Devangana and Natasha were met with huge outrage and condemnation from across the globe. A collective statement by feminists from several countries including Canada, France, Palestine, Portugal, Brazil, Bangladesh, Mexico, Sweden, United Kingdom, Nicaragua, Germany and India was released in support of Natasha and Devangana. The feminists in their statement demanded the unconditional and immediate release of Natasha and Devangana along with release of other peaceful protesters who took part in the anti caa/nrc movement (The Indian Express, 2020).

Natasha Narwal lost her father Mahavir Narwal to covid on 9th May, 2021 while she was still in Jail. Her father was the biggest supporter of Natasha’s activism and even while she was in jail her father ran a relentless campaign outside to let the world know that her daughter was innocent and was fighting for a just cause (The Hindu, 2021). Natasha was granted interim bail of three weeks by the court to perform the last rites of her father and was told by the court to maintain, ‘radio silence’ while she is out on bail (Sur, 2021).

Devangana and Natasha were finally given a regular bail on 15th June, 2021 and they walked free out of prison after spending more than a year in prison (Sinha, 2021). The regular bail order of the Delhi High Court read, “We are constrained to express that it seems that in its anxiety to suppress dissent, in the mind of the State, the line between the constitutionally guaranteed right to protest and terrorist activity seems to be getting somewhat blurred. If this mindset gains traction, it would be a sad day for democracy” (Sharma, 2021).

Justice for Najeeb Movement

Najeeb Ahmad, a student of MSc Biotechnology in JNU disappeared from the university campus under mysterious circumstances on the night of 15th October, 2016. Najeeb’s mother Fatima Nafees has since then been fighting a battle in the courts and on the streets to find her missing son who according to her was attacked by fellow students

of the JNU affiliated to the ABVP, a night before he went missing. Three investigative agencies namely the Delhi Police, CBI and the crime branch carried out search operations and investigated Najeeb's case but neither could they find Najeeb and nor did they find anyone responsible for Najeeb's disappearance (Bhardwaj, 2020).

The sudden disappearance of Najeeb from the university campus was met with several protests organised inside the JNU campus and also in front of the Vasant Vihar Police Station under whose jurisdiction the university campus falls. These protests saw huge participation by women student and Shehla Rashid, a former Vice President of the JNUSU and a student activist of AISA led these protests alongside Najeeb's mother (Sengupta, 2016; Times of India, 2016).

Her speech and articles demanding for an investigation in Najeeb's case went viral on social media and students from other universities also started to raise voice for Najeeb in their university campuses. The video of police heckling Shehla Rashid and other women students who were protesting against Najeeb's disappearance also became a binding force that brought the fraternity of students together to raise voice for Najeeb (Sengupta, 2016; Rashid, 2016). The protests which started from the JNU campus eventually spread to universities across India and even reached the CBI office where students from DU, JMI, JNU and AMU stood in solidarity with Najeeb's mother and demanded concrete actions in Najeeb's case (The Indian Express, 2018).

Scores of women students also protested at India gate against the mysterious disappearance of Najeeb. During this protests, no women police officials were present at the protest site and women protestors were manhandled by male police officials. The Delhi Commission for Women issued a notice to the Delhi Commissioner of Police questioning the absence of women police officials from the protest site and the groping of women students by male police officers. The DCW notice read, "The commission wants to know the reasons for non-deployment of female officers at the time of the incident with the girl complainant. What is the name and designation of the male officer visible in the newspaper clipping who is seen groping the female complainant" (Hindustan Times, 2016).

Over six years have passed since Najeeb's disappearance and the top investigative agencies of the country could not find him and also could not punish anyone responsible for his disappearance. The CBI filed the closure report in the matter in the year 2018 and since then the investigation in his case has been closed (The Quint, 2022). The students at JNU and other universities still take out an annual march on 14th and 15th October every year to keep Najeeb's and her mother's struggle alive. "The journey of a young person like Najeeb Ahmed to a university like JNU is the story of the difficulties

that students from marginalised communities in India face as they attempt to enter the hallowed portals of higher educational institutions” (Shayma, 2022).

Fee Must Fall Movement

The students of JNU started a series of protests and marches against the arbitrary hike in the hostel fees of the university. The protests started from the month of October, 2019 and in the month of November, 2019 the then Vice President of India Venkaiah Naidu went to the convocation ceremony of the university and just outside the convocation hall stood scores of JNU students protesting against the fees hike which they called steep and unreasonable (The Indian Express, 2020).

The movement led by JNU students which eventually came to be termed as the Fee Must Fall Movement took inspiration from a global movement of the same name which originated in South Africa in October, 2015 against fees hikes in higher education institutions. The movement then spread to various countries across the globe including Chile, France, USA and India. The rising cost of higher education is the central problem which lies at the core of Fee Must Fall Movement across the globe (Rao, 2019).

The JNU students had to face several roadblocks in resisting the steep hike in the fees as they were brutally lathi charged by the police and had to face water cannons every time they took out protest marches outside the university campus. On 18th Nov, 2019 the students of JNU took out a march from the university campus to the Parliament House. They were met with police barricades at several places and many leaders of the movement including Aishe Ghosh, the then President of JNUSU was detained by the police. The police resorted to severe lathi charge on the marching students by the end of the evening and several students and teachers were injured during the attack (Sarfaraz, 2019).

The Fee Must Fall movement was led by women students of JNU with Aishe Ghosh leading from the front as the president of JNUSU and the movement coincided with another huge movement the anti caa/nrc movement which was also led by women students of JMI and women of Shaheen Bagh. The period starting from October, 2019 to March, 2020 saw the emergence of leadership of women in activism spaces across India. A protesting woman student of JNU who attributed her participation in the movement to her education opined that, “Education opened up my mind, and that is also the reason why so many women are seen in protests now. The exposure through education and the internet, has encouraged women to speak up” (Johri, 2020).

The majority of the students of JNU boycotted their end semester examinations in the month of December, 2019 and continued their protests against the fees hike. The

protests eventually forced the Ministry of Human Resource and Development (MHRD) to intervene and direct the university administration to hold talks with the members of JNUSU and other student representatives. The MHRD also directed the administration to lower the utility charges along with other components of the hiked fees (Ibrar, 2019).

The fees hike protests by JNU students continued for more than two months and on 5th January, 2020 a vicious violent attack was led by masked goons on the protesting students inside the university campus. Women students had to hide inside the hostel rooms to escape the masked goons. A lot of students were injured during this violent attack and at least 23 students received severe injuries and had to be shifted to the AIIMS trauma centre. Aishe Ghosh, JNUSU President was one of the students who received a severe head and hand injury. The police later brushed aside the organised attack calling it a clash between two groups of students in the university (Iftikhar, Singh and Sarfaraz, 2020).

The vicious attackers did not even leave the teachers at JNU as they were also beaten brutally and over 35 students and teachers were admitted to AIIMS and Safdarjung hospitals. The students shared the videos of the attackers on their social media hoping to get help from the police and authorities. The video of Aishe Ghosh, bleeding profusely was also shared on the social media and it became viral in no time. The video of Aishe Ghosh resonated with students across India and made her the face of the movement and an icon of resistance (The Hindu, 2020).

The impact of the incident was such that famous Bollywood actress Deepika Padukone went to JNU and stood in solidarity with the injured students. She greeted an injured Aishe Ghosh with folded hand and a picture of the incident became instantly viral on social media (Gupta, 2020). Aishe Ghosh emerged as one of the strongest women student leaders of the country after the fee must fall protests and even went on to contest the legislative assembly polls in West Bengal as a CPI (M) candidate (Varma, 2021).

The students' protests eventually came to an end by the end of January, 2020 when the Delhi High Court on the petition of Aishe Ghosh and other JNUSU members ruled in favour of the protesting students and directed the JNU administration to allow them to register as per the old hostel manual and not charge them any late fees too. The decision meant that no fees hike would be applicable on students and the fees structure of the old hostel manual would exist. The court also remarked that, "Government cannot get out of education. The government has to fund public education. The responsibility of paying salaries to contractual workers cannot be on students. Someone has to find the funds" (Times of India, 2020).

The students and teachers of JNU take out a solidarity rally every year on 5th January to condemn the brutal attacks by masked goons inside the university campus on the same date. The police even after a year of the violent incident could neither arrest any culprit nor did they file any chargesheet in the matter. The coronavirus pandemic gave the police a chance to brush the case under the carpet. In fact, “a Delhi Police fact-finding committee constituted to probe the sequence of events and negligence on part of local police in connection with the violence had given a clean chit to the police (Singh, 2021).

Anti CAA/NRC Movement

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which was tabled and passed in the parliament by the government of India on 11th Dec, 2019 was met with huge resistance by the people on the grounds that it hampered the secular fabric of the country and granted citizenship to people from neighbouring countries based on their religion. The government of India was also planning to implement the National Registry of Citizens (NRC) at that time, which when combined with the CAA was seen as a move which will be discriminatory towards the Muslim population of India who may had to face extreme marginalisation and ripping of their citizenship rights (Bhatia and Gajjala, 2020).

The first recorded protest against the CAA happened on 12th, Dec, 2019 inside the campus of Jamia Millia Islamia and it was led by women students of the university, it was during this protest that the iconic picture of three women students of Jamia Millia Islamia namely Ladeeda, Chanda and Aysha got hugely viral on social media and resonated with thousands of students across the country (Sarkar, 2020). The very next day JMI was turned into a battleground with police using brute force against the protesting students. The students had to face tear gas and lathis from the police in order to stop them from marching towards the Parliament house. Over fifty students were injured and more than 60 students were detained during the protest (Ahmad, 2019).

However, the protest which started from Jamia Millia Islamia and was limited to a few other university campuses like AMU and JNU took the form of a national movement after the unfortunate night of 15th Dec when police entered the JMI campus and attacked students who were studying in the library. The police crackdown inside a university campus was met with outrage from students, politicians and activists across the country and it was from 16th Dec that the protests took the form of a national movement. Students across India took to streets and organised protests in their campuses to demand action against the high handedness of the police on Jamia students (Outlook, 2019).

The last push to the movement which made it one of the biggest contemporary movements came from Shaheen Bagh where muslim women from the locality staged and indefinite demonstration in order to show their solidarity with the protesting students of Jamia Millia Islamia who were brutally beaten by the police. The protest at Shaheen Bagh was both led and sustained by muslim women from the community. A 68 year old muslim woman at Shaheen Bagh said, “We are here, to organise and assemble peacefully, and to tell the world that we are not violent. We want to tell them that we are a part of this country and we want to be a part of this country. We want India to be a country that is true to its constitution. Each woman here has held the Indian flag and sang the national anthem” (Bhatia and Gajjala, 2020).

The anti caa/nrc movement saw participation of women students in large numbers who broke several stereotypes starting from greeting the police with roses to giving interviews in the media, they resisted the police action on their fellow students and reclaimed public spaces by registering their presence at protest sites. The anti caa protests showed the world that women are capable of leading a movement and they can do it better than men. A prominent student activist Akhtarista said after the attack on Jamia students that, “The way the police attacked us and ransacked our library has only made us stronger. Women tend to speak up only when it involves women’s issues. The time has come for women to speak up on all issues” (Bhandare, 2019).

The anti caa/nrc protests lasted for over three month but had to witness an abrupt end because of the covid pandemic and the police eventually cleared the protest sites by force citing covid norms and lockdown (Venugopal, 2020). During the covid lockdown, the police arrested Jamia and JNU students as well as other social activists who were active during the anti caa/nrc protests, these arrests were condemned on large scale by civil society organisations and human rights activists. Amongst prominent names who were arrested included many students like Safoora Zargar, Meeran Haider and Umar Khalid. They were slapped with serious and draconian charges related to the violence that broke out in areas of north east Delhi in February, 2020 (The Wire, 2020).

The arrest of Jamia student Safoora Zargar for her participation in the anti caa/nrc protest was specially met with huge outrage from national and international human rights organisations as she was three months pregnant when she was arrested. She was brutally trolled and harassed on social media and several attempts were made to tarnish her character. She was eventually given bail after over two months of her arrest (BBC, 2020). Many other student activists who were arrested in connection with the anti caa/nrc protests still continue to remain behind bars, while some of them including

JNU students Natasha Narwal, Devangana Kalita and Jamia student Asif Tanha Iqbal have got bails (Sinha, 2021).

The anti caa/nrc movement saw many women students turning into full time activists and leaders who got associated with various students and civil society organisations and still continue to raise their voice for pertinent issues and social causes (Lalwani, 2020). The anti caa/nrc movement is often deemed to be the first nationwide movement which has been led and sustained by women for over three months and has marked that, “21st century politics is not going to be handled by the rhetoric of masculinity anymore” (Lahiri, 2020).

PROTESTS DEMANDING WOMEN’S SAFETY IN UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES

Gargi college, a prominent women’s college affiliated to Delhi University witnessed a major security lapse when a group of men who were drunk entered the college campus on 6th February, 2020 and disrupted the annual festival of the college called ‘Reverie’. The drunk men sexually harassed the women students present in the college. The women students of Gargi college shared their ordeal on social media after which the horrendous incident was widely condemned. The harassment of women students of Gargi college continued for over four hours as the men stayed inside the campus from 4:30 pm to 9 pm (India Today, 2020).

Some of the social media posts which were shared by women students of Gargi college after the incident were horrific and scary. “There were drunk, middle aged men harassing us, molesting us and masturbating at us. I was groped thrice by a group of men inside that crowd and when I screamed they laughed,” wrote a girl student. “Girls were groped, locked in washrooms, stalked to the nearby Green Park metro, cat-called, eve-teased and misbehaved during the festival,” posted another woman student. The initial response of the college authorities to the incident was that students should not attend the college festivals if they were ‘so scared about safety’ and this enraged the students further who vowed to stage protests against the incident (India Today, 2020).

The days following the incident saw huge protests by women students of Gargi college who sat outside the college gate in large numbers and demanded action against the perpetrators of the crime. The students also protested against the inaction of the college authorities and the Delhi Police officials who were present during the incident but did little to stop the crowd from harassing women students. Swati Maliwal, the chairperson of Delhi Women’s commission visited the college to interact with the students about the incident and also issued a notice to the college administration and Delhi Police for their lethargic attitude in dealing with the crisis (The Economic Times, 2020).

The women students of Gargi college continued their protest and staged dharna in their campus even after five days of the incident. The student demanded an unconditional apology from the principal of the college whose callous attitude in the matter was widely condemned by the student fraternity. The members of Delhi University Teacher's Association (DUTA) also extended support to the protesting students and condemned the incident while also demanding provisions to ensure women's safety in the university campus (Times of India, 2020).

The DUTA also raised questions on the internal complaints committee of the university which did not even acknowledge the incident. The members of DUSU along with other student and youth organisations also staged protests at the Arts Faculty to extend solidarity to the protesting students of Gargi college. The continued protests by women students forced the principal of Gargi college to file a police complaint and also set up a fact finding committee in the matter to report on the incident. The voice of the protesting students' even reached the parliament where MPs raised and condemned the issue of breaching of safety of women students inside their own campus (Times of India, 2020).

The National Commission of Women (NCW) took a serious view of the incident and assigned officials of the commission to visit the college campus and gather details of the assault faced by women students. The education minister at that time Mr. Ramesh Pokhriyal also directed the college administration to take swift action and address the complaints of the students (Ghosh, 2020). After going through the CCTV footage of the incident, the police arrested at least seventeen men who had entered the college campus forcefully but they all were released on bail (Sarfaraz, 2020).

Some women students who recorded their statement with the police had to withdraw their complaints because of the difficult legal process and the psychological trauma which they had to go through while recalling the incident each time. "Most students have withdrawn their (sexual harassment) testimonies for multiple reasons. I would have to fly back and forth for the case. Keeping this in mind, I don't want to pursue a legal recourse. All of us have a lot to lose when it comes to our future. Talking about it repeatedly is difficult for me. They need to hold someone accountable for the security breach," said a woman student who was sexually harassed during the incident (Sarfaraz, 2020).

Chandigarh University which is a private university, witnessed an equally alarming incident breaching the safety of women students which led to huge students' protest and made it to the headlines. On 17th September, 2022 a woman student residing in the girl's hostel of the university allegedly recorded videos of several girl students in

the washroom and sent it to one of her male friends. The news spread like wildfire after a video of women students confronting the suspected girl who made the video went viral on social media and many women students alleged that their videos were also leaked on the internet (The Indian Express, 2022).

The same evening students turned up in large numbers to protest against the incident and accused the university administration of trying to suppress the matter. In response to the huge protests led by students, the education minister of Punjab had to intervene and requested the protesting students to remain calm while promising them that strict action will be taken against the guilty. There were also social media posts that a woman student attempted suicide after her video was leaked on the internet but the police later debunked the news and called it fake. The police registered a case under section 354 C of the IPC and section 66 E of the Information Technology Act (The Indian Express, 2022).

The women students continued their protests for three straight days forcing the police and university administration to take action on their demands. The Chief Minister of Punjab, Bhagwant Mann, directed the police to take swift action in the matter after which a three member all women special investigation team was formed to investigate the incident under the supervision of senior police officer Gurpreet Deo. The students alleged that videos of over 60 women students were leaked on the internet but the police in its preliminary investigation found that the suspected woman student had only recorded her own video and shared it with her friend (Sehgal and Sandhu, 2022).

The students finally ended their protest on 19th September, 2022 after the police arrested the girl who made the videos and also arrested her male friend who had asked her to make the videos. The police and university administration also assured the students of a fair and strict investigation in the matter. The Chandigarh University suspended two wardens for their negligence in the incident and also made a joint committee comprising of students and members from the university administration to address the demands of the protesting students related to hostel timings and women's safety (Times of India, 2022).

The probe in the matter is still on and at least four people have been arrested in connection with the case. The woman accused of recording the video along with three men have been arrested so far. It came to light that a man named Sanjeev Singh befriended the accused woman through an online dating app and pressured her to share her videos and pictures with him. The initial probe also found out that the accused woman only shared her videos with the man and videos of any other female student were not shared by her. However, the case is still under investigation and remains sub judice (Deep, 2022).

It is important to note that when students of Chandigarh University protested the breach of security and privacy of women students in their hostel, it was exactly during the same time period that a similar incident happened at IIT Bombay on 18th September, 2022. A man who worked in the canteen at IIT Bombay climbed a pipe and peeped into the washroom of the girls hostel. The women students of the hostel caught the man red handed after which he was arrested by the police and an FIR was also registered in the matter (Bhandary, 2022).

The women students informed the police that the accused man had also recorded videos of women in the washroom but the preliminary investigation by the police could not ascertain these claims. The students made a series of demands to the institute's administration after the incident. They even asked for a change in the designs of washrooms so that such incidents can be curbed in the future. The administration closed down the canteen in question and ensured that the canteen will reopen only after it has all women employees (Bhandary, 2022).

The administration also engaged in a dialogue with women students to find out more ways to increase the security in the campus and made essential repairs in the ducts which was used by the man to peep into the washroom. The incident of employees breaching the safety of women students in IIT's have been alarming as in the first week of September, 2022, a woman student of IIT Madras was attacked by an employee of the hostel's canteen. The man was later arrested by the police on charges of assaulting a woman (Bhandary, 2022).

In yet another incident which posed a grave threat to the safety of women students, Miranda House, a prestigious women's college of Delhi University was flocked by men during the Diwali mela organised by the university on 14th October, 2022. The videos of men jumping the walls of the college to enter the campus and raising sexist slogans went viral on social media. The women students of Miranda House alleged that they were sexually harassed by the men who entered the campus and expressed their anguish to the college authorities over the lack of security arrangements for the event (Oreya, 2022).

"Men climbing over the walls to get into Miranda House during an open fest. What followed was horrible. Cat-calling, groping, sexist sloganeering and more. Men entering safe spaces to harass gender minorities is nothing new, but they outdo themselves every time," tweeted a woman student of the college after the incident. The incident sparked outrage from the student community and students from different colleges including women students expressed solidarity with the students of Miranda House and demanded action against the miscreants (Oreya, 2022).

Ms. Swati Maliwal, the chairperson of Delhi Commission of Women, issued a notice to the Delhi Police and the university administration regarding the incident and expressed her displeasure over the breach of security of women students. “The women have made serious allegations of molestation and harassment. How did this hooliganism happen? What were the security arrangements in place?” tweeted Ms. Maliwal. The Delhi Police also filed an FIR related to the incident against unidentified persons but no arrests were made. The men who scaled the walls of the college could be clearly seen in the videos shared by the women students on their social media but still no concrete action was taken against them (The Tribune, 2022).

The grave incidents of breaching security of women students in college campuses are not one off or rare occurrences. In fact, there have been many such incidents across the country, a group of male students of a government law college in Ernakulam entered the nearby St. Teresa’s college to propose to women students on valentine’s day on 14th February, 2017. No action was taken against the male students who entered the college and their acts was hushed off as a harmless gesture by the faculty members of St. Teresa (Banerjee, 2020).

In another shocking incident a mob entered the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, Bihar on 7th October, 2018 and tried to molest the girl students. The girls students resisted the sexual advances of the mob and were brutally beaten for their resistance. The girl students got seriously injured in the attack and had to be admitted in the hospital. On 16th September, 2007, men who had come to appear for a competitive exam near Delhi University’s north campus cat called and sexually harassed students of Indraprastha College of women. A police official who neglected the complaints of women students was also suspended in the matter (Banerjee, 2020).

The students along with other women organisations like the National Federation of Indian Women have often taken up the demand of introducing GSCASH to address the incidents of sexual harassment and other gender related offences in universities. The students of JNU staged a protest in front of the UGC office to demand the reinstating of GSCASH in the university. Geeta Kumari a prominent woman student activists of JNU and also the former president of JNUSU pointed out in a letter to the UGC that the students of various universities wanted a GSCASH like body which JNU already had and instead of replicating the model in other universities, the JNU administration had disbanded the committee (Business Standard, 2017).

Protest Against Hijab Ban

The protests related to hijab which is a headscarf that Muslim women wear as a symbol of practising their faith began in early January, 2022 in response to an order which

barred the Muslim women students from wearing hijab in a women's college run by the state government in the city of Udupi (Karnataka). The rule of barring Muslim women students soon spread to various schools and colleges of Karnataka leading to large scale protests by Muslim women students (Kukreja, 2022). The pictures of the protests in various parts of the country are a testimony to the fact that the protests were led by Muslim women and saw huge participation of women students (The Indian Express, 2022).

The protests against the hijab ban spread to cities like New Delhi, Kolkata and Jaipur where Muslim women were joined in their protests by liberal and progressive sections of the society as a mark of solidarity. A Hindu woman student of Tata Institute of Social Sciences who protested the hijab ban was of the view that the hijab ban would negatively impact Muslim women's access to education. She felt that it was extremely important for academic institutions and classrooms to encourage and foster diversity and respect for all (Kukreja, 2022).

Muskan Khan, a Muslim woman student became a symbol of resistance to the protests when she resisted the heckling attempt of a group of men wearing saffron bands. It was soon after that her video of standing up to these men became viral on the internet. "I had come to submit my assignment but the group of men were heckling me and stopping me from going inside the classroom just because I was wearing the Burqa," Muskan told a news channel after the incident. The hijab ban was widely perceived as yet another attempt to demonize and belittle Indian Muslims and their faith and was met with nationwide protests (Mogul, 2022).

The protests against the hijab ban also reached prominent educational institutions like Jamia, JNU, DU and AMU where women students turned up in large numbers to extend their solidarity to the protests. The students of JMI took out a solidarity march inside the campus amidst huge police deployment outside the university (Sabrang, 2022). The women students of JNU also extended their unconditional support and solidarity to the Muslim women protesting against the hijab ban and released a statement which stated that, "We, the women students of JNU, uphold the right of these women to practice their religion and their choice to wear or not wear a hijab, along with their right to education" (PTI, 2022).

The student fraternity in Delhi, Hyderabad, Allahabad and many other major cities took to the streets to protest against the hijab ban. Afreen Fatima, a prominent Muslim woman student activist who led the protests against hijab ban in her hometown of Allahabad saw the ban as an attempt to isolate Muslim women in India who were being targeted for following their faith. The left leaning student organisations like SFI

and AISA also joined the protests. The protests also gained international attention and noble peace prize winner Malala Yousafzai condemned the ban (Mogul, 2022).

The matter eventually went to the Karnataka High Court when a group of Muslim women students petitioned against the hijab ban. The court eventually ruled in favour of the ban and this sparked further protests from the student community against the court order. The entire state of Karnataka saw protests by students after the court verdict. Scores of Muslim women students hit the streets holding posters which had statements like, 'We will continue the fight. #HijabisMyRight,' 'Hijab Ban is unconstitutional hence unacceptable.' The students also went to the apex court to challenge the order of the high court (Poovanna, 2022).

The verdict of the high court was challenged in the supreme court which too gave a split verdict in the matter with a one judge ruling in favour of the ban while the other judge opposed the ban and upheld the freedom of choice of Muslim women. The matter would now be heard by a larger bench but the entire fiasco led to several Muslim women students missing their exams and dropping out of their schools and colleges. The fact that politicians of the ruling government supported the hijab ban further angered the students and the Muslim community who saw it as an attempt to marginalise them (BBC, 2022).

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