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The Agonistic Struggle between Trinamool Congress and a Non-partisan Protest Alliance: West Bengal and Its Anti-CAA/NRC Movement

Riccardo Jaede

Introduction

- The main purpose of this article¹ is to provide a linear and layered account of the movement against the NRC, CAB/CAA, and NPR in Kolkata and West Bengal.² In particular, it retraces the ways in which a non-partisan alliance of Muslim and non-parliamentary left organizations initially spearheaded this movement and managed to impose their key demands on the West Bengal government under the Trinamool Congress (TMC) party—in spite of the movement being taken over by the latter. While this article does not aim to make a contribution to anthropological theoretical concerns, the analytical theme organizing what is otherwise a largely descriptive, chronological, and synoptic account is anchored in a two-fold argument. Firstly, it is to foreground how a moral community, in fact a citizenry of sorts, emerged in an imagined but morally compelling sense, which in turn exercised symbolic pressure on other opposition forces including the opposition party governing the federal state. The movement's production of publics and their subsequent integration, both symbolic and mobilizational, was successful in creating a moral unity and community which, even if largely imaginary, was nonetheless imagined jointly by otherwise agonistic political actors. This leads onto the second aspect of my argument, namely that this unity at a symbolic level was achieved in spite of—and then precisely through—the fact that the

movement's leaders were politically fractured and pursued disparate goals under the same banner.

Political background to the agitations in West Bengal

- 2 The agitations in West Bengal were sidelined in the national discourse and in its focus on the spectacular mobilizations and displays of state violence in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. However, the importance of East India and of West Bengal in the context of the citizenship mobilizations cannot be overstated. Firstly, the demands for an NRC and various constitutional amendments to Indian citizenship are closely intertwined with the history of Assamese-Bengali relations. The 1951 NRC in Assam and the 1987 Amendment to the 1955 Citizenship Act were, among other things, intended to disown and expel the Bengali population in Assam where it had begun to settle during the 1800s in a position of relative dominance. The 1987 CAA in particular, which was passed in the wake of the Assam Accord, reflected a desire of both the union government and of Assamese nationalists to curtail the influx of refugees from East Pakistan and then Bangladesh, who were mainly Bengalis and who predominantly moved into Assam and West Bengal. The Supreme Court passed a verdict to renew the 1951 NRC in 2014 with the ostensible goal of identifying “illegal immigrants” and “non-citizens” in reference to Bengali speakers. This is enmeshed with other complex ethnolinguistic, communal, and caste-based politics in Assam to which this article does not further attend for reasons of space. Instead, the focus of this contribution lies solely on West Bengal where I conducted 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork from October 2018 to February 2020. In fact, the second reason for the importance of the East, in this case Bengal, to the NRC-CAA nexus lies in the fact that Bengal was the only other British province to be partitioned along religious lines. Unlike in Punjab, however, the population transfer was partial and Bengali Muslims constituted 27 percent of the population of West Bengal in the 2011 census. While the wounds of the eastern Partition are less deep than in western India, they have largely remained socially and politically unaddressed, including among the higher caste Hindus who came from East Bengal in the 1940s and 1950s, and the largely lower caste Hindus who came in the 1970s and thereafter. This is the situation the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been seeking to exploit through the NRC, CAA, and the NPR census in West Bengal.
- 3 In fact, BJP has long been keen to capture West Bengal, India's fourth-most populous state and one that has largely kept out national parties since the 1960s.³ Its two-pronged strategy in this regard involves, on the one hand, an anti-incumbency discourse focusing on poor governance by the ruling Trinamool Congress party around issues of corruption; economic development; law and order; terrorism; and a supposed politics of “Muslim favouritism.” On the other hand, its emphasis on communal polarization to consolidate Hindu electoral support in a post-Partition electorate has been its more active campaign strategy. In recent years, the BJP intensified a discourse around Bengali Muslims, whether Indian or Bangladeshi, as “illegal immigrants” (*oboidho obhibashi*) and “infiltrators” (*onuprobeshkari*) and have spoken of the expulsion of internal national enemies from the nation. The state has witnessed an increase in communal riots since the expansion of BJP party offices, RSS *shakhas*, and other establishments of the Sangh Parivar from 16 riot-like conflicts in 2014 (GOI 2017:3) to 58 in 2017 (GOI 2018:3). In December 2018 and January 2019, the Home Minister and BJP

president, Amit Shah, attempted to conduct large a “chariot procession” for Lord Rama (*ram rath yatra*) through West Bengal leading up to the 2019 General Elections, in the style of the 1990s *yatra* to Ayodhya. For two weeks, three simultaneous processions were supposed to move through hundreds of villages before converging on Kolkata. Mamata Banerjee’s Trinamool Congress ground them down through the state courts, as well as through her mobilizational capacities, and thus prevented the *yatra* and the communal violence it was feared to produce. The BJP nonetheless won 20 out of 42 parliamentary seats in West Bengal during the 2019 General Election.

- 4 Much of the agitation surrounding the NRC-CAA-NPR in Bengal must therefore also be seen in the context of electoral politics, and in particular the 2021 West Bengal Legislative Assembly election. A BJP victory in one of the country’s largest states, and one in which until before the 2019 General Election it had had minimal electoral support, would of course have important implications for the direction of politics at the national level. More specifically, however, the 2021 election is also widely considered to be the litmus test for the survival of the TMC party as well as for the nature of dissident politics in the state from leftist to feminist, queer, or other minority assertions (including those at the intersections of these). Even if some of these are subject to histories of passive and active repression by the state government including occasional physical violence, the relationship between them has largely been agonistic rather than antagonistic (cf. Mouffe 2000:102 f.). Thus, in spite of the seemingly cynical power politics around electoral parties and governance, there remains a certain secular and democratic consensus between otherwise opposed actors in West Bengal, a decorum in which BJP is seen not to partake and which it is expected to obliterate should it take over the state government in 2021. In fact, the remainder of this article is an illustration of the presence and workings of this consensus.
- 5 The NRC-specific activist engagement in West Bengal may well have been the first in India outside of Assam, beginning in mid-2018 and experiencing a consolidation and expansion in the second half of 2019. The movement that emerged over this period was ultimately successful in pressuring the TMC-led West Bengal government into abandoning preparations for the NPR census, which forms the fundamental step in preventing the creation of the NRC. In fact, while being clear on its opposition to the CAB/CAA⁴ and then the NRC, the TMC leadership had promoted a self-contradictory position on the NPR in which it variously dismissed it as irrelevant or objectionable while nonetheless insisting it would conduct the census on which the NPR builds and from which the NRC would be drawn.⁵ Accordingly, the first detention centers were already under construction in West Bengal in late 2019 when the mobilizations were picking up strength. It was not until March 2020, under intense pressure from a newly created public on the streets and in an increasingly unified media discourse around the shared rejection of the NRC-CAA-NPR, a public that was the direct result of the dynamics set into motion by the mobilizations, that the state government formally committed to halting the census preparations in its jurisdiction.
- 6 This article, then, is an attempt to broadly retrace these dynamics. It is based on the Geertzian method of a “deep hanging out”—daily observation without participation—of the movement, which in turn is embedded in 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork on some of the activist organizations that initiated and remained central political actors at different levels of this movement.⁶ I was thus able to follow around and observe their mobilizational efforts first-hand and up close from October 2018 to February 2020. In

particular, I focus on a left-wing political platform called Young Bengal, which co-founded a larger, issue-based platform in the state by the name of Joint Forum Against NRC (*nagorik ponji biroddhi juktomoncho*). Even though the Joint Forum largely lost its leadership position within the mobilization once the movement was taken over by the incommensurably more powerful TMC-led West Bengal government, a complex dynamic the activists had helped create ultimately forced the state government to adopt and promote the Joint Forum's core demands as the government's own.

- 7 The following sections of this paper retrace the trajectory of this activist organization across changing contexts, and the gradual increase in its ability to shape these contexts. Although the political platform spearheading this movement had at its core two non-parliamentary left organizations, it achieved its transformational effects precisely within and because of the electoral context of the looming Legislative Assembly elections of 2021—and because of its normative dimensions.

The CAB Phase in West Bengal (August 2018 to December 2019)

- 8 The earliest agitation against the NRC began in West Bengal in August 2018 with the first publication of the list in Assam. At the time, it was seen by the organizers of the protest as merely an anti-Bengali move confined to the state of Assam, although they quickly surmised then that the NRC was going to be used as a polarizing device by BJP in the 2019 national election. Their framing of the issues and how they connect developed gradually, mainly due to the intense legal and historical research by key organizers, and they were to my knowledge the first in the country to connect the NRC to the CAB and thus to a wide set of issues surrounding citizenship and communal categorization. The organization that initiated the movement in question here is Young Bengal, a non-parliamentary leftist political platform made up largely of urban middle class, largely higher caste Hindus in Kolkata, although there are also a number of Muslims—communist and non-communist sympathizers—among their members. They held public conventions and outreach programs (*procharer program, shobha, onusthan*) throughout the year until they formed the Joint Forum Against NRC in October 2019, a loose alliance of 26 organizations that is jointly coordinated by conveners of a core of twelve organizations. These either feature a largely Muslim membership across a wide spectrum of political, social, and cultural concerns; or they largely consist of Hindus, in which case they are invariably of leftist orientation.⁷
- 9 Over a period of 24 days beginning on November 15, 2019, the Joint Forum carried out an awareness raising campaign or *yatra* by bus through 60 locations across the entire state of West Bengal. The anchor points of the *yatra* were public outreach programs on street corners, markets, play fields, and in town halls. The campaign began with a grand opening in Siliguri at the foot of the Himalayas and wound its way south through villages, towns, and highway stations, touching the north-eastern fringes of Kolkata and moving on to the border with Bangladesh before heading around the capital in a clockwise motion through Bhargar and all the way to Bakkhali on the Bay of Bengal. From there, it moved back north, passing through towns and villages to the West of Kolkata, finally entering Howrah and making its way to Uttarpara in the north. The *yatra* culminated in a mass rally in Esplanade in central Kolkata on December 9. There were between fifteen and fifty activists on the move at any one time, the majority of

them communist Hindu students or youth activists in their twenties and thirties, along with more seasoned political figures in their thirties and forties. Politicians, local political workers, and assorted businessmen with varying political connections and interests would join for a day or two in their wider area.

- 10 Two main considerations that are of relevance to our purposes here had guided the composition of the itinerary. The first was to reach out to and test the responses of a diverse demographic cross-section of the society in the state—Hindu and Muslim, upper and lower caste, East or West Bengali, and with or without a history of communal conflict. To grossly simplify my personal observations from accompanying the campaign as an ethnographer, audiences in Muslim localities tended to reach into the hundreds, listened attentively, and expressed strong support for a resistance movement through idioms of either fear or playful defiance, including in casual conversations I had with bystanders. Audiences in Hindu majority areas (irrespective of caste), on the other hand, rarely exceeded one or two dozen bystanders and it was not uncommon for a program to have attracted fewer than ten members of the public over the course of one or two hours. In fact, those who stopped to listen often left after a few minutes. The second consideration was to expand or reinforce existing networks in these areas across the state, as both the Joint Forum and its *yatra* relied on the support of local political, social, or cultural organizations. In fact, the mobilizational effects of the *yatra* largely lay in consolidating and energizing the existing network of organizations across the state, especially through the personal bonds forged and cultivated by working together and carrying out a public program. Thus, the 2,400 persons who reportedly attended the grand finale of the *yatra*, the mass rally in Kolkata on the eve of the passing of the CAB, were not loose members of the public who had been activated by a speech or leaflet. Rather, they were largely members of already participating or affiliated organizations who otherwise may not have been galvanized. This was evident from the manner in which they arrived at the venue by organizational grouping, and organizers themselves later shared as much with me.
- 11 With the passing of the CAA the following day, it was precisely in the areas in which the Joint Forum had invested most heavily through a higher number of programs, and where local organizations had been the strongest, that the protests erupted most forcefully. This is not to suggest that the Joint Forum programs per se effected these mobilizations through public outreach, *pace* some of the organizers' claims. In fact, the central paradox of the *yatra* lies in the fact that it attracted very limited crowds and little to no media attention. It also hardly raised any money—just enough to cover expenses—and the “manpower” of any participating party was negligible especially in comparison to the massive mobilizational capacities of Trinamool or even the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Nevertheless, the *yatra* formed a major link in the chain of maneuvers through which the Joint Forum effected a transformation of the political landscape in West Bengal.
- 12 It is at this point that I would advance the proposition that the work the *yatra* did occurred on a different plane. The campaign and its programs, although often poorly attended and of limited affective import, effected a moral intervention into a symbolic political space that was shared by most political forces in the anti-BJP oppositional spectrum including the TMC-led state government. It was the mere fact that the Joint Forum had been the first to raise alarm over a large issue, and set a moral precedent with their *yatra*, that spawned copy-cat movements among both the Hindu leftist and

the Muslim political spectrum. Thus the Left Front opposition, various small parties and newly formed independent factions, such as the NO NRC Movement and the Solidarity Forum, initiated their own anti-NRC mobilizations in order to lay claim to the oppositional space declared and instantiated by the agitation of the Joint Forum. This prompted TMC to launch their own agitation and claim leadership over the anti-NRC-CAB space as the issue consequently rose to prominence in the state's public discourse, including in the media and in parliament.

- 13 What emerged from this, I would argue, was a sense of a moral public, a veritable citizenry, around the shared rejection of the NRC, CAB/CAA, and later the NPR. It is perhaps not unironic that citizenship protests should instantiate citizenship in a civic republican sense: as a practice of dissent and deliberation within a common moral-epistemological framework. I render this aspect the central point of interest of this contribution because all participating political forces became answerable to the imagined gaze of this moral community, no matter how disparate their goals may otherwise have been. The visibility of this new public was enhanced through the spectacular displays of dissent, such as state-wide protests and the burnings of trains and central buses in the days and weeks after the CAB was passed into law. This is the dynamic that re-emerged during the CAA-phase of the movement and which is key to understanding the developments to which the final section of this contribution attends.

The CAA Phase in Kolkata: Park Circus Maidan

- 14 The first weeks after the CAA was passed into law were marked by civil unrest across the state, with trains and buses—symbols of the Center and thus the Government of India—blocked, pelted, and set on fire, and copies of the CAA burned along with BJP paraphernalia and effigies of BJP leaders. Large numbers of AIMIM⁸ leaders and activists were arrested although the protests were carried by a wide spectrum of organizations including TMC, as well as by popular spontaneity. The protest rallies in Kolkata over the subsequent weeks were mixed and included many first-time protesters from across the middle classes as well as a great diversity of organizations across the political spectrum, from TMC-affiliated programs to leftist student groups from Jadavpur, Presidency, and Calcutta Universities among others. Liberal and left feminist and queer rights groups held marches and other programs, including a large “Trans, Queer, Women’s March against NRC-CAA-NPR.” The Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk on December 29, 2019, focused strongly on this issue, including on the violence against students and Muslims in Delhi and elsewhere. The agitations had accrued such numbers and force that when the Prime Minister visited Kolkata on January 11, 2020, he could not be driven into the city and was instead forced to fly in from the airport by helicopter—a historic repeat of the massive left-wing protests against the war in Vietnam that forced Robert McNamara to do the same upon his visit in 1968. By the time the *yatra* had concluded a month earlier, the CAB/CAA and NRC had been connected to a host of social issues, vulnerabilities, and marginalities and had drawn in a wide range of activist and non-activist forces that often no longer had any connection to the Joint Forum.
- 15 Once the Shaheen Bagh protest became known, various organizers rushed to be the first to launch a sit-in (*dharna*) in Park Circus, a Muslim-majority area in the heart of Kolkata that is considered a center of Muslim political life. Young leftist feminist

activists from Jadavpur University (JU) in Kolkata were in talks with senior Muslim organizers from the area in early January, when they were beaten to the race by a middle aged lady from the area who runs a local NGO. In the initial days, she sat with her relatives under the pavilion on the meadow next to the Park Circus Maidan Mosque on the seven-point crossing at the northern edge of the Park Circus area. With each day, the number of people swelled, especially after work hours, and the crowd reached hundreds and then thousands in less than a week. In contrast to the largely Bengali-speaking mobilizations during the CAB phase and after, most of the participants here were Urdu speakers of varying class backgrounds and came from the area as well as from other working class Muslim neighborhoods such as Metiabruz, Garden Reach, and Topsia.⁹ However, the early stage of the sit-in attracted a wide variety of supporters and organizers, from artists, actors, queer activists, communists, Bengali and Urdu speakers, journalists, students and pupils, and of course the police and intelligence branches.

- 16 Park Circus consciously reproduced the female-centered political aesthetic of Shaheen Bagh, with women and girls sitting in the middle and a crowd made up largely of men standing around them, the imaginary line of separation soon reaffirmed by a plastic rope a few days later. This spatial arrangement carried its own moral commitment to which all political forces had to adhere—there was an understanding among all actors that Muslim women were to remain the center and the face of the movement from then on, irrespective of the nature and the result of the inevitable struggles for control behind the scenes. The associations with a politics of respectability and male guardianship reproduced images of female domesticity as indicators of Muslim conservatism among several of the communist and feminist student activists of Hindu background. This was further compounded by the fact that many of the women and children were brought there by their male relatives, affines, or organizers on motorbikes and trucks, and would quickly find their place within the “women-only” section. Some of the activists from Joint Forum and other left wing feminist youth activists from Hindu families displayed a complex sense of estrangement and discomfort with this while cultivating and expressing a cultural or social relativism toward what they perceived to be “traditional” gender roles of a socioeconomically oppressed demographic category. At the same time, they often preemptively reflected on Islamophobic stereotyping and used the occasion to reiterate that patriarchy and capitalism produced very similar social arrangements among Hindus. In fact, women had largely been either absent from or been a minority in the mobilizations during the CAB phase, be it as speakers, organizers, or audience members. It was only when the agitations became popular after the passing of the bill that women, including as women, became prominent voices in and of the protest movement. The active and visible participation of *Muslim* women in a political movement of this sort seemed unprecedented, at least to many Hindu activists, and thus became a source of pride and inspiration to them.
- 17 Further, the spatial configuration at Park Circus Maidan instantiated a new gendered division of labor as women activists from the largely Hindu communist organizations, but not the men, could effectively traverse the boundaries and socialize with both the women at the center and the men in the committees. Even after accounting for gendered differences in idioms of friendship and affection, it was the women who in my impression were the ones to form the strongest personal bonds in a relatively short time, and effectively (and affectively) practiced the politics of cosmopolitan solidarity

asserted at the explicit symbolic level throughout the movement (see below). There is of course more to all this than the scope of this article affords, but one final point on the spatial set-up is noteworthy. One of the recurring observations campaigners shared with me and among themselves was that it was precisely the fact that women were constantly inside the sit-in that they failed to participate in the decision making in the committees at the fringes, which had been set up early to deal respectively with food, security, and guest speakers, among other things. Their gender composition was roughly equal in theory, but in practice the men ended up making most of the decisions. This was less by intention and more by a structural effect not uncommon to other, similar modes of protest such as hunger strikes in which a leader on hunger strike is effectively incapacitated from making most decisions.

- 18 The women themselves, however, largely spoke of their participation in terms of the political issues at hand—the rejection of the NRC and CAA—and positioned themselves and the wider movement as the custodians of the constitution, of the secular character of the country enshrined therein, and of communal harmony. Women and men frequently articulated feelings of integration with the nation, and there was a strong sense that the entire country was protesting alongside them and that only active members of the Hindu right-wing were not. The sentiments expressed were of defiance, enjoyment, and excitement especially as the numbers swelled and the maidan filled up. The discourse that emerged from conversations, interviews, speeches, slogans, as well as statements and symbols on posters, banners, and paraphernalia projected a strongly unifying picture of national belonging. The constitutionalist and openly nationalist assertions drew on a repertoire of elements common to other minority mobilizations in India and foregrounded Ambedkar and other prominent historical figures from the independence movement such as Bhagat Singh, Tagore, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Mahatma Gandhi. Early on, first one and then several banners declared this to be a second Independence Movement (*Park Circus Dharna—Swadhinata Andolan 2.0*) and over the days, several protesters would point out that India had been part of the fight against fascist Germany and that it was now fighting fascism and concentration camps here. Parallels were repeatedly drawn between the BJP and Nazism or fascism; Modi and Hitler; and German concentration camps and the NRC detention camps; parallels that ultimately served to reaffirm the movement’s location within a history of Indian nationality and nationalism.
- 19 Various participants and organizers from Muslim backgrounds stressed that this was not to be seen as a “Muslim movement,” and some even went so far as to claim that the CAA was “not against Muslims but against Indians,” foregrounding their own Indianness and their allegiance to the nation through emphasis on the constitution and their own citizenship. While the absence of a minoritarian language is in line with previous local assertions in Park Circus (e.g., Chatterjee 2017:106–8) as well as the simultaneous anti-CAA mobilizations in Delhi (e.g., Martelli and Garalyté 2019:8), it did also relate to a concern about potential fracturing of the movement due to the intervention of political parties.
- 20 In fact, this concern about fracturing was reflected in another prominent set of discursive elements emphasizing that the movement be “not political” and calling on political parties not to pursue their own politics in the maidan. Even representatives of established political parties had been barred from speaking at the sit-in by the Guest Committee of the movement, most notably perhaps a senior leader of the Congress

party and former Union Finance Minister, Palaniappan Chidambaram. Soon, posters at the entrance to the maidan proclaimed: “Welcome to Park Circus Swadhinta Andolon 2.0 Kindly Keep Your Religion, Religious Affiliation and Banner Outside the Gate,” and to cite but one example, the speech in Urduized Hindustani by a young Muslim woman ended in the following words and exchange of chants:

“So, please do not create differences, don’t spread false rumors, don’t post wrong [information] on Facebook. We object to this, there is no party banner here. We’re all Indians, the tricolor is fluttering here, and we are Indians. We are not related to any party. Here our... the tricolor is our banner, and, insha’Allah shall be the shroud of every Indian in this country.”

“Insha’Allah!”

“Long live the revolution!”

“Long live! Long live!”¹⁰

National flags were thus also used to emphasize the non-partisan character that was claimed in order to avert concerns over political infighting. However, there were two further reasons for this. One is that it also reflected public cynicism about party politics widely shared in other parts of South Asia. However, and more specifically, the anti-partisan discourse was promoted forcefully by those factions within the movement that were opposed to a Trinamool influence. Although they were unsuccessful in keeping the party at bay, and although this discourse had itself ended up concealing the TMC intervention behind a veneer of non-partisanship, its normative force did survive into the phase after the TMC had taken leadership over the space—and remained accountable to the non-partisan aesthetic.

The politics of patronage and fragmentation

- 21 Throughout the movement, there were small groups of activists and organizers scattered across the maidan, moving from one little group to the next, discreetly sharing and discussing developments and liaising with other small groups while slogans, chants, and speeches given from within the women’s section continuously resounded through the space. This section tends to the political tensions and maneuvers behind the scenes that ultimately led to the capture of the Park Circus sit-in by the Trinamool Congress party and its allies. Within a few days, the Park Circus *dharna* had become the perceived center of the movement against CAA-NRC-NPR in West Bengal. There are often references to internal rivalries in the scholarship on protest movements which are left unexamined. They are significant here not only because they show how the state government captured an otherwise oppositional movement, but also because they demonstrate the compelling force of the moral category of a dissident citizenry that had emerged discursively through symbolism and rituals of integration and community making, so that even though the largest political party assumed leadership over the movement, it was compelled to adapt its line to the discourse of the movement rather than the other way around. To grossly simplify in the interest of space but also of anonymity, one camp was aligned with and the other opposed to TMC. In the former, TMC operated through a certain larger non-parliamentary Muslim organization as well as a group of businessmen and a small, rival splinter group of left wing activists; the latter consisted of other Muslim organizations and businessmen as well as a spectrum of the Kolkata left, including leftist activists of Hindu background. The Joint Forum was informally close to this second camp and some

of its members were in the committees, but it was not part of the organizing circles in any formal manner.

- 22 The tensions between these camps became visible in the committees, in indirect remarks during public speeches, and through a politics of suspicion surrounding state patronage and female Muslim agency. They concluded in the capture of the movement by Trinamool Congress through a strategy of state-based patronage, akin to a *permit raj*, in which it first withheld or rather delayed permission for the formalization of the protest while identifying, from within the organizers' circles, those willing to establish a link to the state government and municipal corporation. In hindsight, TMC had waited with its capacity for sponsorship just long enough to ascertain itself of its allies within, destabilize the assemblage of organizers internally, and to demonstrate its superior capacity to lead this movement from being an internal oppositional force to becoming established at a state-wide and mainstream normative level. Accordingly, suspicions emerged in the non-TMC camp that some key organizers may have joined the movement in order to position themselves as intermediaries in order to establish rapport to the state for their own benefit, or to accumulate enough visibility, credibility, and connections to run for the office of ward councilor in the Kolkata Municipal Corporation elections that were to be held a few months later (and which, as of the time of writing, remain postponed due to the COVID lockdown).
- 23 As a sign of their confidence and of the decisiveness of TMC, some of the key organizers from the first camp began taking actions on behalf of the movement without consulting with the others. Most notably, a bit over a week into the sit-in they went to meet Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee without the knowledge of many of the other organizers. As part of the negotiation behind closed doors, campaigners later confirmed that the Chief Minister not only granted permission and thus the formalization of the sit-in but pledged her support for it. In exchange, it was reported, Mamata Banerjee demanded the movement be cleansed of "Naxalite" and "SIMI"¹¹ elements who were already entrenched, a direct if inaccurate reference to the communist activists and some of their Muslim allies.
- 24 Shortly thereafter, the protest venue transformed visibly. The maidan was showered with materials such as a tent which ever expanded over the subsequent days; plastic planes to sit on; portable toilet cabins; floodlights; and a sound system with microphones and loudspeakers across the maidan. Space and crowd management were formalized with the introduction of physical crowd dividers to regulate the direction of the flow of bodies, aided by ushers in printed t-shirts with standardized "volunteer" badges. An abundance of food packages intensified relations of generosity and hospitality within the movement, as well as a soft patronage as some of those who were "faces" of the movement or acted clearly as organizers were also able to visibly distribute them to families asking to be fed. In a similar vein, organizers reported a sharp increase in cash funding that could no longer be accounted for by private and small organizational donations. Activists from the non-TMC camp voiced their exasperation at the confident visibility of the takeover through sponsorship, such as in the absence of donation boxes which otherwise could have communicated a pretense that the sit-in was not being "bought" and "flooded" by the state government. Simultaneously, a prominent TMC MLA was allowed to give a speech after representatives from other parties had hitherto been barred from speaking. The subsequent day, two TMC councilors from adjacent wards came with their men and

delivered speeches that did not engage with the NRC and CAA, but instead praised the Chief Minister. They reaffirmed the claim that the protesters could have come to them five days earlier and that they would have gladly arranged for their demands to be met.

- 25 Non-TMC aligned activists, Hindu, and Muslim alike, voiced deep disenchantment and disappointment and a sense of betrayal—and women activists more forcefully so than men, for reasons outlined above. The overall atmosphere on the maidan, by contrast, became all the more festive and celebrative as the movement was seen to receive mainstream endorsement through the state. Crowds of dozens, sometimes hundreds, flocked into the maidan chanting slogans, singing the national anthem, and waving the national flag. Two to three thousand people were present at a time during the days following the government capture, filling out almost the entire maidan around the sit-in. While it is true that the Trinamool party and state administration activated its structured as well as unstructured, non-organizational mobilizational networks,¹² Park Circus Maidan developed its own attracting force. Families came with their children after school and work hours, groups of youngsters and children marched in, and men and women dressed up more and the latter used more make-up than during the first week. It was the place to be, or, as a fellow anthropologist friend remarked, it became like a *mela*, a fair. Many ordinary protesters from Muslim backgrounds continued to frame their participation in terms of the political issue, while simultaneously giving voice to a euphoric intensification of the experience of citizenship through a sense of integration with the nation around a shared rejection, in a vernacular constitutionalist idiom, of the CAA, NRC, and NPR. For many, the expansion and state uptake seemed to underline the sense that the entire country was on their side. It became both a celebration and a protest, and subsequently a place for various oppositional politicians from across India to come and speak as the guests of the movement's joint leadership—that is, the West Bengal government and the local founders of the *dharna*.
- 26 With the state government takeover, the diversity of the Park Circus Maidan movement bled away within a few days as the left, feminist, queer, and other circles withdrew and the *dharna* became entirely Hindustani speaking. Activists with the Joint Forum withdrew as well and opened a counter-center to pressure TMC from within their own space. For this purpose, they organized a rally of reportedly 13,000 people on January 21, the day the Supreme Court verdict refused to stay the CAA, and converted the rally into a sit-in next to the Kolkata Municipal Corporation Building in Dharmatala, a predominantly Muslim area in central Kolkata. The demographic and spatial composition was similar to Park Circus Maidan, in that women were seated on carpets on the street in a section separated from the men by physical barriers. This *dharna*, however, was placed directly on the street and always remained smaller in size. Unlike Park Circus, the women's section constantly faced onto the side of the stage, which was instead directed toward the men's section, thereby rendering the spatial aesthetic less centered on women. During the first week, this arrangement paid little more than lip service to the supposed centrality of Muslim women to the movement, and nearly all speakers were men. However, the Joint Forum kept the program open to anyone who shared the minimum common understanding and thus re-created a non-TMC political space. With time, as the *dharna* became known locally and was promoted through the organizers' networks, the number of women on stage increased and the composition of speakers and performers diversified.

- 27 Yet, it never managed to attract the feminist and queer sectors of the Kolkata activist scene who had initially participated in Park Circus. The reasons for this are complex and can only be enumerated partially and synoptically. The sit-in was seen to be run by male-dominated organizations without feminist credentials which, after the disappointing experience of Park Circus, rendered it all the more uninteresting. Furthermore, Park Circus had started out as a space of multiple possibilities, and that competitive openness also meant that the presence of rival organizations diversified it. The New Market *dharna*, in contrast, was clearly launched by the Joint Forum, and organizations with a history of acrimonious rivalry with those participating in the Forum stayed away. However, New Market did develop its own openness, as a matter of policy but also in that an ever expanding network of other organizations, activists, and other individuals without a history of bitter rivalry or antipathy joined—from local residents, pupils, and students to poets, actors, musicians, business persons, and political figures from across the country. And yet, New Market seldomly achieved the affective intensity of Park Circus, which remained the visible center of the anti-NRC-CAA-NPR movement in West Bengal.¹³
- 28 New Market, although not the center of the movement, quickly came to define the ideological line of the movement in Bengal again. This was partly through their openness and wide network across the state; partly by having continuously been the first to define and shape the agenda since October 2019; and partly through their member in parliament and allies in the news media. Their continuous insistence on the NPR census as the key device through which the NRC would be created and the CAA rendered meaningful came to dominate the public discourse, and changes in the understanding of the issue would first be articulated in New Market and then find their way to Park Circus and other *dharnas* in Kolkata. While Park Circus became a celebratory environment, it ceased to set the line of the movement. Instead, it was the core demands articulated since November and set in New Market by Joint Forum and its allies that dominated the overall movement even if it remained relatively unknown by name among the wider population. In fact, it had even had limited traction among activist women in Kolkata beyond the female members of participating organizations, and the Muslim women at the sit-in had largely joined through the organizers' kin and mobilizational networks. However, no political force in Kolkata or West Bengal differed radically from these demands. Furthermore, the wider alliance around Joint Forum had transferred its presence not only out of Park Circus Maidan, but also out of Kolkata, where they were able to draw on and again reinforce and expand their networks from the previous mobilizational phases. Its activists and allies went into the state districts to agitate and organize, and exercised further pressure on TMC through its mass base—that is, the voters and local organizers, who are not part of the daily activities but are in some part connected to the party. In March 2020, the West Bengal government ultimately fully reversed its position on the NPR and instructed its civil servants to refrain from carrying out the census scheduled to begin in April.

Conclusion: Unity, community, and the shift to a decentered activist modality

- 29 Previous scholarship (e.g., Björkman 2014; Piliavsky 2014; Kapur and Vaishnav 2018) has shown that cash transfers in the contexts of elections do not buy votes but generate

relationships. Thus, it is moral expectations that alter voting behavior. The point I wish to emphasize here is that in this case, the relation of patronage imposed an obligation not just on the receiver, but also on the giver. TMC entered into a relationship of obligation because they rendered themselves accountable to the discursive perimeters of the protest movement. TMC's takeover in itself created a public commitment to the moral-political criteria of the movement, which were strongly influenced by Joint Forum as it continued to set the movement's agenda from a new location. Crucially, this agenda included at its core the clear rejection of the NPR census. In fact, even the big banners at Park Circus featured rejections of the NPR from the beginning. The competitive uptake of the cause by various oppositional forces along with the constant projection of unity prevented a symbolic fragmentation of the movement and produced an imagined moral community to whose gaze all political actors were accountable. This unity was produced through the integration of different actors with diverging strategies, goals, and modes of participating, who nonetheless used the same symbolism and partook in a shared normative imaginary.

- 30 The COVID lockdown in late March 2020 arguably saved the movement in West Bengal from running into a wall and imploding, while in Delhi the sit-ins ended in disaster. Mainly, the movement's ground-level strength at the time rested on the state government's endorsement, and on the fact that implementation of the NPR is understood to lie with the states and not the center. Thus, if the state government had not cancelled the NPR in March and if the census had thus commenced in April as scheduled, the movement would not have had the capacity to actually boycott it effectively since sit-ins as a mode of resistance would not have sufficed. Irrespectively of whether jurisdiction over the implementation of the NPR can or will be taken away from the state governments and be given to the center, a BJP victory in West Bengal in 2021 will lead to its implementation with the full force of the state government. In the meanwhile, it was not clear how long Park Circus could have further sustained itself as a protest movement when all of its demands had been taken up by the government. In New Market, there was confusion and disagreement on which direction to take the movement in, and on whether to continue with a hunger strike they had begun. Supporters of the hunger-strike approach became unsure of where to take it politically, and there was no clear exit strategy from it. There were early signs of a wider disintegration that could have led the movement to atrophy in absence of an NPR-NRC process to boycott. This is ironically due to their own success: the NPR-NRC was not going to be implemented for at least another year, until and unless BJP comes to power in 2021. Whatever would have been left of an organized boycott force by that time would further have been on its own and faced with an antagonistic rather than agonistic adversary.
- 31 The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on dissolving the movement fundamentally changed its mode of organizing in West Bengal in contrast to Delhi – and it bought organizers time to rethink and regroup. During the *yatra* in November and December 2019, there had been a strong centralizing tendency: sometimes local committees were created, but ultimately, they had remained answerable to the Joint Forum which was headquartered in Kolkata. However, the pandemic shattered and scattered this arrangement, and led to autonomous neighborhood- and area-based modes of conducting political and social work which came to the fore during cyclone Amphan in mid-May 2020. The visibility, credibility, and networks created through the movement,

including the networks created by being pushed out of Park Circus Maidan and the new bonds between Muslims and leftist Hindus, allowed organizers from this alliance to perform large, donation-based relief operations in the wake of cyclone Amphan in various parts of the state. These could provide a different starting position for a post-lockdown, new mobilizational politics that is more decentered and possibly less susceptible to facing the same fate as the decapitated movement in Delhi and elsewhere, where many of its visible exponents were arrested by the authorities. Should BJP win the 2021 election, it could face a more distributed, more diverse, and possibly more resilient dissident force in West Bengal.

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NOTES

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2. These refer respectively to the National Register of Citizens (NRC), the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill (CAB) and Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), and the National Population Register (NPR). Unless specified by a different date, by CAB I refer to the 2019 bill before it was signed by the Government of India on December 12, 2019. CAA then refers to the act into which it was signed and serves also as a demarcation for the phase of the movement after this date.

3. For the historical connection between Hindutva and Bengal, see for example Chatterjee (1992); Sarkar (1999). However, after the communal consolidations of the 1930s and 1940s, all large political parties in West Bengal have historically "transcended," as Bhattacharya (2009:59) puts it, mobilizations based on caste, religion, or ethnicity. That is, until BJP. As Kanungo's (2015) study retraces, BJP first entered West Bengal in the 1980s at the panchayat level. It expanded its presence across much of the rural areas of the state but it was not until its alliance with Mamata Banerjee upon her split from Congress in the 1990s that it began to register tangible if limited electoral successes. The TMC-BJP alliance won 100 out of 294 assembly segments in the 1998 Assembly election (but BJP won only one seat of the 14 it contested, out of a total of 42). In fact, it was TMC that helped BJP into Bengal and BJP that helped TMC onto the national stage, with Mamata joining the NDA government under Vajpayee. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) used this alliance and the NDA government to expand its organizational structure in West Bengal. However, after Mamata's break from the alliance, BJP failed to win any seats in West Bengal in either the assembly elections in 2001, 2006, or even in 2011 when the Left Front was defeated by TMC; nor in the Lok Sabha elections in 2004. It won only one, the Darjeeling Lok Sabha seat, in the 2009 elections (Kanungo 2015:56). Since the BJP victory in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, however, their expansion in West Bengal has been incommensurably accelerated by their access to capital and the use of IT cells. Simultaneously, other Sangh Parivar organizations such as Bajrang Dal, Durga Vahini, and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (which has been present in the

state since the Ayodhya mobilizations) have intensified their muscular assertions of Hindutva which are associated with an increase in communal violence (e.g. Roy 2017; Nath and Chowdhury 2019). The number of RSS chapters (*shakhas*) has reportedly grown from 580 in 2011 (e.g., Das 2017) to 1,800 in September 2019 (Bhattacharya 2019).

4. It should be noted that in the early 2000s, Mamata Banerjee, then a Member of Parliament and in an alliance with BJP, had been a vociferous supporter of expelling “illegal Bangladeshis” by creating a register of citizens. This became a cause of embarrassment after she reversed her position as Chief Minister and arguably further decelerated her commitment to a clear position on the matter in 2019 and 2020.

5. The reasons for this are complex and it must be noted TMC may not necessarily have had sinister intentions here. Rather, the state government, like many others, may have been unaware of the connection between the NPR and the NRC until an opposition MLA and a supporter of Joint Forum, Ali Imran Ramz (a.k.a. Victor) from Forward Bloc, was in November 2019 invited to explain it to the Chief Minister (CM) based on the understandings developed by activist researchers. Consequently, the government agreed to *halt* the preparations for the NPR but remained reluctant to *cancel* the process altogether. The TMC’s embarrassment over having passed, as part of the NDA at the time, the 2003 CAA of which the NRC and NPR are a component may have led them to deny the link to the extent that they were aware of it. In addition, one might surmise that the government of West Bengal wanted to avoid the political costs of a constitutional crisis that would have been triggered by not implementing a central directive. This could also, in part, have been pandering to Hindu voters already affected by anti-Muslim politicization and the anti-incumbency discourse of TMC’s law-and-order problem. It is imaginable, although I do not have evidence for this, that the state government may have had the intention to pressure its bureaucrats to include as many individuals in the NRC as possible so as to reduce the number of Muslims stripped of their citizenship and thus of their voting rights. In other words, a census with a limited NRC. Census information, in any case, remains of great value to the governing.

6. In light of the developments in Delhi and elsewhere, I have refrained from naming any individuals or further organizations in order to blur identifying information.

7. None of these are affiliated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M]), which had led the Left Front coalition that governed West Bengal for 34 years until 2011. This is worth noting because CPI(M) had on several occasions attempted to sabotage the *yatra* as it became a contender in the intra-state oppositional space on the issue. However, it also did so because the increasing prominence of the issue in the state caused the party embarrassment: it in fact supported the NRC in Assam, where it was a popular demand, and claimed to oppose it in Bengal while remaining trapped in insecurities about how this may be taken by the increasingly communalized Hindu electorate. This resulted in CPI(M) being generally marginalized in the agitations against the NRC-CAA-NPR.

8. All India *Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen*, a political party originally from and largely based in Telangana, but with a growing presence in other states including West Bengal.

9. Many (but by far not all) Muslim inhabitants of Kolkata have transgenerational histories of migration from Uttar Pradesh and other states. They tend to speak Urdu and Urduized Hindustani rather than Bengali, while the vast majority of Muslims outside the city—in particular rural communities—are Bengali Muslims. There is a complex historical tension in the language politics among Muslims in Bengal, which is also reflected in class, caste, and cultural differences around the supposed superior status of Urdu speakers. This is of course complicated by additional forms of social segmentation and stratification among both linguistic groups.

10. *“Is liye bhed bhau na ki jai, ghalat afwah na phelai jai, ghalat facebook main nahin dali jai. Ham is chiz se i’tirad karte hain, yahan koi party ka bener nahin hai. Ham sab hindustani hain, yahan tiranga lahra raha hai, aur ham sab hindustani hain. ham log parti se ta’aluuq nahin rakhte. Yahan hamara... ye tiranga*

hamara bener hai aur insha'allah is desh ka har hindustani ka kafan bhi hoga." / "Inshallah!" / "Inqilab zindabad!" / "Zindabad, zindabad!"

11. Students' Islamic Movement of India, a banned organization originally from Uttar Pradesh.

12. As Chatterjee's (2017: 87 f., 95–98) study of Park Circus elaborates, local party leaders each command a network of followers (including subordinate party workers) through relations of patronage which, though tied to their official location in the party and city bureaucracy, are highly personalized. As has also been remarked for neighboring Bangladesh (e.g. Suykens and Islam 2013), during a party mobilization each level in the hierarchy contributes their own followers, and followers of followers. In addition to such "official," structured networks, leaders are expected to bring their kin and a wider network of other personal relations for whose upkeep they pay during that day. This is also a competitive display of mobilizational and organizational capacities in full view of superior officials, such as ward councilors.

13. Its social media presence was also negligible in size compared to Park Circus Maidan, which was intense. The role of social media in the entire movement is both ambiguous and important, and I leave aside a more in-depth discussion of the digital space in order to focus on the street-level politics in this article. However, to attempt a preliminary outline: in addition to facilitating communication and co-ordination, the roles of social media also ran in parallel to those of the news media when disseminating information to a public, whether real or imagined. In this sense, social media also often embodied or facilitated the (somewhat imagined) "gaze" for which political performances were staged and where they were "recorded" as having executed their illocutionary functions. Social media is more democratic in this regard than news media because it is more accessible and less controlled than the latter, which may also serve as a productive contrast to the scholarly interest in the (largely top-down) capture of social and other media by Hindutva forces. Activists in Kolkata make heavy use of social media and going to or making it into the news media (whether small or mainstream) is often considered a "next level" step of sorts. In contrast, many of especially the older Muslim women at the *dharnas* reportedly did not have social media accounts, and TMC was ultimately pressured by engagement on the ground and not through social media. In other words, its role should not be overstated. This is an underdeveloped area to which I intend to return in later work.

ABSTRACTS

This article offers an ethnography of the citizenship protest movement in West Bengal from mid-2018 to mid-2020. In particular, it retraces the ways in which a comparatively marginal alliance of non-parliamentary left groups and Muslim organizations managed to impose its agenda on the state of West Bengal even though the movement was hijacked by the state government. It chronicles the year-long agitation before the passing of the CAA that altered the political landscape in the state. A multilayered analysis of the dynamics, composition, and symbolism of the Park Circus protest from January 2020, which were Kolkata's response to Delhi's sit-in at Shaheen Bagh, offers insights into the ways in which the state government under Trinamool Congress seized leadership over this movement. This in turn rendered the government subject to the movement's agenda, which continued to be defined by the non-partisan alliance. The article concludes with the effects of the COVID lockdown on the movement and the possible transformation of dissident politics in its wake.

INDEX

Keywords: CAA/NRC protest, West Bengal, Trinamool Congress, Non-Parliamentary Left, Agonistic Struggle, Park Circus

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